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THE PEACE OF THE WORLDS

If we could count the stars, we should not weep before them. While we think we can change the drama of history, and of our own lives, we are not awed by our destiny. But when the evil is irreparable, when our life is lived, a strong spirit has the sublime resource of standing at bay and of surveying almost from the other world the vicissitudes of this.

George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*

I cannot say I do not live. I eat, drink and use my exercise bike to keep my legs in running order. They do not really run. They do make movements that put a strain on their muscles and they stop, both the muscles and legs. The same goes for the mind. It is part of a train of thought, not of events, and no thought lasts forever, being as fragile as whatever can be found in the mind. So the train stops and I watch an old video cassette where Macbeth makes a fool of himself because it is much more difficult to make a wise man of yourself. But being wise lasts longer and can thereby propel you into the realm of immortality.

Nothing lasts longer, not even your wounds, and you succumb to them sooner or later. And you should strike 'later' out as you proceed from day to day, from Hamlet to Banquo's offspring. Mind your language – there are ladies present! Mind your language – there are gentlemen present! Mind your language – there are children present! They *are* present and for their sake something must be done, if only by proxy, out of courtesy and humanism that outdates itself or outruns its run of luck. And those present do overreach themselves, but what they reach does not amount to any riches – only to a few beaches I might have visited in my childhood when my parents spent their holidays on the Black Sea.

I open my eyes and see whatever they call 'harmony' because even a dumping-ground is a place or piece of harmony or of music, as they used to say in the Sixties. You would throw a tin can, hit the middle of a rubbish bin and they called it 'a piece of concrete music' and sometimes just 'a piece of concrete'. So, whenever my eyes are open, I see a piece of harmony. Someone says, 'I wish you'd do something about your bedroom – it's a real mess.' 'It's a real harmony,' I answer. 'What do you know about harmony?'

'What do *you* know about harmony?'

'What *do* you know about harmony?'

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Suppose I open my eyes, and this supposition is not wide of the mark because I do open my eyes from time to time, not necessarily at 6 a.m. What do I see with these eyes of mine, wide-or-shut open? I see whatever is the case and I cannot say it is a piece of cake or a piece of disharmony that I have the benefit of before getting out of bed. Creeps in this petty pace. I wish I could creep up the wall opposite, like a spider. Why? To prey on small flies and other insects? Or just for the sake of webs and nets? Harmonious, aren't they? Tomorrow, perhaps tomorrow.

PART ONE

One suffers what they call ‘the elimination of one’s absolute generality of reference’. They call it what they wish, but one continues to suffer. One suffers from one reference, two references; or from their absences. One also suffers the elimination which eliminates something from somewhere. This elimination may also eliminate something from somebody. And this time it is somebody who suffers from this elimination; and many other eliminations, for that matter. One suffers from eliminations and references. One reference refers to one whose number is two. The other reference refers to numbers and none of these numbers refers to human beings. So a lot of humans say, ‘These eliminations are none of our concern. Our home is still our castle, and our castle has always been the most beautiful castle in the world. And the world is the best of all worlds. Yet we have no idea what other worlds look like, sound like and so on. We don’t even know if they sound the alarm or the absence of it. Perhaps they do something and the sound they produce is the best sound in the world, in the universe, and so on. If it is the best sound, this sound must coincide with our sound, which means there’s only one sound in the universe. And this sound is identical to Adam Kadmon. Anyway, Eve has just gone out with old what-d’you-call-him. You do not call him? Well and good. Let us call him Adam. As we know, there are several Adams. The first one was the first. So he was created out of ashes and also out of God’s ribs. And then he was eliminated once and for all. That’s why we can achieve our comfortable lives only after years of hard toil. And sometimes we don’t achieve them at all. So we lead all sorts of uncomfortable lives despite many years of hard toil. Why? Because we have nothing to do with the oil industry. And every day eliminates something from our lives. We don’t mind, actually. But we do mind the elimination of our absolute generality of reference. We need a reference; two references at least. From our former guardian angel. From our future guardian.’

And sometimes they do not say anything, these humans or those humans, in spite of their propensity for talking nonsense. They think they talk sense, all the time, but once in a while someone comes in and says, ‘*Non*,’ and suddenly everyone becomes aware of an alien presence and someone says, ‘You know, many people affirm that the pyramids were built by extra-terrestrial visitors.’ And then a question-and-answer session begins as if all those people were sitting, standing and talking at the French National Assembly. ‘Are you from another planet?’ ‘No.’ ‘Have you come to our planet to destroy our civilisation?’ ‘No.’ ‘Could we empty your pockets to see if you’re armed?’ ‘Yes.’ Two individuals turn the ET’s pockets inside out and find a few toothpicks. ‘Are they your bombs? Do you construct them on your planet?’ ‘No.’ ‘Do they come from another galaxy? Do you order them via the Internet?’ ‘No.’ The \$64,000 dollar question is, can we protect ourselves from this unknown weapon? The answer depends on the goodness of the visitor who may decide against using this weapon immediately, on the spot, simply because he does not find this spot appropriate for his enterprise, for his dearest wish – to destroy the Earth. Or probably it is time itself that we all can blame for our unbearable survival. The visitor consults his watch and says to himself, ‘I’d better wait for another century. I’m not in a tearing hurry.’ This visitor is selfish and consequently does not realise how important it is to rid us of the poison we inhale every blessed minute: our lungs and indeed our bodies are far more lethal than arsenic. Actually they are the only weapon we can combat the extra-terrestrial tourist with, on condition that we are in a position to make him swallow our bodies. Two bodies would be enough to floor him or her. Let’s say it’s a “her”. Three bodies would probably kill her once and for all, removing time from her busy schedule.

The controversy rages on, and one is unable to pinpoint precisely why the two sides cannot agree on the matter of life and death. It is well-known that no other matters have kept our brains and hearts busy through centuries, and even theoretical physics speaks only about these antipodes. If we analyse subatomic particles, we do it only for the sake of electricity (life) or atom bombs (death), and if time-travelling crops up in our discussions, it is only because some of us are dissatisfied with the ecological conditions we confront day in day out, and even at night, whence the frequency and persistency of nightmares. So, upon seeing a mysterious being, we wonder if we should welcome the newcomer or chase her away instead of taming yet another shrew. Misanthropes hope she is a cruel, heartless extra-terrestrial whose aims and hopes are confined to the annihilation of humanity and its dwelling place. Others run towards the nearest atom bomb and call a few airports where a suitable carrier can be found and entrusted with our protection – without further ado. Our science-fiction literature taught us that not only birds of a feather flock together: the warriors from Mars observe this ritual far more scrupulously. When an earthling sees them in the sky, either in their spaceships or on their own, relying exclusively on their in-built engines, this earthling of ours often mistakes them for birds. What is more, they are as like as thousands of peas, and our humanists shake their heads, saying to each other, ‘For all our imperfections, we are freedom-loving individuals. And the most important freedom of all, the freedoms we are showered with in our free countries, is the freedom of personality. We’ll never look and think like those Martians. Never ever.’

But misanthropes beg to differ and say we already look, think and feel like them (those Martians, those birds, those peas) and so our survival or common grave will never make any difference: we are already them, those robots invading us in novels and real life. We are more or less indistinguishable from the machines we build in our factories, and sometimes a specialist can tell a machine and a human apart only after carefully counting their legs, arms and shoulder blades. And if a machine has the same number of members, tendons and nerves, specialists have no alternative but to speak to both those machines and humans for hours on end; to no avail. Even if you present them with a simple alternative, ‘Are you for war or for peace?’ an extra-terrestrial can answer, ‘For peace’; and no one will be any the wiser. Moreover, to many people, be they Martians or Venusians (or Venetians), peace and war are interchangeable, for you can be at peace with yourself and the world only in your tomb. And you are often at war with yourself during a holiday period: you spend more time in your own company, and your doubts, worries, instincts and the unconscious come to the fore and spoil the fun. And you begin to hate yourself for being an old spoilsport.

Psychologists and teachers say we have the power of life and death over ourselves. And often they talk their disciples and patients into believing that whatever they decide and visualise is bound to materialise in the not-too-distant future, which means that life and death are two figments of our fruitful and efficacious imagination. Recently I saw a film about a man who could kill his enemies by means of one thought only. If he was on a train, he would say, ‘You jump from this train,’ and his enemy always obeyed his order, even if all the doors were locked. And you could not use the lavatories for this purpose: their windows were barred. The victim would make a hole in the ceiling and jump from the roof, after walking on it for a while. And if this so-called hypnotist was on a plane, he would say to those he disliked more or less intensely, ‘Jump from the plane,’ and sometimes as many as 20 people opened all the windows, walked along the wings and jumped from them rather beautifully, making a few backward somersaults amidst the clouds. I wonder how the Martians I am talking about would behave, if submitted to this magnetic treatment. They might guffaw with delight and say to the hypnotist, ‘We are sensitive

only to frozen rays.’ In this case, the hypnotist would have to travel with them all the way to Siberia where even sunbeams are always frozen hard.

Paul Klee’s admirers affirm they need no magnets to kill whoever puts spokes in their wheels: they just show the culprit *Tod und Feuer* that my favourite artist created in 1940. Only Buddhists, Hindus and early Christians (especially their martyrs) were not terrified by the very notion or image of death. Others always showed a clean pair of heels, when someone wrote the word ‘death’ on a piece of paper, on a patch of sand or in the mud. Even those who had no German screamed upon discovering ‘*Tod*’ written all over a wall or elsewhere. Schubert wrote a quartet entitled *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, and this title proves to some extent that death is masculine, not feminine, contrary to what the French believe and affirm. When they say ‘*cherchez la femme*’, one might think one goes to war with the intention of being killed: a heroic death is better than any suicide, even if you opt for opening your stomach with a sword. The maiden, on the other hand, is neuter and I believe that death is neuter too. A man with a scythe, a woman whose kiss is poisonous. This pattern is too simple and hardly echoes life’s intricacy which is often neuter or neutral, as a matter of fact. If you see a scythe walking towards your body, you think neither of Macbeth nor of his wife. And death (or life) is a scythe, although neither a man nor a woman is about to brandish it and cut your throat. It often stands in a corner, waiting for you or some other human who may or may not walk by, an attaché case dangling, from his or her hand. If this creature does walk by, the scythe cuts its throat or divides the upper part of the walking body from its nether part. Or death is probably a maiden who puts a banana skin in the middle of the path along which you are walking. You collapse and die of a heart attack as you realise that death *is* neuter after all.

And *Feuer*? Klee’s fire reminds us of Hell, of Purgatory, of Maria Callas who chose a crematorium in preference to a gorgeous tomb into which her body might have been lowered to the accompaniment of Norma’s aria. It is needless to enlarge upon fire, its destructive and purifying forces, because so many writers and painters have already done so to warn us against any contact with this element. Even a child knows how fire works and what damage it can cause if you come into contact with it. Even on his deathbed, a man might say to his wife, ‘I still recall the pain I felt when I put my fingers in the flame of a candle. I hope I’ll be spared a similar experience in the Hereafter where you put your whole body in an oven, if you happen to find yourself either in Hell or in Purgatory. Actually I think the Hereafter, the whole of it, is just Hell, Hell, Hell, nothing else.’ When looking at Klee’s picture, you might draw the same conclusion, even if you concentrate on the fire, ignoring death that is frightful enough to send you to Hell without further ado; without cancers, strokes and so on. Bosch’s *Delicious Garden* (as I call it in English) can also do the trick, for Hell attracts your attention and spoils the fun before you draw some pleasure from the garden’s ecstasies. According to some mystics, Hell is just a garden swarming with snakes. You begin to enjoy yourself with a beautiful lady or a gorgeous boy and suddenly a snake bites you – in the very midst of your ecstasy. Instead of enjoying this ecstasy to the full and to the end, you ask your partner to suck the poison from your wound. It is true that the act of sucking is a pleasure in its own right, but the pain spoils everything: this pleasure, your partner’s unquestionable beauty and sex appeal. And your screams deaden the melody and harmony of your partner’s voice.

For obvious reasons, we believe that early Christians were closer to God and to the world’s conflagration: to the end of their miserable lives. We think that all of them enthusiastically fell into the jaws of the lion. Apparently, however, some Christians recanted their views when about to penetrate the depths of a lion’s jaw. They shouted, ‘I have no wish to become a Christian martyr. Tertullian can say whatever he likes. If he comes to

this arena to attend the performance of my torture, I'll tell him that no delights that one can experience in Paradise and its orchards will ever compensate me for this suffering.' Other Christians – they were as early as the former ones – used to declare that the end of the world would come before the lion's bite, before he (or she) begins to munch on their bodies. 'The end of the world is nigh,' they shouted. 'It's closer to our bodies than the lion's teeth.' 'Let's wait and see,' retorted the last pagans, their torturers, their butchers. If particularly inspired, they might add, 'Only three inches separate my teeth from your body. Do you think the end of the world is located within these inches?' Some Christians, the members of obdurate sects, were able to rant and rave about some imagined worldwide catastrophe, even inside the lion's jaw. And the chroniclers point out that no one could hear the lion's roaring, on account of the majesty of Christian hymns, songs and prayers. And if a sceptic voiced his doubts about the lion's ability to roar and munch at the same time, some Father of the Church invariably answered thus, 'Even if a hundred lions were summoned to this arena, their choir wouldn't be heard. Not a single note would you hear, you, you, you, unbelievers in Christ.'

The film director who shot *The War of the Worlds* was convinced that ETs, their brains and technology, were far more advanced than ours. Do the Martians also know much more about God than our Nicholas de Cues? If so, extra-terrestrials are far more humane than any human because they can correct their images (their reflections in mirrors) in accordance with God's physique and features. They photograph God and go to their cosmetic or reconstructive surgeon: some of us think that at the beginning, originally, in some *ur* or other, we all looked like God – in full accordance with the Bible's categorical statement. But then a reaction set in, a human reaction literally permeating God's image and disfiguring it – to please the Devil, no doubt. God's innocent, immaculate features were now peppered with sins of all kinds – of all unkind kinds, as some theologian put it. So it is rather the other way round: we were akin to God's way in an *ur*-past about which we know next to nothing. Actually we know nothing, and next (in this context) means we call it '*ur*', for we are capable of understanding and approving Rousseau's approach to the problem. The further our technology gets on its way to flawlessness, the closer we stand to our basest instincts and stupidest conclusions. In the film I have just touched upon, the Martians bombard us with their rays, but a priest says they are closer to God than our human race – not on account of their planet's position in the sky, mind you. He is obviously one of Hegel's readers and consequently he bets his bottom dollar and farm that history is growing wiser, more beautiful and safer: no more harming each other, no more wars. He goes towards their spaceship, waving his handkerchief and shouting, 'God be with you, our dear supermen devised by Nietzsche and realised through your robots or with your own fair hands. By the way, do you have hands? Or are you equipped with tentacles? Never mind, never mind. You might have a score of paws, for all I know or care. Do you know what my mother used to say half-a-century ago? Take your filthy paws off my nice clean washing! Well, I hope your paws aren't filthy. Are they? Anyway, you're not about to touch *my* nice clean washing. And these clothes of mine are already soiled by your explosions, by your heat rays, as they call them. They don't realise (those unbelievers in God) that your heat rays speak volumes about your hearts, about their extra-terrestrial warmth. But I would ask you not to give a demonstration of this proverbial warmth in use – I take it on trust. Besides, I'm not very fond of sunny beaches, of the Riviera, let alone of Tripoli where tourists are burnt alive. Apparently the inhabitants of Tripoli affirm that the heat they experience when walking along the streets of their city is worse than Bosch's fires, their heat and destructive force.'

Of course the priest reminded the intruders of our peace missions and the United Nations, of how many military conflicts had been avoided, thanks to the so-called 'messengers of hope, peace and quiet'. A messenger

arrives, realises there is a conflict in the offing and says to all those involved in the conflict and its offing, 'I'm offering you the peace, prosperity and hope you need to struggle for life against the heavy odds you must be aware of.' 'And what about money?' asks the crowd. 'Hope is money,' answers the messenger. 'If you hope that you'll be able to find a suitable job or seduce a billionaire, you'll get the money you've been dreaming about ever since your babyhood.' 'We'd like to be *sure* about that,' says the crowd. Going back to the unfortunate priest, we must point out that it is not fair on the intruders to make them responsible for all the deaths both analysed and even anatomised in the movie under discussion. The priest was clearly getting under the Martians' skins (instead of warming their frozen hearts). He should not have expounded *his views* on the Christian doctrine: it is enough to say, 'God enjoined us to love each other dearly, without striking anybody with rays. Not even with rays of love, mind you. Love rays caress you, you know. They stroke your hair, your head and your heart. They tickle your feet and you laugh. And you love, love, love.' Instead, he talked about hope, saying that life without hope (and without love) had no meaning. For a while, he played with the words 'love' and 'life', pointing out they were like brothers and sisters. 'In my opinion, life is masculine and love feminine. And vice versa, if you wish. In your language they might be neuter.' He made a laudable attempt to draw the same conclusion, when playing with 'hope' and 'love', but failed most miserably – all the more so since, as it later transpired, being immortal or eternal, the intruders were likely to giggle, if taught the doctrine of the Resurrection they did not need at all.

Of course, as we all know, the doctrine of the Resurrection, the very fact of it has little in common with our physical survival throughout centuries and millennia. What counts is our spiritual upheaval, our passing to a higher plane of regard from where we are bound to see the Supernatural Being face to face, so to speak. It does not mean there are two faces facing each other, and I suppose there are only shoulder blades on the plane I am talking about. But if there are only two shoulder blades facing each other – one belongs to God and the other to a human or a Martian – the divine contact can be established and the whole substance of the human is born anew, as they say today, without bothering about the proofs of their declaration. Newborn, newborn, they repeat, boasting about their prayers and the way they fight their addictions to alcohol, drugs and unbridled sexual intercourse. This renewal or second birth, however, is far above ordinary prayers and the consumption of the booze stored with foresight in your cellar or in the kitchen, within arm's reach. Luckily for him, the priest did not broach the subject of the Resurrection as he continued to walk towards the aircraft about which we know a lot, thanks to H. G. Wells and the films we saw on the subject of the Martian invasion. He just said that hope was an important item in one's miserable life, and oddly enough, this remark triggered off a discussion that might not have taken place at all, considering that the Martians were in a position to kill the intruder straightaway, at the very beginning of his legendary walk. Today you can see this walk on your screens, for it has become a symbol of reconciliation, of peace and quiet, of our universal collaboration and entente cordiale. This entente is probably a part of our wishful thinking, we say to ourselves, but we have to try, even if there is a lot of harm in trying, judging from this walk and the priest's appalling destiny. And we try our hardest as we walk towards others, waving our handkerchiefs and shouting, 'We don't mean any harm. Do come out and give us a fraternal or sisterly kiss.' Usually no one comes, but if somebody does take the trouble to budge and approach our faces, this somebody slaps our faces and roars with laughter. Or we are beaten senseless. And when we recover from the shock, we find out that this busybody is no longer there, in front of us, within our reach. So it is pointless to call the police and complain about the rudeness of a stranger who might turn out to be an extra-terrestrial hooligan.

We might have shown them the end of the film where a huge congregation sings a lot of hymns in a cathedral surrounded by the Martians on all sides, from every angle. Their heat rays are about to leave their canons or sheaths or whatever they call them, but the humans still count on the sentiment defined in our dictionaries as ‘universal mercy’, and on the beauty of our hymns – especially of those performed in Orthodox churches, as foreigners point out – that can triumph over evil in no time at all. Of course an Orthodox liturgy lasts for hours and hours, but the Martians have a lot of patience: they had not assassinated the priest I enlarged upon in the previous paragraph – not at once, not on the spot – in spite of the unbearable boredom one is likely to experience when listening to such a homily. I do not believe that the Martians were destroyed by a number of viruses from which their nature was unable to protect them. What happens on our planet is logical enough: Aids and the coronavirus overcome our resistance and mock our technological advances; sometimes in no time at all. (Not in the twinkling of an eye, though.) The Martians must have surrounded and annihilated our microbes without even using their arch-sophisticated weapons. And what about the Russian songs and leading basses? Did they eventually get over the Martians’ aggressive mood? I suppose that Russian philosophers also joined the army and had a go at their extra-terrestrial ‘superiority complex’. Of course all extra=terrestrials are not only aware of Nietzsche’s works: they know them by heart. That is why they always put up a good show when ‘will to power’ is on the agenda. But a Russian philosopher, Viacheslav Ivanov, was both a ‘Nietzschean Christian’ and a Dionysian, and therefore firmly believed in the ‘loss of self’. I am sure he invited his foes (and brothers) to ‘shed the coils of their burdensome selves’. ‘Emotional liberation’, ‘mystical anarchism’ – these expressions and notions must have struck a few sensitive chords in the Martians’ hearts. And they certainly strike a few chords in my musical, pianistic heart; and yet I disagree with the rest of Ivanov’s doctrine centred upon what the Russians call ‘*sobornost*’ which may be translated as follows: ‘cathedral’nost’. (*Sobor* means ‘cathedral’ in Russian. And *Dom* is ‘house’.) And once again I return to the movie I saw to visualise Wells’ Martians – and also his humans – more clearly, more authentically. The congregation was singing out of tune, which reminded me of the monks one reads about in *Don Quixote* and other books where monks are rather on the amateurish side. What goes on may be described as a sort of *sobornost*’ because those people seem to direct themselves ‘at the unconscious’, achieving a ‘living union’ (yet another of Ivanov’s notions). As soon as you find yourself in the consciousness you start criticising your neighbours and go so far as to insult them either publicly or privately. Most of them are ‘damned fools’ unless they recently promised to give you a helping hand – ‘as many helping hands as you wish’, as they put it. So, after much soul-searching you resolve not to insult them today. ‘It’ll be for another time,’ you say to yourself somewhat grudgingly, biting your nether lip. Ivanov spoke at length about the ‘authentic voice of people’; I would rather listen to Kathleen Ferrier and Tito Gobi. And of course I vote (with both hands) against the ‘non-egoistic, communitarian psyche required in a society without coercion’. I might however lower one hand to signify I am in agreement with the happy ending of the previous sentence: ‘A society without coercion.’ Yes, Ivanov thought that no one would ever dominate any other human being – no whips either for women or for men – on the grounds that we would be in love with each other and admire unconditionally everyone’s beauty. Moreover, we would daily narrate fairy tales, myths, legends, parables and our own stories; an intricate web of psyches.

Suppose you set up an underground communication with your fellow creatures; or rather an underskin communication. You have no idea what happens inside your partners or neighbours, but you feel something, and I think they used to call this phenomenon ‘vibes’ or ‘fluids’, although I am not sure the latter term does not come from Russian. In my native country, we used to say, ‘He has good fluids,’ and nobody thought in terms of liquids,

upon hearing such a remark. Of course Westerners think that the Russians *always* think in terms of vodka, and I have dwelt on this derogatory habit throughout my literary life. What might reunite us is the truth, and proletarians did their best to stand united, come hell or high water, because they thought that Lenin, Marx, communism and the party (and all their comrades) were right and knew the truth, if not in detail, at least in patches. They would point at a patch and say, 'Here's the truth and there's nothing either beside or beyond this truth. In other words and terms, there's nothing beyond. And even fishes know that.' As long as this truth remains inside a body, a mind and a bundle of nerves, you can smile at each other and pat your pals on all the shoulders they might offer to your touch. But if someone says something definite (they often call this a 'definitive version'), then somebody else is bound to contradict the speaker unless the action is set in a country hard-heartedly ill-treated by a dictatorial government. There are people who habitually contradict their friends and enemies alike – for argument's sake, for the sake of the contradiction under discussion; just for the sake, you know. You say something and they say, 'No,' even if you do not ask them whether they agree with you or not; whether it is a matter of life and death. Or not at all, not at all: there are no lives nor deaths in this matter. Yet you go on repeating what you said, and your interlocutor or an interloper says, 'No.' He or she does not even take the trouble to say, 'I beg to differ' – a lovely prelude to any conversational fugue. There are many descriptions of such conflicts. Oddly enough, they often come to a head in alchemical treatises, which is hardly explicable, given the foggy perspective offered by such treatises. For instance, one of them can start quite innocuously as if nothing had ever been in store for any of us; nothing ominous, that is. 'The bird of Hermes is my name, Eating my wings to make me tame.' This opening sounds auspicious and the reader might think the author's senses and *élans* will never spin out of control. You just eat your wrath and murderous instincts and also many uncontrollable urges, determined to bring them under control. You are an emblem of the cyclically sublimated mercury which is said to drop a feather every time it rises. Suddenly you flow into a fit of rage over this self-consuming meal and accuse your neighbour and former friend of murder. As a matter of fact, many alchemical treatises are autobiographies in disguise, and their austere attitude may delude some readers into believing they are genuine accounts of what really happens in laboratories. So they often start with wings and bizarre meals, but then you realise it is a different fire you encounter in the oven. And the alchemist tells you, 'This Mercury was about to rape my favourite mistress. In the nick of time I wrenched her from his embrace and locked her in my retort. And the fire of my love burst into flames at that very instant.' A Chinese alchemist described the dangers of wing-eating as follows, 'Disaster will come to the black mass: gases from food consumed will make noises inside the intestines and stomach. The right essence will be exhaled and the evil one inhaled.' And logically enough, he advises us against eating our own bodies, even if it is propitious for the growth of modesty and self-abasement. No wonder he was not a Christian.

So, as I pointed out, the priest was burnt alive or dead: only a pile of ashes remained at the end of his mythological walk, of his courageous attempt to come to terms with a foreign civilisation. He heard a few voices issuing from the flying saucer, and these voices talked to him about hope and its ramifications, its advantages. 'We know nothing about hope, because we've got everything,' one of the voices said abruptly. 'We read Spinoza,' said another voice, 'and we spit in its face, although it is faceless. Hope is faceless. But we just feel like spitting, whenever we hear this ludicrous term.' 'What *do* you have?' asked the priest. 'Do you have any spiritual values? Apparently you know nothing about universal love, otherwise you wouldn't talk to me so rudely and senselessly. Have you ever heard about what we call "universal brotherhood"?' 'Sisterhood,' shouted one of the Martians. 'Are you females? All of you?' asked the priest. 'None of your business,' said another Martian. The priest suggested

they should work for the final establishment of harmony. ‘What establishment? What are you talking about?’ he heard, surprised and partly disillusioned. He resumed his struggle for mutual understanding and the peace we have always had in mind, even when beating our dogs or servants with a stick. He said at that point, ‘Do you know anything about harmony? You’ve read Spinoza, if I’m not mistaken. You might have heard Mozart’s works, assuming you’re acquainted with our culture, thoughts and feelings. What do you think about Mozart’s contribution to harmony?’ The priest’s death was coming, and at some point he saw it and realised that the invaders were in a position to materialise theoretical and abstract notions. He thought, ‘I wish I could materialise hope and its ramification. It might help in the long run.’ Had he been able to run – he was paralysed with fear – this run of his would not have been long, alas; his life was already standing on the threshold of death. Of course some mystics teach us what they call ‘the utter detachment’: ‘You should detach yourself from your life. Let it do what it pleases. Let it die, if that is its wish. You should remain firm, determined and free from all shackles.’

I don’t believe it is the desire to save the priest and his ideals that drove some producers to modify the original version of the film. The Japanese probably thought about the discrepancy between their culture and this empty talk about hope, about happiness that the Chinese have never regarded as the ultimate goal of life. And the Japanese – at least in the domain of Zen Buddhism – were much influenced by their neighbours and their attitude towards life and death. Be that as it may, the Japanese version of *The War of the Worlds* shows a Buddhist bias overcharged with well-known Zen symbols. After taking a few steps in the direction of the saucer, the priest quotes a koan with a view to swaying the balance of power in that area and all over the Earth. He speaks of two monks whose chief preoccupation was focused on a cat lying at their feet. One of these monks picked up the cat and asked his pal, ‘Do you have any idea what this gesture means? If you give no reply to my question, I’ll cut this cat in two.’ The monk to whom the question had been addressed remained silent. So his pal put his threat into action and cut the cat into two. ‘How would you react, if confronted with this situation? What would you say to your pal? Can you hear me?’ The intruders give no reply to the priest’s question. ‘If I understand you rightly, you intend to cut us into pieces.’ ‘No,’ answer the intruders. ‘We intend to burn you alive.’ ‘That’s not the right answer,’ says the priest. ‘You should take off your sandals and put them on your heads. Do you have sandals on your feet?’ ‘No. Just a pair of boots,’ answer the visitors. ‘They’ll certainly fit the bill,’ says the priest. ‘Take them off and put them on your heads.’ ‘They’re too heavy for this purpose,’ say the visitors. ‘Sandals are much lighter and softer to the touch.’ ‘I wouldn’t mind the texture of your boots, if I were you, you know. Peace should be achieved at all costs.’

After viewing the film, a Zen monk said, ‘There’s a koan in which my colleagues touch upon the teaching of the Daiba Sect. They just touch upon it which is customary in our circles – we never explore the universe thoroughly, trying to get to the bottom of its mystery. We know that its mystery is bottomless, and by exploring anything thoroughly we might fall through and smash our heads to smithereens on some bottom or other. Even bottomless things have bottoms somewhere. So my colleagues touch upon the Daiba Sect and say, “This sect’s teaching is a silver bowl filled with snow.” Do you know the answer to this koan? “Such a thing – smash it to pieces.” The Martians would have justified their aggressive attitude, had the film director known more about Zen Buddhism’s tenets.’ Sometimes laymen are more astute, probably because they are capable of exploring our mysteries thoroughly, without bothering about their insoluble nature. One such laymen said to the monk, ‘Is your head filled with snow? If so, sooner or later the snow is bound to melt and you’ll be as empty-headed as a village idiot.’ ‘I wish I could become a village idiot,’ answered the monk. ‘You’re a Zen idiot,’ said the layman. ‘Such a being should be smashed to smithereens,’ whereupon the same layman took an axe and smashed the Zen idiot’s

body to pieces. ‘What a pity,’ he commented as he cast a glance at the corpse. ‘I meant to smash him to smithereens.’ ‘You’re a *lay* idiot,’ said another layman to the layman. ‘Such a being should be smashed to smithereens,’ whereupon he grasped an axe and smashed the lay idiot to smithereens. ‘Pity you can’t admire the beauty of my masterpiece,’ he said to the corpse.

One can go on for ages, quoting and unquoting, misquoting koans and suchlike, assuming there are things identical or similar to koans. Only another koan is similar to any given koan, as Zen Buddhists put it, but you can comment endlessly on one koan, which could not be done in the film I am talking about; partly on account of the Martians’ cruelty. They sent their heat rays at the drop of a hat, and the earthlings had no time to develop their arguments, voicing their doubts about the standpoint adopted by the invaders. There is a koan on which you can base a novel, provided you feel like writing a novel instead of contenting yourself with a short essay or parable. An angry fist does not strike a smiling face. If you present such an argument to extra-terrestrial warriors, they can point out they have no intention of using their fists. ‘We’ve got myriads of heat rays in our storeroom,’ they might say with a smile as if our earthlings were able to strike them either with their fists or their atom bombs; as if they were afraid of our armies and generals. Our generals knew the visitors’ capacity for probing into *our* capacities and innermost moods. Anyway, they did not need to use their psychological rays to find out whether we were about to strike them in any way. They also knew we did our best to put a brave face on things; on their heat rays, among other things. What is more important, however, seems to refer to light, to brightness, and smiles reveal the presence of light in human nature. In other words, the face symbolises human evolution out of darkness and into light, which cannot be said about Martian faces. Of course no one has ever seen a Martian face, not even in films, for the Martians wear masks equipped with all sorts of instruments, including lasers. That is why even one Martian, deprived of his saucers and storerooms, is extremely dangerous: he always shoots to kill. And even his thoughts are lethal, considering how negatively hot they are. And when a poet says, ‘Here goes a hot Martian,’ she draws no parallels between this moving figure and hot dogs. Mystics often see the Devil and they convey the full horror of such encounters by writing in their notebooks, ‘His forehead is seamed with horizontal lines and shaded by its sprouting horns.’ It is little wonder that journalists apply this description to the Martians, to their *dark* faces.

For all disappointments and defeats, some generals still trusted human ingenuity, and the next step they took related to human smiles which, according to the famous koan, should deter extra-terrestrial tourists from striking our faces. The only order given at the end of the war sounded thus, ‘Smile, you fools, otherwise you’ll be burnt to death by the Devil in person.’ It is no easy task to bring a smile to people’s faces: you need professionals for the job. They are called ‘smile manufacturers’. They rely heavily on our imagination which is supposed to supply us with happy ends and events, with whatever *calls for a smile*. But in the presence of a Martian saucer, nothing can induce a human being to smile, given a striking and convincing demonstration of what is called happiness – not to be confused with a mere hope. You see the saucer and it is not flying overhead, exciting your curiosity and making you get in touch with reporters. It stands in front of you and every minute something rumbles in it as if dissatisfied with our planet’s ecological conditions. And suddenly you realise that this something protrudes from its surface, from what looks like a metallic skin, and desperately you start looking for a shelter or, better still, a bunker. Alas, there are no bunkers in the neighbourhood and you have no alternative but to fall back on your memory that supplies you with the image of the bunker where Hitler committed suicide in 1945. On top of this bunker-related problem, you have to obey the commands you hear, ‘Smile, smile. Don’t think about bunkers and suchlike – they won’t protect you from heat and hate.’ You do your utmost and in the long run succeed in

replacing the saucer with a bottle of champagne and a woman whose legs have always electrified your libido. The bottle puts you in an amiable mood, but the image of the woman is likely to miss the mark: you do not smile when making love or resorting to what they call 'our self-service' or 'our most intimate and ultimate do-it-yourself'.

A true scholar ignores the number of corpses left unburied (merely lying in the fields) in the wake of an interplanetary conflict. Oblivious of human suffering and misery, he sticks to his vocation and spends his time or eternity in archives and libraries as he does his best to unravel the mystery of human or rather inhuman behaviour. According to such a scholar, an ordinary Martian was in a position to see not only our thoughts, but also their consequences and the mythological overtones that mercilessly preside over human actions. The woman visualised by one of the victims was analysed in accordance with Bosch's well-known picture where the seven deadly sins have pride of place. The sin we are concerned with is always referred to as *voluptas*, and even those who have no Latin know what this word denotes in the kingdom of human sensitivity and begin to smile voluptuously at the very sound of it, sometimes upon hearing *volu*. The soldiers to whom the words of the general appealed with the intention of subjugating the intruders visualised the same woman; at least the Martian scholar did not hesitate an instant and pinpointed with assurance the source of the vision. Contrary to what was assumed at the very beginning of this hostile encounter, the Martians (or other alien visitors) are much more pious than humans, and their sexual relationships, if any, are permeated with spirituality to the point of making them relinquish any physical contact, any rubbing of bodies. In English this custom or rather phenomenon can be described as follows: they are eager to rub shoulders with each other, but they leave their sexual organs alone. And some scholars go so far as to declare they have no sexual organs at all, with the exception of a few antennas one can see in films devoted to the subject. And admitting a woman to the realm of visions is out of the question, says one of the rules magnificently engraved on the walls of their schools and universities.

No wonder they instantaneously identified the human vision which their antennas came across on the battlefield depicted in many books. Their all-embracing knowledge of human culture allowed them to pinpoint its whereabouts with the utmost accuracy, and when perusing their archives, *our* scholars laid hands on a book in which Hieronymus Bosch's picture is reproduced in relation to the massacre. Oddly enough, the Martians attributed the vision to all the soldiers their antennas confronted on that memorable day. In the book we read the following statement: 'The vision comes from what is called human mythology that is poisoned and peppered with sins, some of which are deadly. *Voluptas* is one of their favourite sins, and it should not be overlooked even on a battlefield where we all have other fish to fry. Apparently, even in the heat of a battle when our heat rays rage in space and time, they are prone to voluptuous dreams featuring the woman whose sinful substance cannot be mistaken. She seems to be dozing in front of a mirror she cannot see, for her eyes are closed. On her breast you can see a toad which is a symbol of lust: all medieval painters were aware of this particularity, judging from their iconography. Of course if you asked a human soldier whether he spotted this toad on the breast of his beloved, he would deny its presence vigorously. He would shake his head and say, "Her breasts looked like the two juicy pieces of fruit I ate every day in my childhood. Her breasts were as immaculate as those of my mother. And I'm sure she had no breast implants." The humans whose psyche I scoured for the details related to the woman did not seem to be aware of the importance this animal played in Ancient Egypt where, like the frog, the toad was associated with the dead. Even our children know that mummified toads have been found in tombs. Besides, in the Middle Ages, toads, as well as snakes, were the natural attributes of the skeleton.'

Apparently the parallel their scholar drew between death and the soldiers' visions allowed him and his colleagues to kill humans without remorse. They had no qualms about shedding human blood in unparalleled quantities. At least this aspect of the bloody war proves that all the aliens known to our historians and astronomers can be filled with remorse and so, sooner or later, we are likely to find common ground. It would be incongruous to admit that Martians need an elaborate symbol, an intricate Egypt-situated pattern, to justify their actions and pacify their conscience if only to some extent, whereas we massacre our brothers and sisters on a daily basis. And I am not sure our conscience, if any, suffers in the process. We just overload our aircraft with bombs and let them fly all over the territories discussed in newspapers. Incidentally, the toad is one of the shapes assumed by a demon when he sits upon a witch's left shoulder. Thanks to two tiny horns borne on his forehead, a toad is recognisable as a demon, and witches take infinite care of him. Anyway, the Martians turned out to be far more concerned with virtue and were prepared to resort to the methods known as 'the arsenal of inquisitors'. They did act like inquisitors during the battles and especially after them, in the prisons destined for the humans they captured instead of killing them outright, which could have been done rather easily and on the spot. But they wished to demonstrate their adherence to righteousness, to the symbolic light radiating from our sacred books that we blissfully ignore, believing it is enough to have them in our libraries and drawers. Before turning in, some humans touch the Bible, whereupon their deadly sins vanish into thin air, as they sincerely assume. The Martians we study in the film were determined to prove to them they had to *expiate* their sins, sometimes at the cost of their wellbeing and health. This standpoint explains rather logically the number of tortures to which those prisoners were subjected in the expiation-halls of the prisons we are alluding to. We shall return to this subject because it is the key subject of the study we are inclined to pursue, for better or worse.

In the light of what have been said so far, it is hard to understand the attitude our Martians adopted towards the children shown to them on the same battlefield. Indeed, there were lots of children in the midst of the soldiers who carried them or even waved them as if imitating white flags. Children are more suited for peace negotiations than any flag, any colour, but the Martians seemed to ignore this aspect of universal life, for all their knowledge of symbols, myths and sacredness. They continued to carouse in their aircraft or saucers or cups and turned a lot of deaf ears to the religious hymns chanted by those immaculate, utterly virtuous creatures. (Every Martian has dozens of ears at its disposal.) 'An angry fist does not strike a chanting boy,' shouted the soldiers. The Martians continued to laugh as they emptied their glasses after clinking them together: they were already drinking to their final triumph over humans. They repeated this sentence and commented upon it thus, 'Our fists are not angry. Our fists are dancing to the beat of the drums. And they're striking whatever happens to be in the way of their dance. It is a dance of death, if you wish. It doesn't really matter if you wish it or not. The lights and loud music in the club – that's what we call our spaceship – make us want to kill you.'

These pieces of information are contradictory and no scholar will ever endeavour to affirm they are coherent and logical. But they reflect both our visitors' mentality and the real situation our ancestors experienced, if we believe the documentary based on H. G. Wells' historical novel. On the one hand, we are perfectly aware of the ruthless method to which the Martians resorted as they invaded our territory; on the other, we must admit they were driven by their undeniable piousness, for God's punishment can be enacted either through floods and earthquakes or by means of flying saucers teeming with aliens. I am sure that, had the priest I described in detail some time ago asked the Martians, 'Have you been sent by God?' they would have answered, 'Yes. The Almighty is very busy at the moment. We are His henchmen.' Nevertheless I would not go so far as to suggest that the

remark I chanced upon in one of our sacred books refers to our Lord and Saviour: 'Like other dictators, he tried to distance himself from the dirty deeds carried out by his henchmen.' We often try to explain God's injustice by referring to our sins, deadly or otherwise; and this principle is healthy because it permits us to hope that someday the Almighty will forgive us once and for all. Saints cannot sin, said St Augustine and I think he was right unless God changed His mind at the beginning of the first Crusade and ever since our saints have been sinning as much as the ordinary citizens of our countries. But I do hope we shall become saints in the long run, well before doomsday.

According to some reports, the Martians did their best to guide us along the path leading to sainthood, if not to utter salvation, whatever that means. At some point in the film (and probably in the book I have not re-read) a human collects a few drops of Martian blood and realises how miraculous this blood can be, if used appropriately and with care. 'From now on, we shall never go to Lourdes and other places of this kind with a view to being cured of all our maladies at once,' he said to himself. Indeed if you smear this blood all over your face, you will become as beautiful as Apollo or Madonna. If you have been blind for three decades at least, you will see everything, right down to the most distant stars. If the air you inhale has always brought you the stench of rotting fish and burning rubber, from now on you will thoroughly enjoy the fragrance of roses – even in the middle of a thoroughfare or within a former Soviet toilet. The hero's hand – in the film at least – gets rid of a scar and a few pimples. He looks at his hand and says to himself in pensive tones, 'And what about my face? I have a pimply face, don't I?' But the hall where he stands and muses seems to have run out of blood which he fails to lay his hands on, for all his toil and sweat. Actually, in a manner of speaking, he aspires to lay his *face* on a huge quantity of the saintly blood. He even pictures to himself a lake of this blood where he swims to his heart's (and face's) content. Next day he runs into a Martian, kneels down in front of him and says, 'Could I please have a glass of your blood?' 'As much as you wish,' answers the Martian. 'We have a blood station inside our spaceship.' The Martian opens his veins and sprinkles the human with his blood. The latter climbs on a car and delivers a sermon to a group of passers-by. The birth of yet another legend.

The reports contradict each other too, and the explanation for this phenomenon does not lie too far from our ability to decipher the scrolls of destiny. Every coin has two sides; every human or Martian has two sides too, and that is why we say either 'The Martians are bandits' or 'The Martians are Jesus Christ and his brothers' or 'No one ascends into the heaven which ye seek, unless he who descends from the heaven which ye do not seek, enlighten him with his rays.' The Martian, who generously sprinkled the human body he met with his blood, is either an assassin or a saviour. First we should question ourselves or others on the subject under scrutiny – before making announcements to the press and idle strollers or observers. Of course they are bound to contradict each other, saying, 'You're on this side,' 'No, you're on *that* side.' The discussion may go on for ages, which is not advisable in the light (or heat) of the endless conflict: a film must have an end, but the struggle for life between good and evil will never come to a close. Let us not forget that the heat rays I have not described in minute detail (no need to do that) continue their show. Exhausted and outwitted, our generals shout and scream as their tongues still hope to talk the Martians into unconditional surrender, 'The show mustn't go on. You don't have to heat the Earth. It's already hot. Global warming, you know.' To cut a long story short, we are looking for a messiah, and nothing will ever stop this show of our hopes and naïveté. And this particular hope and show – the one I have partly enlarged upon – springs from the blood Jesus sprinkled on the thief who was saved and not damned, like his companion in misfortune. We all recall the two thieves who were crucified on either side of Jesus Christ's

Cross. And we still wonder why one of those souls was saved, against all odds: neither of those thieves was baptised. But Christ's blood is far more efficacious than water, whatever its ecological or spiritual perfection.

Another version tells us of H. G. Wells' credo exposed and conceitedly praised in the books I have read neither in my childhood when I got acquainted with *The War of the Worlds* nor in my mature years. In those books our author speaks about the sect he created – on the spur of the moment, in my opinion: he puts great emphasis on science instead of agreeing with Dostoevsky who declared rather naively yet sincerely, 'Beauty will save the world.' I do not think that the kind of beauty he had in mind was predominantly linked to the human body. After all, he was a writer and admired not only Walter Scott, but also paintings – those of Claude Lorrain and Rubens, for instance. So he was alluding rather clearly to the arts, to their beauty, to the beauty created by human beings. Of course these beings we organically call human are quite unreliable, as all extra-terrestrials still affirm, but if we can rely upon anything or anybody, it is in the domain of the arts we had better look for such messiahs or masterpieces. H. G. Wells came up with the idea he called (rather esoterically and exotically) 'Samurai'; and yet I am not sure he was thoroughly acquainted with Bushido and martial arts in general. His scientific sect or socialist party has a caste of philosopher-kings, and these kings or philosophers or both are called 'Samurai', for some obscure reason. (Why not call them 'Martians'?) These Samurai belong to a 'voluntary nobility' which saw the light of day on the day when 17 ordinary citizens of that science-fiction and science-dedicated community said almost in unison (to this community's members), 'Every one of us is a knight in shining armour and we'll rule over you to save you from death and dishonour. And from decadence, from capitalism.' On the same day they became the sole administrators, lawyers, doctors, public officials, and also the only voters. To justify their actions and decisions, they said, 'There cannot be true democracy without reform of the electoral system.' But after a while they repudiated their earlier adherence to our contemporary freedom and its foundations, saying, 'Our government has never promised to uphold the principles of democracy.' They still maintain that their privileges and crowns are accessible to all, but every Soviet citizen was used to such declarations and lies. Incidentally, Wells paid a visit to Stalin and found him intelligent and adorable; unless I'm confusing him with George Bernard Shaw. Well, Wells thought that his system embodied the only solutions to the problems we are confronted with every night and every morn. 'The society I depicted in my books can confidently look forward to an orderly and efficient administration. We might call its members or kings "Samurai", but if you wish to use the Soviet term "Politburo", I won't remind you of Stalin's purges. Words do not count. Nor should we count the victims, if we take into consideration Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's and Marx's dialectics, its antithesis.'

The Samurai were to base their activities and ideology on science, on scientific methods and their ineluctable progress predicted by the same dialectics and doctrines. This mentality, this attitude towards our life and the world we suffer in – not exactly like Jesus Christ, I must admit – engender all sorts of errors for which we are paying the price, as our ecologically-minded citizens say. They are right of course: it is easy to be right in these matters, whatever American presidents might affirm in their speeches. I suppose H. G. Wells would have joined the optimists whose belief in our invulnerability and forthcoming immortality is unshakeable. He must have said many times that sooner or later we would dominate the flora and fauna; and earthquakes, tsunamis and suchlike. I cannot quote you chapter and verse, but I am pretty sure he said so many times – perhaps during his discussions with Stalin or Lenin. Of course he knew nothing about Aids and the coronavirus that is about to convey humanity to the threshold of demise, as I call this threshold or state of affairs. In the 21st century we no longer talk about Aids which continues to pester everybody, with the exception of the impotent. If plague and tuberculosis no longer

deprive us of Mimis and poets, we are definitively and defiantly on the safe side; on the side of immortality, in other words. That is what most of us thought only seven months ago, before the advent of the coronavirus, before its coronation. And now most of us think we are on the unsafe side forever: what happened seven months ago is more or less tantamount to the revolution successfully staged by Copernicus. Anyway, it is a turning point in our history: we have turned away from our dominance of nature and the future. Some of us might have realised we unavoidably depend on another energy which is far superior to all our powers and atoms put together. (Let us call it 'The Alenergy'.) And apparently this particular Air Force One dislikes our prides and prejudices rather intensely, judging from the virus's intensity and virulence. And its callous, careless approach to the tragedy of the human condition. Copernicus displaced or rather dethroned the human race by setting the sun in the middle of the universe (of *their* universe), making us turn around it as if we were just fawning men and women, nothing more – just the stuff the sun's dreams are made on. The coronavirus removed us from a homemade, rickety armchair, and we found ourselves on the floor or in the toilet one has to use on a train, after queuing for this opportunity, after watching how several people do their best not to demean themselves in the middle of nowhere. Now most of us are aware of our sorry plight – I, for one, do not feel sorry for humans – of our inability to cope with the destiny we did not opt for; unless my wife is right and we were *invited* to this Earth in order to accomplish our duties. As her or the Almighty's guests, I suppose. Well, we had presumptuously assumed the role of dictators or kings; not of philosopher-kings, though. We are already dead, to some extent or entirely and for good; and the Martians are entirely blameless, for all the information supplied by H. G. Wells and Hollywood producers. And even they are not in a position to raise us from the dead, removing our bodies from our makeshift tombs. 'Here is God's work besought,' as Mylius says in his alchemical treatise. 'For it is a great mystery to create souls and to mould the lifeless body into a living statue.' Incidentally, some time ago I voiced my objections to H. G. Wells' diagnosis of the origin of the Martians' disappearance from the surface of the Earth. I thought at the time that a bacteria or a virus was incapable of undermining, let alone destroying, such extra-terrestrial robots equipped with heat rays and other supernatural gadgets, due to their superhuman technology and skills. But suppose they did succumb to a virus unknown on their planet, among their species whose attention was focused on immortality and not on death which is mightier than immortality and eternity. Let us not forget that *fatum* was far superior to the Grecian gods – the fact regarded by many theologians as a fruitful source of Christianity and its inception. Humanity needed a god who could triumph not only over *fatum*, but also over death himself.

Spiritually minded humans search for the gods everywhere, but their favourite hunting ground is situated up there, in the heavens. It goes without saying, for our books and treatises abound with vertical élans and hopes. H. G. Wells did not realise to what extent we depended on the arts, on music and poetry – for our salvation, not for our creature comforts. (Some poems sound very uncomfortable.) Stephan George describes the misery of whoever walks on the surface of the Earth and then says in German, 'Those to whom our thoughts are directed walk in heaven and every step they make is an immeasurable flight. And their wings reveal the last enigma or puzzle of the universe. And also their intentions. They are about to alter the stuff of laws on their altars and create a new space within our decrepit space, new rooms inside our putrid bedrooms' (*...siewandten / Stoffes gesetze and schufen / Neuen raum in den raum...*) As an inveterate (former) bachelor I am used to rinsing bowls, plates and cups instead of putting them into my dishwasher after every meal or high tea or low coffee, as I call it: my coffee is undrinkable. My wife loads the dishwasher every day and the Martians have already adopted the same procedure in regard to our world except that they do not stuff our spaces into their dishwashers. (They have none.) According

to our poets, they first create a new space within our dirty, vicious space and then throw out the latter: it is easier to create a new space within something, not in the open ether. But once it is there, right in front of you, you should get rid of its shell or envelope. 'There cannot be real happiness without abolition of old spaces,' they point out.

Let us now return to the hero (a Hollywood actor) who went in search of Martian blood, hoping his skin would become as smooth as silk – as a result of this form of baptism. It goes without saying that not for an instant did he think of his adventure in terms of spiritual baptism: the Martians were regarded as a multitude of antichrists whose coming was the opposite of Christ's appearance on the Earth and in the universe as such. But even an antichrist (a sterilised one) can prove to be a wonderful healer – somewhat akin to a medieval sorceress. We are used to the images displaying for the sake of our unconscious or perversity a lot of ingredients – the sperm of a cat, an owl's saliva and urine – with which our books and documentaries are literally stuffed. We spot a few drops of sperm and automatically assume they belong to a cat or a tiger, and we hope (another instance of this sentiment) that they have nothing to do with human procreation or masturbation: our sperm is exclusively and exquisitely harmful, if not lethal. In the film and in the books devoted to the subject they seldom depict the sperm in which a lot of babies from these enigmatic planets – Mars, Venus, Pluto – make their way towards reality. Naturally enough, we assume that aliens multiply in a different way – even if they are acquainted with God's injunction. 'All right,' they say to each other (all these aliens) 'we have nothing against this sort of multiplication table, but we do mind imitating earthlings, these ignominious bastards, in this or any other respect. They're so abominable, those devils, that even a modest imitation of their rituals may harm our members and thoughts beyond repair.' Sure enough, there is no love lost between Plutonians, Saturnians and the inhabitants of the planet to which I seem to belong, in spite of my reluctance to acknowledge my whole-hearted approval of its beauty and contents. I cannot say I dislike Swiss lakes and mountains; nor have I ever questioned my overwhelming loyalty to Beethoven and Giovanni Bellini. But it is enough to watch a bullfight to realise how base, corrupted and nauseating our so-called human nature has always been.

We have always been bad and mad – even worse than Byron, but one should not speak of gladiators in relation to bulls and toreadors: they are not on equal footing. Gladiatorial combats provided a lot of fun to spectators and this aspect of our condition – being enamoured of blood-shedding fun – is incorrigible and no saviour will ever cure us of this immortal disease. Bulls and matadors are not equally equipped for the fight they engage in for the sake of a fun-loving audience. Bulls need neither banderillas nor lances to make mincemeat of matadors or toreadors. They would do it with great gusto, even if properly fed before the fight – just to avenge the representatives of their species who have fallen in the course of past centuries. Moreover, they need no weapons to tear matadors to ribbons, and I would gladly offer these decorations to the ladies whose applause and shouts enhance the morbid atmosphere of arenas. Let me digress for a moment to say that the ancient Greeks practised many forms of combat and some of the stories told of them and their participants compare with the feats of modern Eastern martial artists and exceptional bulls. As some of us know, the boxer Milo of Crotona was capable of killing a bull with one blow from either hand. This incredible feat has been demonstrated by the modern Karate Master Oyama – in front of television cameras that are keen on murders, even if some of them eschew the sight of bloodshed. Actually Milo – Russian women call him '*mily*' ('darling'); gays prefer the nickname 'Venus' – was often asked to shed the blood of the bull he had cold-bloodedly murdered. So he often continued to hit the bull either with his hands or his feet until the blood deigned to spurt out all over the arena. And some ladies bathed in this blood as if such a ritual could restore their youth or passions or la joie de vivre depicted in *Satyricon*.

Let us go back to our feeble-minded and feeble-muscled matadors. Nothing prevents you from viewing their bodies, our body, as a collection of ribbons of various sizes and values. It is true that no woman will ever ask you to offer her a ribbon made from a toreador's flesh, despite the love she can feel when admiring the art and courage of this toreador. But you do not have to tell her anything as you offer her a beautiful ribbon you can previously tint, taking your cue from alchemists. And if, out of feminine curiosity, this lady inquires about the nature and colour of your gift, you can answer, 'I'm an alchemist. I hope you don't believe the rumours that relegate our procedures to the Middle Ages and antiquity, to the Dark Ages, so to speak. Alchemy is very much alive and its methods inspire scientists and artists.' But most of the women to whom you offer human flesh are quite satisfied with the object itself and have no desire to get to the bottom of the mystery surrounding whatever decorates their breasts and necks. Beauty should not be dissected, as the saying goes – for the simple reason that the morsels you get in the course of the operation are not as beautiful as the original.

Another version of the story that tells about the alien invasion to which I have partly devoted this book sheds light on our attachment to jewels, curios and antiques. You buy a house and begin to fill it with the objects you will need almost every day: a fridge, a chest of drawers, an electric cooker. By using them correctly (you should not leave the fridge open for hours) you can sustain your body; but not your eyes, alas. They also need food and diligently, generously, you provide food for them too. You buy paintings, sculptures, antiques and a few ribbons for your wife. And if she asks you where these ribbons come from, you may answer, 'You like bullfights, don't you?' 'How disgusting,' she may answer. 'Do they come from a bull's body? You know I hate bulls and other animals to the point of applauding their utter annihilation.' 'I would never have dreamed of offering you a bull's flesh. What you're wearing now used to hang from your favourite matador, from his bones.' I do not think our aliens are fond of bullfights; they are probably not aware of them, for their knowledge mainly concerns high culture, music, our psyche. And if we ask them, 'What's your opinion on the matter?' 'On what matter?' 'On our matter, on our race.' 'Aren't you spirits?' they may inquire. 'You overestimate our propensity for spiritual maturity.' 'But there are many alchemists in your midst. Don't they endeavour to turn your body into a pure spirit? Or rather they separate your body from your soul, if we understand these matters rightly.' 'You should say, "These spirits," not these matters,' we round off.

Many people openly declare the Martians came to our planet in order to get a few ribbons for their wives and mistresses. 'They observe the rules of chivalry that we forgot and forwent a long time ago. They salute the ladies of their hearts ceremoniously, on bended knee. And they offer them jewels and ribbons and necklaces. The most precious gift is a ribbon made of human flesh.' Of course you can enlighten these ladies on the origin of the ribbons they are longing for. They are not *made* of human flesh. They just *come* from it. As a matter of fact – and this fact is open to dispute – the Martians landed on the Earth in the company of their long knives, somewhat similar to our two-edged swords. These knives bore a lot of in-built rays so you could not organise a fencing tournament, counting on the Martians' participation. Actually you could have done it, considering that we all live in free countries and are allowed to do almost everything – within reason and laws. But engaging in a fight with such an adversary would be unreasonable: he might burn you alive, even if you fence much better than he does. It is true that he might have done a bit of fencing while he was at college, but you are an Olympic champion and your living room is decorated with the medals (and a few ribbons) you have got in the course of your triumphal march through tournaments and countries. But what are you supposed to do when confronted with a heat ray? Your technique is perfect; your art is beyond compare. You are on the verge of another victory. Suddenly you see

a light that has nothing to do with the enlightenments they talk about in books and churches. It is not the global warming we know by heart that you experience right now, although, at the outset of this torture, you can remember our ecology, the dire straits it is in. But the torture does not really prolong your agony and you burn alive, as usual – as usually happens when a Martian encounters an earthling; not on an equal footing, needless to point out.

‘I announce therefore to all you sages, that unless ye slay me, ye cannot be called sages. But if ye slay me, your understanding will be perfect, and it increases in my sister the moon according to the degree of our wisdom, and not with another of my servants, even if ye know my secret.’ Neophytes assume that this discourse on the life before and after death, or just on death himself denotes either a simpleton or a downright masochist, a maniac whose utmost pleasure lies in death coming from the outside; and suicide always comes from the inside, even if you neither poison yourself nor will yourself to death. As a matter of fact, the supplication directed towards others has nothing in common with masochism unless spiritual upheavals, resurrections of all kinds and gold ingots can be regarded as the symbols of masochism. I have forgotten whether the stage I am alluding to is called ‘nigredo’ or ‘negrido’ or just greed – many of us believe that alchemists fiddle with retorts and sulphur only for the sake of money – but I am pretty sure that the slaying emphasised through my quotation can be represented by the victims of the Martians. Their imprints were lying on the surface of the Earth, not in a retort, in a medieval laboratory, but the ashes collected on those spots (there were many of them, alas) might have led the collectors to self-knowledge and the light they ignored because they were not seeking it. And God did not bestow it on them as if they had not deserved His gifts, His mere attention, His noncommittal glance.

Incidentally, the priest I enlarged upon at the beginning of my chronicle could have been saved, had he uttered these words within the Martians’ hearing: ‘I announce therefore to all you sages, that unless ye slay me, ye cannot be called sages.’ Humans often do the opposite of what they are told (of what is gold): it is second nature to them. (*Esprit de contradiction*.) The Martians might belong to the same psychological type, as Jung was accustomed to pointing out in his lectures and books. If you say to them, ‘Please, don’t kill me. For God’s sake, don’t harm my fragile body in which my immortal soul continues to purify itself. Extinguish your heat rays that hurt us atrociously. Think about our children and wives who need bread and butter and candyfloss. They’ll never get any of these items, if you kill me on this spot. Can’t you withhold your aggressiveness and fire? And brimstone? Let’s find another spot, I beg of you. This one doesn’t appeal to my senses, to my aesthetic and ethical senses. To my sixth sense, let alone the five senses they always speak about in scientific books. Let’s postpone this hostile encounter – the weather forecast is bad.’ If you talk to them like that, they will burn you dead on the very spot you did your utmost to denigrate so thoroughly.

If, however, you are eager to stay in this vale of tears forever, just shout, ‘Slay me for God’s sake, otherwise I’ll never see the Almighty’s face, chest and collarbones. Don’t you understand what I’m talking about? When did you have your wisdom teeth out? And your wisdom thoughts? I naively assumed you were on target. I would never have taken the trouble to keep this appointment, had I known how disappointing you are, my dear alien idiots.’ After hearing you out, they are likely to put their heat rays away (in their pockets or cupboards) and forget about your very existence. Had they killed you outright, they would also have forgotten you, but it is not their memory you bow and scrape to – as far as I know. Why should you? You should care only about your salvation, purification; about the golden mine of your mind. An alchemist spends some time in a retort (or a crucible) where a liquid (why not water?) slowly comes to the boil, bent on purifying your soul and separating it from your tendons, sinews, organs and nerves. It does not really matter where you spend your time, provided you purify yourself and get rid

of impurities, to put it mildly. They cling to your soul and you plunge into a bowl of hot sulphur (whatever that is) to get a first-class ticket to Paradise, as Dostoyevsky put it. You go to the airport and say to an employee or a cashier or a spaceship's attendant, 'The first-class ticket to Paradise, please.' And the cashier answers, 'No more tickets, Sir (or Madam, or your Ladyship).' Then you say, 'How so?' No point in talking to cashiers, employees or attendants: they are under the orders of the Almighty. And this Almighty can turn out to be *that* Almighty: just the boss of a large international company.

Your impurities and stupid beliefs will not get you anywhere, as the saying goes. But what can get you *anywhere*, and where is this *anywhere* located? Probably in the Hereafter, and many people turn tables to find out what happens beyond the threshold of death because nothing really happens on Earth except catastrophes, both psychological and astronomical. The moon looks angrily at the Earth and a hurricane leaves its hiding place and devastates California or another part of our heritage. Thanks to Paracelsus who drew our attention to the parallels between planets and our organs, we can cure a few diseases such as diarrhoea. We rejoice on our way out of the toilet and die on the way to the kitchen where a succulent dish is still waiting for us. I do not remember which planet takes care of our indigestion, but this morning I saw an image which may inspire a few naive earthlings who hope their relatives will come back to life. These relatives were either killed by aliens or died on their own, assisted only by cancer or tuberculosis. On the image I contemplated this morning Saturn yields up the children he has swallowed. When? Where? No idea. But, according to the picture, Saturn is the leader of the wise and so we had better follow him whatever his final destination. (Wisdom, I suppose.) The image talks about the *Materia Prima*, imbibed and heated in the right proportions. But where can this *Materia* be found, collected, imbibed and heated? And when? The when is also of the utmost importance, which we forget pretty often, engrossed in the where – on the spot that keeps our immortality intact. And some earthlings believe the where is situated on the spot where the victims of the Martians (see the beginning of the book) were (where?) mercilessly killed.

So they go to the spot, identify the imprints left on the soil (Here's my father, I'm sure), collect the ashes and go home, anxious to put them into their retorts before the 'entire disappearance of life', as they put it. They think this kind of ash continues to live after death almost automatically, somewhat in the manner of our nails, hair or tumours. Oddly enough, cancerous tumours continue to grow even in our coffins as if determined to undermine our afterlife, even if we deserve the honour of spending the rest of our eternity in Paradise. What is the use of enjoying your stay in Paradise if these malignant cells proliferate throughout your glorious body? Well, let us put this question aside: we are not in Paradise yet and so the problems we are facing in our pre-Paradise existence demand our immediate interference. What are these problems? Immortality, the final and irrevocable triumph over death that still awaits us in the wings, if not on the stage of life where we have played this tragicomedy ever since our conception. Incidentally, I wonder how we play this comedy in our mothers' wombs. Do we wear masks? Do we perform a *commedia dell'arte*? What did *I* perform in my mother's womb? (After all, I am interested only in myself.) Had I been assigned the task of bringing Pierrot back to life? In my mother's womb?

Of course no one prevents us from tackling the problem of our personal immortality – as long as we are on the *surface* of the Earth, in the vale of tears and phony triumphs. But the dead are dead and some of us can contemplate their imprints, left behind by the Martians and their rays. So we collect the ashes and sprinkle them with what the Russians call 'the saint water' that is supposed not only to remove cancerous cells from our bodies and minds, but also to resurrect us in the event of our untimely demise. (All demises are untimely, as we know only too well.) So we sprinkle the ashes with this water and wait without looking at our grandfather clocks: we

should take care of our nervous systems. And then we recall the importance of the sun and the moon. Their fluids (the Russian way of putting it) can bring us back to life, provided we show the ashes to them, to the sun and the moon and also to Saturn; just in case. The corpse was severely dehydrated and needs fluids urgently, as Russian witches say as they carry the retort out, into the open air. Once outside, they have to decide what kind of influence they should use, because the moon is a woman and the sun a man. If you wish to resurrect a man, you should bathe his body in the rays of the sun. The only snag is you do not know whether you should not rather resort to the moon's fluids to take advantage of the notion known to Platonists and also to all those who understand the word 'androgynous'. Some witches say, 'This man died because his masculine nature was too narrow – narrow-bodied, as it were. If your body is too narrow, it has no room for immortality, for eternity. Eternity is large and you can't insert it into the puny constitution of a masculine, anti-androgynous man.' Incidentally, if you say to Swarznigg, 'You're anti-androgynous,' he might answer thus, 'I'm not a misogynist. I adore women and I've never slept with men, although some of my assistants are very handsome, as handsome as Adonis. I just happen to be a man, that's all.'

The point is the situation we are confronted with presents a few insuperable problems: nothing is one-sided in this life that always resembles a coin – a flying saucer in its right. (On the one side it is just a saucer; on the other it is a cup teeming with hostile aliens.) The female principle has in mythology a destructive as well as a creative aspect. Let us not forget that muses create and sirens destroy. Of course it is risky to expose the ashes of a man to the sun: masculinity plus masculinity may drive the corpse into the Earth instead of conveying it to the dinner table. But sirens can destroy the ashes and everything else, down to the immortal soul. No point in shouting, 'Muses are welcome and sirens must go to Hell,' because acoustics and the open air may let you down, betraying your intentions most atrociously. As a result of their malignancy a group of muses land up in Hell, whereas an army of sirens rush towards the ashes and lead them astray – to the same Hell, in other words. Besides, the moon and the sun seldom meet in the sky we can gaze at for hours; when sitting on the terrace of our country house, for instance. So you have to carry ashes to-in and fro-in, shaking them ruthlessly. You might also lose some of them on your way back to the house. As a result of this particular mishap, you are likely to bring back to life a one-legged man or woman; or an absolute half-wit. Last night such an idiot wrote the following poem:

*I thought I was a flower
In my own garden or niche.*

*I am not. I hope I am
A niche in my
Own.*

I am sure the above poem will be commented upon, for we are in love with idiots, and this statement does not concern surrealists and humanists only. Of course a lot of charity balls are organised for their sake so their lifestyles are incomparably more luxurious than those of ordinary, more or less intelligent citizens. Somebody makes a speech, other humanists applaud and draw banknotes out of their pockets. They put the banknotes on a table in front of which many people sit and check their forthcoming speeches. Then a cashier counts the money and says, 'Quite enough, you know. Otherwise they might get obese, and we don't have enough money for crash diets and

crash-diet clinics.’ Apparently in Russia they are less expensive than in Germany, according to what I saw on television, but anyway prevention is better than cure. In this case, prevention amounts to parsimonious contributions. Yet it is rather ludicrous (isn’t it?) to pay for lack of food, for the emptiness of your dinner table – a familiar sight in paupers’ households. Of course a lot of jokers are likely to point out that genuine paupers have no houses and no holds: they have nothing, in other words. ‘They can’t even say, “I have nothing to write home about,” for they have no homes. There’s no denying, however, that they have quite a number of nothings. But you shouldn’t write home about them, especially if you have no home, either sweet or bitter.’ Well, you are sitting at an empty table – in a crash-diet clinic, needless to say. A nurse comes in and puts a bill on this table, on the spot where a plate embellished with a lobster should be found and enjoyed at leisure. ‘Do I really have to pay for emptiness?’ you ask. ‘And what about me?’ asks the nurse. ‘By the way I’m pregnant. And your dinner table isn’t empty either,’ she adds, touching the bill with her fingertips.

Before going back to Saturn and his children, let us comment on the above poem before others set about it clumsily and without much fervour. Anybody can say, ‘I thought I was a flower,’ especially when there are four people around a dinner table – two couples, obviously. You say something silly or deliberately absurd to trigger off a discussion: even if these two couples hate each other and have no wish to talk about anything, either silly or serious, inevitably one of the participants will ask you a question about this flower. ‘Did you really? Did you hope someone would pick you up?’ or ‘Were you afraid your hands and even your face smelt of onions?’ You may answer thus, ‘Don’t you know that St John of the Cross makes flowers the image of the virtues of the soul, spiritual perfection being the bouquet into which they are gathered?’ The hosts and the guests are sure to burst into laughter and the atmosphere of gloom will vanish into thin air – without any outside assistance such as a recording of the Modern Jazz Quartet. Or you can say, ‘Aztec civilisation cultivated ornamental garden flowers as a pleasure for gods and men and also as a source of inspiration for artists and poets. I wouldn’t have been able to write this poem had I not identified with this flower – with the flower of the poem, I mean. Besides, the flowers themselves – I’m still dwelling upon the Aztecs – symbolised the phases of cosmogonic history. Our times remind me of an item of news I read about many years ago – in The Times, I think. “Six people were rescued by helicopter from a fishing boat in distress off the Cornish coast.” Well, today the whole population of the Earth is in distress, considering the coronavirus’s ominous presence. I wonder what kind of air-sea rescue could help us. Should we send an email to the Martians? We’re badly in need of our history, of its future history, of our personal histories’ happy endings. And of cosmogony of course.’ The effect produced by your poem will be even more spectacular if you have no garden to speak of; just a path leading to the nearest street. But if your guest alludes to the lack of any garden on your territory, if any, you might get angry and the dinner will be spoiled irremediably. ‘You couldn’t be a flower in your own garden,’ he might say, ‘because you don’t have one. I can’t see any niche either. Why don’t you just squeeze into your biggest vase? You can’t do otherwise.’ You had better be Zen about this disrespectful remark. ‘You’re right. No garden, no niche. That’s why I say “I am not,” you know. But I hope you’ll allow me to be a niche, a hollow in one of my walls. Actually they’re not mine: we’re renting this house.’ You can also be *extremely* Zen about it. ‘If asked, “Does a dog have a Buddha-nature?” you may answer, “U,” which means “is”, “being”. Why give such an answer? Thinking of that which is not a garden, niche or flower, as garden, niche, flower – this is “U”.’

No existence – what does that mean? If you look at me, if you take the trouble to look at me, you see I am here. But look over there and you will find me over there and everywhere. You look up, you look down, you go

down and collect some earth which you put in a vase. Lo and behold: there is a flower in this vase as if it had been growing there for ages. And yet it is as fresh as a daisy. You look up and see me among monsters, in the hands of Saturn, in his mouth, in his belly. I am about to be born and it is probably my fifth or seventh birth, spiritual, physical and otherwise; otherwise there is no birth whatsoever. Now we can go back to Saturn and the children he yields up. They say he swallowed them once upon a time, and at the same time he yields, which may abolish time once and for all. You are in his mouth, in his bowels. You are also in the Earth and in a crucible where your earth is turning into water and evaporates so as to reach the Ether or Esther. No one knows what or who you are reaching for. I undergo metamorphoses, for I have to go somewhere, under the earth, in all probability, in search of metals. But for this palpable earthly substance, existence and stance, I would never have been born. And even death goes underground and only down there do I find myself, my hands and lips, my sense of touch, my touching existence.

As I go back to Saturn I keep wondering why he swallowed those children: even naughty, nasty children do not deserve such a death. If we take into consideration today's tendency to regard children as our only precious possession, we shall doubtless adopt lenient methods when dealing with them. On no account should we flog them as if they were the horses momentarily linked to Raskolnikov's and Nietzsche's destinies. Even if we continuously slip on the banana skins they put across our paths, we should not thrash them either with a whip or an innocent-looking belt. You fall down the stairs and injure your back or break your leg or both. (Or both legs.) You have an irresistible urge to spank the brat whose mischievous behaviour is unquestionably responsible for your falls down the stairs and also out of two windows. But you do nothing of the sort and banana skins sprout up everywhere: in your bathroom, in the suburbs of the city where your family has lived for more than 20 years. But you should not forget that Saturn might have swallowed them in those days, when children were mercilessly beaten at schools and also at home and sometimes in their beds where they would stay for weeks, if not for months, unable to move, let alone to walk and play soccer. Consequently his behaviour was quite in keeping with the rituals that, in those days, surrounded him on all sides as if to suggest he should punish the children. Looking for a whip and flogging them would have been beneath his dignity so he just swallowed them, being averse to the idea of munching on their bodies and digesting them in his bowels.

Did they deserve such treatment? Many years, if not centuries, have elapsed between what we are witnessing today and those children's misdemeanours, but one thing is certain and can be certified by all witnesses: Saturn did not digest them in his belly, which might have led to his yielding them up differently. What were they doing in his belly? Let us not omit the following crucial detail: they spent a long time inside this monster or god, and they were bound to do something during the centuries lying between their disappearance and deliverance. Did they play soccer inside Saturn's corpulent constitution? With the exception of cripples, all children play soccer; even female children do it nowadays. No one knows whether they availed themselves of the joys related to soccer in days of yore, but let us put this question aside: it seems irrelevant to the problem we are scrutinising as we do our best to find out why the children found themselves in Saturn's belly. Well, they might just have twiddled their thumbs, for all I know: there is no much room for football and even tennis inside our god's or devil's body. What else could they have done? Did they read instructive books? Did they tackle koans and their mysteries? Apparently you can spend your life unravelling the intricacies of the meanings enclosed within one single koan. Is carrying out this ritual worth your while? Does this sacrifice transport Zen Buddhists to heaven? We already know that Christ's blood – the portion He spilt on the Cross – can ensure your transportation to Paradise's most attractive park. But the children I am speaking of had no opportunity to reach the Cross either realistically or spiritually:

they had not been trained to be mystics or visionaries or lunatics. Nor had they been taught the importance of Zen Buddhism, of Zazen and other disciplines connected with the cult to which a multitude of people devote their leisure hours.

What we do know concerns their deliverance. On the image I saw in my books they fall out of Saturn's mouth and land on the lawn where he must have been standing for some time. Why did this enigmatic creature (half monster, half planet) resolve to liberate the prisoners? What good deeds did they execute to be released on parole? Or did Saturn allow them to forsake his substance forever? Inside his belly they could not have taken part in charity balls. Nor did they ring old people's doorbells, bent on providing a morale booster. (A loaf of bread, a Christmas song.) They might have been praying for years and years. Or they just revolted against foreign rule and established their own government, as so many nations have always done. And their government decreed an end to discrimination on grounds of age. Indeed you cannot put a middle-aged, corpulent man into your mouth and swallow him either with the intention of digesting him for the sake of your stomach's doubtful pleasure or just for the fun of it. What kind of fun are we dealing with in the present case? You have a man or a woman in your belly. Let us suppose you are a man and you wish to possess the woman you love so completely you are prepared to eat her, saying to amazed bystanders, 'Napoleon wished to devour Josephine – the supreme proof of his love, of anybody's love. Or hate.' Indeed you can devour someone out of hatred, for the sake of justice. It is all the more understandable since you are not a whale and consequently do not swallow prophets who, after spending a few months in your intestines, return to their native countries and resume their sermons, resolved to save humankind, animals, plants and water. (The air and fire can be left in peace.) You put your enemy into your mouth and munch on him (not her: you are a gentleman) ferociously. Then you swallow his morsels and your bowel, your whole digestive system, does the rest. One is tempted to attribute to them the following words, 'You're getting what you deserved,' repeated several times in a row. When your neighbour or a colleague says, 'Please excuse my stomach rumbling – I haven't eaten all day,' you are bound to realise he recently devoured one of his enemies.

Let us go back to Saturn and his children who have become his in the course of their prolonged, unpleasant stay in his stomach. By the way, I omitted to analyse a similar situation with regard to a man or a woman who can be eaten either by an ogre or an ordinary man. You often say to your parents or fellow students, 'He put a grape into his mouth and swallowed it whole,' as you talk about another fellow student of yours. You cannot utter the same sentence, if you deal with a human body: even a dwarf would present you with lots of problems. Be that as it may, you cannot swallow him or her whole. A human being, I mean. You have to munch on him or on *her* – for argument's sake, let us disregard your courtesy, your impeccable manners – and swallow the result, saying to your victim, 'You're not Osiris so no one will be able to resurrect you.' Your behaviour is more or less logical, if we take into consideration the fact that by this time (dinnertime) your disagreement had reached such a pitch there was no hope of an amicable conclusion. But what about love? Why did Napoleon yearn to eat Josephine? If I am not mistaken, in those days they had no X-ray machines that might have permitted Napoleon to watch his wife's behaviour inside his body. Let us not forget, however, the state of her body: even Napoleon was unable to swallow a human being *whole*. What is the point of watching bits of Aphrodite dance in someone's belly? A belly dance, forsooth!

Saturn is back once more. Some time ago (in days of yore no doubt) he swallowed a few children whose bodies did not enjoy themselves (according to our conclusions) inside *his* body, corpulent or otherwise. Never mind, never mind – this episode or rather its prelude is a thing of the past. Why did he swallow them? Do we know

anything about the way they landed up in his stomach? Are we sure they did land up there? In the first place? They might have been born in his vagina, for all I know. Such creatures are in a position to give birth (and death) to all and sundry, according to our books and mythologies. For instance, Zeus gave birth to Athena. I have no idea when I thought up a plan which might allow the inhabitants of our planet (it has been spared by the Martians) to live happily ever after – after their respective births. For a while neither your parents nor yourself are really aware of the psychological type to which you belong. And it is important to control the range of your emotions and virtual moods: a lot depends on them in human life, and even the Martians are not altogether free from their influences unless they are just rudimentary robots. Your mother – or your father, for that matter – might be put in the picture about your future at the very outset of your prenatal life. Instead of pointing all the time at her belly, your mother occasionally complains about her migraines – or splitting headaches which would be more in keeping with what happened to Zeus. Accordingly, one day her head splits open and a baby comes out, her future written all over her mother's face. Many people are likely to say, 'I've been ill and so don't be surprised if do my utmost not to overtax myself. I do realise to what extent it's easy to compare the newborn girl to Athena, deducing her qualities and future from those of her prototype. She might become a mathematician instead, or a female equivalent of Heidegger. But I really have no time to work out what may happen in ten years' time.'

This line of reasoning is extendable at will. You may believe that open-heart surgery – which you heard about on TV – was carried out for the sake of a newborn child. At some point her mother realised her future daughter's propensity for sentimental feelings and heart-to-heart talks was undeniably demonstrated by the heart disease she was suffering from. No wonder that her husband required a timely Caesarean called (on this occasion) open-heart surgery or birth. The child was born with a few tears in her eyes and a piece of music by Tchaikovsky made her cry in earnest. But, contrary to all expectations, she did not become a famous pianist, an unparalleled performer of Rachmaninoff's concerti. She kept on falling in love with bums and princes, paupers and crooners. And she cried so often that her mother would not let her go out without a large supply of handkerchiefs. If, on the other hand, you were born routinely, threading your way along the sexual organs, you will be able to make love three times a day even to ugly, untidy, foul-smelling women. You can also be born from a leg, but in this case it is rather difficult to say what future lies in store for you: you can become either a long-distance runner or a short-distance one.

And then again you think either about Saturn or Zen Buddhism which reminds us that we should not ask questions such as: 'What am I?' 'Whence do I come?' 'Whither do I go?' If you ask yourself the first question, you may answer, 'I am a high jumper.' But your inner 'I', accustomed to mocking you on a regular basis, is sure to say, 'You're not. Now and then you're just high on heroin.' If it is the second question you find on your agenda, you will answer it as follows: 'I'm trying to remember my surroundings, the cell where I was imprisoned for nine months as if to please Dante and pay homage to his mathematics. Was it my mother's collarbone, my father's navel? Is that why I gaze at my navel all the time? To tell the truth, I think my navel is the most beautiful part of my body and there's no reason why I shouldn't look at it day and night. My nightlight is bright enough to enable me to gaze at my navel even at 3 a. m. But I'm very intelligent too, ambitious, self-sufficient and intelligent. So I might have split my father's head open to get involved in the games of the world where only winners prosper and become as famous as Paul McCartney.' But let us not forget that it is pointless to ask about the place from where you came in the first place: now you are in the umpteenth place. You are here (it is pointless to sing 'I wish you were here') and it is this here you should rely upon, if you wish to recognise your inner nature. And this nature of yours does

not depend on the place where you were born, on the organ from which you ultimately sprang. Suppose there were no organs to speak of, to write home about; in other words, there were no organs at all. You came out of the blue and you will go back to the blue, and it is too early to take care of this blue, dusting and repainting it, restoring its colour to the world's prenatal state. Zen Buddhists say that before the birth of the world – and nations have nothing to do in this domain of our thoughts – everyone was the Buddha: horses, dogs, plants and also the tree under which the Buddha himself mediated for many years before teaching his methods and conclusions. All right, let us go back to this state, taking our cue from our comings and goings, from our return to Saturn and Zeus, to Athena and the human brain where so many errors and triumphs originate day and night.

I might have been born in my own brain that was the Buddha in those days, in days of yore when everyone and everything was the Buddha himself. So if someone puts this question to my brain, I answer, 'It is from this brain you're talking to that I emerged or surfaced in days of yore – in days of awe, as we say now because we can't visualise them, materialise them in our visions. And whatever is mysterious, invisible, unknown makes us shudder with apprehension.' Luckily for us, Zen Buddhists say that all these questions are immaterial, irrelevant and pernicious: we spend too much time on their irretrievable darkness. 'The question itself issues from the very source of all mysteries and inconceivabilities, and asking it defeats its own end. The answer is possible only when we stand away from the conditions in which we are.' But one might say we do stand away from these conditions; after all, we were born and consequently distanced ourselves from the organ or nothingness where we spent some time before our birth in this universe. Suppose I was born in my father's liver, which gives rise to many odd questions I am bombarded with as I progress from one life-stage to another. They say, 'You must be an alcoholic. You have a wine cellar and the number of the bottles you have already drunk might stock a huge wine shop.' I answer that my father seldom, if ever, drank wine or vodka, and that anyway this question and also my answer defeat themselves, for we are talking here and now, and the only way to get away from this situation guides everyone to cemeteries and crematoriums.

I wrote a book about my future, my life in the Hereafter where I might burn in the fire of Purgatory, if not in that of Hell. Let us think in terms of Purgatory, otherwise nothing makes sense: we burn in Hell without writing books and reading them. So I am tempted to ask the following question, 'Why do I burn?' Zen Buddhists answer thus, 'As long as fire is fire and keeps on burning this question is unanswerable, because fire is to burn, just to burn, and not to reflect on itself. To know itself is to cease to be itself.' In Purgatory, while standing bolt upright in this fire, I am sure to say to myself, 'I wish the fire would meditate upon its own condition.' I talk to myself, to the fire, trying my best (not my worst, for once) to talk it into reflecting on itself as if there were something to reflect on. Fire is fire; you strike a match and it starts burning, and sometimes there is no rhyme, no reason to this match and its fire. They do not get close enough to cigarettes and pipes to light them. And those who strike these matches remain where they are, rooted to the spot, and say now and then, 'God spoke to light and there was light somewhere.' Of course this action and its result reflect the nothing of life, its void and self-annulment, but you have to live nonetheless, answering 'To be' to whoever speaks to you on the spur of the moment.

So I speak to the fire I stumbled upon in Purgatory – at least within the bounds of my train of thought – and I say to it: 'You lead a senseless existence. You obey the orders you were given some time ago by some archangel or other. Did you reflect on this archangel and his order? Actually you're supposed to reflect on both before passing on to the archangel herself. You finish your meditation on some and broach the subject called "other", talking to yourself, to one of your numerous selves. Then an archangel comes out of the blue – of the sky, as it were - and

you begin to reflect on her. (Or out of the blue flower.) So let us start the whole procedure, as soon as possible, otherwise I might burn to ashes. Don't forget that the archangel you're meditating upon is not of Martian origin and so I'm not supposed to die, leaving my imprint on the soil. In due course, the archangel will tell you I'm bound for Paradise.' In the meantime, you meditate yourself and you come up with the idea that you neither come nor go, to all appearances. It might appear that your substance (or nonsense, as I usually say) comes in and goes out, now and then, but we know what to think about appearances as such. And Zen Buddhists say, 'You come from nowhere, pass away nowhere; you are neither a mass nor a collection; you are neither static nor becoming; you are not to be located, nor are you to be located in a definite quarter.' So even if you say that, once upon a time, you came from your mother's womb, you are sure to hear the following remark: 'You did not come from your mother's womb because there is no such thing.' 'Which thing are you talking about?' you may ask. 'There is no such thing as mother, yours or someone else's. Consequently there is no such thing as womb. And there are no comings and goings, needless to say. So you cannot go back to your mother's womb, for all your yearnings and yawning. You are getting bored in this world. You are already bored to death. But you do not die and that is the problem you have been unable to solve so far.'

You walk, walk, walk and eventually reach a threshold that does not look like an ordinary threshold behind which there is a door and a bottle of champagne, a fireplace and a couple waiting for you. So you say to yourself, 'This threshold doesn't belong in this life of mine which is no longer mine, to all outward appearances. Let me consult my inner appearances before I jump or rather walk to conclusions. No, now I know for sure that this threshold is otherworldly and so I must be careful before jumping in at the deep end. And even if this end isn't as deep as all that, I should be careful because it's an end after all.' So you look at this threshold for a while as if to decide whether it is better to stay where you are or cross everything at once – after all, this threshold is everything, as far as your life is concerned – and you put your foot on it before doing anything fatal, irretrievable. Your foot must feel something fishy, you think as you continue to analyse the situation in your terms. And yet you are aware that there are situations beyond your control, as some characters say in a film I have almost forgotten. How on earth could you control this threshold, its whereabouts? You say, 'Get away, you bastard. You don't belong in my life or even beyond it. Do you know why? Because everything is eternity and there are no events, as the Chinese put it. You just go from one state to another and what counts is the number of your metamorphoses. And if you're not good at mathematics, you may just forget everything, including your body. Zen Buddhists are right: you must get rid of your body. How? You give your collarbones to your mother and all other bones to your father. Does that suit you?'

Well, let us go back to Saturn again. As they say, he continues to yield up the children I have seen so many times, in the same picture, in the same book. But this does not mean anything, considering that these children neither come nor go, and if we accept Saturn's generosity, we must also opt for these children's future. They are becoming visible and with the passing of the years, they might become a bunch of middle-aged men and women. And this bunch is bound to be located in a definite quarter. You might write this affirmation off by saying, 'There are many grown-ups in this bunch and they don't live together unless they belong to a utopian community. Or they live in a huge communal apartment – in the Soviet Union, for instance. But the Soviet Union is a thing of the past and so are its satellite states. So what are you talking about? What definite quarter do you have in mind?' I am watching Ligeti's *Grand Macabre*, and I say to myself that many ex-Soviet citizens and also the citizens whose native countries were located within the former communist bloc hang onto the notions they have been familiar

with ever since their births: dictators, incessant applause, phony slogans, five-year plans. Dictators are not always stupid: Julius Caesar was not. I use these notions as the mere elements of human mythology. And all its elements should be used, in my opinion, otherwise in some years or months we shall no longer have any mythology in our possession, at our disposal. And if you are in need of your whereabouts or definite quarters, if you wish to place them in your recollection, you can always speak of Julius Caesar and Jesus Christ, of the Rubicon and Golgotha.

The children continue to come out of Saturn's mouth and I wonder if they were not born within this monster's body. After all, the monster's association with King Janus, who is believed to have welcomed him to Rome, left behind memories of a golden age and, in this context, he symbolises the culture-hero and especially the one who teaches the arts of agriculture. So we have many contexts and possibilities within our reach, some of which lead us to the Soviet collective farms I forgot many years ago, assuming I ever recalled them, and to artists, to the culture-heroes of the past. (I, for one, do not care about the present.) So once again we have no idea to which categories of citizens the children born out of a mouth belong; their personal identity (*kseion*, if I am not mistaken; and I must be mistaken) escapes us completely, absolutely. At Saturn's festival, the Saturnalia (linguistically logical), the social order was reversed and slaves ruled their masters, the latter serving their slaves at table. That is what happened after the so-called Russian Revolution onto which I will never hang, whatever they say about the influence exerted by one's childhood over one's adulthood. I recall a Soviet film in which an admiral was sitting at a table in a Parisian three-star restaurant. One of the waiters turned out to be his former owner, so to speak: a representative of the landed gentry who – at least within the context of the film – ill-treated him atrociously. A good example of how a slave can become a master; no need to read Hegel's works in the original. A specialist can always argue about the origins and the significance of the Russian Revolution: it is often bracketed with Saturnalias. I am not sure the whole of my native country's history can be regarded as an example of how Saturn and his children disported themselves. On the other hand, I am pretty sure that if you rummage in the Soviet archives, in their drawers, you will find a ludicrous justification of Stalin's purges, based on Saturnalias and our appearance in Saturn's mouth. Slaves overthrow masters; children kill their fathers. But Saturn is still alive, as far as I know. By the way, all Soviet historians and astronomers regarded Saturn as the planet of righteousness and justice. And whenever Soviet rulers came up with a new agricultural idea (the predominance of maize, for instance), scientists reminded everybody that Saturn is connected with the Sun's office of fecundation, of government and of continuity, one ruler succeeding another as season succeeds season; their way of killing several birds with one stone. Soviet dissidents, on the other hand, quoted at length a number of astrologists who maintained that Saturn is a 'wizard' planet and elaborated on its fleeting light universally associated with disappointments and TRIALS (always in capital letters) of life depicted as a skeleton sharpening a scythe. One of the widely appreciated dissident books is entitled *Hammer and Scythe*.

But if you do not know yourself, neither Saturn nor koans can advise you as to how you should behave in everyday life or even in the sort of spiritual life you wish to explore so as not to perish in the mud. And your self-knowledge dramatically depends upon your birth and the earlier stages of your life when you lived with your parents or in an orphanage – in the country of your birth. You are unable to think in terms of emigration and settlements until you have enough money not only for a bus, but also for an Airbus or a Boeing that can convey you to the other side where the grass is always greener. From where you live in your adolescence, you look at the other side on TV or on a computer screen and think, 'I wish they could show a patch of grass instead of multimillionaires and paupers.' And then you exclaim, 'Their grass is greener,' and this exclamation resounds in

your ears and recollection on the day when you eventually pluck up your courage, pack your biggest suitcase and take the next plane to the United States of America. You disembark and if your papers are in order, you begin your new life without undertaking the conversion of St Augustine fame. But it is better and easier to disembark in yourself: you need neither a passport nor money to go on an expedition into your origins. Besides, the grass is always greener within yourself. And the headquarters you occupied in your prenatal period are far more important than your life in the United States, even if you happen to meet Donald Trump and your influential colleagues.

You said you must have been one of the Buddhas you see almost everywhere unless you forget the path leading to the past, museums, India, China, Japan and many other spots where the Martians might have left their traces, being as omnipresent as the Devil – at least in the context of this work, as I am used to saying and writing. One of the koans – they are Buddhas in their own right, as Zen Buddhists affirm – puts you in the picture about yourself. (All other koans do exactly the same, provided you are attuned to them and yourself.) According to this koan, you might look at any object, in any direction; you will always see so-and-so. And this so-and-so is you. And every so is you. And every hyphen is you. I-and-I, in other words and also in other worlds. I look down the street and catch a glance of I. I also spot ‘and’ and start looking for it or him. But I might spare myself the trouble of searching for ‘and’ or even ‘or’, for I am also ‘I-or-I’, and whether I see myself with my inner eye or an outer one does not really matter under the circumstances. And these circumstances are also I, so I can say, ‘Under I.’ Actually I make love to myself in the way described by Othello in Shakespeare’s eponymous tragedy: I lie on myself, under myself, I kneel down before myself, I kiss myself. I can say about the result of my sexual labours, ‘The baby was conceived in March, so he or she will be born in December.’ I engrave a text on my skin, as is done in the film I saw many years ago, the film based on Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book*.

Your prenatal life may be related to one of the organs depicted in a book devoted to the anatomy of the human body; or to that of the universe. You might have been born on a star and that would account for your twinkling, for the propensity you have displayed on many occasions. This propensity can be seen in your eyes, inside them, outside them, but no one says, ‘The radiant smile and the sparkle in her blue eyes are clear signs of a woman still deeply in love,’ for you are not deeply in love, except with yourself. As for the universe, your attitude towards it twinkles as if passing from one state to another. It is neither love nor hate you show to your neighbours or unbiased observers, assuming they are inclined to observe anything. It is the middle way you chose in the course of the prenatal period you travelled through on your way to what may be called the ‘outdoors’. There is a sort of so-and-so in your stance. Sometimes you are ‘so’, sometimes you are ‘so’, and even the ‘and’ can be detected in your face and words as you switch from one so to another.

In Yoel Hoffman’s book *The Sound of the One Hand* I found the following *koan*: ‘Though the body is covered with all sorts of beautiful clothing, the bowls are filled with piss and shit.’ I think one can misinterpret this *koan* – or any other *koan* – rather easily, but that is part of the game, as they say: on your way to the right answer you are bound to make a lot of mistakes, and the corrections you supply are also part of the game. Of what game, I wonder? Of the divine game? Of the Martian game? Of the game played by Saturn’s children in his intestines? For a moment or so, for ten hours at least, I thought that the bowls revealed by the text are the bowls meant for cherries, not for piss and shit. The meaning I hit upon seemed to describe the situation I find myself in as I disembark from someone’s mind or body or soul. Every single day. (From my own mind and body and soul.) And this description fitted my own attitude towards the world into which so many people have been thrown, as so many philosophers put it. (By Saturn or Jupiter, those inveterate children throwers.) Whenever I am in my

own company – and anyone can conclude I am always in my own company, after reading my so-and-so thesis – I feel the beauty of everything, although my clothes are not up to Platonic standards, to the beauty he advocates. They (my cloths) remind me of Wittgenstein who said at some point, when asked about his eating habits by one of his hosts, ‘I can eat anything, provided the food I’m offered is the same.’ I am reluctant to change my clothes which know me even better than I know myself, so my motto sounds thus, ‘Know thy clothes.’

Once again we get entangled in languages, in their letters, meanings, wordplay and games. Upon seeing the light of day you may say to yourself, ‘The world is nothing but a bowl of cherries.’ I remember the cherry jam my grandmother used to put in bowls, but the world has nothing in common either with my grandmother or with the cherry jam I devoured in summertime, throughout the seasons. And all seasons looked and tasted like the cherry jam; so did Vivaldi’s and Tchaikovsky’s *Seasons*. Then you switch to the opposite pole and forget the cherry jam replaced by piss and shit. And after a while you realise that the bowls you lighted upon in the above *koan* are part of the alchemical process to which you intend to devote your life. So is the toad depicted by Bosch in the *Voluptas*. ‘A Toad full Ruddy I saw, did drink the juice of Grapes so fast, / Till over-charged with the broth, his Bowels all to brast.’ ‘Here we have a Toad described, and in it the whole secret of Philosophers: The Toad is Gold; so called, because it is an Earthly Body, but most especially for the black stinking venenosity which this operation comes to in the first days of its preparation, before the whiteness appear; during the Rule of *Saturn*, therefore it is called the ruddy Toad’ (ÆyrenaeusPhilalethes, Anglus, Cosmopolita).

THE THREE QUESTIONS OF MASTER TOSŌ

QUESTION ONE

One clears the weeds of idiocy and is enlightened by Buddha’s teaching so that one can see one’s nature. Now where is human nature?

ANSWERS

1. One’s nature is in the weeds of idiocy and *Dummheit*, if the weeds are written in German. Today no one clears the weeds of *crétinerie*, for you have to realise you are a cretin. But even if you say to yourself, ‘I’m a cretin,’ you have no tools for clearing or cleaning anything, not even your toilets. If you spend your life looking for tools you cannot find, you are a double cretin or a damned fool; otherwise you are just a cretin. And you are damned.

2. In days of yore human nature was in a lake, in a mountain, on its top and also inside it, in a tree of life, in a tree of wisdom, in Dante’s *Commedia*, in Euripides’ *Tragedia*, in a dog, in a cat, in a mouse no cat will ever eat, on a star, in a daffodil, in a cloud, in a grain of sand, in a drop of milk. I have no idea where it is now. Nor do I have any idea as to the whereabouts of what they call ‘second nature’. Anyway I have no wish to look for human nature. And I would not pick it up, even if it was lying on my chest of drawers.

3. I wonder if I should look into myself, for I am poisoned. I would do better to look at a tree or at my cat. And I should talk to my cat instead of talking to myself. No more interior monologues. Only exterior dialogues. And even if human nature were within hearing distance, I would not hear it, let alone listen to it. Today human nature shouts or screams, but I am not its saviour, not even a member of its club. So here is my answer to the question called upon to elucidate the topographical mystery of human nature: it coincides with shouts and screams. I coincide with my deaf ear that I turn this way and that: the world is overpopulated.

4. How to weed out human idiocy? You find a few weeds (nothing in common with Pascal's *roseau*) and write 'Human Idiocy' on them. And then you weed them out. But language is neither omnipresent nor omnipotent. Even if everyone grows mute – you should outgrow words – you will find idiocy everywhere. Nothing doing, nothing saying. Weeds and reeds are not supposed to think, whatever Pascal (or Descartes) might have said on the subject. How could they ever think? Did they think when uttering their words? Academics thought we should weed philosophers and their thoughts out. So human nature is out. There are only weeds and reeds that neither think nor exist.

5. If the mind is destroyed, even fire can refresh you, said someone. There are lots of fires all over the Earth. How many historic buildings are damaged by fire each year? Humans call them 'refreshments'. It is as if they were having cold showers. Humans do not know they are in Hell. Human nature is in Hell. This question should be put to Hell. And Hell will answer, 'Right here.' What kind of fire did Cocteau long for? Apparently he answered thus, 'Any fire, provided it is divorced from human nature. I'm interested only in bodies, in burning bodies.' 'Are you in love with Giordano Bruno?' asked someone. 'And what about Savonarola?'

6. Throughout his pilgrimage, the Buddha taught the Noble Truth of Suffering: Birth is suffering, disease is suffering, death is suffering, to be conjoined with things one dislikes is suffering, to be separated from things one likes is suffering, not to be separated from things one likes is suffering, to be in the midst of flames is suffering, to be in water is suffering, open air means suffering, close air means suffering, human nature is suffering. When asked, 'Where is human nature?' the Buddha would point his staff at this, at that, at this, at that. For hours and hours he would turn on his axis and point his staff – at this, at that, at this, at that.

7. You understand the world and its words quite literally. They say you are surrounded by weeds and there are also weeds above your head as if you were designated as 'the saint of weeds'. You begin to weed your surroundings out and soon you notice that your life has holes; or windows, as you call them. If asked about human nature, you answer, 'It is beyond these windows I've patiently created over years.' And if they say, 'You're not a saint, are you? You haven't been canonised, have you?' Then you show humanity the weeds you have already removed from the Earth, from your body and mind. You have the patience of a saint. If asked once more about human nature, you answer, 'Patience.' And then you start to weed their questions out.

8. They say that the weeds you find in Master Tosō's koan stem from the French word '*vide*'. As Heidegger and Jaspers put it, 'You should stand at the edge of a chasm and stare into the void.' And if you ask what kind of void you need to stare into, they answer, 'Before Einstein, space was regarded as a formless void. You should retrace your steps and persuade your time to follow in your footsteps. If the void you get swarms with forms, you might fall, and your fall will be regarded as human nature. So the answer to this crucial question is "a falling body".'

9. Human nature is the set of clothes you wear. You take your clothes off and stamp on them for a while. If asked (Zen masters always ask questions), 'Why are you stamping your feet?' You answer, 'I'm stamping my feet to stay warm.' 'Why do you wish to stay warm? Is warmth your human nature?' 'No. It is the set of clothes I wore some time ago that corresponds to human nature. Today, you had better strip your clothes off all the time.' 'What about wearing masks and gloves? Aren't you afraid of the coronavirus?' 'Masks and gloves denote human nature. So does the coronavirus. "*J'avance masqué*," said Descartes. His mask and his thoughts denote human nature. Human nature is in Descartes' tomb.'

10. I asked my hairdresser to trim my fringe, but she has cut it far too short. 'What did you do that for?' I asked. 'Your hair is the weeds of idiocy,' she answered. 'People used to say, "You look exactly like Prince Myshkin."'

What will they say now?' 'They'll say, "He looks like himself." Here's a mirror. Look at yourself. Can't you see your nature?' 'No.' 'Have you ever seen Zen Buddhists?' 'No.' 'They all have shaven heads.'

11. I am only concerned with moral attitudes. And also with *mortal* attitudes. And I do not care about the outward signs of wealth. *Inward* signs of wealth or poverty are far more revealing and significant. A child in a womb is also an inward sign of wealth. If a woman goes to an abortionist, the latter is likely to ask her, 'Do you have any idea as to human nature's whereabouts?' 'What are you talking about?' she might ask. She does not understand the question. Here is the answer, 'She came out of that death-looking house as poor as the meanest beggar.'

12. I never lost myself in Time so blissfully, with such wild abandon. In those days Time was tantamount to the weeds of idiocy through which I roved for hours and hours, ravenous and radiant. I knew that human nature awaited me somewhere, my sleeping beauty, my purest foolish fool.

13. Today I am sitting in my rocking chair. And I change my position quite often. Quite often. None of my positions is appropriate either for this afternoon or for my life in general. But I am still searching for the right position. I shift position from the front to the back of my room. And sometimes I hold my body in an upright position.

14. I got up, walked over to the window and opened it. Some engine droned on and on. I had no idea what kind of engine it was. Or was it the voice of a child? A whimpering child? You don't have to feed the baby the moment she whimpers. You don't have to feed her at all.

15. I am sitting in my rocking chair. But I am not alone. There is a lamb in my room. The lamb that gambolled 'on the green' a few hours ago. A few months ago. It approaches my body and rubs its head against my hips and knees. Is it a she-lamb or a he-lamb? Perhaps I could add: 'a ewe or a ram'? Are there females and males among lambs? Only females? Only males? 'A young sheep esp. less than one year old with no permanent teeth developed.' But the sex of this animal is not to be deduced from its teeth, I suppose. The sex of *any* animal, come to think of it. Of any creature. Teeth have nothing to do with it. Nothing at all. It is not a question of being devoured. Or bitten. And yet biting is part and parcel of sexual games.

16. A carpenter imitates the ideal bed when he makes just a bed, one bed, a particle of the ideal bed. A poet imitates the carpenter when he describes the bed standing before him. Whom does the poet imitate, when he lies down on that bed? He imitates Zeus, Ares, Aphrodite – everybody. He imitates sleep and human nature. He imitates love, life and Desdemona.

17. The leg of the bed is split. I was afraid it might split. The leg of the bed. I was six years old. I had hidden myself under my uncle's bed. He was making love to his wife. He had a very beautiful wife. My uncle. Now he is an impoverished widower. I spent a whole night under their bed.

18. The leg of the bed is split in order to destroy those below. A lot of people are lying under the bed. Small people. Childlike people. But no one makes love in bed. No one even lies in bed. But the leg of the bed breaks of its own accord. In order to destroy small people. I am lying on the bed.

19. The victory at chess of IBM's Deep Blue over Kasparov raises questions and gives answers. I, for one, am neither impressed nor shocked by this victory. Let us analyse the following sentence, 'Our short-term aim is to deal with our current financial difficulties, but our long-term aim is to improve the company's profitability.' Let us ponder over it, let us not ponder over it: it is not worth our while. Human nature lies beyond aims and victories, in the superfluous, in the no-man's-land, in the no-woman's-land, in the no-land, in the primeval chaos where, according to Wittgenstein, we could at last philosophise in peace.

QUESTION TWO

After you have learnt of your true nature, then you can escape from the cycle of life and death. But when you are on the brink of death, how will you escape?

ANSWERS

1. I would rather be seated in front of a computer. Better the Internet than the dead. Computers can be switched on. And off. And their signals resound in the air, whereas the dead are silent. Even Hamlet is silent, let alone his father's ghost. Moreover, computers always play up to the living. And they answer their questions. And they speak to the living now and then. And they cheer them up. And they play games with the living, all games down to erotic ones.

2. I saw a movie some time ago. A man was making love to a teenager. I could hear her crying out in pain, gasping and groaning. And then – silence. She had stopped breathing. He felt her pulse, reached out for the armchair which traditionally wore his jacket during his clandestine visits, took a paper handkerchief out of an inner pocket and wiped his fingerprints off her breasts.

3. The house in which a tragic hero dwells is perched on the brink of a precipice. The house is not lying on its side at the bottom of the precipice. The house is rocking on the brink of the precipice. And the hero takes a walk in his garden, now and then. And he smiles. And he guffaws. And he roars with laughter. And he kicks the front door as he remembers an episode from his childhood. And yet he has got only six months to live. He mocks his own agony. And he teases his agony. And he tickles it. (His agony is ticklish.) And he caresses it. And he holds it in his lap. He lives with it. And he drinks with it. He drinks to his own health. And his agony also drinks to his health. They often clink glasses.

4. Was it the question of Your program? Had *You* programmed me for six months? Was it too late to modify Your program afterwards? You saw I was madly in love with life. I told You I was madly in love with life. I typed it out. And You memorised it. You memorised my love, my tears. Why didn't You do me a favour? Why couldn't You be humane for once? Just a slight modification in the life-program. Seven months instead of six. Seven years instead of seven months. Life instead of death. Why didn't You do it?

5. I have always been superstitious. Ever since my childhood. Black cats, white dogs. My fingers have been crossed for many years. I can hardly move them. Now it is of no importance. I'll never cross my fingers again.

'A herd of stampeding cattle has trampled down the crops.' This answer is even more alarming than the previous one. 'Eight people were trampled to death when the stadium collapsed and the crowd rushed out onto the football pitch.' Football is my favourite sport! 'Several people were trampled underfoot and seriously injured in the rush to get out of the building.' What building? What if *my* building is about to collapse and I know nothing about it?

6. An ideal wayfarer does not leapfrog from one monument to another, but enjoys a glissando that every pianist should learn in their childhood in order to play melodies smoothly, organically; and a melody is the purest expression of Time. Instead of changing your fingers, which presupposes a leap from one finger to another, you just slide from a black key to a white one, as if caressing both. A cat is sauntering in the garden where, ensconced in a wicker chair, I ponder over my next move: I am a former chess player after all. Should I type yet another word or fool around with the cat? Neither move ensures a victory, but I no longer care about victories and defeats because we often cannot tell them apart; the latter might invigorate an individual (or a nation), putting new life into him. But do I need a new life?

7. You escape from the cycle of life and death and meet the cycle of death and life. Then you plunge headlong into the cycle of non-existence and nirvana. Then the void comes to your rescue and you are rescued by the void, whereupon you find yourself in the middle of the plenty. Have another nirvana – there is plenty more where that came from. Have another vana, and mir means ‘world’ in Russian. Have another nir. And if you meet a woman (or a man), you can say to her (or him), ‘Have another uncle Vania.’

8. The ability to fly between worlds freely and at will is one of the most important powers acquired by shamans during initiation. On the brink of death, you buy a horse and become Don Quixote; or just an ordinary shaman flying through the air on his or her horse; from one threshold to another. Why should you escape from death? Of course you can always say, ‘I don’t fear death because I wish to sever my ties from suffering, rebirth and so on. But I like flying on my horse. And I’m very fond of Richard Strauss’s tone poem *Don Quixote*.’

9. To go – where? To escape – from what? Why? To die – when? Why to die? Who is there? A being of light. I must have died, crossing the threshold of life, of death, of nirvana, of all sorts of kind and perspicacious Vanias. What is this Being of Light’s name? Is he really a Being of Light? Why does she have dark hair? Is she a Being of Dark Hair? The Dark Lady of the *Sonnets*?

10. France is coterminous with Italy. Only during a pandemic can you notice the border separating these two countries. The coronavirus separated them for a while, not forever, whatever happens or does not. Life is coterminous with death. What could separate them? They have been in love with each other ever since the Creation or the Destruction. History has never been able to separate them.

11. You identify with a tree. You do not even have to climb it to reach its top: the top is inside you, at the spot where your soul is located. You look for the brink of death, but it is nowhere to be found as if death had been vanquished by John Donne. You say, ‘I don’t mind your fiddling with death, your tampering with its *tempo*. But I’m very fond of brinks and edges and have no wish to be deprived of them, even for the sake of immortality.’ But you are not even allowed to fall from the tree because you are the tree. The grim reaper is precluded from felling this tree. The Almighty takes pity on you and offers you a scythe. Yes, you are a Christmas tree and the scythe is lying near your roots.

12. This replacement of the mother’s breast by the industrial tin is one of the saddest examples of misdirected ‘modernisation’. ‘If you want an example of the potential poisonousness of the tin, there was the Franklin expedition to – I think – the Arctic circle, or Greenland – I forget,’ said an English friend of mine. ‘The entire crew of the ship went mad and died, without realising the cause. In fact it was the first sea expedition to use canned food, and the cans were sealed with lead – which gave them lead-poisoning.’ Jasper Johns took a tin, wrote on it, ‘The Threshold of Death’ and sent it to a contemporary art gallery. The sculpture *The Threshold of Death* has been exhibited for half-a-century. Only Zen Buddhists run away from it.

13. Summon a contract killer to your door. Open the door. Let him shoot you. Crawl on all fours towards your bed and tell your wife you have been shot dead. Show her your wounds. Let her drink your blood. Your union will be sealed through your blood and death. And she will wound herself of her own accord to follow you into your grave. And you will both drive towards the Hereafter.

14. At the highest levels of Aikido your opponent spends his time on the floor where you push him without touching his body. You just look at him and he finds himself on the threshold of death. How could he escape? I am asked. You switch his vital force off, but not completely, contrary to what may be assumed at the sight of the prostrated body. You leave a tiny quantity of electricity in him. What for? To show the threshold of death, its

faithful image. And then you say to yourself, 'I'm in a good mood today.' So you raise your arms as if to surrender. To surrender to whom? To what? To your good mood, to your innate decency and righteousness. And the body you floored several hours or weeks ago rises from its makeshift tomb. Sometimes it goes so far as to fly off. You shake your head and lower your arms. 'Today, let us be matter of fact and down to earth,' you say. 'Let us be mundane and prosaic.' 'That's how I evade your question,' says the opponent to his Zen master.

15. 'The mind should be completely open,' says a Zen master. 'But if I open my mind,' answers the pupil, 'the coronavirus might enter it and install itself on the brain stem.' 'If this happens, you'll remove this stem from your brain and replace it with the Tree of Life. Your mind should be free, taking in everything without distortion or grasping.' 'Shouldn't I distort the coronavirus?' 'You should grasp it.' 'What if I die in the process?' 'The Tree of Life you've already installed in your brain will assassinate death.' 'What if it doesn't?' 'Your self doesn't exist. What do you fear?' 'The death of my non-self.' 'You should have no thought of self or non-self, no thought of yes or no.' 'Shouldn't I say "no" to the coronavirus?' 'Don't say anything to it. In the long run it will get bored to death and die of its own accord.' 'What if it escapes?' 'It will feel lonely and miss you terribly. So it will come back to you and your stillness will eventually put it to death.'

QUESTION THREE

If you have left the cycle of life and death, you will know where to go. But when the four elements are separated, where will you go?

ANSWERS

1. What elements are you talking about? Water, air, fire and earth? Water can be advantageously replaced by wine, and Scriabin depicted fire much better than any fireplace. So did Wagner. You walk on the Earth, even if you are not really down-to-earth, as they say. Suppose they take the Earth away from you. So what? You will fly and talk to clouds instead of talking to Polonius *about* them. And then you will sail in your boat (the one you can find on Egyptian murals) through the stars instead of singing your silly songs about them. If they deprive you of the air, you will live in the Ether, like any self-respecting alchemist. And what about water? I have never worshipped swimming pools, as so many bourgeois people do: they refuse to buy a house if it has only bathrooms, whatever their number and dimensions. Actually I already touched upon water-wine, and I think I said enough about this transubstantiation. And about the above separation.

2. Some people think – and not all of them are anarchists – that disorder is far more organised (or beneficial) than order. The unorganised power is the Sovereign of the world, as H. G. Wells put it. He kept putting things and words on, down, somewhere, mostly in the future of humankind, and now I am trying to sort them all out. In my opinion he was yearning for the separation hinted at in the above koan. It is something transcending persons, he added. There was already the Wells pile or hill in the future, but he added a few words to it as if it could not have survived without them or this addition. (He was addicted to prophecies.) So many things and Platonic ideas transcend human beings that I, for one, would not care about the Wellsian transcendence. But do these things to come or go transcend the Almighty? All right, this exploit is out of our reach. But what about reaching Him, melting in His heart of hearts? What about becoming a lump of sugar in God's omnivorous mouth? This lump would be the Sovereign of the world.

3. Divine beings sail on the waters of the Great River which animates the Cosmos – the Milky Way – and the deceased, in order to join this celestial fleet, must be provided with ship and steering oar. I see some priests carrying

a number of barques on their shoulders to the quay. (What quay? Where? In Moscow? The Moscva River?) The priests place these barques on huge ships that are drawn along the river. I rise and head for the quay and lie down in one of the barques and go, go, go, go. Where am I going, floating, sailing? I dip my oars into the water and pull. The water pulls as well; so does the ship. The greater the mass of an object, the greater its gravitational pull. The mass is small, the Mass is solemn. The *Missa Solemnis*, no less. No less, no greater.

4. Separation is on the agenda. I write and say, 'I love you,' but even before I finish this sentence I do not know what I am speaking of, for I is I and I am quite aware of what this I (and all other I's) means. But what follows is beyond my ken, beyond any ken I can imagine as I sit in my study and ponder over I and something else I cannot remember. What is it? This is the word they call 'love' and I seem to remember it rather clearly, although mist and snow about which W. B. Yeats spoke so eloquently seem to interfere and blur the picture. I restore the picture and even its primordial colours, but the picture itself is out of focus, in spite of the brightness and authenticity of the colours I am dwelling upon. Am I dwelling upon anything? Yes, I am dwelling upon colours. What colours? What picture? They talk about love; so do I, apparently, to all intents and purposes; to some intents and one purpose. So what are we talking about? And who are you, for God's sake? Who is God? What kind of sake do we have in mind when we talk about God or anything else? Are we talking about anything?

5. I am told that in the East they emphasised the dimension going towards the immeasurable, and consequently you cannot measure anything except love, love, love, which is also immeasurable, otherwise it is not love you are talking about. You measure your steps as you go towards your death and the dead in general who are everywhere, as your instinct and knowledge say to you day and night. All right, you are going towards death, parting from whatever is dear to you, and they call it fragmentation or separation or whatever. There is a fragment called 'love' and you are holding this fragment in your hands. And you know you are supposed to give it to someone, but you have no idea to whom you must give this love or fragment or word. So you just drop it and it remains on your carpet, until further notice. For a while, you wait for this notice, but it does not come; it does not fly in, in other words. It is neither in words nor in thoughts; not any longer. They call it 'our fragmentary world and thinking', and I call it names; and that is all I can do about it.

6. You deny division and say, 'All this is one. As usual I have no idea about this one's identity, but I know it is one I'm talking about. Or just the One. Or whatever.' And you write a book about mystics because you are a mystic yourself. So it is your duty to write about mystics and tell everybody how to meet the Almighty and what to say to Him or Her. So they meet Him and Her and begin talking; not smoking, mind you. Smoking is prohibited in the areas called 'divine'. You say, 'Your Wholeness, Your Holiness, Your Niece,' because a number of nieces and uncles are included in this greeting of yours, directed towards wholeness. Now you know to whom your love is addressed in the numerous letters you are about to write and put into envelopes. You begin your letters and write, 'I know who you are, my dearest, my love and life.' And you realise you are short of breath. What is more, you are short of this and that and everything. You wish you could be more. But you are no more.

7. In the East they have a number of techniques oriented towards one meditation only; or to a number of meditations centred upon one object, subject, thought and mode of meditation. In the West they just walk or drive around and look at a number of windows, resolved to devote their time and space to window-shopping or shopping windows. They shop and look out of their windows, whereas in the East they meditate upon one dot, one void, one oid. Not on diesel/lubricating oil, mind you. And even in the West they meditate upon the word and deed called 'love'. They go to bed as if asked to demonstrate what they are talking about. And in these beds of theirs they demonstrate

what they are talking about, even if they no longer talk. They just moan and groan and then we hear a faint, almost imperceptible cry. At least I do hear a sort of cry, a sort of faint cry.

8. What do we need? Smooth flow. This smooth flow is needed to end fragmentation and ensure the advent of one harmony, not necessarily composed by Mozart. By whom should it be composed and created? By ourselves. So we put two and two together and listen to the result; we listen to Four and this four (and all other fours) sounds like a lullaby most welcome by those who cannot sleep either properly or even improperly. So our thought and meditation flow rather smoothly from one object or idea to another, and every time we hear or see a harmony, we thank every blade of grass and say, 'I don't wish to die. Life is so wonderful I don't wish to leave it forever and ever. Not even for a second, you know.' And if we happen to talk to God, we might say, 'Thou know,' or 'Thou knowest.' Thou knowest, Thou knowest we repeat as we fall asleep either once and for all or only once.

9. In Hebrew the verb triumphed over other words or notions or ideas. What a pity I do not write in Hebrew. But I know I have nothing to do with verbs or words, even if I go on writing, even if I go on, whatever that means, whatever I am talking about. I am a noun and in my dictionary the word 'noun' is represented by the letter I.

PART TWO

We are always getting ready for an event or a non-event, and sometimes we say to ourselves that our life boils down to these preparations. And so we prepare ourselves for everything that comes or does not, for it is better to do something, to no avail or to vail; and even if eventually a veil covers everything, hiding all the meanings of life from our inquisitive gaze, we think it is a veil worn by a woman who hides her beauty from our desire. And this desire is the will to live or to die, to exist in any sense of the word, even if this sense is nonsensical, which happens so often we are not inclined to make a speech about this nonentity, nonsense and the lack of life, the lack of lakes we might have visited in Switzerland or somewhere else, before dying, because dying has its own geography. You study geography at school and realise you study the itinerary of your own death that does not necessarily go from one agony to another. It may go from Stravinsky's *Agon* to another *Agon*, written by yourself or somebody else, considering that you are everybody and agonise in any body or soul you can think of. But for the moment you do not think about anybody, and the soothing influence of this thought enables you to sleep soundly and unsoundly. You might think that the sound produced by one hand is soundless because this hand of ours does not move and cannot meet its counterpart to applaud yet another production of *Othello* or *Desdemona*. If I remember rightly, the sound of one hand does not exist within some boundaries imposed either by our common sense or by commoners we know nothing about. All right, you go in search of a guru and find one in a desert or in a populous city where only Trumps and trump cards live and prosper. (Who is Trump? Please, consult the Internet.) So what does the sound produced by one hand amount to? It mounts, mounts, mounts and after a while amounts to something. Then we begin to scrutinise this something and stumble upon Creation – in its rudimentary form perhaps. We have no idea what this 'perhaps' means. It may mean 'certainly', 'of course', and 'you'll die in due course', but I, for one, do not want to die for nothing or even for everything; for once, nothing and everything do not make any difference.

There are people who cannot stay where they are. They look around and get excited, thinking that this world offers them myriads of gifts they are eager to count, unwrap. They make me think of those gold-diggers who dreamt of unwrapping the Earth, of removing its surface. How much easier it is to *collect* the gold lying under it instead of digging, sweating, drinking beer, collapsing on some bed or other, or just on the same surface of the same Earth. What a pity they thought, when they had an opportunity to devote a few seconds to the Earth they were ill-treating, that this Earth of ours was fully dressed. We pay a lot of money to the girls who strip their clothes off in our presence, and sometimes we do not pay them anything: they undress because they feel like it. They like showing their naked bodies to their visitors who sit down and gaze at them, sometimes emitting a few sounds to encourage the ongoing process. The Earth resists such shows, such voracious spectators who are prepared to rip all clothes off to fill their pockets with gold or precious stones. First you think in terms of gold, and this very term (gold) comes to mind whenever you picture to yourself a luxurious existence peppered with villas, vines and cherry orchards that seem to pay homage to Chekhov and Japan. And then you pass on to precious stones; you cannot help it, even if you are not interested in precious stones as such. We have an irresistible urge to pass, pass, pass, to pass on, to, through; we have to be on the move, otherwise we might end up saying to ourselves, 'Life is stultifyingly boring.' So we move from gold to precious stones and from them to villas, swimming pools and also to our bodies enjoying these pools' water and atmosphere and drinking wine within these pools and also outside them, leaning back in a wicker chair. While sitting in this chair or a Louis XV armchair, we might forget that we

pass from life to death, and this passage is far more important than what we always think about in the presence of pools and villas.

But if we believe in the immortality of the soul, the passage we are talking about or the rite of this passage is not very important after all: sooner or later, the soul will find a body – a more suitable body for its experienced, mature contents. But is the soul immortal or may it die, as it does in Gogol's immortal masterpiece? There must be something unchangeable in the soul, otherwise everything would be changeable, for the world is enclosed in the soul – in the world-soul, as they say; and consequently in every individual soul as well, as they point out after a while. Individual souls exist within the world-soul, which is logical enough to convince everyone of the truth of what I am talking about. Birds of a feather flock together, and souls are birds; at least they are birds in the medieval paintings and frescoes I have come across many times; let alone in alchemical manuscripts. The assertion 'the soul is the Philosophers' Stone and also a bird' might appear self-contradictory: birds fly off and fly through the air and also through clouds, whereas stones usually fall unless they are embedded in mountains, rocks and suchlike. Yet this assertion is *not* self-contradictory, and anyway one should fear neither contradictions nor self-contradictions. The soul is apt to encompass pluses and minuses, a multitude of poles, be they apart or not, and the whole of our contradictory world where virtues can kill and often do, even in the presence of police officers. Anyway, if the soul is unchangeable (and it *is* unchangeable, until further notice) it has always been with us – even in our absence, so to speak; before our birth, in other words. At least there is *something* unchangeable within it, and the rest does not really count, since the unchangeable part can restore the changeable parts to their pristine conditions. The process might take some time, but within the bounds or rather unbounds of eternity, time and its lapses fade into insignificance, when you compare them with the magnificence of infinity, immortality, eternity and everlastingness. To tell the truth, the body does change now and then or rather always: growing older and older. And some philosophers assert that we live with death and not with our wives, husbands and children. I wish I could become an orphan, as they used to say in the Soviet Union, whenever they were told the Communist Party was their father (and also their mother, as a matter of fact). But even if death is not my father or elder brother, I wish to remain alone; anyway, it is my dearest wish, even if I am doomed to live in life's debatable partnership, even if I have to say 'farewell' to life and its company. *La dame de compagnie*, as the French put it, whenever speaking of death and his (her) presence. They do not say '*La belle dame sans merci*': they think no doubt that death is not beautiful.

But the metamorphoses to which our body is prone do not mean that it dies as soon as a new motion gets under way: you can move within your life without crossing the threshold of death, without even stepping on it. What counts is the immobility of your soul which contemplates eternity – not only at night, as a poet stated rather convincingly. And as long as the soul sees eternity and studies it industriously, we run no danger in the domain of immortality, even if this immortality concerns only our spiritual parts, not their physical counterparts. But, as our theologians (and others) put it, 'The soul feeds the body, not the other way round.' If this remark is taken seriously and studied assiduously, we are shielded from death and its consequences (bonfires located either in Purgatory or in Hell or in both). And when we ask ourselves, throwing up our hands in horror, 'Is there anything constant, reliable in the world?' we answer, 'The soul and God and the Holy Trinity.' And if we continue to question ourselves and the world, saying, 'Really? Really? Just looking at a picture of the sea is guaranteed to make me feel sick. But doesn't everything look like the sea? Is there anything else in the world? A lake, for instance? Lake Constance?' we often answer in desperation, 'There's no such thing as Lake Constance. Even Pool Constance is

out of our reach.’ (This reminds me of *Così fan tutte*.) What would we do with a pool or a puddle, whatever its name? Well, our body grows older and older, and we are weary of counting our wrinkles, although this operation requires neither differential calculus nor Lobachevski’s formulas. Why should we count them? No one is likely to ask us, ‘How many wrinkles do you have?’ And even if such a question can be envisaged and foreseen, we may answer as follows, ‘Can’t you see them? If you feel like counting my wrinkles, you can do it yourself. It’s part of the game called “Do it yourself”.’

Once, in the streets – in those days I was still walking in the streets and even entered shops – I saw a man who, while standing close to a woman, was actually counting her wrinkles, now and then touching her face, her cheeks, her forehead. Well, you do not have to look at yourself in mirrors every day or every other week: no one asks you to do it. No such order has ever been issued by the police and so you may not be arrested on these charges. No one can say with conviction or without it, ‘The police brought a charge of indifference (or negligence) against him.’ But if you do look at yourself in mirrors – out of curiosity, no doubt – you can reassure yourself by recalling the constancy, permanency and immortality of your soul. You can also remind yourself that your soul is full of milk as if it were your mother; and that is why in some quarters it is called ‘The Milky Way’. What is more, to take advantage of this way and its milk, you do not have to travel or walk along this way, which would be rather embarrassing, given the state of my legs, their laziness and inhumane unresponsiveness. Some of my former colleagues used to press their chests as if hoping to squeeze a lot of milk out of their souls. And they often asked me for help: I was supposed to give them a back massage. And now and then I heard their jokes, ‘You’re massaging my ego, not my back,’ or something along these lines. In those moments I had no alternative but to answer thus, ‘I didn’t know your ego was located in your back, not far from your coccyx. Do you want me to massage your head instead?’

I am not quite sure I have proved the immortality idealistically attributed to our soul – by St Augustine, among other philosophers, fathers and theologians. He kept repeating, ‘But we have already proved it several times,’ which is not entirely true unless the affirmation ‘the soul is eternal’ needs no proofs, no comments. Is eternity inside the soul? If it is not, then it should be looked for outside it, within its reach. If I understand him rightly, he suggests the soul is either full of milk or has an eternal access to it through a tube – ‘The Milk Tube’, as he calls it. It is noteworthy that he never touches upon the Milky Way as if it had no importance whatsoever, as if the cosmos could exist without it. There are many problems everywhere, as I have already stated many times, in many places, and one of the places where the number of problems and enigmas seem to mushroom round the clock is St Augustine’s text. You go on reading it and the mushrooms I am talking about sprout here and there, not to say ‘everywhere’. For instance, he uses the word ‘mind’ – in Latin, *natürlich*: his Greek was as poor as my Latin; perhaps even poorer. This mind is immortal, and the soul’s life expectancy depends on its immortality. My mind is not immortal and it is unlikely to grow or become immortal – in the twinkling of an eye or of a star – whatever I might do; except if I write Dante’s *Commedia* or *Hamlet*. The saint speaks abundantly and with gusto of cuts of all kinds, saying, for instance, ‘If a disease cuts your body, your internal organs and also your face, you may grow smaller and shorter, shorter and smaller until you reach a quasi-equivalent of zero. But it is not zero yet, even if you die, as a result of these merciless cuts. Your tomb is not a zero unless I am very much mistaken. And if your ashes blow away on a lot of winds, these winds and the ashes that travel with them are not zeros. Just look at the devastation caused by the recent hurricane.’ Last night they read this excerpt on television and the host said, ‘You

shouldn't be afraid of the coronavirus. Aren't we immortal?' 'We are indeed,' shouted a member of the audience. 'Come on, we can win this game.' 'That's the spirit,' said the host.

You are still alive unless you have managed to cut off everything, down to your immortal soul. It is as if you were a film director, shouting, 'Cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, cut!' What remains of the film amounts to very little indeed: just a man who staggers to the nearest phone, picks up the receiver and says, 'Help, help, help, help, help, help, help!' Actually you could become immortal (or grow immortal, if you prefer) through this particular word, by repeating it ad nauseam, provided your mouth is God-oriented. But you had better be prudent, for prudence is the mother of immortality: you may die from nausea. Anyway, you will be alive as long as your soul rubs shoulders with your mind, and the soul is so kind-hearted it simply cannot leave the mind in the lurch. The soul has no reason to part from the mind because it partly depends on it, on its intelligence and prudence. Often the soul acts recklessly and it is regularly found guilty of reckless driving: you do not have to be a mystic to compare the soul to a driver whose vehicle explores the nooks and crannies it encounters on its way to God. (What other destination could the soul have?) Nevertheless the soul never loses sight of the mind and vice versa: the mind clings to the soul without which it would be soulless. And in the whole universe there is nothing more frightful than soulless beings. They can hardly be called beings, to tell the truth; nor can they be called 'non-beings', for the notion 'being' should not be applied to the substances deprived of the most vital element we can dream about. St Augustine speaks of substances as do pigheadedly medieval philosophers (Bertrand Russell did not approve of this custom); and yet he lived neither in the Dark Ages nor in any other age associated with medievalism. Paradoxes also begin to mushroom as soon as we open philosophical books, and sometimes we are unable to notice anything else, saying to ourselves, 'Just another paradox, and here's another paradox.' One of these paradoxes refers to the birth of the soul which, as we have already stated many times, is immortal or eternal, and consequently cannot be born. If you were born, you may not last forever: one limit calls for another (*les limites se répondent*), and you will die sooner or later unless you are limitless.

But before dying you should find out where your soul is located and how it behaves within this location. If it is embedded in life, than life will never leave it in the lurch, for life is life and it sustains whatever it is attached to, however superficially. Life has a multitude of tubes through which its spiritual blood flows day and night, and there is no reason why this vital flow should stop unless God decides to stop it once and for all. But God and the soul are twin brothers or sisters, and they cannot be visualised separately. Heretics declare they cannot be visualised at all, given that both are based on the *niet-niet-niet* theology, on the negation of 'this spot', 'this substance', 'this body'. But that should not concern us at the moment, for when your subject-matter is eternity, you should not deviate from it so that your way of reasoning never bifurcates. In a way, it is as motionless as immortality itself; and yet we are afraid of reduction as such, of the parts we may lose in the course of our turbulent existence. Our sizes (all of them, throughout our substance) are constantly reduced, and the soul grows smaller and smaller in the process. For a while, we might think it gets rid of whatever is pernicious in its bosom, but then we realise that also our celestial parts and particles flee from us as if afraid of our corrupted nature; as if we were powerful enough to corrupt and thereby kill our soul. We should not forget we were created by a being or substance far more precious and perfect than our body which has many defects. And try as we may, we cannot hide all of them as we stand in the presence of God's and men's and women's eyes. Of course there are clothes in shops and in the world in general, and we are allowed to wear these clothes in our endeavour to hide our ugliness. But the soul always stays naked and it is pointless to remind it of its own indecency, of the law that does not allow our law-abiding citizens

to walk stark naked up and down the streets, around the city squares. So the body was created and this thought might mean it is not entirely immortal, for all its relative perfections. There is no denying that the body can be beautiful: nobody (certainly not God) prevents it from being so ever since its birth: a crying baby is often more beautiful than his or her parents, relatives and numerous counterparts. But its beauty is subject to changes, to the Book of Changes, according to the Chinese pundits, and our Christian pundits agree with them, saying, 'God loves you, but you have to accept the ebb and flow of love in a relationship.' 'I was recently divorced and feeling at a very low ebb,' you might answer. 'You can't be divorced from God, even if a new flood inundates the Earth. You'll be with Him in a new Ark.'

So the body was created by something or someone better than itself, otherwise no creation would make any sense: we should not go down the hierarchical ladder; we are already on its lowest rung. Nor could it be created by another body: creation eschews tautologies. We all know that God is unwilling to create a perfect world, for such a world would be another God, and this tautology puts Him off His strike. Again and again He creates imperfect worlds where we suffer for the sake of perfection, of our own perfection which we are bent on achieving so as to coincide with God's image, superimposing our body and soul on His substance. So we are not created by another body, by another material, matter, physical nonsense. We stem from the Spirit and so cannot die, for spirits never pass away; nor do they die, in common parlance. Our soul and life, on the other hand, are inseparable, and as long as they do not quarrel – and that is out of the question – they will both remain immortal, even if deprived of the aforementioned tubes. After all, the air itself is food of love, especially when Palestrina or another composer resounds in it. And the soul partakes of this air, anxious to sustain itself for the sake of eternal life, of paradise on Earth and in heaven. Every morning I drink a cup of tea in my living room, and if I open a window (in summertime, needless to say) my cat comes and begins to smell, inhale this air almost ecstatically; as if breathing in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. That is how the soul feeds itself, whenever disconnected from the aforementioned tubes and other contraptions designed to nourish it.

We cannot doubt the presence of the soul in our body, for without the soul we would be helpless and mortal, as mortal as flies. And yet the soul is not just one of the shapes of the body because this occupation (being just a shape) is beneath its dignity. We all know that, whenever we hanker after superior visions and revelations, we should distance our brain, mind and intellect from the body and its physical dirt. This dirt penetrates into us and prevents our purity from contemplating the world's immaculate state, and that impossibility puts spokes in our wheels – in the wheels that are destined to convey us to Paradise. So we should do our best not to get influenced by the body and therefore remove it from our way, whenever this way of ours leads us to higher spheres and spirits. If the soul were just a shape of the body, one of its shapes – its arm, for instance – it would perish with the body: let us not forget that an arm can be cut off, and not only on battlefields. But our soul's immortality seems to promise our body the same quality, the same advantage that would make our life even more breathtaking than it is right now. (How could you feel secure in the world where death holds sway and brandishes his scythe?) The soul contemplates the truth; but for its presence at the very core of the body, we would be unable to put two and two together, which we do rather often, especially during our commercial meditations. Alas, without such meditations we would not be in a position to make ends meet. And if we fail to make these ends meet (and embrace), we might die prematurely, even if our immortal soul interferes on our body's behalf. So the soul contemplates the truth which is as motionless as the Prime Mover; it moves others while staying at home – as majestic as a statue in the Petersburg Summer Garden. Or in the Louvre, or in the Winter Palace, alias the Hermitage. In the long run, the

body is bound to receive, to welcome the influence of these statues and their magnificence, otherwise its stupidity and irresponsiveness would know no bounds. And judging from what we see in mirrors and lakes, our body has bounds, and thanks to these bounds it displays what is called ‘harmonious form’. Even an ugly body is beautiful, at least to some extent, otherwise it would not have been created – not even by the Devil, mind you. Why on earth should you create repulsiveness, spending your time and energy on hideousness? Even if you *are* the Devil.

We should nevertheless fear that the soul may die of what they call ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’ which is sure to lower it to another rung where it would not look like the soul. What would it look like? It might look like a member of the body – like one of its arms, for instance. And this arm might just lie on the ground, waiting for idle observers and solitary walkers and those walkers who talk to themselves, being deprived of companions in misfortune. Such a walker comes across the arm and asks himself or herself the following question, ‘What kind of object is this arm? Is it just an arm, or is it a soul in disguise? If I opt for the latter solution to the enigma, I must continue to question myself on the subject. Is it a damned soul or just a dead soul? Is it blessed or not? Is it in Hell or in Paradise? Or in Purgatory? What about its whereabouts? Is it lying on this road or flying overhead, in the midst of the stars?’ Usually such walkers end up touching the arm and turning it this way and that in search of beauty spots and suchlike – of any sign susceptible to reveal to them the truth related to the object they scrutinise and dissect. Often they go so far as to break the arm in question – in their eagerness to find out more about its substance or contents. They look at its bones and tendons and come to the following conclusion, ‘In my opinion, it is just an arm, an ordinary arm – not a soul, not even a damned soul.’ Hardly anyone is prepared to attribute any quantity of blessedness to this member of our body. Even if this arm comes from a museum, from a Greek statue, from Aphrodite in person, one is unlikely to worship it as a relic unless one sides with artists and atheists. In short, the soul is reluctant to become the body, even a member of the human body I have been discussing at some length, resolved to view the soul from every angle imaginable, even from the angle associated with an inferior substance, namely the body. No one can doubt the truth I have just touched upon: the body is inferior to the soul in many respects. If asked why, I shall answer as follows, ‘The soul is situated closer to the Supreme Being from Whom it borrows its light and spirituality. And it is loath to turn into the body, for no one can wish to be downgraded, even in an ordinary life where nothing elevated really happens – you have been removed from your post as managing director, becoming a mere employee. But in the domain of spirituality you should be on your guard, especially if you run the risk of losing your celestial essence, as we might call it, for want of any better definition. Of course, if you happen to find yourself in the midst of humans, you can hear something along the lines of, ‘Let me perish. Let me finish my days in Hell, in the gutter.’ Driven by your humane mood and general disposition, you may say, ‘Can I give you a piece of advice?’ ‘You can give me as many pieces as you wish, if what you have in mind is related to finances.’ ‘No, it is not.’ ‘In this case, even three pieces wouldn’t make me change my mind.’ ‘You should drag yourself *out* of the gutter, not *into* it.’ ‘I’m fond of riches-to-rags stories, you know. The opposite category is a piece of sentimental American trash.’

A long time ago we resolved to despise the body for its physical, material and vulgar inclinations which we could not associate with anything supreme; not with the Supreme Being anyway. And the soul, in our profane opinion, has always been in touch with Him, and this touch, this human or divine touch, condition, continues to ensure somehow our the soul’s and probably our own immortality; or call it eternity, if you wish. But why is the soul superior to the body, in our opinion? The body bathes in the light we daily receive from divinities, deities and the Palace of God, whereas the soul only *meditates* upon it, being enclosed in the body it cannot help despising

and underestimating, for all its spirituality and virtues. In the soul's opinion, the body has no virtues and no spirituality: everything comes to it through the soul, through this divine mediator bestowed upon us by our Creator. The soul says, 'We've just received a message from Daddy. Once again you seem to have misbehaved – you touched an ugly, obnoxious woman instead of thinking in terms of virgins and their immaculate condition.' Besides, the body is attracted and perturbed by food lying almost everywhere: in restaurants, on the tables destined for mathematics and music scores. There are sandwiches and glasses of Coke everywhere as if we were just eating and drinking, not thinking in terms of our salvation, redemption and journey into fear. The point is the division or separation we are talking about is no longer valid, given the mixture we confront, whenever addressing our soul or touching our body which unexpectedly reacts in the ways mechanically attributed to the soul's sensitivity. It is as if it were saying, 'What are you doing? Do you know what you're dealing with? I'm your soul, not your belly.' Let us not disregard the crucial observation: 'In the quantum domain the procedure by which we analyse classical systems into interacting parts breaks down, for whenever two entities combine to form a single system the process by which they do so is not divisible' (Nils Bohr). In other words, the soul is inseparable from the body and consequently you cannot say that one entity you are holding in your mind comes from God and the other (the body) from the Devil who still entertains it with clothes, food and sports cars. Inadvertently you may at present find your soul in a Ferrari, driving recklessly in California or Germany. Under our very eyes the classical system breaks down and in the midst of its ruins we are likely to stumble upon St Augustine's bones or tissues or nails that, according to our specialists, continue to grow even in Paradise as if we needed to scratch some saint's or virgin's face. Usually we endow the soul with sentiments, feelings, intuitions and hopes. It hopes to live forever, and yet any equation – never mind its simplicity, its rudimentary structure – talks to it about its forthcoming death in the body of its owner. Then the soul begins to contradict its detractors, saying, 'My owner is the Almighty Himself, not John, not Ivan, not Masha, not Irina.' And then it dies rather peacefully on its Creator lap, listening to His lullaby.

So we can no longer accuse our reason or our mind of insensitivity, of callousness and greediness. We are used to the data supplied by this instrument of ours that says from time to time, 'I've calculated that it would take us two years to save up enough for a car,' or 'The new tax system would be calculated on the value of property owned by an individual.' Our soul used to counter such information by saying, 'We don't need this sports car. Let us go for a walk and inhale nature's vertiginous harmony. Apparently it's enough to open one window to hear the music of the spheres. Let us open all of them. Let us open the window of those celestial spheres. Or let us go to a museum and admire a few of Vermeer's masterpieces, if you see what I mean, if you've ever heard about this painter. You might have heard about Proust, though. Well, Proust minutely described the colour one can see on a roof of one of Vermeer's houses. Let us go and contemplate this roof.' What you hear now inside your brain, body and soul sounds like a Varese piece or a Cage example of concrete music animated by lorries, cranes and electric lawn mowers. 'I prefer Vermeer to Kandinsky.' 'And I prefer Kandinsky to Vermeer. There are many colours in Kandinsky's paintings.' 'But there aren't enough roofs.' 'What about Mahler's *Ninth*?' 'What about the *Kunst der Fuge*?' But the worst dialogue you can chance upon – the dialogue resounding in your heart of hearts – is related to God, for *their* relationship with the Almighty grows more and more problematic, given that the Fathers of the Church did not know the first thing about quantum mechanics, strange as it may appear: the Church is said to know *everything*. At some point the body asked the Almighty (God the Father) if they could not form a new trinity in the bosom of Creation. 'Shouldn't you update the world and its history?' asked the body. 'The cosmos is filled

with the reek of stale beer and cigarettes,’ it said complainingly. ‘You ought to be brought up to speed with the new guidelines. We’re no longer allowed to smoke in public bars. And the cosmos is a public bar, nothing else. The alarm goes off automatically as soon as smoke is detected. You used to smoke 40 cigarettes a day and 50 cigarettes at midnight. And if You think You can carry on drinking so much without damaging your health, then You’re mistaken.’

You cannot offer this searing exposé to any Catholic or Protestant without submitting your soul and sometimes your very body to a rebuttal, either physical or spiritual; both are very painful, especially when you deal with born-again Christians. So you just say our soul strives for the purity of truth, and this purity can be found only in the sphere inhabited by the Almighty Who, according to St Augustine, has no counterpart or rather no contradiction – no contrary element in the whole of the universe. And what about the Devil? Anyway the soul contains and occasionally displays the purity inherited from the Prime Mover or from the Primeval Great Substance, and the lies we hear everywhere have nothing to do with this purity: there is no such thing as pure lie. Well, everybody agrees with this statement, otherwise we would have to admit the presence of impurity within the soul’s body or substance or envelope, and that is what they call a ‘contradiction in terms’, for the soul is pure by definition. (Here is one of its definitions, ‘Purity itself.’) No one can deprive it of this purity, with the exception of the Substance that bestowed it upon it. And God’s mercy knows no bounds: it continues to spread and grow and glow even beyond the universe or a series of universes. Removing purity from the soul would be universally regarded as a merciless act – a crime against humanity, if you please. Actually the Devil could do it rather easily, and some of us believe He has already done the deed – not in the Garden of Eden, though. Even our superman is incapable of soiling our substance: his superiority is not sufficiently superior for committing such a crime. Anyway, only a superior being can extract this purity from the soul’s entrails, and any soul – even a miserable representative of this species – is superior to the superman and even to the superwoman. Well, this purity is identical to eternity and therefore the soul will never die, even if the coronavirus is allowed to pester us for another century. But the soul can lose all its qualities, advantages, purities and privileges, if it forgets its Mover, Creator and Benefactor, which can happen on account of the Devil’s evil intentions, doings and schemes. (He is a schemer who always finds a way of getting what he wants.) He often talks to the soul as he travels to the Earth or flies in the midst of constellations, saying, ‘Don’t you find this Creator of yours conceited? By the way, without wishing to sound conceited, I am the best salesperson in the universe. You may ask what I’m selling. Well, here’s my answer, “The Absolute Truth.” Actually I might *offer* it to you.’ Being polite to a fault, the soul is likely to ask, ‘Could I do anything for you in exchange?’ and the Devil is sure to answer, ‘Nothing at all. Just allow me to remove your purity from your body.’ ‘But this is my most precious possession!’ ‘Not quite,’ answers the Devil. ‘For some time – since the advent of quantum mechanics, to be exact – you’ve been in touch with the body. Where’s your purity now, I wonder? They even talk about your own body, about your heart of hearts. You’ve been soiled and spoiled. Too many cooks spoil the broth. All these physicists, my God. These so-called gods.’

Later on the soul received the body’s letter of protest where it voiced its doubts as to the soul’s unquestionable superiority, on the grounds that qualities and sizes can no longer be measured, even inaccurately. ‘We are indivisible,’ it wrote, ‘and therefore cannot be judged, measured and qualified separately. I cannot affirm we are in love with each other, and the rumours testifying to this effect are grossly exaggerated, in my opinion. However, we are inseparable – somewhat akin to a twin brother and sister or rather to those children who live together, eat together, sleep together, but never make love, never sleep with each other. What do they call them?

You know what I am talking about, I suppose. If you do not, look at the pictures where you can see two bodies literally interlaced, interlocked and interlinked. I have this word or two words on the tip of my tongue. You have neither a tongue nor its tip. Minus a tongue, minus a tip, minus a mouth.’ Here is the soul’s answer, ‘Your memory is quite deficient, my dear brother-in-quantum-law. You cannot recall what pair of twins we remind our acquaintances of. *Et bien*, they are called Siamese, although I am not quite sure our couple fits the description provided by one of my memory cells. You see, my dear brother, there are symmetrical conjoined twins and nonsymmetrical conjoined ones; I mean twins, not just one with an “s”, if you see what I mean. In the case of symmetrical conjoined twins, the children usually have no birth anomalies except at the areas of fusion. My memory tells me there are cases that permit those creatures to survive independently, which is not our case, our case history. You cannot survive independently, my dear brother. Or should I call your “sister”? I could be separated from you by surgery because I have enough tissue and organs for independent survival. In cases where each twin has enough tissue and organs for independent survival, they are often successfully separated by surgery. By the way, your penis is the only member of yours to argue for even token recognition of my independence. You might wonder why it is this particular member I have singled out to remind you of my independence and freedom. It is easy to explain and understand: your other members are oblivious of love, my dear Sir; they are too preoccupied with food and other pleasures I do not care about. That is why our Siamese connection is mostly carried out and upheld through your penis, however trite and barbarous this piece of information and this conclusion may sound. Yes, they often see us together; and yet we never have sex, as they say in the streets of this barbarous world. We are intertwined, so to speak: your penis is sufficiently flexible, pliable and passionate for this posture or rather rite that always reminds me of Oriental lore, of *their* sexual habits and skills. But the rest of your substance leaves me cold, I am sorry to say, and I do hope you will take this complaint of mine into consideration; otherwise I am not sure I shall not demand surgical separation from you in the near future. It is so frustrating to live so close to each other without being able to communicate thoroughly and even spectacularly. We may write a few books together: your fingers, my sentiments, our thoughts, our interior monologues, our heart of hearts. Your heart would beat, mine would feel. Wouldn’t that be a nice arrangement, a solution to all our problems, a removal of all our worries and anxieties? My dear brother, sister and husband! Do take heed of my opposition to your unfriendliness, estrangement and lack of cooperation, as they say in this world of ours. Don’t forget that I am fairly well-developed. You, on the other hand, are rather tiny despite the size of your muscles and overall bone structure: your skeleton, in other words. In short, you are bigger than I am, but not in the cosmic, spiritual sense – from the spiritual point of view. In these matters you are dependent on the “larger twin for nutrition”, as they put it in their encyclopaedias. For what I call “spiritual food”. In your hour of need you should recall the following piece of information: the underdeveloped twin may be surgically separated from the larger asymmetric twin in order to save the one better able to survive. I mean, you should not forget I am wholly *against* this separation, this cut: this murder, to put it bluntly. Anyway, I promise to stay with you until further notice. Your soul.’

There are people – I wish I could say, ‘There are no people’ – who are prepared to leave their homes and wives without waiting for any further notice. They think this further notice is too far away, and waiting for it might be fatal to both their lives and hopes for better incarnations lying in wait for them somewhere, not necessarily in the Bahamas. They pack and unpack their suitcases, and finally brace themselves for crash landings and part, leaving their rooms, cottages and castles forever, if we believe their promises which seem to keep them from the places where they were born and spent the greater part of their lives. They wish to leave everything behind and

start a new life as if you could start anything anew, forgetting your flaws, birthdays, mothers and a few children you might have had in this life of yours. What can be forgotten? Even Alzheimer's disease and its magnificent void cannot protect you from your unconscious, from days of yore where a multitude of yores await you whenever you wake up and recognise the light to which you have grown accustomed in the course of your so-called existence. And if you do not recognise it, the reverse is not true because light always recognises you, even if you hide under your blanket. It recognises you to the point of making you recognise yourself either in a mirror or by looking at your hands which might have strangled a lot of Desdemonas, had you ever been in love with this wretched woman. In short, you are a human being, and that is what I say to myself when the truth of what is in store for me appears rather clearly, bathed in the light I have just touched upon, assuming the light we have in mind is always the same, whether we allude to it when consulting our brains, or switch on the lights in our bedroom, living room, in our castle or palace.

In other words I am mortal and go from life to death without ever pausing for a cup of tea in spite of all the cups of tea I have drunk throughout my existence seen in the same light, under the same chandelier. The chandelier is the same, and I might conjecture it is God I am praising as I put on these lights that allow me to see my dire straits and other straits available to me, provided all of them are dire. I dare imagine other straits, but whenever I think about happy endings and developments, I hear the doors bang, bang, bang, even if I do not try to get closer to them, for they are used to keeping me away from my goals and ideals. And I wonder how all the people whose urges for travelling do not leave them in peace (provided by their bedrooms) proceed in order to open all these doors and take all those trains. You wish to take a train and you see it leave the station where you have been sitting for quite a while, and you literally cannot budge from where your seat is located – that is what might happen in the course of your departures and the decisions you enact, materialise and put into action. Well, you do not even know what your destination is and pack your things, your toothbrushes, before taking the trouble to picture to yourself anywhere, not only the landscapes one is acquainted with if one goes regularly to the Bahamas and other islands of this exotic sort. There are no pictures either in your mind or on your writing desk, but you are determined to leave and start something you cannot describe either in minute details or in any other details, minor or major. You can describe neither your state of mind or body, nor this thing you call 'my dearest and only wish' that pushes and kicks you until you can no longer resist its force. They call it 'vital force' and you wonder – if you have enough time and concentration for this wonder – if this vital force or '*élan vital*' is vital or lethal. Suppose you decide it is vital. You can make any decision you like except that with the passing of the years or minutes your decision may prove fatal instead of being vital as you supposed, carried away by your usual enthusiasm, hedonism and optimism. You cross a few thresholds, traverse the park adjoined to your castle and die under the wheels of an ordinary car or a bicycle or a cycle or just a cle. It is grotesque and humiliating to realise that any cle is capable of obliterating you forever.

Some individuals trust their tactile sensations or truth, and begin to fiddle with maps as if their fingers could guide them through the labyrinth of lines, letters and circles. Or they just walk towards a huge map hanging on a wall, shut their eyes and put their index fingers on the map. Then they open their eyes and often find out that their fingers are off the mark: they touched the wall instead of the map. The map is big and you thought you would never miss the mark despite your closed eyes, but your legs deviated from the right trajectory and at some point you switched to another direction. Now you are looking at the wall and wondering what kind of destination your finger and legs have chosen at random or with the help of God. A wall is a meaningful symbol, and it is not for

nothing that Pink Floyd chose it for one of their albums. And we should not forget that many prison guards boast about the solidity and impenetrability of their walls over which no prisoner has ever been able to climb. Nor is it conceivable to drill a hole in them and squeeze your body through this hole, even if you go on a diet and become as thin as one of the Seven Dwarfs or Snow White herself. Of course the wall may also mean the absence of plans and trips, and disappointed, weary of trying and deciding, you sink into your divan and indulge in a meditation inspired by a koan or noan or naok. Why not nok, a mere nok?

You meditate on the sound produced by one hand. You raise your hand and slap the wall that gave no answer to your question related to distant countries, islands and beaches. This wall cancelled your projects and aspirations, and you slap its face or body or buttocks. The wall produces a series of sounds linked to your hand, to the koan you investigate in the hope of finding the right answer to the mystery into which your life was plunged at the moment of your birth. Do these sounds belong to your hand or to the wall? Suppose they belong to both, but neither of these ingredients shed any light on your life except that you recall how your mother and father spanked you in your childhood and even in your adolescence. Even your uncle dared spank you, when he felt like it, for no reason at all. 'We need no reason for spanking our relatives,' he used to say as if determined to find out what the sound of spanking meant and how it could explain his recent failure, his loss of money. Whenever he lost a huge amount of money he spanked all his nephews and thanks to this exercise he has so far managed to placate his nervous system. 'If I don't spank these boys and girls on a regular basis, I'll land up in a lunatic asylum,' he used to repeat. He always spanked them with the right hand, and everybody knew exactly what this sound meant and where it originated.

You can go out, come to a standstill, lean your head back a bit, raise your right or left hand and set about 'making the wind', as you usually put it. You wave this hand of yours savagely, madly, as if saying 'adieu' to the whole human race, but no one looks at you and the inhabitants of our planet are kept busy somewhere; and many of them are sunbathing on the beaches of which you cannot avail yourself because your index finger touched the wall, not the Bahamas. So you conclude – and you are even allowed to jump to this conclusion – that your hand and its incessant movement will not have a dramatic impact on demography. Nor will you ever be able to get rid of half-wits whose number has tragically increased over the last 20 years. Of course you could write on your hand in red ink: 'Morons, go away, fly away and settle on Mars.' A few minutes later you will see your neighbour whose intelligence must have stayed in his mother's womb. You ask him why he hasn't flown away. 'You might have gone to the Bahamas,' you add: it is pointless to talk to him about Mars. So you forget about humans and think about the creation in terms of winds. You wave your hand even more savagely than before and the wind is beginning to pick up. You intend to create a hurricane with a view to purifying our planet. Your mind's eye shows you a lot of heads flying through the air, and you hope that heads do not deserve to stay on Earth, working in laboratories, in studies, in orchestras. This eye exhibits a lot of heads that have already gone with the wind.

If you sit in a concert hall and listen to a second-rate performer, you are allowed not to participate in the general applause that is sure to follow the execution: people come to concert halls in the hope of clapping their hands quite often, otherwise it is better to stay at home and slap someone's buttocks – with both hands, if necessary. But you are a staunch, feverish admirer of Zen Buddhism, and one day you read about a disciple who cut his arm off to please his teacher who was rather pleased and even delighted by his disciple's homage. So you pay homage to your parents or to no one in particular: you just take an axe and cut off your left arm. And then you go to a concert hall, listen to a bad pianist and do not clap your hands after the happy ending of the performance. You are

happy it is all over and done with. You are also happy because you will have a magnificent opportunity to speak about the heroic act that deprived you of your second arm. Sure enough, in the middle of the thunderous applause a bald head turns towards you and says, 'Why don't you join us? Didn't you like the performance?' You take your jacket off and everyone sees the hole that replaced your right arm a few weeks ago or just last Sunday. 'Of course I liked the performance,' you answer. 'But as you can see, I'm unable to demonstrate my enthusiasm.' 'You could spank yourself. Why not slap your cheeks or thighs?' 'The sound produced by my thighs wouldn't match the quality of the performance. I'd better slap my buttocks. Unfortunately the trousers will muffle the sound and distort its purity, warp it out of shape.' 'We wouldn't mind your removing your trousers for the sake of the applause and artistic justice.' So you stand up, head for the stage, climb onto it, remove your trousers, turn your back towards the performer and slap your buttocks soundly and endlessly. In a Fellini film you would add to this innocent manifestation of displeasure a fart, but I cannot stand vulgarity in any shape or form.

Zen Buddhists devote a lot of time to sounds, timbres and especially to their total absence ordinarily called 'silence'. A respectable Buddhist would not speak of silence as such, saying instead, 'The trees are not talkative tonight. Yesterday, around 3 p.m., I heard a sound of one hand, a hurricane. The roof of my house caved in during that hurricane, and I got the feeling a hand was pushing the roof down. On the spur of the moment I wrote a poem about the roof and the hand:

'I heard the sound of one hand.

I saw one hand and one roof.

I put my hand over my head.'

After reciting the poem, the Buddhist put his hand over his head, raised the other hand and pushed the first hand down so his face was covered now with his first hand. The second joined the first and they began to stroke the Buddhist's face as if making a declaration of love. 'I love myself,' said the Buddhist. 'Even when I happen to slap my buttocks, which I do from time to time for the sake of the sound I appreciate and cherish, I love myself – even more than during the caresses I lavish on my face, neck and shoulders. But sometimes I don't remove my trousers before producing the sound related to my buttocks and hands. I use both hands on this occasion, you know. To tell the truth, I enjoy the sound of my trousers as well, and sometimes I just hang them in my room to slap them at will, to my heart's content. I can't say I suffer from solitude. Anyway, the sound of my trousers and hands alleviates whatever suffering I can experience for no reason at all.'

Zen Buddhists are often seen slapping various objects as if to enjoy the sounds they obtain in the course of the rough yet pleasant procedure. You slap a stone and it cries indignantly, 'Why did you hit and hurt my face? What have I done? Have I insulted you? To my knowledge, no one has flung me in the direction of your face. You're not hurt, are you? Why hit my face, cheeks, eyes and nose?' A human can do that to a human, I suppose, without incurring fines and the victim's understandable wrath. You slap someone's face and this someone removes his gloves and throws them in your direction. (So many things are thrown in your direction: energies, accusations, waves and wives to whom you have to pay a lot of divorce settlements.) Whether you pick them up or not does not really matter: tomorrow, at the crack of dawn, you are to meet your adversary at the edge of a cliff and fire, fire, fire, until the former or latter – your rival, in other words – falls and touches the bottom of everything. (You should not confuse his body and life with yours.) And Zen Buddhists or just those who call themselves 'Zen' or

‘Budd’ meet somewhere and indulge in spanking whatever can go along with games or serious, life-or-death rituals.

It is noteworthy that the time you mention in your inner monologues does not always reflect the importance of ‘no time at all’, which is an important part of any time. If you drink a glass of wine, this glass is bottomless and the wine endless, infinite: it is the proverbial river flowing in Paradise, from one corner of it to another. And you drink it all the time, not just at will or to your heart’s content. Your heart is content, fully and truly, but you continue to drink the wine because you like it, and you like drinking it to your *body*’s content. And your body is not always content, even if you do not belong to the poorest people displayed by our world – chiefly in the course and context of documentaries that incite you to take part in the lotteries destined to enrich these poor people through charities, balls, concerts and exhibitions. They exhibit a doll and say, ‘You should buy this doll for your grandchildren.’ ‘I have neither children nor grandchildren,’ you answer. ‘Buy this doll for yourself. When you feel lonely in the evenings, you could play with this doll. She could be your daughter, granddaughter and even your niece to whom you might bequeath your estate.’ ‘How much?’ ‘Two thousand dollars.’ ‘But it costs a few cents.’ ‘Don’t forget the children we’ve always spoken of.’ There are children who walk around your house, estate, palace and swimming pool. You ask them a few questions, but they do not answer them, as is their wont. They show you their empty hands and you say, ‘Could you please clap your hands?’ They clap their hands. ‘What do you think about the sound of this sound? The sound you’ve just heard?’ They do not even shake their heads as if paralysed, as if the *children* were paralysed. Yet they can show the palms of their hands, trying to impart that if you paint their hands life-size, you will become a multimillionaire instead of being just a millionaire. You can tell them that superrealism is a thing of the past: movements and tendencies go and disappear. But they are bound to answer you as follows, ‘We know that superrealism is passé. But our hands are not. Can’t you see them in front of your eyes? What do they mean, in your learned opinion?’ You end up giving them a thousand dollars.

Zen Buddhists spent their lives in the area where hands meet, clap; but they do not collect banknotes. If you clap your hands, one can say if there is money in them or not, and specialists are even able to say how much money you have in between the palms of your hands. You empty your hands and show them to the Buddhists you got in touch with, anxious as you are to search for truth and find it. Then you ask them to shut their eyes – not wide-open, not wide-open, you repeat several times – and then you put a few banknotes in your right hand. Without dropping this banknote (that would be inexcusable) you slap your cheek, wait for a moment (‘Wait a moment,’ you say) and then ask all these Buddhists, ‘What did you hear?’ They answer, ‘You slapped one of your cheeks.’ Then you turn your other cheek and slap it too, after putting another banknote in between your hands. ‘What did you hear?’ you ask. ‘You slapped your buttocks without removing your trousers,’ they answer. ‘You’re wrong,’ you say. ‘Do you know why you’re wrong? Because you’re not Christians who turn the other cheek whenever one of their cheeks undergoes bad treatment. Don’t you realise how bad it is, bad, mad and what not, to slap somebody’s face? Even if it is your own face you slap? For the fun of it?’ ‘I don’t see the fun of it,’ answers a Buddhist. ‘All right. You do it seriously, resolved as you are to punish yourself for a multitude of misdemeanours. Well, I didn’t slap my buttocks, contrary to what you supposed and concluded after listening carefully to the sound of my hand. What else? What else?’ And this question seems to materialise as you speak to them or somebody else, to a stranger you are not eager to invite into your living room. Actually that is what I feel whenever I venture outdoors where I see a lot of strangers and foreigners who I am not supposed to embrace for fear of communicating to them and myself the virus that has outgrown the place of its birth. At the beginning of our history, the Magi or the three

Kings paid a visit to Jesus Christ, but now you see only doctors in the doorway, on the carpet leading to your cradle, bed or divan. They ask you, 'What are your sensations?' before taking your temperature and opening your mouth. They do not inquire about your mission, status, and so they might ignore your messianic vocation which is more than a mere vocation – it is a profession you intend to make use of in the midst of humans, animals and plants. To save a plant, sometimes you need a glass of water, and even humans are sensitive to water and the glasses that can transfer this water to their stomachs or whatever really needs a glass of water in their and our organisms. Well, you drink a glass of water, two glasses of water instead of drinking vodka day and night. So what?

A few days ago I bought a few bottles of a Mosel wine and I am drinking it now as I continue to write whatever comes into my head, whatever goes out of it. If something (or everything) goes out of my head, I do my best to capture it in mid-air; and if I do not succeed, I plead with my lost thoughts, saying, 'Please, don't leave me forever. I had no time to write you down because you're fleeting glimpses, some of you. And most of the time you're just what not, and unfortunately I recall only *not*, not *what*.' Life has no meaning and most of us are aware of the fact, although some of us resist this fact and its meaning, doing their utmost to engrave some words on the monument of life. These people say, 'Our life is a monument and no one can deny it. So let us engrave a few words on this monument of ours. Which words would you wish to see on this monument or pedestal or whatever?' You answer immediately, on the spot, without budging from your seat or the windowsill where you decided to spend one hour at least, 'Love, friendship, brotherhood, sisterhood, sisters, brothers, husbands, neighbours.' You erect a monument to life and look at it for a while; one might even say you contemplate it for hours and hours, far beyond many sunsets. And then you demolish this sign or symbol – in the wake of a disaster that struck your family last month or yesterday. You also break a few pieces of furniture as if they were responsible for your unhappiness, misery and all the nots and whats you have come through to end up where you are – in the present, at this moment.

This wine reminds me of Goethe (why should it remind me of Germany or Luxemburg?) who drank a bottle of wine every day; and apparently he enjoyed it to the detriment of his health and spiritual wealth. Upon awakening I felt I would be unable to run or even walk today, for my right arm and collarbones are not in walking, running, jumping order. I wonder in which order they can be placed, and if I knew the name of this order, unhesitatingly I would detach them from my body and lay them down in that order to let them rest for a while, probably forever: I have enough members to clap and slap and sleep – to my heart's content. I slap my bedposts and hear the essence of my sleep, and I am delighted to find that only *my* sleep is embedded in it: even the persons I invited to this bed of mine and who shared it for a while, for one night or two, are excluded from the list and from the sound. My life sounds like one hand, and that is why my life is one and indivisible in spite of all the sermons I have heard about brotherhood – for years and years. Yesterday I went out, exceptionally, and was told that I should on no account embrace or (God forbid!) kiss anybody, and a wave of happiness engulfed my heart so that for a week at least I shall not do anything to its content – not to double the size of this content. Some of our organs grow bigger and bigger – liver, for instance; and they say it is better to cut them down to size, from time to time. What about the heart? They say a 'big-hearted fellow', but if you let him take care of his heart to the point of letting it outgrow his body, you might encounter some resistance, a selfish attitude that nothing in the world could abate, diminish, cut down to size. If you say to such a fellow, 'I beg to differ,' he might answer, 'Don't forget that you're talking to my heart. It is his opinion you're trying to dispute and oppose. And the heart is always right, I'm afraid.' His heart goes on growing (under your very eyes) and eventually hits you in the face. You do not think it hit one of your

cheeks, otherwise you would offer it your other cheek, without further ado. But you think it hit you on the nose, and you do not have the other nose. Besides, the only nose you have at your (and its) disposal is bleeding now – most atrociously, in your opinion; and your opinion counts in these matters. If you take part in a political discussion, you are bound to come to the following conclusion: ‘No one listens to you.’ But if your nose bleeds and you say so in your colleagues’ presence, and if once again your colleagues do not take your words into consideration, you bend over their sheets of paper – you might also bend over the clean sheets their charwomen have just put on their beds – and leave a few drops of blood on them, saying you have admired Pollock for more than 50 years. This is the only way to attract attention to your persona. You slap your face, your nose starts bleeding and you leave your blood everywhere – even on the monuments erected to the glory of the general who conquered the whole world and had no inkling of its polluted atmosphere. (It is gift-wrapped, as it were.) The point is we can no longer sell the Earth: nobody would buy it. Nowadays potential buyers pay no attention to lakesides, orchards, Siberian wolves and other beauties. They just pull a sort of thermometer out of their attaché cases, look at it for a while and say, ‘Five kopecks, not a penny more.’ You talk to them about the Himalayas, Niagaras, Laras for whom so many verses have been written. They show you their so-called thermometer and say, ‘No, dear Sir. We won’t buy your planet – it’s worth nothing.’

Goethe lived in other times, other atmospheres and, contrary to what Arletty says in the famous film *Hôtel du Nord*, he was the atmosphere of his time. A man or a woman can become an atmosphere, provided they are big enough to create it; and the heart does not always have pride of place. Suppose you see a heart – any heart, for that matter – in a marketplace. You do not recognise it at first and even at last: to you it is just a punch ball or bag (or heart, why not?). So you begin to punch it, and if someone says, ‘What are you doing? This heart may have a heart attack,’ you answer, ‘I paid my ticket and I’ve every right to punch whatever I like – you, for instance.’

It is noteworthy that Goethe, for all his occupations and preoccupations, had enough time for parties and danced like an ordinary *girla*. (Russian slang.) I am probably not Goethe because I do not dance like mad everywhere, not even in my dining room or bedroom. And yet many people dance in their bedrooms before plunging into the waters that do not welcome them: they stay neutral. Never mind: you wash your body, your soul, your former lives, and you walk out of your bath quite happy as if prepared to start anew whatever and everything or even just ng. You have no idea to what you are supposed to attach this ng. Nigger? Out of the question. And once again your thoughts revert to *nigredo*, to the state that precedes all white men and women and even the painting in which Malevich tried to paint a white square on a white canvas, or a white canvas on a white square, or a white world on a white world, except that we have no limitless whiteness within our reach. We see a spot of whiteness and make a dash for it. We find it, touch it, make love to it in all senses and nonsenses and oversenses. And at the end of our exertions, this white spot says to us, ‘You think I’m pure, virtuous, virgin. You’re mistaken, I’m sorry to say. I’ve slept with everybody, in all the beds available to humans. Now I’m yours. By the way, I even slept in the bed of a god.’

And you say to this woman, man or god, ‘I wish to sleep with you in the same bed, in the bed you shared with god.’ And this woman or man asks you, ‘Why? Do you wish to become a god yourself?’ You answer, ‘I *am* God. I have always been God, otherwise there’s no point in living this life of shit, this shit of life.’ And what about Goethe whose subject matter we broached some time ago? Who is Goethe? A subject, a matter. You remain at his bedside until he goes to angels or Faustus or all the words he has ever written about: Cosmos, Love, Devil, Devil, Devil. The Devil says, ‘What do you want?’ This is a ludicrous question, given that everyone wishes for eternity,

beautiful women and men, a lot of villas, not necessarily with swimming pools: I, for one, am not keen on them. Goethe said he was longing for a wine cellar the Almighty had stocked up before the poet's arrival, and this explains the image we saw a few moments ago: Goethe drinking a glass of Mosel wine that I continue to avail myself of at my writing desk. I seem to have forgotten about my hand and its capacity to get in touch with the other hand of mine as if I had no other hand of mine or anybody else's. I do not mention your second hand for a while, and then you realise there is nothing to write home about: you have only one hand, like many Zen Buddhists. Then you write home to say you are a Zen Buddhist, and if your father asks you, 'Why do you think you're a Buddhist?' you may answer, 'I've got only one hand.' 'And what about clapping?' asks your father. In your answer you enumerate all the objects you slap to keep your hand in, and as you write this letter to your father, you slap all the pieces of furniture you come across not only in your house, but also in your neighbours' estates. They call you a 'slap boy', but you do not care. What you do care about is the music created through your contact with the world.

'If I were to write down the sum total of what is worth knowing in various branches of knowledge that I have studied all my life long,' wrote Goethe, 'the resulting manuscript would be so small that you could take it home like a letter in an envelope.' I could post to myself what I have already written in this book, and throughout his life Goethe carried an envelope where a few words were written in capital letters. One of these words is ALCHEMY and I remember putrefaction as I read this word either in Goethe's envelope or in one of the books I have in my library. Is it an excuse I am looking for as I continue to drink my glass of wine, getting older and older and older? Now and then, I really have to slap my thighs to find out if I am really alive, for only flesh, anyone's flesh, can answer this question more or less correctly. If you put the same question to your mind, it is likely to answer by a koan, for instance, 'The river flows and you must flow too, otherwise nothing will ever flow.' And you may answer to your brain, 'I don't care a hoot about whatever you're talking about. I don't wish to flow. I hate Heraclitus and his pupils who must have ended up in the Atlantic Ocean and choked on an oil slick. Whenever someone dares speak of Heraclitus in my presence, I hand him a glass of oil from an oil slick. Actually it's better not to flow at all. I'm not good at shooting and if the target I care about moves from side to side, I'm unlikely to hit it. But if you're rooted to the spot, I'll kill you in no time at all, or just in two seconds.'

What can be learnt in this world of ours? Why should you live and learn? Why can't you just live as long as you live and die? You live and learn you should not put your hand into your fireplace unless the fire they always talk about has not been kindled yet. You put your finger in it, saying to yourself, 'I'll hold it as long as the fire is out.' And then the fire you are thinking about appears and your hand burns in this fire, which is logical enough, given the omnipresence of physical laws and our lore. Then you begin to slap various objects – with what remains of your hand, leg and other parts of your body and mind. You put your mind into the flames and it talks to you about the Buddha, as usual. You remove your brain from everything and concentrate exclusively on the remains of your hand as if there were something to write home about. But why *should* you write home? You have no home to speak of, and if you can neither speak nor write about anything, this thing does not exist – an incredible piece of luck bestowed on this thing by the Almighty or His stooges. One of the stooges says to another stooge, 'Why should this thing see the light of day? Let it see the light of night.' And the two stooges put a lorry on the thing's mother and this lorry crushes and squashes the thing under discussion, under its wheels. It also flattens the mummy's body. They exhibit this body in a museum and call it *The Stillborn Child*. And the museum attendants require your attention, otherwise you will not listen properly to the stillness of this child. 'Can you hear his A

of her sisters (my wife perhaps) continues to pay the rent – ‘The rent is due at the end of the month,’ says the third sister every other week – but at the end of next month the flat will no longer be available. No other flat is available, owing to the third sister’s laziness and unwillingness to do anything related to leases, payments and bicycles.

In the email I received and read this sister speaks neither of her truant disposition nor of her first and second sisters’ multiple efforts on her behalf. They drive her from one establishment to another, and if she is fed up with them, their conversation and clothes, they lend her their cars and also their bicycles, whenever she is in the mood for fresh air, for pedalling up hill and down dale. ‘They never do anything for me as if I weren’t their sister. They read neither Chekhov nor Fichte and their accusations sound hollow, although they’re convinced they’re right. They accuse me of selfishness and I say to them, “If I feel like having a long hot bath every evening, I’m entitled to it because every human being is isolated to some extent – to the extent of this bathroom, for instance. And you allow yourself to knock on its door during my daily ablutions as if you had any right to do so light-heartedly. All right, you’re at home. It is in your house I’m staying right now because my destiny doesn’t give me much choice. If I had another destiny, I would never ask you to help me, for I need neither your hospitality nor your other virtues. Unfortunately I have only this particular destiny within my reach, and I don’t even have to reach for it – it comes of its own accord and stays with me, alas. Hopefully not forever. Incidentally, you might be in my shoes, my dear sisters, and then I wouldn’t knock on your doors, even if you stayed in my bathroom for hours and hours.’ Ingratitude is not the keystone of my existence. Recently I said to one of my Russian friends, ‘Never again will I bother you with depressive moods. I go on writing, and I fight no uphill battles against blank pages. Being depressed under the circumstances would amount to perverse ingratitude.’ So she is not my doppelgänger. Fichte’s philosophy is just the playground of loners who put metaphysics on the highest rung of human existence and suffering. If you suffer atrociously, you content yourself with your representation of the world where you are always right and happy, whatever happens in their materialistic world, in their dead, quasi-buried universe.

‘Death is a very mediocre painter,’ said Goethe. And if death knocks on your door – he never rings the bell – you let him in because you are weary of life and think that your rheumatism will leave you alone as soon as you cross the threshold beyond which death as such reigns and stares at you. You look back and see your rheumatism on the other side of the threshold and you smile for the first time in your life: all other smiles were phony and did not reflect the state of your mind and other things. But sometimes death comes to you for another purpose, assuming there are any other purposes in life except death, and you sink into your armchair or just sit down and death begins to paint you on a canvass he must have brought to your room. Death paints you and you look at him, trying not to move as if you were already dead. You ask death, ‘Do you want to paint my life or my death?’ And death answers, ‘I wish to paint you on the threshold of death, on my threshold.’ ‘Could I cast a glance at what you have already painted?’ ‘Of course you can,’ answers death. You rise to your feet and look at the painting you see in front of you, and you ask yourself if what you are looking at is really a painting, not a pain you have never felt. ‘Where’s ting?’ you ask. ‘There are no tings around us,’ answers your visitor. ‘No ting-a-ling?’ ‘No.’ ‘Are there *things* anywhere?’ ‘Perhaps,’ answers the visitor. ‘But I’m not painting things. I’m painting you. And you’re not a thing, either in yourself or within my own body. You’re just a variety of pain.’ You notice as you continue to look at the painting that the number of wrinkles you have never counted reach the domain of astronomy: only stars can rival your propensity for growing so many vestiges on your face. And yet no one will ever say when looking at your portrait painted by death, ‘I love this starry night.’ You are night all right, but you are not a *starry* night and you wonder if anyone can say about the firmament, ‘It’s a wrinkled night I’m looking at.’ So you remain what

you are: a night, a wrinkled nothing, a threshold where one or two or three must wait before joining their death forever.

You look at your portrait and ask, 'Where's the threshold?' 'What kind of threshold do you have in mind?' asks death. 'I'm supposed to cross the threshold lying between life and death,' you answer. 'There are no thresholds anywhere,' says death. 'I am life – eternal life, if you wish. If you think in terms of eternity (you do, if I'm not mistaken) you must forget about thresholds and life. I am here and everywhere. Actually I'm not death, contrary to whatever you might find in your dictionaries. It is always "contrary" that you find in your dictionaries and even in your mind saturated with false knowledge. One even wonders if it is knowledge or noledge. You know, I think it is just "no" and nothing else. You can't say "yesledge", can you? None of your dictionaries will ever accept this term.' So you sit down again and look at death which moves its brush from right to left and up and down as if you were moving, as if your face were displaying any emotion. What kind of emotion could your face display at such a moment? The emotion you feel is not kind; nor is it generous, and if you see a number of children in front of you, around you, you will not give them 10,000 dollars, for the simple reason that you do not have them in your pocket. And you wonder whether you have them anywhere – in your safe, in a bank, either in Singapore or on the Bahamas. You may ask death where your money is, and death may answer your question. But is it really important, your money, your portrait, the number of wrinkles you wear on your face as if it were a precious garment? You think you are a genius and so none will ever forget your existence and contribution to the history of the world. And then somebody rings your doorbell, comes into your room, looks at you and says, 'You don't have enough wrinkles on your face and even on your thighs.' You begin to rub your thighs and face. After a while you ask the visitor, 'Am I a genius, in your opinion?' The visitor answers, 'Yes. Let us keep this "yes" for a while, perhaps forever; hopefully forever.'

You talk to death and then you say to everybody, 'This is one of the most important stages of our life. Putrefaction is necessary and vital – without it you may die all the time, today and tomorrow.' Actually I am not sure I know what putrefaction means because the only image I receive from the blue or God (whenever I think about putrefaction) looks like a corpse ruthlessly eaten, devoured and enjoyed by lots of worms; and I have no wish to count these worms. Nor do I talk to them. Should I say to them, '*Niet*'? Why should I say 'no' to all these creatures that have the same will-to-live as humans? As a matter of fact their will-to-live is much more impressive, given that they eat something we find repulsive; even cadaver-eaters, as I call them, are disgusted by their food, but they think they are duty bound to eat corpses because it is the only way to bestow immortality upon them. 'Do we remind you of our food?' they ask their victims' relatives.

A Taoist or an alchemist hands you a phial and says, 'If you wish to bring your mother back to life and prosperity, just sprinkle a few drops on her dead, almost buried body.' You buy a hundred phials inside which the precious elixir lies in wait for yet another corpse. Alas, the corpses continue to follow their paths leading either to Hell or to Heaven or just to putrefaction and gold, as alchemists and their admirers believe. Goethe, for one, could understand the people whose only passion seems to depend on scars and other horrors born by our faces, in the wake of a drunken brawl or a drunken war. Thousands of soldiers used to drink themselves courageous or careless before picking up their rifles and making an attack on a city. They drank one glass of vodka and said to their comrades-in-arms: 'I'll kill them all, just wait and see.' After the second glass of vodka, they said, 'I'll destroy the Earth. Chemicals and oil slicks are on the slow side.' After the third glass, they used to threaten God, brandishing their fists and smashing chandeliers. After the fourth glass, they usually said, 'Leave me alone. I don't give a

damn.’ Such soldiers habitually had a multitude of scars on their faces, and Goethe thought we should not allow ‘our recollections of the features of men and women who have been our friends to be ruined by a disfiguring mask’. On the other hand, you might experience such a wave of pity and general sympathy for humankind, which you hate not only for its stupidity, but also because of cosmetics and hairdressers (and barbers) that you say to the disfigured individual, ‘Poor thing. O my God, you did it for us, you defended our country at the cost of your beauty.’ ‘No,’ says his wife. ‘A drunken brawl, not a striking example of bravery. He was so drunk he couldn’t defend his wife. You see, I was raped before his very eyes, his closed eyes, three times, by three yobs. Do you know what “yob” means in Russian? He fucked. The verb is “*iebat*”. You’d better not use it too often. You can say in Russian: “This yob yobbed me yesterday.”’

You cherish a face and then somebody calls you to say this face was disfigured. In no time you get dressed, take a taxi – you are too shaken to manoeuvre the steering wheel properly – and begin to cry during your journey to wherever the victim you are in love with suffers from his own reflection and a series of vivid recollections. ‘She’ll never look at me again. I’ll do all I can to prevent her from seeing this hideous mask. I look like the elephant man or like that actress I saw in one of the films about a circus. Goethe said, “You shouldn’t show your scars to the women you love unless you got these scars in a Napoleonic war. Then you can devote half-an-hour to the history of these scars, saying as you touch them ever so slightly, ‘I got this one at Austerlitz. This scar will always remind me of Borodino and Kutuzov.’” The beloved comes in, after turning her own key in the keyhole she knows by heart – she never looks at it before inserting the key – and in a voice choked with emotion utters the following words: ‘Oh my darling, oh my darling. Don’t hide your beautiful face. You’re far more beautiful now.’ She is right and Goethe was wrong. One wonders why, upon making his trivial remark, he disregarded the alchemical lessons he had taken from Nicholas Flamel and other glorious representatives of this golden vocation. Nor did he honour the pity about which Schopenhauer wrote for hours on end in his notebooks and also on the blackboard in the classroom, at the university where he competed with Hegel and lost rather pitifully. ‘Pity, pity, pity, pity,’ he kept writing on the blackboard, whereas Hegel wrote, ‘History is over, I am on the top of the world, you should leave Germany and fly over to the United States of America.’ Hegel’s students used to walk by the classroom where Schopenhauer kept standing in front of the blackboard, and the remarks they exchanged in the course of their walks did not seem to favour the philosopher’s (not Hegel’s) standpoint. ‘Whenever I say to a down-and-out loser, “I’ve always had a lot of sympathy for you,” I hear, “I don’t need your sympathy, moron. I’m the happiest man in the world. And you’re just a down-and-out loser. But I don’t have much sympathy for you – I think you’ve brought your troubles on yourself.”’ It goes without saying that, if your sympathy meets with a rebuff, you can rebuff your fellow-creature in your turn, ‘I don’t pity you at all. When I utter the words “sympathy” and “commiseration”, I do it only out of respect for the Buddha and Schopenhauer. Do you know how the Buddha used to demonstrate his pity? He always went on a long journey in a barouche overloaded with walking sticks and bread. Whenever he saw a man or a woman who walked with a slow, stiff gate, he would pick up a walking stick and offer it to the sufferer. And whenever he saw an emaciated child, he offered him a piece of bread. Some naughty children shouted as they greedily grasped the piece he offered them, “We want brioche, not this bread of yours. It has gone stale in the course of your journey.’ ‘It has always been stale,’ the Buddha would answer. ‘I eat only stale bread. It’s good for my and your health.’ ‘Do you ever eat biscuits and cakes?’ asked the children. ‘No. But if I happen to eat one of them, one day, this biscuit or cake will be stale.’

In Russia I knew a teenager who drank a bottle of vodka per day, and if he had no bottles in his vodka cellar, he would steal some in the nearest shop. After drinking he might spend a night on a muddy pavement, and when a purist asked him, 'What are you doing on this pavement?' he would answer, 'I'm a pavement artist.' 'But you're not drawing anything on this pavement, are you?' 'I don't have to. I am a living sculpture.' Then someone taught him the rudiments of the alchemical lore and he gave up the art of sculpture, opting for retorts and crucibles, metaphorically speaking. He just spoke of alchemy, whenever accused of offending his fellow-citizens' aesthetic sense and also their sense of justice. 'This tramp behaves like a cad and steals our property. How many bottles of vodka has he stolen in his adolescent life? And I bet he began to drink vodka in his cradle.' 'No generation without corruption,' was the only answer these citizens heard in the course of nine years at least. But the tramp did not limit his alchemical methods and rituals to vodka and pavements, to the mud for which Moscow and many other Russian cities are justly renowned. (Let us not forget snowballs.) One day he made up his mind and married a woman whose beauty never struck anybody so that one is driven to the following conclusion: 'She was not beautiful at all.' But this shortcoming hardly mattered, for alchemists always speak of gold that awaits them somewhere, perhaps in some bank or other. The couple was inspired by Nicholas Flamel and Avicenna who both enlarged upon what they called 'the Corscane bitch and the Armenian dogge'. So the tramp's wife joined him on the muddiest pavements of Moscow where they rolled and rolled as if flouting the proverb: 'A rolling stone gathers no moss.' 'A rolling human body gathers a lot of mud,' they used to say. After gathering a sufficient quantity of mud, they would come to a standstill (to a partial standstill, to be exact) and began to bite each other 'cruelly', according to Nicholas Flamel. In between the bites, they shouted, 'Swallow my poison,' 'What about you? Have you enjoyed *my* poison?' 'Delicious, better than last night.' 'And my sperm? Aren't you eager to taste it today?' 'Of course I am. Where is it?' 'In my penis, you silly fool.'

They never leave each other, from the moment they seize on one another (if the cold hinders them not) till both are slavered with excitement, literally filling their adversaries and lovers with venom. Mortal hurts, lots of gore and blood in this so-called living movie. Then they kill each other and get stewed in their proper venom. Among their admirers, there could be found a few voluntaries whose curiosity and willingness to learn the alchemical lore and its practical side – physically, not only through books and shows – know very few bounds. They *partake* of this stew – alchemists often use old-fashioned, almost solemn words – and spit out the morsels with the intention of sending them into the world again. The alchemical glue helps their admirers restore the bodies to life, and it is another life the innocent bystanders see in front of them. Some of them, unable to put up with the tragedy of their resurrection, turn their backs on the scene, but somehow they continue to take part in the show – such is the might of the cosmic process in the course of which putrefaction turns into gold, death into life. The more they practise their art, the better they can teach its intricacies and mysteries, its labyrinthine structure. Logically enough, putrefaction is carried out on so-called Black Square. From the mutual destruction of conjoint opposites, there appears the metallic, volatile humidity which is the Mercury of the Wise. The wise component says to disciples gathered all around the stage on which the comedy is performed (White Square): 'Look at the stars, look at the stars. Have you no wish to compare our starry appearance to the night sky where a lot of sputniks fly from one pole to the other? Don't forget that these stars told shepherds and kings that a child was born in Bethlehem. And today he will be born in Moscow, on Red Square.' Generally speaking, children adore colours and their metamorphoses, and so their parents often have an opportunity to watch the game these colour worshippers play with redcurrants, pink peppercorns, kiwis, blackberries. They put them on a parquet floor and

start mixing them ecstatically. Then they walk on them for an hour or so, creating their own masterpieces. And then they ask their parents, 'Don't you think my painting looks like one of Pollock's creations?' And if their parents shake their heads and say, 'Your masterpiece reminds me of Kandinsky,' the children burst into tears: they thought their Kandinsky-period was already a thing of the past. 'This painting is an extremely significant step in the evolution of my pictorial style,' they say in plaintive tones. And if you take these adolescents to Red Square where one can watch the final stage of the alchemical ritual, they do their best to repeat the gestures and ejaculations of the participants. At home they open all the windows because they need a lot of wind and its belly where they intend to spend some time as if determined to get back into their mothers' wombs. 'Mummy, can you see the wind's belly?' they ask. 'Of course I can. But wouldn't you rather spend a few hours in *my* belly? You seemed to like it as an embryo.' 'I just have to take a significant step in the evolution of my personal Philosophers' Stone. Your womb lies at the beginning of the process. Now I'm thinking in terms of other bellies. Unfortunately in your belly I received only terrestrial food. In the belly of the wind I'm sure to get the celestial and purifying influences. Once installed in the belly of the wind, I'll wait for the New Earth which must eventually emerge from nowhere.' 'Not out of the blue?' asks the mother. 'This time it will emerge from the *nigredo* state, from this darkness darker than darkness. By the way, Mummy, I would stay and watch the play, if I were you. If you return to the kitchen, you'll miss the Peacock's Tail.'

A family life cannot always be compared to the principles displayed by alchemists throughout the Great Work. Of course your wife has betrayed you many times and she is doing it at this very moment, but what may happen somewhere in the middle of the Work that many alchemists regard as the Greatest Work ever, is far more dangerous and destructive. The temperature goes up, an ingredient gets wrong – gets off the right track, that is – and an explosion blows off your head as if you were beheaded by a guillotine or by an axe, like Charles I. You say to your assistant, 'Go and fetch my overcoat, will you? For some reason, I'm shivering with cold in my thin cotton shirt.' The explosion you feared comes to the fore and destroys both the fore and your fears. In your tomb you no longer fear either tombs or explosions. Nor do you yearn to hitch up your wife's pleated skirt. Your whole life was a perfect example of putrefaction deprived of a glorious conclusion. The end of the 'second work' comes with the appearance of the Whiteness, *albedo*. But you got stuck in the 'first work' and the amount of venom you swallowed proves this conclusion beyond any reasonable doubt.

They say – the same alchemists or a bunch of their colleagues – that once the Whiteness is reached, 'our subject is said to have acquired sufficient strength to resist the ardours of the fire'. Your corpse is already in an advanced stage of decomposition, and if at the outset of your death you were still able to recall some features of your life or putrefaction, now you are prevented from giving rise to one single thought, let alone to your dead body: it will never rise from the dead unless Jesus or one of his trustworthy angels intervenes on your behalf – personally and with utmost concentration. Oddly enough, your corpse has acquired sufficient strength to resist the ardours of the fire: if your relatives resolve to cremate your mortal remains, you will not bawl your eyes out, contrary to what many heretics did in days of yore and the Holy Inquisition. (You no longer have a pair of eyes.) The members of your family might ask the staff to scatter your ashes at sea. Of course this water, the water you acknowledge as your permanent tomb, is also part of the alchemical process. As Nicholas Flamel puts it, 'And finally killing one another, be stewed in their proper venome, which after their death, changeth them into living and permanent water.' He also declares that all these ashes and stages of corruption are for your own good. You lose your natural forms with a view to taking a nobler and better form afterwards. The form of water?

I recall a Chinese precept or a Taoist doctrine that advocates the stance adopted by water, whenever we get in touch with it. We touch it and it acquires the shape of the finger that we used for this tactile communication with a certain quantity of water. It obeys our finger or any object, any piece of base metal, and we wonder why it makes no difference between the hand of a genius and a toothbrush: it adopts the doctrines of both. (A shape is a visual doctrine, as Taoists put it.) And you should adopt your destiny as if it were an index finger. Suppose you lose your body in a car accident. Miraculously your head survives and you take advantage of this survival to pay homage to your passion for tourism and also for food, for three-star restaurants. Your head embarks upon a journey – a real journey, not just a walk – and you reach one of your favourite restaurants where you are almost worshipped, considering your loyalty to great delicacies; in spite of your disaster. Upon your arrival you are conveyed (in a basket) to your table – only your head is entitled to it. The waiters are so polite and respectful they put a knife and a fork in front of your lips as if you could use anything except your teeth and tongue. And since you have no stomach and consequently cannot store and digest the food you indulge in, you keep it in your mouth as long as is necessary to dissolve it in your saliva. Now and then you talk to the waiters about alchemy, pointing out you do not regret the loss of your body, for everything happens in one's mouth. Besides, it reminds you of the initial stage to which a professional alchemist submits the *Materia Prima*. 'What do you call the *Materia Prima*?' asks a waiter. 'The starter?'

Is it pointless to visualise a situation in which you can talk to your body as if it were far away, in the Hereafter. (The truth and nothing but the truth.) You turn a few tables or rather you ask your wife, who is still faithful to you, for all your misfortunes, to turn a table or two so you can talk to your dead and mutilated body. At first you have no idea to which piece of your former substance you had better speak and then you hear your right arm's voice. Or you *seem* to hear its voice, and it is preferable to get in touch with a figment of your (or your wife's or your table's) imagination than to lie prostrated on a cushion, doing nothing. Usually your head just lies on this cushion, for your wife is not always available, within your reach, for you have nothing to reach her with except your tongue. Of course even you, despite your state of mind and body, can stick out your tongue at whoever happens to be within your field of vision, but you refrain from this gesture: you have no wish to forget your manners, in addition to all the other lapses of memory you have suffered from since your accident. Yet now and then you do stick out your tongue at her and she says, 'How dare you? Are you forgetting your manners?' And you answer, 'I do apologise for my incongruous conduct, but I just wish to ask you to turn this table. I'm bored to death, and it would be even more impolite to bother you with my tales of woe.' 'Turn this table with your tongue,' she says. You roll towards the table, stick out your tongue and try to turn it in earnest. Life is hard anyway and whether you do something with your hands, your head or your toe or not you will never succeed, especially if you wish to establish contact with the dead. You turn a table, your head, you twiddle your thumbs, and what you eventually hear amounts to very little indeed – to two hoots of an owl.

Suppose it is ordinary paralysis and they roll you up hill and down dale in a wheelchair with an in-built engine that allows you to go (roll) rock-climbing among other things. But what are these other things? Suddenly you realise to what point you were in love with your aunt who has been dead and not buried for more than 20 years. Her ashes were scattered at sea and you yearn to communicate with her by means of your tongue that can both turn your favourite otherworldly table and talk rubbish as long as they feed you properly. Meanwhile your wife begins a new life and her disloyalty is far more evident now than it was three years ago when she allowed herself only a few indiscreet phone calls during which she carried out what is rightly called 'oral sex', holding the

receiver in her mouth, massaging it with her tongue, while listening to her partner's reactions. An oratorio of sighs and screams is performed now right under your very nose, and the partners in love invite you to participate in their orgy by smelling their bodies, ecstasies and what not. And they ask you what you think about their exploits. You congratulate them twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. In the afternoon you turn whatever can be turned and listen to the dead who impart their secrets to you, using in the process outmoded, worn-out words. One gets the feeling they talk a lot, those dead, to their relatives and utter strangers whose ability to turn appropriate statuettes permits them to compel the dead to open their hearts. And if, taking their cue from our hero, they have no hearts, having lost their bodies and all their internal organs, they just open their mouths and talk for hours and hours as if resolved to neglect the tidiness of their tombs or the sea where their ashes continue to lie undisturbed.

They say, for instance, 'We use the verb "to impart" very often because we are open-hearted and open-mouthed. The quick hanker for the secrets of the Hereafter, and we have known these secrets for several decades. We say to the quick, "Do you want us to impart the secrets of our eternal survival to *you*?"' "Yesterday you didn't impart anything on the subject I'm interested in." "Don't you worry – there are no shortages in our kingdom. There are old castles where fire burns constantly, and even I can't say whether this fire comes from a fireplace or from a human body. So I'm unable to impart any information to you on this subject either. There are also skyscrapers. Which of these dwelling places do you opt for? The palace, the fire or a skyscraper?"' But more often than not, the dead impart a dozen bits of what they wrongfully call 'the secret lore' to the quick – a series of open secrets, to tell the truth. 'A great compassionate heart which is the chief factor of the desire.' A good excuse that womanisers and rapists use at will and rather successfully. They single out a fine figure of a woman and say to her, 'Shall we make love somewhere?' 'How dare you! I'll call the police.' 'My great compassionate heart,' says the rapist or Jack the Ripper. 'The chief factor of my desire for your body, mainly for your legs.' 'Why have I deserved your compassion?' 'Because you're bound to be raped today or tomorrow at the latest. Not in the long run, you know. And you'll be raped by a man with a small uncompassionate heart – if you don't yield to my caresses, compassion and desire.' And if a police officer comes and bends over the couple, the rapist says, 'I'm doing it out of compassion.'

The dead talk a lot about compassion: 'an all-embracing love or compassion'; and so on and so forth. And you answer them thus, 'I'm an invalid. Only my head survived the accident in which I lost the rest of my substance – or of my nonsense, as my wife puts it. I have a disproportionate heart, believe me. And this heart I keep in my chest of drawers works very hard as it discharges massive quantities of compassion destined exclusively for my consumption. I pity myself day in day out. What would *you* do in my shoes? You're dead and buried or dead and scattered, whereas I continue to live without myself, so to speak. What else could you say about my sorry plight?' We know that universal love starts at home, in a mirror called 'Narcissus' in which you install your reflection in the mornings and in the evenings, before turning in. You say to yourself, 'I'm not bad tonight. I'm rather handsome, despite the number of years I've traversed since my first cry in my mother's womb. I'll sleep well, I'm sure. And my sweet dreams will be swarming with my reflections – on the surface of lakes, in orchards, in the woods.' The same goes for compassion: you cannot have pity on a human being unless your self-pity has already reached fever pitch. You pity yourself all the time, even if your head is still on your shoulders and not on a cushion or on the floor, rolling towards a lobster. You pity yourself because you were born, and had you not been born, you would have pitied yourself in some limbo or other. But if you are exceptionally miserable – this happens if a human being loses his whole body, with the exception of the head – you need all the pity your heart can produce, for yourself.

‘Let others count on other hearts,’ you round off yet another interior monologue. The point is your destiny allowed you to keep your head within your reach (within the reach of your soul) only because the greater part of destinies are cruel, and they know how to make you suffer to the utmost – by making you analyse your suffering and its origins.

The dead are born *donneurs de leçons* (lesson-givers). In one of the Hereafter-located libraries they lay their hands on a book devoted to Zen Buddhism and begin to recite its precepts, wise sayings and condemnations. ‘We condemn all those who do not pity their neighbours. If you display no compassion upon meeting your neighbour in the mornings or in the evenings, we condemn you irrevocably.’ Those Buddhists remember yet another rule, ‘You are not supposed to judge your neighbour, let alone your extra-terrestrial visitors. Don’t forget that Spinoza said so too.’ ‘Why should I pity the man who owns five villas and seven cars?’ you ask. ‘Because he suffers on account of his birth and the years of labour he has to plough through. Every morning he sees an enormous pile of papers to plough through, and every sheet of paper bears the weight of millions and billions. You should devote your whole existence to the purification of a pitying and compassionate heart.’ Your heart is already filled with pity, but two dirty thoughts seize control of this pity and start nibbling at it, like two mice. At first you pay no attention to this ongoing meal; then you realise you feel no pity for one-armed persons. Yoga is a very effective technique for combating stress, and you resort to a series of exercises you learnt under your guru’s scrutiny. You say to yourself, ‘People under a lot of stress may experience headaches, minor pains and sleeping difficulties. I need neither of these problems. A one-armed person doesn’t really deserve my pity – he can eat, drink and even make love, caressing his wife’s or companion’s cheek.’ But if you feel nothing in the presence of a lonely head lying on a cushion, you are duty bound to remove two dirty thoughts from your formerly compassionate heart. You may also purify these two thoughts because no individual, no thought can be entirely bad, as the Buddha and the Fathers of the Church used to point out. Every thought you find in your head is almost infinite (the cosmos is embedded in it) and so you can always arrange a small room for purity and goodness inside it. Sooner or later this goodness and that purity will attack the evil empire which tyrannises your heart. And the regimental band will perform a triumphant march at the sound of which all one-armed and one-legged individuals are bound to grow arms and legs in no time at all. If this miracle does not work, you can give them – so-called one-persons – an extra-portion of bread and butter. And you write an article where you must quote a well-known Zen Buddhist’s remark: ‘An all-embracing love or compassion which, in combination with knowledge and will-power, never ceases from devising all means to promote the spiritual welfare of every sentient being.’ You had better quote this wise saying at the beginning of the text, otherwise you will not have enough room for a multitude of necessary, essential and vital comments; otherwise no one will ever understand anything. Incidentally, my friend often meets Zen Buddhists – only to say that Christianity is superior to their so-called ‘discipline’ on account of Christ’s suffering on the Cross and also before the Crucifixion. Some Buddhists reply as follows, ‘Too spectacular. Below the belt.’

I am told life is better than death because there is enough room for love within life’s bounds. There is no love in death unless you come across two skulls that kiss each other frenetically as if bent on proving to the quick they are in love with other, for all the wise sayings one hears everywhere and culls from books. I think there is much more love in the Hereafter, not only because the saints you fly across in Paradise cannot dance properly unless they are interlaced to the point of becoming one spotlight or searchlight or floodlight – it depends on your whereabouts and moods. You can be in a theatrical mood, in a sea-voyage mood or in the Crimean mood: you see a lot of searchlights on the beaches that surround the Black Sea. I think you can afford to love your neighbour,

even if this neighbour happens to lie next to you; if you rub coffins with him or her. (A nice example of gallows humour.) If you take this idiom literally and do rub shoulders with your living neighbour, sooner or later one of you gets his block knocked off. But even if you dig up two coffins and they start rubbing against each other in the wind – literally, not metaphorically – you will hear a pleasant music somewhat akin to Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Or to your own romantic, ghost-inhabited dreams or nightmares. In the 19th century the Americans would always ask the English if there were ghosts in their castles, for there were no old castles in the United States of America; not in those days, not in those nights. 'You'll have to wait for a month or two,' the English would answer, if they wished to keep those beautiful American ladies on their estates as long as their thirsts and appetites required. Anyway, I think the dead are better equipped for love and its numerous rituals. In the vale of tears we have concerns about whether the government will be able to provide viable social services for poorer families. In the Hereafter there are no poor families, no rich families, no social services unless you are worried about the upkeep of your tomb: flowers, geometrical design and neatness, stones and all. In the Hereafter you can devote to love the whole of your eternity. The quick betray you on a regular basis. You are saved by Giselle or Beatrice. We are judged by the dead.

They (a large number of gurus) announce, 'There is enough room for this and that. So you'll live forever because there is enough of "for" and enough of "ever", whether you write these three syllables as two words or not.' No wonder that usually Zen Buddhists, when about to enter a cave or a cellar or just an ordinary room, ask, 'Is there? Is there?' The chief guru may answer by raising his fist, and it is the commonest answer one chances upon in those light-governed regions inhabited by Zen masters and their disciples and idle observers. (You cannot get rid of idle observers unless you decide to kill them after declaring war on their countries.) This fist means you are in danger of being beaten mercilessly, if you go on asking Zen questions. That is why disciples often have their arms and even heads cut off, and they may do that on their own initiative. A monk cut his own arm off to please his future master because this irresponsible master was taking no notice of his supplications. (I already spent a few seconds on this incident which unexpectedly had a happy ending unless no-no-no-nothing ever ends, either happily or unfortunately.) The master was pleased to some extent, but I am sure this extent would have been much longer, had the disciple to come or to be – he had already come – cut off his head instead of offering his bleeding arm to the most renowned Zen master in human history. He (the disciple) ought to have built a guillotine and pressed a button, when fully prepared for his own execution. He might have made a short speech before embarking upon this self-sacrifice – to score points over Louis XVI and his pathetic wife. He might have said, 'Your Majesty! You were just an unwilling and unprepared victim of the revolutionists. You knew nothing about Zen masters, koans and the Buddha himself who would have told you a few home truth after reading your diary, the entries you had scribbled in your notebook, your "nothing, nothing, nothing". Look at my sacrifice, at the homemade guillotine which will enable me to become my future guru's disciple. It is for the sake of koans that I'm going through this procedure. If asked, "Is there? Is there?" I would show them my guillotine. You could also point to a tree and raise your fist or your leg. Your fist could point at a star, at a boat and the waves enraged by this boat. You could just brandish your fists, now and then jerking your head up. But my guillotine is the best answer one could give to this koan called "Is there?". And my rolling head is bound to supply a happy ending to this conundrum.'

The Tantra Scripture says: 'My path leads to death, but, unless I die, how can I know that path of mine is bad and that yours is good?' Apparently this is all one can say about one's path unless one is permanently asked round the clock (or *square* the clock, as Zen Buddhists put it): 'Is there? Is there?' So you explain rather patiently

as you stamp your right foot, ‘This is all I can say about my acquaintance with the path.’ ‘Aren’t you standing on this path?’ ‘Yes. So are you.’ ‘My path is good. What about yours?’ ‘Go to Hell. If you do, your path will be bad.’ Well, you are standing on the path, on the only path available to humans, and you are loath to move forward or backward or sideways. Even if you go right, you will follow the same path or road. Russian fairy tales often sound ridiculous – in the light of this path’s omnipresence. (Or they *look* ridiculous, given the presence of light.) At some point in my native (or mother) fairy tales a knight rides as far as a crossroads and reads the following inscriptions: ‘If you ride right, you’ll be right’, ‘If you ride left, you’ll become left-handed’, ‘If you ride straight on, you will be on to a good thing’. An experienced knight always chooses the least enticing promise so he is likely to become left-handed in the context of this foolish story that only inexperienced children truly relish before going to bed or to sleep. After a while, the knight penetrates into the Kingdom of Leftists, and a courtier tells him, ‘The Royal Princess will get married before the end of the month. Our King enjoined us to look for left-handed knights, otherwise the Princess will never get married and everything will be marred.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because only a married princess is proud as Lucifer.’ ‘Why are you looking for left-handed knights?’ ‘Because our Princess will never fall in love with right-handed princes.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because she is left-handed.’ Or the knight meets an adversary who has already slain 1001 knights, but he knows he will never vanquish a left-handed opponent, even if the latter happens to be a dwarf: a sorceress told him that when he was in his cradle or on his mother’s lap or in a sort of hammock. Do you need to know that your path leads to death? Perhaps, if you are still in your cradle and you believe – if you believe in anything at all – that you will live forever and that your mother will always strip her clothes off to give you quick and easy access to her breasts, her milk and honey as fairy tales put it, instead of putting a jug of milk and pot of honey on your dinner table. But if you open a book where a lot of Tantric scriptures await you, you do not expect to find a piece of information you have been spoon-fed with ever since you were born, ‘You’re dead, you’re dead, you’re dead.’ Yes, once again they remind you that you died at the very moment of your birth, but you yearn for other pieces of information. You wish to know more about the stars and the universe in general, for you will live in this universe for quite a while, perhaps forever. Instead, the Scriptures say to you, ‘You are on the path that leads you to death.’ It might say instead, ‘You are on the path that leads to rebirth, resurrection and the Holy Trinity.’ Well, anyway you cannot know anything as long as you are alive because only outdoors you will know for sure you were indoors, once upon a time. And now you are nowhere with the exception of the Hereafter that teaches you a lot about your former lives, saying, ‘You were in Rome, you were Brutus, you were Catullus, you were Louis XVI and so you were a good engineer. You made a number of clocks, but you were a bad king and they put your head under the blade known as the “guillotine and its punishment”.’ You are likely to hear all sorts of useless remarks and affirmations, once you are out of life and its suffering, its bottomless misery. But there are other miseries in the cosmos and so you continue to scrutinise the bottoms of those miseries that open their bottoms, permitting you to contemplate other bottoms to your heart’s content.

I must have seen a dozen of Rothko’s paintings – in museums, in galleries, in everyday life, not in everyday books. Now I am looking at his paintings in the book I purchased a long time ago, perhaps in one of my former lives; in my formal lives, as I say sometimes, when in need of saying something clever or stupid. I remember my own thresholds of death on which I spent a few hours, on several occasions; and on every occasion of this kind, of these unkind occasions, I saw a line or a stripe and no stars that can infuse you with optimism and hope. Rothko said at some point, ‘What is there? Is there anything if there are no lines, no stripes?’ Actually, before every suicide you contemplate either idly or actively, you see a line or you represent it yourself: your brain represents a line,

becomes a line, one thought only. And this thought speaks to you of your forthcoming (or notcoming) suicide. You do not require any description of this act: your window, your liberator is already open and you can even say it is looking at you with expectation. Your window also treasures a lot of hopes and one of these hopes is centred upon your forthcoming suicide. The window says to itself, 'What am I doing in this house? Am I here for the sake of fresh air only? Of course they can see a bit of the sunny skies of California and a few trees – thanks to my presence and openness. But I have other aspirations in my bosom. And one of these aspirations concerns the liberation of this person looking out of me at this particular moment, at this hour of my night. This person intends to throw his body out of me, out of this window I am talking about, this talking window. And I do hope he'll do it, otherwise my presence is useless. A bit of the sky, two trees, a breath of fresh air. What do you take me for? I've never felt so humiliated in my life.' In Rothko's last paintings there are lines or thoughts that lead 'elsewhere', as they put it. Could I ask them to put this 'elsewhere' on my chest of drawers? Yes, I recall my last suicide, my last temptation – my last St Anthony, as I call it. According to one of my theories, St Anthony's temptations were not related to women, demons and other lascivious products of our consciousness. He just wished to commit suicide in spite of his awareness of God's presence and of His first-hand participation in his (the saint's) birth. And he did say to himself several times in a row, 'I can't take my own life because it is not I (not I, not I, as Beckett and Fichte put it) who gave it to myself.' The saint had only a smattering of English and anyway his knowledge of grammar was quite rudimentary.

In one of the picture galleries I have visited in the course of my life I saw a painting where the saint in question (and in painting) was kneeling down in front of a boulder as if praying to it, which was and still is out of the question, given the saint's deep devotion to Christianity. The title of the picture I am talking about was and probably still is, as I usually point out, *Not Entitled*, and Rothko's admirers are sure to think it is titled *Untitled*. Actually the saint was often seen in front of this boulder so the painter's imagination was at rest when he came up with the idea of painting the saint's favourite posture. The saint kept repeating to himself, 'Not entitled, not entitled,' meaning he had no right to commit suicide on the grounds that he had not been the source of his own life. In those moments, however, he did not think about his mother, about maternity as such; he was thinking in terms of fraternity or rather of fathernity. God the Father gave him the life he was about to sacrifice on the altar of his own anxiety, unworthiness and finitude. Now and then he would knock his head against the boulder, but every time he withdrew from the boulder and his forthcoming suicide: 'not entitled' continued to resound in his head, soul and spirit. Not entitled, not entitled. He was thinking his thoughts, his fears and duties out loud, and in the long run the boulder learnt the saint's exclamation by heart; in other words, it memorised it and consequently could also voice its anxiety and fears, its sense of duty. 'Not entitled, not entitled,' it said from time to time and it ended up moving backwards, whenever St Anthony attempted to commit yet another suicide. Even now, in the 21st century, one can see this boulder rolling around the desert where the saint is said to have spent as many as 21 years. Of course both photographers and painters do not miss the opportunity offered to them and us by the boulder and its Creator. The rolling boulder gathers a lot of admiration and curiosity as it continues its journey through eternity and infinity. As for Rothko, he never even *tried* to paint this boulder, for he relied entirely on his inner visions, intuition and emotions. In a way, he always relied on his forthcoming suicide as if trusting it and destiny completely. I remember my own attempt in this field, and the window was open, if I am not bitterly mistaken. Perhaps I was just about to open it, and the line I talked about this morning was directed towards this opening, overture and jump. I had been assigned the task of carrying out the ritual they call self-slaughter. (And Hamlet

immortalised this call of destiny.) Rothko felt more and more isolated; I just felt more and more and more, isolation being my second nature. So I do not have to say to myself, 'I'm more and more *isolated*,' for I am not very fond of tautologies. To say 'I' means isolation; all those 'Not I's' they touch upon, whenever they feel like touching others, remain outside, I am delighted to point out. I can even point at their non-existence, if need be, if called upon to make a rude gesture. So I need not repeat Rothko's thoughts and conclusions to which I might have been driven many times, had I not concluded everything, a long time ago. What did I conclude a long time ago, probably on the day of my birth? I concluded that I am titled *Untitled*. What am I doomed to conclude on the day of my death? By the way, I had a dream last night, one of the last nights I am allowed to spend in this world. I saw a man ceremoniously dressed in red and black (resurrection, putrefaction) and I told myself, 'He'll say a few words about my death. Of course he might say only one word "death", but when, when, when should it happen? Or shouldn't? I'm sure he'll say, "You'll die in five days."' 'You'll die in five days,' he said.

Rothko thought his paintings needed their own environment, space-time, their own walls on which nothing else could hang with the exception of the visitors. Some tourists or music lovers or Rothko's lovers were unable to withstand the pressure of his paintings (of colours mostly) and succumbed to the first temptation they felt in their breasts, chests; very often this urge did not even have to reach their hearts. The point is you have to be left alone with these paintings, otherwise I do not understand why they should hang in isolated rooms. They are not isolated from others, and this is the only vital, essential, true isolation we need in this life of ours or Rothko's; all other walls, buildings and landscapes would not disturb us in the least. Even if the pagan gods agreed to open the doors of their palaces (Olympus, Valhalla) to welcome Rothko's masterpieces, these masterpieces would not cringe at the sight of paganism, as the Russian philosopher Lev Shestov always did, preferring Jerusalem to Athens. But others, all those tourists, visitors, spiritual foreigners – they are always about to flock into galleries, rooms and palaces – are sure to spoil the anti-fun suggested, proposed, offered and imposed upon uncommon viewers whose readiness to commit suicide at the end of their visits or even in the middle of them is undeniable. Just look at their faces, at their bodies – they are the spitting image of the paintings they are looking at. And what about us? Aren't we looking at *them*? If you wish to commit a comfortable, peaceful, harmonious suicide, you must have a private discussion with the rooms I am talking about; a sort of tête-à-tête, a painting-à-painting, a tête-à-painting, Rothko-à-Rothko, otherwise you had better stay at home and eat a few pastries that might obliterate a lot of other desires in your heart and head. So I am not tempted to cross the English Channel and reach the Tate Gallery either on foot or in a taxi. Such a pilgrimage would not be out of the question, if my legs were not out of order – to such an extent that I do not even remember what their real order must look like during my walks or struggles with staircases. A few days ago I watched a Japanese film where a samurai had a fight with what looked like a well-trained battalion of samurai. He was wounded many times but obstinately refused to fade away and continued to run, arousing my admiration and envy. I can be floored with a single pinch – not with a punch to the head, mind you. The samurai could have been engaged for yet another version of *St Sebastian and His Arrows*: I think his body was stuck through with a dozen samurai-wielded swords. And I have no idea how many swords he swallowed in the course of this obstacle race. I can hardly rise from my chair. Never again will my body manage to retain its dignity throughout my daily walks in the area where I survive.

Well, suppose I do cross everything down to the threshold of the Tate Gallery and find the room dedicated to Rothko's meditation upon death or the afterlife; just upon this morning, that afternoon and three nights. What would I find in there, apart from Rothko's murals, his colours? Other visitors, as usual: they are not likely to let

me see these paintings on my own, probably because they think I might commit suicide, if unwatched, untitled, unwatched. Suppose I ask them to leave me (and the paintings) alone for three minutes, only for three minutes. They are sure to say to themselves: 'During the first minute he'll take a nail and a hammer out of his pocket. By the way, he called this pocket "My Suicide Pocket". He'll devote the second minute to hammering the nail into the wall, assuming he'll find enough room for his hanging body. He's on the fat side, isn't he? And he'll hang himself in the course of the third minute. An attendant might interfere to point out that to let the suicidal urge grow and destroy all vital élans one has to look at the pictures, to let them come into their own in one's chest and even in one's buttocks, otherwise these buttocks may revolt against the ritual, saying, 'Don't kill us, for God's sake. We're longing to live, to sit on various chairs, armchairs and divans. We are also dying for the sunny beaches of California. What are you doing? All right, all right – we also adore these paintings. And we'd like to contemplate them for hours and hours. But you won't be able to do so without our assistance – at some point you'll grow tired and your legs will refuse to hold your body in an upright position. So you'll have an irresistible urge to sit down – irresistible urges aren't always related to murders and suchlike – and we'll give you a helping hand or rather a helping buttock. Two helping buttocks, as a matter of fact. We don't want you to slide from the bench and find yourself on the floor.' I think there are no benches in the Tate Gallery so I would have to remain standing for hours and hours before dropping onto the floor and finding myself at the mercy of the Gallery's attendant and English doctors.

I remember Duchamp's painting – the one you can see only through a keyhole and not entirely, if I remember rightly; from a distance. In those moments you are at one with the painting, especially since you are not allowed to see *everything*, to penetrate the painter's brain like a bullet. After a while, you say to yourself, 'I've tried being friendly but she keeps her distance' (the woman in the painting). That is what space is about. Duchamp repeated that rather often, when asked, 'What is it all about?' It is about a picture or the world you can see only through a peephole – not face to face, in accordance with St Paul's promise which I cite so often I cannot forget it in spite of my memory's propensity for creating lapses; in spite of its love for holes and hollows, as the French put it. Not for hellos, God forbid: it no longer memorises newcomers and so it is pointless to greet them. At least that is what it thinks, and my memory is no longer under my control so I cannot say to it, 'Are you forgetting your manners? Say "hello" to this woman, to this picture.' My memory keeps silent and I am no longer tempted to speak to it, even when in need of some information it might have buried in its bosom, in its heart of hearts. Even if, at some point, my memory did have a heart to speak of, to write home about, now it no longer has it, if I am to take into consideration its lack of concentration, of memorisation, its lakes where nothing and no one are reflected; not even Marcel Duchamp, let alone Narcissus. So Marcel Duchamp did not content himself with the acquisition of a room where his last painting is still exhibited – in California, if I am not mistaken. He also acquired its void – in addition to the space and wall magnificently and graciously offered by the Almighty without Whom no room would ever have come into existence and seen the light of day, let alone the light of the candle held by the woman. It is high time I resumed my account of the space where this woman – she is not in white, she is in the nude – is exposed. (In Philadelphia, of all places.) You can neither enter this room, longing though you are to see the picture at close range and even touch it, taking advantage of the most alluring dress any woman can wear – her own nudity; nor can you see the whole picture as if there were something utterly indecent within its invisible parts. An invisible rapist, for instance; or an invisible Jack the Ripper. Duchamp did not wish you to pay too much attention to the seamier side of life. What did he wish you to think about, when meditating upon his picture, upon its visible part

or particle? I showed my wife a reproduction of the picture I had found in a book devoted to Duchamp's scandals and inspirations, and she said, '*Étant donnés* means there are several data we haven't been put in the picture about. And they *are* in the picture. You can see the woman's vagina, and the light welcomes her son or daughter, another Being of Light. The Messiah perhaps, at last.' Only one person is permitted to see the advent of the Messiah or the welcome given to Him or to Her; or even the Great Expectations. It is too early to inform the Three Wise Men or the Three Wise Women about His or Her coming. Of course someone – a visitor of note or just a visitor – may pat you on the shoulder, shouting right into your right ear, 'You can't stay here forever. What are you waiting for? The Second Coming?'

The crux of the matter concerns the rooms where you are supposed to enjoy – not *le mot juste*, I'm afraid – Rothko's paintings to the utmost, but this utmost is unlikely to come to fruition, if there are others around you in those blissful, dream-like moments. The visitor I touched upon in connection with Duchamp's masterpiece is sure to remain quasi-paralysed, after hearing your prophecy or merely good news: The Second Coming is at hand. After all, you see a candle, a vagina whose invitation to a sexual dance is beyond a shadow of a doubt. (At this particular moment you find neither shadows nor doubts – only the candlelight and the wide-open vagina.) But even if you resort to this magic formula inside the Rothko rooms, they are likely to ask you a ritual question, 'What are you talking about? All this stuff on the walls is just about death, not about comings and goings.' You can think and feel whatever you like, hoping that you and the painting you are looking at are on the same wavelength. Alas, there are so many swimmers in those rooms, halls and sacred spaces that the waves of light and darkness you receive and respond to are greatly perturbed not only by stupid remarks, but by the very presence of all these people, visitors, tourists and self-righteous prigs. You wish to remain alone and carry out the face-to-face of St Paul fame, but they literally rub shoulders with you, and you get the feeling they rub everything with you, down to their stupidity and vulgarity. And you get the same impression, even if you are surrounded by sophisticated, highly intelligent princes of genius. In short, you wish to be left alone: in the Rothko rooms and halls, in the Big Hall of life.

'The sun is setting, and a deep, dark, fearful night approaches. At such a time can the Mother leave Her children alone in the dense and gloomy forest?' One does not know where this bit of truth is situated, and one has no wish to find out whether it is truth or not or just a piece of nonsense, like so many other pieces, the same pieces. One might think it is his or her mother's womb we are talking about, the same Tantric Scriptures, because we cannot talk about anything else: we talk only about mothers. And one might wonder why we are waiting for a mother at the heart of this dark forest; after all, we are within our mother, our *Mutter*, the *Materia Prima* they are always working on in their alchemical laboratories. *Mutter, Mutter, Mutter*. You can hear this *Mutter* in a Mahler song, in Wagner's operas, in Goethe's opera entitled *Faust*; not *La Damnation de Faust*, mind you. Perhaps I am just walking around Rothko's rooms, halls, bathrooms, bedrooms. His paintings are multi-spatial: you can open one of the books where his paintings are exhibited, put it on a table, on the floor, hang it somewhere. Then you walk away, come back and his space welcomes you, his dark forest, and you begin to wait for your mother unless you feel her body all around you as if she had never died, as if Goethe had saved her at the end of his opera. Yesterday I chanced upon a line I took the trouble to memorise – to make sure my memory is still in working order. Not in perfect working order, needless to say. It rolls for a while, gathering moss and pieces of information, of disinformation, and then comes to a standstill. And whenever my memory comes to this still, to this stand, I cannot recall a simple line, as simple as *bonjour*. 'Here's a sorrow that doesn't call itself sorrow.' How does this

sorrow talk to itself? Does it need to say to us, 'I am sorrow, you know'? And it goes on thus, 'Don't you recognise me? Of course you do, so I needn't say, "I'm sorrow, nice to meet you. I'm the deepest sorrow one can imagine, visualise and hear. Can't you hear my sobs? I'm trying to speak to you between sobs. Here's one sob and over there you can see and hear another. But between these two sobs I'm trying to impart to you some Absolute Truth about which you know nothing at all, not the first thing, not the second thing.' Actually, upon reading this line that must have come from a Swedish poet, if my conjecture is right, I thought about my wife whose joyful disposition seems to reflect many suns and not a single moon. Yet there is a moon deep-down in her soul of souls about which St Augustine spoke for hours and hours as he tried to convince us that his soul was immortal. 'Not immoral – *immortal!*' he shouted as he looked out of the window to get a breath of fresh air. Sorrow is the fundamental feeling, but I think that joy should be put on it, over it. Don't we cover corpses? Don't we wrap them up in shrouds? They are gift-wrapped parcels after all; after all that has been said about the Almighty's gifts and our prayers, our response to God's kindness.

Chaliapin sings about sorrow, and I remember this fact, not its contents, although there are some tunes, motives and phrases in my head, and they do not evaporate as I continue to talk about Chaliapin, about his singsong. In my head it sounds thus, 'Tarataramao my sorrrrrrrrowtirararamumu, evurernvuiq and my sorrrrrrow,' and so on. (So on is also in my head – just in case.) Of course you might and probably should have the feeling it is sorrow itself you hear as the Russian bass comes to us from a record player. 'Do you understand what I'm talking or rather singing about? I'm singing about my own sorrow.' You can put Rothko's paintings anywhere – upside down, if you wish. Their presence is unquestionable, inevitable and you enjoy them ('enjoy' is not the right word) in any position, in any posture – you can walk on your head, for all I know. You will go on enjoying or ensorrowing them as long as they are within your field of vision. Sorrow is the snow on which you walk – on your feet, not on your head. But your footsteps (*vos pas sur la neige*) are gay, as gay as Ophelia and King Lear.

Why should you feel sorrow in the first place? In the first place comes a sorrow that calls itself death, for the very notion of death makes you feel the uselessness of every gesture, of every hello that dies before being uttered. And the person to whom you address this 'hello' has died already. When speaking of death, I do not necessarily think of friends and even of mothers, whoever they are, whatever opera or poem they come from. The death of an animal makes me feel the sorrow that cannot name itself. No name can name the reality of animals, of their dying, lying on the ground, no longer breathing. What about their hearts? Where are they beating now? I still hear the beating of my late cat's heart, and I know it does not come from Edgar Allan Poe's story. It does not come from any story, however beautiful or horrible. It comes from life – from real life, as they say. They always talk about something real, being quite aware of our world's unreality, of our world's un, un, un. You look around you and say, 'Here's is one un, and over there I can see and feel another un. You feel an un, you make love to it and un begets your child, your un's un. Hans, if you wish. Yesterday (it was a fruitful day, *ma parole*) I also lighted upon a title I immediately fell in love with: *Élevage de poussière*. I am still in love with this title for the simple reason that it denotes exactly our daily routine, our today's (and tomorrow's) world. We make love to one another, to each other, to everybody and so we multiply and give birth to uns, to a multitude of uns; or to dust, if you wish. We should not confuse a speck of dust with the grain of sand poetically praised and magnified by William Blake, if I remember rightly, if my memory is not in the grip of still, if it is still in motion; and in order, to some extent. If they say, 'There's not a speck of dust/dirt in their house,' they mean they have no children. But they forget that the people they are talking about are specks: the man is a speck of dirt and his wife is a speck of dust.

As I looked at Duchamp's painting or rather Man Ray's photograph, I was asking myself where these specks of dust had come from. 'Were they received and housed by the photograph itself?' I asked myself. 'Or were they part of the photograph?' I went on asking myself. And then I switched to humans, as we usually do, being trapped in the overpopulated world which has too many people for the amount of food, materials and space available there. Oddly enough, it has enough sorrows for everyone, even for animals, plants; even for the coronavirus they are planning to eliminate through a vaccine or just by dropping an atomic bomb on it. The only consolation we find in the midst of this disaster refers to the specks I am talking about, for the sorrow of a speck is not as sorrowful as all that, one might say and think. Last night I came up with the following doctrine: you had better believe, generally speaking, provided you do not believe in Man; as long as you do not believe in Woman; on condition that you do not search for *la femme* or for *l'homme*. Let us bet on your belief, on your faith in the fairness (fair play) of Creation. In this case we might put forward the hypothesis that the specks of dust were put in this world by the Creator and they did their best to multiply and replenish whatever was empty and in need of being plenty. So one might conclude there are no vacuum cleaners in the universe – at least in *our* part of the universe which I am talking about. (Why should *anyone* talk about it?) There are no dusters, no dustbins, no dustmen, no dustpans. No dustpan intended, as they put it at the beginning of our history. And Chaliapin continues to project his voice, singing, 'O if I could express my sorrow' – that is how it goes, I suppose – 'I would sing another song, much more sorrowful and soulful than this one. But I can only sing. Stravinsky said, "Music can't express anything apart from itself," and I just express both music and my voice, not my sorrow.' So we bet on the Might which must also be All, otherwise even Bill Gates could take care of humanity through vaccinations and other methods approved and applauded by the multitude. We cannot know everything and time means nothing, if every instant does not remain somewhere, within this All – provided we write it with a capital A – and Might with the capital M or without. If we write Might with a capital M, it becomes so mighty we can rely on it even on the rainy day, on the stormy night, right in the middle of a horror story. But how does this Mighty use its might and All? *Élevage de poussière*. Does It (He, She, *On*) breed humans? Does It farm them, those little chickens? Let It do what It likes in the field, in the domain, in the Animal Kingdom, but leave humanity out of it, leave this fly out of the ointment.

Is our world organised or disorganised? Of course there are people who just open their eyes, look at the world, catch a glimpse of something, of a leaf, and say, 'It is so marvellous it can't have been created by atoms alone.' And if someone says, 'There were also a lot of molecules on the day of Creation,' they might answer, 'Even if there had been a lot of boulders, it would have been powerless – nothing to do with Might and All that.' 'Do you mean to say there was a huge boulder, an omnipotent, omnipresent boulder? Do you think the universe was just a boulder, a massive, impenetrable boulder?' And they are usually bold enough (audacious beyond measure) to maintain it was – it was a boulder like the one represented in some Magritte paintings. I must have this painting in my library, which means I have the universe in my library, our universe, the whole of it. And again one is likely to stumble upon this grain of sand and its universe, its tiny, gigantic, measureless universe. Yet I permit myself to insist on the difference between Blake's grain of sand, his grain of truth, and the specks of dust I am going through as I walk around my district, around my universe. I just go through all these people without touching them, without feeling anything, neither pity nor envy nor anger. Is that what all those Buddhists mean when talking about their nirvana, their physical and spiritual absences, lacks, lakes where nothing can ever appear, no reflection whatsoever? This doctrine is on the crude side, this boulder in the middle of the universe, everywhere, isn't it?

Before Einstein the theory of relativity was commented upon by Russian philosophers, and their theory did not coincide with Einstein's time and space. Their theory coincided with a sort of boulder, but their universal boulder was conditional or unconditional – I cannot put my finger on it. I have no idea what kind of finger one needs when trying to define or describe their theory: it is so nebulous, obscure, woolly. Of course they talked about light day in, day out and also at night, at home or far from it, in the middle of nowhere; but their light was always there. So were their obscurities. They said, 'Everything is related to everything else, otherwise we wouldn't be able to construct a single thought of ours or theirs. And all these loose ends can be found in that Subject or Substance where our ends meet at last.' 'It is His helping hand we have to thank for the mess we are in,' I cut in. 'Wouldn't humans be cured of their viruses, spiritual and otherwise, if nothing could be put together, neither two and two nor three and three?' 'Leave our Trinity alone,' they answer and the discussion comes to a close.

Perhaps there *is* a grain of truth in our doctors' doctrine: we are related to one another, to animals, plants, stars and superstars. The past is somehow related to the future and so we constantly come across our former lives that remind us of Caesars, of Versailles and its Louises, of paganism and its Venuses, and so on. But what could I do with it, if I had all these chateaux and crowns and wounds (and Brutuses) in my possession? How to come to terms with so-called humans? To call them 'animals'? To call them 'cats and dogs'? To call them 'drops of rain'? Why not? Why not? My wife talks about water every single day and she does not forget to water the tomatoes she planted in my (our) garden three weeks ago. Of course she does not speak of water's memory: she can be found on a higher rung of the water hierarchy. She says it can adopt the shape of every thought either coming or going through our brain – if any, if any, if any, I repeat, anxious to enliven the atmosphere created by the coronavirus and our confinement. And I say to her I will not drink any water, either mineral or not, either sparkling or still, until I am scientifically assured that no human thought resides in it. 'And what if I create a litre of Platonic water for you?' she asks. 'You would drink the *Symposium*, you know.' 'And love, love, love,' I say and sing. 'I could also fill your taps and bath with the *Commedia*, Beatrice and Virgil. Incidentally, do you thank the water you continue to drink, in spite of your aversion to humans?' My wife thanks even her nightmares, let alone her bitter dreams. She thanks everything and everybody, even if nothing happens either in the world or outside it: in former lives, on the outskirts of outskirts. That is how astronomers speak of our universe and their exploration of it.

Last night I had two nightmares, and I think I might have died in my sleep, if I had traversed a third nightmare. As usual (in my nightmares) I get lost in a city I do not really know, and 'do not really' is so exasperating I am on the verge of committing at least two suicides: one is not enough, I'm afraid. I get lost and yet I am sure I can take a train and arrive at my destination in no time at all. And if I do take this train, the one I firmly intend to take, I spend hours in it without getting anywhere. I do not even get lost any more, and that is also exasperating because you are always happy, at least a little bit, if you do get somewhere instead of getting nowhere. In your nightmares you are likely to ask a lot of pointless questions such as, 'Is it better to get nowhere than not to reach anything, any destination at all? Am I not a go-getter?' And in the second nightmare I was ill-treated and beaten by an ugly, hysterical woman whose behaviour was on a par with what we often see in B movies where hooligans beat a lot of honest citizens to death. My arms were bleeding and I kept saying to a policeman who had come to the scene of the crime, attracted by the woman's screams, 'I'm a pianist, you know. I need my arms to play Beethoven's sonatas.' 'Do you have a lawyer?' asked the policeman. 'Why are you asking me this question?' 'Because this woman's screams speak volumes about your behaviour.' 'Scream volumes, you mean?' Many of us

believe that dying in one's sleep is the best death one can hope for. Next time I swear I shall commit an additional suicide to die happily ever after.

I do not search for characters because, to some extent, to many extents, they are based on *real* characters, on those humans one can see out of one's window. Of course you can draw the curtains and let your own darkness – just the opposite of Beings of Light who are also human – reign in your room and in the whole house where you walk, talk to yourself and sometimes to your wife; and to your cat. Several days ago – all happens ago, ago, ago and everything goes – I found a DVD I must have bought in 2009 in Paris. This documentary is devoted to Stravinsky's life and works and dedicated to the glory of God, as the composer himself used to say about what he had written. I watched this documentary and realised we are still on the same wavelength, Stravinsky and I; or rather he is a wave and I am a particle. But we belong to the same Bohr-inaugurated picture. He (Stravinsky) left Russia forever at the age of 27; I did the same at the age of 26; I was almost 27 at the time. Do I dedicate my life to the glory of God? To the glory of an unconditional or conditional Subject Who is not subject to decay, to memory lapses, to *lapsus*, as the French put it? At some point – try as I may, I cannot find it as I watch the documentary again and again – someone says Stravinsky could not bear being called Igor. He never forgot and forgave those who dared call him thus and not otherwise (Igor Feodorovich). I remember an episode that speaks volumes about our identical identities, about our wave-and-particle picture. I was 13 at the time, and for the first time I saw one of my professors who, incidentally, died only five years ago, outlasting all other professors of mine. I came into the classroom, greeted her politely, almost ceremoniously, and she asked me how she could call me. I said, 'Valery.' 'But how do your parents call you?' 'Valery.' This was not true, but my parents had other rights which could not be shared by my professors, teachers, gurus and other representatives of the human species. Yet I liked this professor very much. I paid her many visits in the course of the last 30 years, after my return to my native country. She recalled this episode when the members of the NHK team came to her place to film her answers to their questions. And Stravinsky was ruled by rituals so one might say his life was a ritual in its own right. (Why am I so fond of this expression? Because I have no wish to be in my own wrong?) I have my rituals almost everywhere: a ritual cup of tea, a ritual number of words I am supposed to write every day, a ritual sleeping pill, a ritual bottle of wine. Actually Stravinsky was so infatuated with whisky he could stop at the sight of a shop where a bottle of Scotch seemed to wait for him. I do not like whisky at all – probably because I have never drunk an exceptional bottle of Scotch. I drink whisky twice a year, when I feel like it or it feels like me – it just happens and I have no idea why, *warum, pochemu*. Stravinsky, on the other hand, knew why he was drinking whisky – with Nicholas Nabokov, among other Russian whisky-drinkers. Apparently he always had a flask of whisky in one of his pockets, and I have already touched upon this undeniable fact in one of my books. But even writing about whisky did not induce me to fall in love with this liquid that my wife does not approve of, for all the love she has for water, for non-alcoholic H₂O (if I am not mistaken).

Am I Russian? I am, I am. But to what extent? I am watching a documentary on the exodus from Russia, after the definitive defeat (the definitive version) of the White Army in 1920. The Wrangel Army was leaving the Crimea, and those who decided not to leave their motherland were ruthlessly destroyed by their red conquerors: the latter did not appreciate their brothers' love for the Russian soil, culture, future and skies. There are so many descriptions of the red atrocities or of the atrocity of the Reds that I do not feel duty bound to describe the Gulag or rather the prelude to Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, its solemn inauguration. Once again I opt for animals; for once I shall not enlarge upon my cat whose weight will reach 12 pounds this year, according to my

calculations. (He is no longer *mon tout petit*. He is, he is, he always will be.) A lot of chargers were left to their own devices as two overburdened ships progressively (regressively) lost sight of the shore, of Russia, of the past. Those horses were knocking at gates and looking through dozens of windows in the hope of finding their food, our food – any food. Even a carcinogenic sandwich would have given a much-needed boost to their confidence, their will-to-live, their bodies and souls. For whom do my bells toll and toll? For whom will my bells always toll? For Russia and her horses. Not for those who stayed, trusting the Bolsheviks, their phoney promises, the Reds who were not dead, not yet, not in those days, not in those red days and nights. (Nothing is weirder than red, crimson nights.) Not for those who were unable to defeat the Red Army.

Stravinsky was in love with Russia, even when composing the works that had nothing in common with our native land – *Oedipus Rex*, for instance. After all, neither Oedipus nor King Lear's subject lost their eyes in Russia, on her steppes or mountain tops. 'Talking about our old Russian family house (nothing to do with the English novel) has made me feel quite nostalgic,' said Stravinsky at the end of his meeting with Nabokov. I had no house in Russia, and the flat I lived in for 21 years is occupied by three *okupanti*; invaders, in Russian. Do I cry whenever my thoughts go back to Moscow and have a cup of tea in my former flat? I do not think so. Perhaps I should try the experience: either mentally or realistically I have not drunk Darjeeling in my former flat ever since my definitive departure from Russia in 1974. Moreover, on his deathbed, or quite near it Stravinsky was composing or inventing the Lord's Prayer in Russian, of all languages, linguistic and nostalgic places. I do not pray in any language, and if I pray at all – and I think I pray a lot – I do so in my private language which is a mixture of what I am writing now and music. By the way, his second wife appears several times in this documentary I am relying upon to recount my life and its peripeteia, and the last time she is inaudible; and yet she speaks a lot, her lips moving up and down and also sideways. But you cannot hear her for some obscure reason, and this obscurity must be linked to her incapacity to express herself more or less coherently. What she did say in spite of everything was less coherent than one can assume, because the film director would not have permitted himself to silence Stravinsky's wife. What a beautiful woman she was, judging from this film and the photographs I saw in my youth and also in my mature years. Speaking about them, about my mature years and female photographs, I recall one of them rather vividly, for the woman I made acquaintance with – through this photograph, not in the real world – was tremendously beautiful. On the same day I learnt she was a ballerina who probably danced in Diaghilev's company. Anyway, she married George Balanchine who also appears in the documentary: he staged a lot of Stravinsky's ballets. In the Sixties, during my studies at the Moscow Conservatoire, I read a book on Stravinsky that saw the light of Soviet day right after the composer's visit to his and my native country. Actually I ought to have begun my account of our parallel lives at the beginning – at this historic visit. I ought to have begun with the concerts I attended in 1962 when he conducted some of his works before our delirious audience. But let me first finish the story of my love ignited by the ballerina's photograph. Such an ignition, such a situation might grow dangerous, if you forget the whole world, keeping the photograph under your pillow and on your writing desk, sleeping and working with it. There are lots of bathing beauties in front of you, behind you – everywhere, to be exact. You ignore them for the sake of the photograph you will never be able to sleep with, even if it spends a whole decade under your pillow. At some point – I think it was in 1912 – Nijinsky created a ballet entitled (by Debussy) *L'Après-midi d'un faune*. At the end of this particular après-midi, the fawn actually masturbates on a piece of clothing – on Diaghilev's underpants, as the company's detractors publicly surmised. Well, you can carry out the same ritual – we are talking about Stravinsky, about a notorious ritual-lover – on a larger scale, in every

room of your spacious castle. You are neither a fawn nor Nijinsky – nor Stravinsky, for that matter, but no one is allowed to forbid you whatever you feel like doing within your walls and ceilings. But using a photograph for quenching your various thirsts is not the best pastime I can think of, whenever in the mood for thinking about pastimes. Usually all my pastimes are around me: my computer, my library; so I have neither to look for them nor to think about their virtual realities. By the way, Stravinsky died in New York, not in Hollywood.

The ballerina's name was Miss Tumanova or Miss Fog in English. Then she became Mrs Balanchine; in English as well. For a while I envied Balanchine rather ferociously, saying to myself and probably to some of my friends, 'This choreographer is a nonentity. It is true he staged a few of Stravinsky's ballets, but I saw one of his productions in Moscow, and I left in the middle of the show, annoyed and bored almost to death. Incidentally, boredom is dangerous because you never know when you're on the threshold of death.' Several weeks later I bought a DVD, a film where Tumanova played a part, and I do not remember what she was talking about; nor do I have any recollection of her deeds so I even wonder if she did something in the course of the film. Perhaps she just stood somewhere, in some nook, in some cranny, doing nothing, nothing at all. I was thoroughly disappointed, and I realised I no longer envied Balanchine; I even thought he might have been a very good choreographer after all, after all my envious impulses and unrealistic desires. 'What is realistic in this world?' we may justifiably ask ourselves. The woman we are holding in our arms? The woman we make love to in some bed or other? Just the other, any other? I no longer think about Tumanova, but I cannot help thinking about women, in general and in particular, and the woman who comes in handy for my train of thought is Stravinsky's second wife. I wonder what kind of nonsense she was uttering in front of the indiscreet and insolent cameraman. Why did they dare drown her words and reflections out? Am I likely to reach this stage of life? Talking for the sake of talking? I should tell my wife I shall not be offended if she puts on a disc so as not to hear my rambling and raving. Why should I drive her crazy? Ten minutes ago I rose from her operating table on which I exposed my body to her magnetic hands and vibes. She said, 'Your health is generally good, but you do have a few minor problems. I'm not sure you'll be able to walk in 20 years' time.' She cured me many times and I must have described this restoration work in my previous works: it is my duty to speak of my wife's exploits. After all, I am not allergic to *all* human beings, and Stravinsky alongside his second wife can be shown off to advantage in the museum of my human nature. As for others, other others, I am not sure I am in the right mood for talking about *them* this afternoon. I can just mention the orchestras and their members whom I saw once again in this documentary; and once again I said to myself, 'I'm delighted not to have wasted my time in their company' – in those and other orchestras' company. Stravinsky suffered from a hernia, and this is another proof of our spiritual and physical affinities; this illness, I mean. I am also suffering from it, but my love for Stravinsky's music would not suffer, if I did not suffer from a hernia: there is a limit to the amount of suffering. Sometimes he would call his producer to say he had to be literally picked up and carried away from the podium in the direction of the room where he could lie down and forget about his worries, not about his music. He never forgot either his own music or that of his colleagues. He had so much energy at his disposal that he would blow off steam by copying out Purcell's and Schoenberg's masterpieces, when suffering from a shortage of inspiration. I am not sure my energy will ever surpass my supply of inspiration which is guaranteed by the presence of Muses in my parlour.

When looking at all these orchestras and musicians, I get the impression I was also carried away from them, from the podium, although at the time when I was conducting I had no problems either with my back or my legs that could walk towards podiums and stages and away from them. Away from them, away from them: I have

always hated concerts. But I hate orchestras even more unless I am allowed – by the time-machine or God – to attend Furtwängler's or Toscanini's performances. What patience one should have to work with those musicians who keep on looking at their watches and thinking about their wives, dinners and beers. So 18 years ago – the count is certainly wrong – I left podiums forever, and every time I see a conductor and the orchestra to whose members he talks from time to time I say to myself, 'I was right, my guardian angel was right.' What is left seems to be circumscribed by my house, my garden, my library situated in the garden, by Plato's ideas. My out-of-tune piano also reminds me of Stravinsky: his piano was even more out, out, out; and the tunes, numbers were in his head, as Robert Craft pointed out. I used to be an anarchist; at least I felt a lot of sympathy for Bakunin and Kropotkin; and also for Noam Chomsky. Stravinsky said, 'I can even bear a communist, a nasty communist. But anarchists are quite unbearable. Even a nice anarchist is unbearable.' Stravinsky liked order and I sympathise with this tendency all the more wholeheartedly since I am also inclined to put everything in order; even my affairs which are limited to my books, my forthcoming books, other people's books, other people's music and drawings. Every morning I put my thoughts in order, resolved to write the same number of lines, if not of words, which enables me to enjoy the existence of the street where I can walk and sometimes talk to my wife who seldom, however, keeps me company during my walking and talking ritual. When she does not, I talk to myself and listen to audio books. Yesterday she told me – the action was set in her parlour – that we had looked for each other for many centuries. Five years ago we found each other at last, 'but the life we are living together will come to an end – in this century,' I cut in, shaking my head. 'And this life of ours is the last one,' she added. 'Why is it the last life we are to spend together?' I asked. 'Together or separately,' she said. 'This is the last life for everybody. The whole universe will change from top to bottom. Lives and deaths will be different after the end of this life.' 'Will there be any deaths?' I asked as usual. (I am usually worried only about death. And Stravinsky was terrified by him.) 'Death will be life and vice versa,' she said. 'But where will all this come from?' I asked. I gained momentum and went on, 'I question our links with the Creator, with the Subject or Object that holds our history in the palms of its hands. Do we need a go-between? Many years ago I saw a film inspired by D. H. Lawrence whom I don't like at all. A boy went from a man to a woman and back again. So insipid, so boring. As is his book about women in love. One might be put off love, off words upon reading this book. There are also sons somewhere, but I feel like saying to D. H. Lawrence, this particular Lawrence (I like the other, I like T. E., not Spielberg's E. T.), "I'm not your son." That's what Antony Perkins says to a priest in Orson Welles' *The Trial*. I'm not your son, not your woman, not your love, not your go-between. I wish my cat could understand what I say to *him*.' 'What *do* you say to him?' 'I am your son, your woman, your man, your love, your go-between, I go between you and your food, and your garden. I am your guardian angel. You're my guardian angel.' 'What about me?' asked my wife. 'You're Sophia. The problem is Russian philosophers don't agree on Sophia's profession, vocation and even on her whereabouts. Is she always staying with God, inside Him, in His garden? Does she blow us kisses instead of giving us a lift to Paradise? Or is she just a go-between, like that boy from D. H. Lawrence's tiresome book?' 'Have you ever heard about the wire of silver?' my spouse asked. 'Its root is in our soul and in days of yore it was stretched across the universe. So it reached the Source, in the long run. All our former lives can be found on it. One of my prayers sounds thus, "Would You help me string together my former lives?"' 'Anyway, I need this life and myself – changing bodies and souls is not my cup of tea,' I retorted. 'Metempsychosis and its consequences might put me off my stride. Frankly speaking, I prefer this life to Paradise and its amusements. And you are much more beautiful than the ladies one reads about in the Koran, in the sections devoted to Paradise.' 'Paradise is right here,' my wife

declared. ‘The other day I saw a multitude of luminous spiders running around their webs. Even spiders are light-bearers, and perhaps we don’t need other bearers because light is everywhere – you don’t have to bear it, to convey it somewhere.’ ‘In *Crime and Punishment* spiders are associated with eternity,’ I said. ‘But you can hardly call this eternity Paradise on Earth or in Heaven. Svidrigaylov speaks of a hall filled with spiders, their webs – I was going to say “their wives” – and consequently with the flies they’ve already caught. I still wonder whether these flies are humans in disguise. The victims of metempsychosis, you know.’ ‘There are no victims.’ My wife seemed to make an issue of every tiny nuance. ‘There are only winners.’ ‘And what about death?’ I asked as usual. ‘Our heart is a black hole, and you can throw all your worries and miseries into it – along with death.’ ‘I love you, and I mean it from the bottom of my black hole,’ I answered.

Russian philosophers talk a lot about unity that seems to allude (rather unequivocally) to unification or rather to the process of unification, and we must admit the word sounds familiar, especially after the reunification of the two Germanys. The point is this time we have to unite the Almighty with men and women, which is no problem, as any church-goer might say except that, in the course of this unification, God should be deprived of His omnipotence; otherwise we cannot be free. In other words, we cannot be born on our own – the essential aspect of our freedom. And our reunion with God or rather our contact with Him, our immersion in His spiritual body should be creative. It is not for nothing that George Bernard Shaw came up with the famous slogan ‘God is in the making’; a slogan or maxim – for once let us not get bogged down in words or details. I said nothing about this problem to my wife because I had bigger fish to fry: I wished to talk to her about *our* union, our daily reunion – in short, about our love, both platonic and orgiastic. Nor did I tell her about the Russian aspect of love; at least philosophers prefer this particular aspect, leaving aside orgies, ecstasies and even ordinary *jouissances* or orgasms. That is where Sophia comes in. At first, however, we are told by the Russians that we can unite only through love – somewhat in the way they (proletarians) unite in Marx’s renowned manifesto. Only through love do we unite and realise we are just a creative act of God – His masterpiece, according to the Bible. Moreover, through our corporeal unions or sexual acts both Jesus Christ and his Church are created, and thereby Logos’s incarnation in the Bride is repeated or rehearsed. (It works both ways.) These philosophers also take on the problem called ‘Adam Kadmon’ in whom everything is included, as they say in shops and travel agencies. Consequently a Human Being who contains not only Adam Kadmon but also his wife, Eve Kadmon, becomes the centre of the universe where everything and everybody can be found; spiders, among other creatures.

To my wife I said nothing about our limitation that, thanks to Jesus Christ, continually becomes Authentic Existence: she does not utter his name recurrently. Once a month perhaps. Well, you can be a true, authentic, gigantic Christian without talking about your faith all the time. But I did say to her that through our double identity we daily reach for unity, for Oneness. And at the peak of our ecstasies we say to ourselves (perhaps my wife talks about it to her sisters): ‘We’re contemplating the Universal Soul.’ And this Soul is Sophia or one of her incarnations. The problem is we cannot see her (Sophia). We can thank our imperfections for this invisibility, our deviations from the right path and our separation from the Godhead or, as the pantheists say, from the Godbody. Theologians and philosophers are fond of guessing games, as a result of which we are left holding the baby: there are too many solutions to this problem, too many versions and ramifications. We are related to God, to both His body and head, but we are not inside Him yet and so we need Sophia who might introduce us to God, to put it profanely, if not socially. But we can discard Sophia, her presence or invisibility, if we are *inside* the Almighty. It is the French and Russian ways of putting it: you cannot say God two times in a row. If you say God, you have to

say the Almighty or our Lord or the Godbody a few seconds later. I already commented upon this state of affairs once or twice, and I was unresistingly drawn to the following conclusion: 'If it weren't for French and Russian linguists, our God would not have so many names among which we should count the interdiction to name the Supreme Being. The same goes for Logos or rather for the translations of this key notion; and for Sophia. Of course we are allowed to name Sophia as often as any of us wishes, especially if some of us have wives or mistresses called Sophia. Unluckily for us my wife's name is not Sophia.

Sometimes I do not feel like interrupting my wife because her gestures are apt and to the point – much more so than words, whatever their beauty and veracity. So I let her gesticulate, lapping up every tiny movement of her hands, elbows and hair. But I have long Russian discussions with my Moscow friend whose attachment to Orthodox rituals and tenets knows no bounds, as I usually say, when talking about boundless phenomena. Here is one of our dialogues, slightly modified and abridged:

HE: The Creation always starts with the One. Then the Creator uses His personal multiplication table and the One becomes the Many. And then the Multiplicity reverts to the One.

I: I've already reached this stage. I am the One and no others spoil my fun or soil my eternity.

HE: Eternity depends on history to which we are still attached because of the multiplicity of our sins.

I: There's only one sin in my life – original sin.

HE: Because of our sins the One continuously disintegrates, crumbling between God's fingers. Only the Church can help us survive and reach the Oneness we sing about in every Mass, in every Liturgy.

I: Does your personal history imitate that of the Church?

HE: My history imitates my confessor's speeches. Anyway, our unity is the Church – nothing happens outside it. So history is the growing of the Church, its outgrowing material and empirical elements.

I: I have no confessor. But I keep a box of confetti in my chest of drawers. From time to time I throw some of it as if celebrating a marriage.

HE: Your marriage? With whom?

I: With my personal Sophia.

HE: There's nothing personal in the universe.

I: Apart from Bergman's *Persona*, I suppose.

HE: The spiritual body crosses the realm of the individual. It crosses the realm of time. Do you know what I'm talking about?

I: About the fifth body. Do you mean to say you're already in eternity?'

HE: I do.

I: I don't know whether I'm already in eternity or in the realm of time where we're talking and drinking wine and cognac. But I do know that two persons who have realised the fifth body can dream simultaneously. My wife and I dream simultaneously.

HE: Do you *live* simultaneously?

I: In spiritual consciousness there's no difference between dream and reality.

HE: I know, I know. There's only a difference, as between a figure and its reflection in the mirror. I'm dreaming about the state where there are no figures, no mirrors, no differences – nothing at all.

I: What about 'at all'?

Many scientists and mystics attribute to spiders the characteristics chiefly known through Wagner's *Ring* where the Norns spin and weave our destinies – a lunar manifestation, no doubt. Like the moon we have our waxing crescents and waning crescents, and for 30 years at least we have been regarded as a dying crescent or just a corpse which has not reached its coffin yet. The wire is so fragile that even Wagner did not succeed in ensuring its immortality so we might wonder if he was not bent on our destruction too. 'But verily, the frailest of all houses surely is the house of the spider,' says the Koran. It is certainly beautiful to some extent (I am speaking of a cobweb, not of our life) but I often get the feeling that even a fly can tear it apart; or make a hole in it through which the spider will fall into a *black* hole. Reality is fragile too and there are so many holes in it that it is no wonder we continue to fall like Adam and Eve or like the spider I did not take the trouble to describe in detail. What counts is its fall, the fragility of the world which only Stravinsky's or Webern's order could save, if we studied their music regularly and thoroughly. I am coming round to Stravinsky's point of view: anarchists are unbearable because numbers and harmonies lie outside their teaching, activities and hopes. Or they are so distant I shall never be given an opportunity to catch a glimpse of them, to hear their notes. I do not think any musical order will reign in the world that can neither feel nor understand nor even hear music. Other orders (others others) govern the world, and these orders should be annihilated – rather quickly, I suppose. And I would take part in this destruction, if I were sure that something might replace our orders advantageously. But replacements are sure to be located 'along the same lines', and these lines are often bloody and always stupid. I am sure of that. When I read Stefan George I realise to what extent his prophetic voice was sterile, feeble – more or less similar to the way I spoke after my sojourn in a nearby hospital. I had the coronavirus and amazingly escaped unscathed, as they say when speaking of car accidents. He was a prophet, a messiah, a leader – a Führer, to some extent. (Further, further, suggests my spellchecker. That is what Hitler used to say until his army's defeat at Stalingrad.) But George disagreed with the Nazi and settled down in Switzerland – in protest against Hitler's attitude towards the human race. After Hitler's advent and death we cannot speak disparagingly of humans; at least we have to point out that our underestimation of human gifts, intelligence and musicality has nothing to do with Hitler's racial theories. 'There are two mountains,' wrote Paul Klee, 'on which the weather is bright and clear, the mountain of the beasts and the mountain of the gods. But between them lies the crepuscular valley of men.' Both Stravinsky and Klee preferred animals to humans. I cannot say I am following in their footsteps: these steps are mine and I do not even have to follow them. I climb these mountains and fall from time to time, for you cannot help falling, being unworthy of both the gods and animals. George expressed our unworthiness differently, but whatever you say, you focus your words on the crepuscular virus of the human race. It is not the twilight of the gods; it is the twilight of humans, pathetic and ridiculous. The word 'pathetic' always reminds me of Tchaikovsky's last symphony that I conducted almost 20 years ago. It was my last symphony, the last concert I spent on a podium; it took place in Japan and in my personal history. Stravinsky saw Tchaikovsky and, according to my (and his) recollection, he attended the hall where Tchaikovsky conducted his last symphony – eight days before his death, if I remember rightly. Perhaps I should drop this expression that crops up throughout my works: I do not remember anything rightly, and sometimes I just do not remember anything so you cannot even say I remember something wrongly. Robert Craft played on an excerpt from this symphony during Stravinsky's agony which was somewhat predicted by his ballet *Agon*. Then Stravinsky's second wife interfered and he realised this music was linked to what we may call the 'Russian death'.

How did George express our decrepitude, our end of the tether? Should I copy his poem out? In Stravinsky's footsteps? Can't find it. Well, he speaks about a number of cornucopias to which we pay no attention. Dante's *Commedia* lies on our table and even on our sheets, on our pillow. We do not read it. Nor do we recite the poems we might have learnt in our youth, even in our childhood. We did not learn anything. We do not memorise anything as if the world were unworthy of our attention, memory and lives. We are unworthy of plants, animals, Paul Klee's mountains on which the gods continue to mock us, our unworthiness and decrepitude. George spoke along these lines and once again I realise these lines are unreliable, crumbly, flaky. They look like zigzags or rather they do not look like anything at all so it is pointless to look at them, to walk along them, to speak along them, along their sides and minds. If any, if any, if any. As usual. They are just a multitude of dots and we hear now and then, 'Dot the i's and cross the t's.' What for? So far we have not taken notice of the world's dignity; at least in this century and at the end of the previous century. We do dot the i's and cross the t's, but these i's and t's are wrong, jejune. They are sideways, always. Yet we dot and cross, dot and cross. Our dotage and crossage.

My nostalgia, its nauseating variety, holds me up to ridicule: whenever I see young ballerinas, I say to myself, 'It is all over and done with. Not always, not always done with.' So many botched opportunities, overtures. It is our youth we should pine for, not Russia, as some Russian émigré said and probably did; I mean he might have committed suicide because his youth was far more distant and inaccessible than Russia. It is ridiculous to regret the absence of young ballerinas at my dinner table and elsewhere, elsewhere; almost everywhere. It is ludicrous not to regret anything, as Edith Piaf does (does not) again and again in her famous song. Unless we are Buddhists, saints, yogis or Ludwig Wittgenstein, we are bound to regret every moment; even tragic moments are better than death. During those tragic moments, you can say to yourself, 'I am King Lear or Richard II or Charles I. I am a King and dying with a crown on one's head is better than living without crowns, with the coronavirus.' A poor substitute. But it is better to live with this poor substitute – as I did five months ago, in a nearby hospital – than not to live at all. What a pity no one suggests you will live forever, if you accept getting contaminated at the height of this Pushkin-celebrated feast: I would accept the deal at once. I would drink champagne in one of the clinics – preferably in Switzerland, paying homage to Stravinsky and Charlie Chaplin. What a pity that no virus will enable me to attend the production of *The Firebird* in Paris, along with Proust and Sarah Bernhardt. (The time-machine virus.) In the documentary devoted to Stravinsky and his ballets, I saw a few young ballerinas, whereupon I recalled my visit to the ballet school in Moscow where I played Chopin's *Scherzo in B Minor*. I played it badly because I could neither play nor stay nor stand bolt upright nor sit bolt upright. Had I spotted a bed somewhere (in the wings, for instance) I would have lain down on it and waited, waited, waited – in Stravinsky's footsteps, as usual. He says at the end of the film, 'I like writing music even more than music itself. Sometimes I have problems, but I can wait like an insect. I've waited all my life.' I do not wait any longer, but for years and years I did nothing except scribbling a few words on many sheets of paper or playing a few notes on my out-of-tune piano. Inside that ballet school I would not have waited for inspiration or maturity or style; I would have waited for *her*, for one of those girls running around – in the nude, if I remember rightly. Be that as it may, a lot of naked ballerinas are running around my memory lapses right now. And I continue to walk along the dry, flaky line; along my *peau de chagrin*. But I do not suffer from splitting headaches – for once I am out of step with Stravinsky's constitution. I keep in step with Paul Klee: 'To reduce oneself completely to oneself, to prepare oneself for the greatest solitude. Distaste for procreation (ethical supersensitivity).'

*Oh! dream of joy! is this indeed
 The light-house top I see?
 Is this the hill? is this the kirk?
 Is this mine own countree?*

Where is mine own countree situated? At some point Stravinsky met Dylan Thomas, and this point was situated in Boston, in 1953. They spoke for a while and drank a few bottles of whisky, I suppose, which led to the idea of writing an opera together. Whisky leads to these kinds of ideas more often than wine that you enjoy without thinking about anything else, otherwise it is not worthwhile to open a bottle of Romanée Conti. The opera was to represent a re-creation of the world – not its resurrection, I hope. They (some other humans) had thrown an atomic bomb on the world and only one man and one woman remained on the surface of what no longer looked like the Earth as admired by cosmonauts and astronauts. The survivors do their best to restore the Earth to its former condition. What does that mean? Is my country situated before the Big Bang? Shall we restore the Stone Age to improve on our so-called brains and hearts? Is this the remedy we should envisage? I am not quite sure unless it is the Precious Stone Age I have in mind, in my brain. What about my heart? Anyway, Dylan Thomas died on his way to the restaurant where he was to have dinner with Stravinsky. Instead of the opera, the latter wrote a short piece entitled *In memoriam Dylan Thomas*. In memory of the late Dylan Thomas. And I am writing this book. In memoriam sweet dreams.

This yellow line leads to death. This white line leads to death and Paradise. But for these lines, there would be only black squares, black hells, black prisons. Or white prisons. Does this make a world of difference? Does this make the world go round? ‘My path leads to death, but, unless I die, how can I know that this path of mine is bad and yours is good?’ Suppose I have just begun this article or book with the quotation I am to analyse not only for the sake of dimwits, but also for everybody’s enlightenment – even I do not understand it adequately. Sentimental people often say you do not have to unravel mysteries: you have to trust your intuition and your heart, even if it is not altogether compassionate. You see a mystery and position yourself in front of it, not too close, not too far: you need to dissect both its details and overall structure. If your heart refuses to cooperate, you put forward your intuition and set it in motion. Your intuition flies towards the mystery, touches it, sticks to it like glue and begins to rotate, brushing against its surface. Then it gives it a big bear hug, whereupon you understand what this mystery is about; and often you say to yourself, once the mystery is in the bag, ‘It’s no mystery at all. Nothing to write home about.’ Even if you have only one head in your possession – no bodies, no fingertips – you can make use of your intuition by rolling towards the mystery, moving round it like a satellite, rolling on its surface like the ball one sees in football matches. You roll and move round and roll again and, as you proceed in this fashion, your mouth utters declarations of love: you must seduce the mystery, otherwise you would not be able to worm information out of it. As usual, dialogue helps us not only clarify our own thoughts, but also to find out what others think on the subject, on this or that mystery. Dialogues might be dangerous, though: others often contradict us, saying, ‘This is a great mystery and even mystics have never reached its bottom, let alone its light situated in the upper parts of all mysteries. Why are you so self-assured? Do you take yourself for a prophet, for Moses? Have you already seen the Almighty in a bush or from behind it?’ You have no alternative but to admit you have never seen either the Almighty or one of His angels, whereupon others snigger at you and their sniggering often lasts for

five minutes at least. So I, for one, never speak of mysteries and their bottoms in other people's presence, and if I eventually come into the open (or rather into the close), I say, 'Everything and everybody is shrouded in mystery.'

What about the quotation I touched upon as I embarked upon the mystery contained in it? Indeed the very first words might puzzle a misanthrope who is willing to make some concessions and fall in love with one person. But an 'all-embracing love' is beyond his or her ken in every sense of the term. In the first place, this individual (let us suppose we are dealing with a woman) cannot embrace everything and everybody; nor does she know how to set about it. Suppose you get out, climb onto a roof and shout, 'I love all of you! Please come and let me embrace you heartily!' Some people may come to a standstill, look up and say, 'Why should I climb onto this roof? What for? I don't care about your embraces. I've never met you. I'm not in love with you. I'm rather inclined to regard you with disdain – your suggestion is ludicrous and absurd.' And she says to a passer-by, 'This man up there thinks I'll allow him to harass me sexually, psychologically and biologically.' I think that the all-embracing love we encounter in this treatise or whatever it is concerns exclusively the starry sky – not the one depicted by Van Gogh who was too much in love with Heraclitus. It is as if he were saying to us, 'You can't step twice into the same sky, especially if there are a few sputniks overhead.'

All my life I have dreamt of landscapes or rather of the way I might depict them, thinking about this possibility only in terms of literature, for I am quite unable to paint anything, let alone Van Gogh's sky or shoes. I might begin as follows, 'For once the stars were not twinkling either in the sky or in songs. They stared at the Earth peacefully, imperturbably as if thinking we were all friends and lovers; as if they believed in human harmony and fidelity.' Alas, I cannot depict any landscape or cityscape so I leave them alone, in peace. Are they in peace with the world, with themselves? Let us return to the starry sky. I must admit it is not easy, considering that I am writing this paragraph in the afternoon, and only the polluted air greets me, whenever I look out of the window. Well, I shall use my imagination and picture to myself the starry sky and the peace and harmony reigning overhead, despite the satellites that continue to transmit their signals and information to the Kremlin and the Pentagon. If someone accuses me of indifference towards humanity – I seem to prefer the stars to human beings – I can affirm that the only way to embrace the whole of humanity consists in looking at the stars. According to astrologists and laymen, laywomen, every human is linked to a star, lucky or unlucky, as the case may be, and I am still at great pains to visualise a lucky star within our sky or somewhere else except in an optimistic or silly mind. And the only star to which I might attribute this adjective is the twinkling star admired by a child: 'How I wonder what you are.' Just an unlucky star, in my opinion, but perhaps my opinion does not count in these matters; you need a nursling, the brain and mouth of a nursling.

Compassion is known to me thanks to a lot of suffering endured by animals and plants that cannot complain except in Dante's masterpiece. But even in his *Commedia* the trees are not on their own: they are humans in disguise and I, for one, do not believe that every creature and every object is human to some extent. It is the other way round: I am an animal, otherwise I might already have shared the fate of Dante's victims suicides who offer their branches and twigs to wandering Jews and Gentiles. And when humans talk about their children, trying to tip the scales in favour of the human species, I think of Goethe who, when invited to look at a suckling, ran away in horror. I remember the day (and even the night that followed that day) when I was shown into a room where a newborn child was expressing his sorrow in his relatives' presence. He screamed, cried, and was getting redder and redder as if with a view to becoming the symbol of the Soviet Union. I did not escape from the sight and from its soundtrack, but that day was crucial in my life, although I cannot speak of turning points in relation to the

sentiments I experienced. There was nothing to turn from, to turn to: I was still too young to realise what I was doing and how I should live so as not to die while holding my mother's breast. I am almost sure I was an infant of under four months at the time, but the intuition I spoke about some time ago is probably more pronounced in the kingdom of babes because their minds do not interfere with their decisions and movements. Of course the suckling pig I ate last Christmas did not think at all, but even the babes you do not eat remain outside of thoughts and conscious decisions. Of course you would suck your mother dry, even if you were unable to move at all: they would take your body and bring it level with your mother's milk and let you enjoy its taste and vigorous impact. You can say that you signified your desire to eat and drink by crying, screaming and biting whatever was put within your mouth's reach. What I have in mind concerns the decisions we take in the light of what has happened in our existence. Children's negative feelings often get acted out in bad behaviour, but they do not originate in thoughts: babes are as thoughtless as science (from Heidegger's point of view). I am not sure that babes can boast about their intimate knowledge of an all-embracing love and compassion; at least they do not remind us that they are the Buddha's followers. But their will-power is tremendous, especially in this day and age, and whenever a baby opens his or her mouth, a lot of heads turn in her or his direction and so one might say, 'All our turning points reside in babies' mouths.'

A baby utters a word and we do not catch its meaning. We walk towards the baby and ask her to repeat the word, saying we are too stupid to understand what she means, even if we understand the words she utters. She utters this word once again, and we ask her to show this word either by making a gesture or by drawing it on a sheet of paper we put under her right arm. She slaps our face and this gesture is eloquent enough, for a lot of duels have stemmed from this gesture in the course of our history. We smile and say a few words to the effect that this gesture is manifold. 'Do you want to punish us?' we ask. And then we ask another question related to the virtual punishment carried out by the baby's hand, 'What's my crime or misdemeanour, my darling?' The baby tears up the sheet of paper we put under her right arm and starts kicking the pieces. 'Why didn't you doodle something on this sheet of paper?' we ask. And we show her how a human being can doodle something on a sheet of paper. 'The good thing about doodling is that it takes my mind off any problems I've got,' you add. The child does not enquire into the origins of your problems and goes on slapping your face as if you had not done your utmost to understand *her* problem. And you cannot say to her, 'I understand your problem. Now I understand the meaning of your acts,' because you had better not lie in front of a baby whose future behaviour can be often be traced back to her parents' lies, quarrels and sexual indecency. So much for our understanding of children's truths. That is how we promote the spiritual welfare of every sentient being.

Klee spoke about it, and I felt it throughout my Soviet life which vanished into thin air a long time ago, in spite of my memory's persistence, insistence and insolence. There are frontiers, *Grenzen* or whatever they call them, and even in your childhood you pay attention to them, if your parents put under your right or left hand a sheet of paper, eager to find out why you cry and scream instead of going to sleep peacefully and with an angelic smile on your face and even on the rest of your body. In my story the child tears this sheet of paper into pieces and he is probably right (I identify with him) because it is his first attempt to get rid of borders delineated by the sheet's edges. You can step over them unless you tear the paper up, and at some point I tore one of the Soviet borders up as I left my native country at the age of 26. Klee thinks you always create borders; you cannot help it, even if you get through them, whenever you add a line to your drawing, a line, a square, a circle. But your creative process, your lines and squares are the new borders you have to tear to pieces, otherwise you will never create anything

except borders, frontiers – your own death. Or the death of art at least, which is not as unimportant as they think nowadays. And humanity is one of these borders and I need other spaces to live in to feel on the same wavelength with animals whose lives do not coincide with our lives. Some say that animals understand us. I disagree completely with this notion which bases universal harmony on the human brain, on our hospitality and sensitivity. My cat does not take the trouble to understand my moods. It is his mood that directs his steps towards my moods and my body waiting for him, for his head. Rubbing his head against my body. Does his head understand my body? It just rubs it the right way. I must be wrong and my cat is always right; it is enough to catch him staring at me, and his eyes will tell everybody he knows much more about the world than all the scientists and psychologists put together. I am told their eyes, their animal eyes, their glances – the glances you encounter when looking at animals – can cure you of the coronavirus and even of death, on condition that he is still in the making and not unconditionally within your body. I am under the impression – in such moments I am a true impressionist – that most of the time my cat goes through the motions so as not to thwart my expectations. I expect him to roll over onto his back and he readily, almost ecstatically, comes up to my longings. But he knows what I have never seen or heard – not even in my wildest and most authentic, prophetic dreams.

There are many obstacles you do not notice until they suddenly come to the fore, and you say to yourself that this particular nuisance has always stuck out a mile; and you begin to wonder why you have never noticed it. For instance, someone who can occasionally help you always rings you up at the wrong moment, and little by little this moment inexorably grows until it becomes an hour, the wrong day, the wrong month. This person annoys you terribly; you waste your time and nerves when speaking to him. You also notice that his jokes are in bad taste and his taste is just bad – in all the domains you analyse in the course of your discussions. And a child to whom you might say, one day, in the manner of a Zen Buddhist: ‘Why do you always play with mud,’ continues to play with it even on the day of his 40th birthday. Whatever he touches turns into a huge quantity of mud, even if the object he picks up is as small as a kitten. Even a kitten turns into an appalling human being as soon as this former boy touches it; and yet his arm just *brushes* against him, her or it or t. Suppose he is drinking a cup of tea that you offered him out of kindness and politeness, and upon his departure you empty not only the teapot where the rest of the tea awaited other guests, but also the box from which you had removed four spoonfuls of this damned and bloody tea. In short, these wrong ways and beings spoil your life unless you resolve to remove them from it, either one by one or en bloc. Unfortunately I chose the former solution and consequently wasted a lot of time in their (those obnoxious people’s) company so one might conclude it is my fault, my inhumanity, my hatred of whatever is human. I mean they (another obnoxious bunch of people) might jump to the conclusion that I am at the root of all these partings, arguments, disagreements and voids. Of course I do not care about what obnoxious people say or think, and I am sure my cat will never accuse me of anything, with the exception of my trips abroad, of my leaves of absence; and that is what matters, counts and remains in my life: the obnoxious people are gone forever unless the doctrine of eternal recurrence is right. They ring me up, all those people, to say they are back, and if I dare ask them how they succeeded in overstepping the obstacles I had erected on their way to my existence, they might answer, ‘It’s the doctrine of eternal recurrence. You’re not in a position to abolish it, we’re sorry to say.’

Klee painted a picture entitled the *Entlegene Landschaft* (A Faraway Landscape) and I think he was right as he began to distance himself even from landscapes where humans appear from time to time, sometimes all the time or all the times. I mean that, if there is a multitude of times we are confronted with (no need to bring up Einstein who is often in the wings, if not behind your door), all of them may grow overpopulated – overburdened

with our reflections, non-reflections and idiotic conclusions. And how could you unburden time? By forgetting it, by imploring your memory to shower you with memory lapses, with Alzheimer's, a lot of Alzheimer's? One Alzheimer's disease is not enough to get rid of our history from which James Joyce wished to rise (I'll rise and go –) at the end of a nightmare. I think I have already scanned the horizon (a brain scan, an ultrasound scan) for any sign of my death, of the black flag hoisted on some ship or other. On *my* ship, to be exact. In these matters, one is better to be exact: I do not care about the death of humanity. Going back to the faraway landscapes I touched upon recently – I did not really touch them – I think the painting represents my attitude towards the world I share with others; share and share alike, alas. There are lots of dots within this painting and probably even outside it; and some of these dots might refer to human beings. (*Réalisme oblige.*) There are also a few lines which seem to outline or even sketch something as if Klee had been sitting in front of this landscape, a paintbrush in his right hand; I suppose he was right-handed. That is what human mythology looks like, in my opinion, and I must admit I am on the same wavelength with this mythology. (The lines are perhaps the waves I am talking about.) I might even go so far as to claim I am one of the dots one sees when looking at this painting. Going so far as the faraway landscape. But I should not forget that my body is filled to the brim with ganglions and the dots I see and feel as I look at Klee's picture. And they are not as innocent-looking as one might presume, assuming that one presumes anything: I and others are far from each other. Nothing but faraway landscapes, bodies and souls. Pointillism is never pointless. And in a few days I shall know for sure what connection I have with all these points, landscapes and astral bodies.

My wife speaks of entities all the time, and if I experience a pain somewhere, sometimes outside my body as if it were coming from the Supreme Entity, she says, 'Perhaps the woman I asked to leave your house has come back.' One day she literally worked on my house where a woman born in the 18th century stayed and even lived for no reason at all, in my opinion. She lived in this house because it belonged to some of her former husbands. 'Does she have one now?' I asked rather naïvely. 'She's got several husbands,' my wife explained. 'The entities I'm always talking about live in both worlds, ours and theirs. Some of them live in a dozen worlds at the same time.' 'I wish I could live outside. I'm an outsider anyway.' 'Not in this domain,' she pointed out. 'You can't live outside all these worlds.' Whenever she speaks of these entities or ghosts, I see a woman in white that I call the White Woman. Actually it is a rose, the White Rose, as alchemical books call her. She appears at the end of the Second Work. Strange as it may appear – all appearances are strange, to some extent – I have known this woman in white all my life, for all the unfortunate, humiliating experiences I have had with women of all kinds, dressed in white, in black, in red.

Yesterday my personal magnetiser or magnetic healer or spiritual healer or spouse hovered over my body to find out if I was suffering from cancer on account of the ganglions I seem to accommodate and put up with inside my body. She said, 'My pendulum isn't worried about your state of health. Of course you've got a lot of minor ailments, but I'll unlock the doors.' That is how she defines the course of her actions: she unblocks arteries, thoughts, vital forces. I have no idea what she does with chakras, although she mentions them rather often. Does she block them? They might belong to the entities of light I can count upon in my hour of need – in my hour indeed, as I say, for there are no other hours, in my opinion. So I listen to her description of entities and of the evolution to which our Earth seems to pay homage by vibrating faster and faster, by rotating with more intensity and conviction. 'What are you driving at?' I ask as if I did not know the answer. She believes – and she is not alone – that we are on the threshold of a major turning point. Yes, the Earth was not destroyed in 2012 because we

had misinterpreted the Maya, the Aztecs and also the New Testament that warns us and our extra-terrestrial friends about the forthcoming end of the universe. Actually the major turning point we all have in mind from time to time, probably because we are not quite satisfied with the universe we are living in, might have taken place some time ago when the Chinese authorities decided to come into the open and say there was a dreadful bacteria or virus in their midst. And now this virus is in every country's midst, in our midst, and we are no longer allowed to shake hands with one another, let alone kiss each other. And this stance of our today's and tomorrow's world may be called 'faraway landscapes', for up to now neither the fauna nor the flora have suffered from the calamity they call coronavirus or crown virus, as I call it. And yet at first the Chinese thought the virus was transmitted by their faithful dogs and they kicked them out. Many dogs were roaming the city streets, as gangs of yobs traditionally do, and sharpshooters shot them dead whenever they saw them. And they saw them rather often, given that almost all the dogs of China – for once we do not feel like talking about tea – were outdoors, and to keep the virus in the same area (outdoors, that is) sharpshooters and even those who are not accustomed to harming flies and other insects destroyed them mercilessly.

What may surprise somebody is the immunity to the virus brilliantly demonstrated by children, and one might say there are lots of exhibitions devoted to this particular and very humanist immunity – throughout the world. If you have a child in your family, you look at this child all the time, saying to yourself, 'My genes will inhabit the future, even if I succumb to the fatal disease. Look at my child, look at my child.' But no one looks at her, for you keep everybody at bay, and even your wife is not permitted to cook anything, to eat with you at the same table. The example provided by children in every country we may speak of on the spur of the moment inspires the old and the young alike: everyone wants to join what they call 'the second childhood'. Even some children do their best to grow younger so as to avail themselves of the immunity bestowed upon the youngest representatives of our species. They may go out and shake hands with their fellow-creatures, after asking the ritual question, 'How old are you?' They can make love with other children, and we look at their bodies with envy and disgust: our own fate disgusts us to the point of making us curse the universe and even its general director. We acknowledge our children's fundamental, inborn innocence; and their superiority in every domain, even in the domain of lovemaking (after all, they are *allowed* to have sex) is proven beyond any reasonable doubt. But they are about to pass a law forbidding us to see and caress our children who may die as a result of this manifestation of our love and hope in the future of our genes. The authorities (they are always 'they' unless you can pinpoint them, saying, 'Stalin, Hitler') think they are called upon to protect the future of humanity from our corruption and the many distortions we send to the world from our hearts, minds and even souls. 'We hope,' say the authorities, 'that your souls aren't immortal, otherwise the universe is doomed.' Traditionally in Russia fortune-tellers and prophets mushroom through the ages, and some attribute this phenomenon to the Russians' fondness for mushrooming. Velemir Khlebnikov came up with what he called 'the planks of destiny' (the pranks of destiny) on which he wrote the history of humanity starting with the Buddha. (Why not with Adam? Or Eve?) I do not give two hoots what lies in store for humanity, and I cannot figure out why all the members of our species – those who are still alive – have not already sung in unison, at the end of some oratorio or other, '*Après moi le deluge.*' Poor animals. What will become of *them*?

These authorities remind me of two camps that can be detected and analysed – not only in this wretched day and age; they must have been in our midst in every day, in every age, ever since the Creation, its big and small booms. One camp is hell-bent on improving our minds and lives as if we had enough material to provide a basis

for this improvement. If you resolve to improve some nothingness, you will get another nothingness, which has nothing to do with the cornucopia you hoped for at the beginning of your labours. The camp to which I belong seems to regard our existence as ‘done with’, according to our definition. So it is better not to touch it any more, not to *do* anything with it. Let us not forget that ‘done’ means it has already been done and so we should utter another slogan or whatever you might call it: ‘Nothing doing.’ Indeed what could you build on the remains of the world and history, on the debris we are surrounded with on all sides? And what do we see in our minds? The same debris or a slightly different heap of debris. A Bosch painting shows us an isolated foot, and one wonders – if one has any strength left to wonder about such a phenomenon – if this foot is part of a body. (The body of a beggar who starved to death.) Anyway, this foot exhibits our present condition rather vividly because we cannot say we have already disappeared, being killed and buried – to some extent we are buried – by the virus discussed on TV and everywhere else. What is left of us amounts perhaps to this foot: our mind is already gone. Going, going, gone, as they say. But let us be charitable and maintain that the Boschian foot is a relic: it used to embellish an emaciated body, that of a saint no doubt. This foot is very expensive, one may conclude. What of it? I think the painting is called *The Last Judgement* and the market is said to collapse on such days, at such moments, because there is no point in buying anything if you are on the threshold of Hell. You always think in terms of investments and one wonders what you can sell in Hell, apart from your suffering. How much does it cost? Of course it depends on the quality of your suffering, of its commercial value. I cannot help wondering if the fire one is likely to experience in Purgatory is more expensive than its hellish counterpart. Of course the fire burning in Hell is more intense, I suppose, otherwise Hell would appear harmless; at least in comparison with Purgatory. God makes sure that Hell frightens not only sinners, but also saints whose saintly conscience always heaps on them reproaches, saying, ‘You gave only five dollars to that beggar. Go back and give him another dollar.’ ‘But where is he now?’ asks the saint. ‘He died of starvation. Only one foot remains of his miserable body. Give a dollar to this foot.’

Yesterday I received an anonymous email and realised, after reading it, that my conscience is in poor shape, for it does not heap anything on me – neither reproaches nor insults. Apparently we all should say to the world and also to God, ‘The fighting shows no sign of abating. We are still at war with the virus crowned recently in the Republic of China to our absolute horror. We are duty bound to come to terms with it. We can suggest it should die in peace, leaving us alone with our gadgets. The Earth vibrates faster and faster, but the virus’s vibrations have already abated, we must say to ourselves.’ And we might add, ‘My tomatoes are flourishing this summer – it must be the warm weather. And our tomatoes are not in a class of their own. Our hopes flourish too, so do our gardens, trees and finances. The weather is fine and we are happy, whatever viruses visit us either in China or in Europe where our civilisation was born many millennia ago. Our sciences affirm that we have not changed during these millennia because we are even more solid than rocks exposed to water and its drops, its infernal dripping. Do they call it the “dripping technique” or “beef dripping”? Anyway, if a piece of meat drips in our presence, we just add a few grains of pepper to it and eat it. That is why we are more solid than rocks, mountains and their next of kin. They say we should give up the food we indulge in all the time. They say we shall live forever, provided we grow thinner and lose at least 20 kilos. They say, “Look at this beef. You should drip like it or like cows.” What is more, we should take part in the Human Genome Project which might enable us to isolate a miracle gene, an immortality gene. You inject it into your veins and sing tra-tra-la to celebrate your achievement. But first we should pray for the departure of the virus which is bent on the utter destruction of our bodies. And even if it does not depart at once, we should thank both nature and God for its imminent departure. “Thank you, thank you,” we should shout.

“Now we know we shall live forever unless another virus intrudes upon everyone’s privacy. Leave us in peace, leave us in peace. Let our privacy be private. You are just an interfering busybody, a gatecrasher, a bodycrasher, a peacecrasher. You are just a crasher. Go to Hell and don’t spend too much time on its threshold.” And then we should thank Hell for its cooperation, its contribution to our happiness and bliss.’ Incidentally, last night I watched a documentary I had recorded back in 1995 in which an American scientist assures television viewers that they will not suffer from Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s ‘in 15 years’. In 2010, if you please. Today no human being suffers from these diseases. Not anymore. A nice *incident*, isn’t it? Or shall we call it ‘a slip of the tongue’, ‘a slip of the brain’?

Our ideas differ as to what can be called happiness and bliss in the context of family life which is the essential aspect of our earthly existence, considering that marital status enables us to have legitimate and happy children. And children have grown too independent of late and we cannot really count on them, whenever educational problems prey on our minds. And of course our children should be brought up in accordance with our idea of good manners, an aristocratic mentality and civilisation in its highest and noblest form. But how can you do it in our society where computers and their games play a far more important role than Homer and the manners you read about in Tolstoy’s and Saint-Simon’s works? Our boys play football (so do our girls) and in addition to this harmless pastime they play games which lead us and them absolutely nowhere, not even to the middle of nowhere, for these games have neither middles nor ends. But the virus in question helps us unexpectedly and this phenomenon reminds us of the two sides of a coin, clouds and every life submitted to our scrutiny or just an occasional glance. Our children are more or less forbidden to go out: out is called ‘virus’ nowadays and you do not even have to say *outdoors*. Everyone understands what you mean when you just utter the word ‘out’. Everyone knows you are not speaking to the virus which cannot be chased away by a mere word, whatever sorcerers, shamans and their disciples say as they shout from trees and mountains, ‘Out, out, out, out!’ Even if Zarathustra talked to the virus, the latter would not obey his commands or exit-dances, as specialists define them. You may begin dancing on the stage of a theatre, thinking you should gradually leave the stage, the theatre and also the city invaded by the virus. You may actually do it – no one prevents you from dancing and leaving countries and continents. But the virus will stay, even if it happens to rival Nijinsky in the domain of jumps and other movements in the technique universally known as the ‘Russian ballet school’.

The virus does not say to itself, ‘Their children should learn how to count and read. I’m not so cruel as to put a lot of spokes in those wheels of theirs.’ In spite of the well-known fact that children are spared by the virus, the schools or rather their doors were shut last week. It is true that you can break a window and enter the school through the hole, but no one does it, which may suggest we do not really like schools and the teachers we listen to inside them. And if we happen to meet the same teachers in the streets, we can say to them frankly, truthfully, if they try to teach us anything, ‘We’re in the street, not in the school. So please shut up and go to Hell. I’m sure you know the way to Hades, don’t you? It’s not for nothing that you teach geography to your poor students.’ By the way, instead of talking about continents and mountain ridges, the same teacher might enlighten us on the topography of Hell, without quoting Dante and projecting Bosch’s masterpieces onto a screen.

To cut a long story short by cutting all schools from it, our children stay at home and play their games in our presence instead of kissing their coevals (and hissing their disapproval). They jump onto tables and begin walking amidst our dishes and empty plates: we hear crack, crack, crack round the clock. At any rate, a semi-circle of our time does sound like that as if we were fond of Stockhausen whose *Schlagzeug-Technik* is partly forgotten,

thanks to the film *Amadeus*, to our newborn fondness for harmony. Then they pass on to their toys and say, ‘You see, we produce the same sounds in the games we play with our toys. So the cracks you hear when we walk and dance on dinner tables denote no disrespect on our part. We just think that Stockhausen is unjustly forgotten. He was a great composer who must have influenced you, your parents and uncles. Your ingratitude is monstrous and that’s what we want to prove as we stroll and jump on dinner tables, on Louis XV chests of drawers and so on.’ One wonders what this ‘so on’ means in the context. Be that as it may, we love our children and for nothing in the world would we part from them, if only for a few months, especially since we are aware of the pernicious influence imposed on them and also on us (on me, among other people) by the outside world. The dances performed on dinner tables come from outdoors, from the schools where teachers do their utmost to cultivate their pupils’ initiatives, élans and so on. And this time my ‘so on’ includes all sorts of violence imprudently stored in us by our parents or the Almighty who now and then stoops to shaping our genes, our quarks and quirks. We also attribute to the outdoor influence the insolence displayed in our presence for the sake of so-called ‘infantile freedom’ by our children to whom we have always given everything, not only bars of chocolate, dolls and trains and toy poodles. And we should not forget that we also gave birth to them without which they would never have enjoyed either chocolate or poodles – or the puddle where they dance to the detriment of their and our own tidiness. We buy an expensive suit and they ruin it through their inconsiderate, insolent dances. And when we show them *The Nutcracker* and say, ‘Wouldn’t you like to dance professionally, like Vassiliev or Nureyev?’ they answer, ‘I prefer my dances and those of my schoolmates and also teachers. Do you know that our teachers dance pretty well? Much better than you and mummy.’

Whatever we might say on the subject, we must thank the virus for bringing all of us together because our families should not scatter throughout the world, living in New York, Paris and Singapore. We should stick to each other, unite, even if we fall, floored by the virus that proves to be more powerful than God’s errand boys. They come with lots of masks, but we say to them, ‘These masks would prevent us from communicating freely and abundantly with our children. They must know to whom they talk, and if I wear a mask, they might mistake me for a monster and take to their heels, screaming and shedding bitter tears.’ ‘But they couldn’t go too far,’ says an errand boy. ‘All doors are double-locked and you wouldn’t allow them to jump out of your windows, would you?’ ‘If a child wishes to jump out of the window,’ you answer, ‘no one will ever stop him from doing so at the right moment – from *his* point of view. By the way, don’t you think that all the moments we are dealing with in the course of our lives are wrong? There are pianists who never play the right notes as if Beethoven or Schumann were wide of the mark. Do you see what I mean? That’s what our lives sound like, in my opinion. Don’t you agree with me on the subject of life and death? Death is the wrong note, and life always plays the wrong notes, whatever happens and whichever virus enters our houses and wreaks havoc on our souls and furniture.’ ‘I disagree with you,’ says the errand body. ‘If your child is determined to jump out of the window, you’re duty bound to put spokes in her wheels. Have you noticed that girls perform these jumps far more often than boys? They might think they’re dancers flying towards their swan lakes. They might mistake themselves for swans. You should never have them watch *Swan Lake*, you know. They might get carried away – literally, poetically. Alas, instead of dancing at the Bolshoi, they sing their swansongs – not at the Vienna Opera, I’m afraid.’

There is no such thing as ‘by the way’; nor does ‘incidentally’ make any sense, considering that nothing is incidental and accidental and the spokes they put in our wheels realistically prove that ‘by the way’ is nonsensical too: everything is *on* the way, *in* the way, *across* the way. You trip over a fallen tree and remain on our Mother

Earth for two hours at least, letting the concussion settle comfortably in your brain which will communicate the news to the rest of your body in no time at all. Suppose you say, ‘By the way, I had concussion two years ago and ever since I’ve been unable to work and think. The only thing I can talk about is this concussion and its after-effects.’ They (and we already know who those *they* are) might shake their heads and inform you that you cannot speak of your overriding disasters by the way.

How to behave with your children? What attitude to adopt? Today, we are supposed to say to ourselves and our children, ‘All right, you know everything, you’re as omniscient and omnipotent as God. I’ll leave you in peace so you’ll be able to take care of your thoughts and body – on your own, without my help. I’ll give you biscuits and a lot of tea with milk, but the rest of your life will unfold elsewhere, not within my field of vision. Do you recall what happened last Saturday? My colleagues staged an anti-war demonstration in front of the US embassy. Police used water cannons to break up the demonstration. Do you recall what I did? Like a lot of people, I watched the events of that afternoon unfold on TV. And I’ll use the same method – let us call it “method”, why not? – when working with you on your present and future. I’ll do nothing, in other words. But I’ll watch you on my computer, from afar. Do you see what I mean?’ Actually many of our gurus advise us not to participate in life. ‘Just watch it from afar as if sitting in front of your computer,’ they say. Oddly enough, they do not mind our using computers and screens, whereas many ordinary people condemn them outright. Well, one might wonder why you let your children out of your sight (not out of your mind, mind you), but the source of your inspiration and education is obvious and can be overlooked only by those who care neither about alchemy nor about their own spiritual elevation. (Could we also speak about our *physical* elevation, considering the importance of stones in the domain of alchemy?) Your idea and your children’s estrangement are borrowed from an English treatise: ‘The bird of Hermes is my name, Eating my wings to make me tame.’ This may mean – and does mean in the context of your educational methods – that the only way to tame your children, bringing them to heel, is to leave them to their own devices. And the device you recommend under the circumstances boils down to the wings and the meals during which they eat them instead of gorging on pastries and suchlike. One cannot say one’s own wings are more delicious than the tiramisu you buy at Harrods. But never mind, never mind – your children’s minds and manners are far more important, especially in the world where the ball of viruses is in full swing. Let us not forget that Polanski’s movie *The Fearless Vampire Killers* was turned into *Le bal des vampires*. Incidentally, there is no more sugar in the shops around our area, and I suppose you can describe the other shops in Europe in a few words instead of enumerating the luxuries of the Western world at length, as you did only a few weeks ago to humiliate a former Soviet citizen. No more sugar, no more salt, no more flour. Soon you will have no alternative but to eat your own tail. (You have no wings.)

Using modern technology does not always appeal to my senses, and my friends, if any – I have only *former* friends on my list – mock me whenever I turn a deaf ear to their words and deeds about which they talk incessantly and with gusto. For instance, I seldom, if ever, use mobile phones, and I have only vaguely heard about iPods that have been on the market for more than two decades – from the beginning of this century, as I rightly or wrongly presume. The point is I come first – like Donald Trump’s America, and so I shall always write **I**, delaying the rest of the sentence and implying there are no rests at all – only the mortal remains of the world. And the members of these mortal remains (what a community!) are swamped with objects, gadgets and futile aspirations to the point of writing Pod with a capital P. Technology, money and other toilet accessories (as I call them) are *capital* to them, as Hamlet might have pointed out. Well, I am the only person in the world worthy of being worshipped, as a Zen

Buddhist saying puts it. Strange as it may appear, Zen Buddhists believed in the world as such. Or does this saying allude to another world?

I am watching a documentary in which Fellini's style is dissected inside the famous Cinecittà studio cluttered with columns, horses, clowns, harbours, and other ingredients of his works. A voice-over says that the director was not keen on technology or what we might call the American way of life, on condition that we have an irresistible urge to call it something. There are other conditions and other calls, and we may follow them for fun, anxious to remain within the context of Fellini's and Julietta's spirits. When watching the documentary, one can see a lot of people turning wheels and waving handkerchiefs to produce a semblance of yet another storm. Then a blanket begins to move up and down and we realise that our boat is about to sink to the bottom of the ocean, like the Titanic and other liners of note. There is a chair in the middle of the blanket, alias the sea depicted in *The Ancient Mariner* and Shakespeare's valedictory play. There are a few spare blankets in the wings – just in case. (For *Pericles*, I suppose.) There is also a supply of dolls – for Casanova, presumably.

Fellini and I are often on the same track, but now and then our path bifurcates because, unlike Marcello, I am not his alter ego. He is one of the very few others I accept and even nourish in my imagination, yearning to give him yet another life, to be his Casanova, if only for one evening, in the presence of a woman I have not met either in my dreams or in the world that is being attacked by the coronavirus (instead of the Martians). He wished they could love him, all of them: actors, producers, cameramen; and I think it is vital to ensure the cooperation of all these people if you are to create a masterpiece. By the way, in the documentary I am still watching he speaks about his way of working on the images collected and stored in the course of the shooting. He never sees them right after the shooting as if he knew exactly what was stored and partly immortalised through his cameraman's efforts. When creating *Otto e mezzo*, he had no alternative but to go on shooting whatever came into his head and resonated in his studio, for the laboratories dealing with the material were temporarily out of order, so to speak. Their staff were on strike. (Staff, strike, staff, strike – that is how this process sounds in my mind when I think back to the French period of my life. The French are born poets.) The film and its makers reach the editing stage and Fellini realises that everything works, in spite of the lack of control on his part. Actually, the cameraman might have understood they were creating a masterpiece, probably because a masterpiece can be given birth to only if you let God act His part. Contrary to what ecclesiastics think, we are perfectly capable of obliterating God's immeasurable power and influence by turning away from Him or by insisting upon our own methods, dealings and so-called inspirations. I do not mind being loved by God; what is more, I am probably seeking His love without knowing it. At least I have never had an urge to enlarge upon my quest in my diary, which is not as reckless as one might presume because I have no diary. I have never had one, for fear of becoming a slave to my past and to death which must be immobile, judging from what one sees in cemeteries, on their stones, on their Philosophers' Stones.

I do not aspire to universal love, to the brotherhood praised and magnified by so many verses that one gets an irresistible urge to burn one or two libraries, hoping the others will follow this example. (Other individuals, other libraries.) Perhaps the same goes for orchestras and conductors who need the unconditional participation of the musicians looking at their batons. I mean these conductors – and all other conductors – cannot conduct and even live an ordinary, everyday love, if the musicians of their orchestras hate them heartily. That is what apparently happened to Karajan at the end of his collaboration with the Berlin Philharmonic: they did not love him any more, to put it mildly. Recently I watched two documentaries on Karajan, and once again I realised how right I was when I renounced my chief vocation: all throughout my adolescence I dreamt of becoming a great conductor. How could

I ever have worked with others? My dreams must be realised only through my own solitary efforts, and no other efforts can join them in the course of this alchemical ritual. (Not an *amicable* ritual, mind you.) Here is a picture I would like to comment on, for it reflects my attitude towards life, birth, the birth of inspiration and great works. I am lying under a tree, apparently dead; at least Lermontov might have said so: he wrote a poem in which he described a similar dream. (I might be dreaming too.) This man I see in the picture and in Lermontov's poem is apparently dead or asleep. Actually he is half-asleep, and this 'half' enables him to feel the influence of the hand and its index finger hanging over his head. Whose hand is it? God's hand, my hand. And also a man, a woman. They are lovers – that goes without saying. Seeing is quite enough. They represent the perfect solution of the solar and lunar opposites in the first water – the central event of the First Work, whatever it is: only in my head and my imaginary retorts can I find the perfect solution of anything, be it the sun or the moon. I may try and join them by looking out of the window or sitting forever in my garden where some fir trees were cut down a few months ago. A skull is often visible in the pictures one finds in books on alchemy. Anyway, even in an invisible world inhabited by invisible women, you will always see a skull and a skeleton. No life without death. And vice versa. No love without hate. I am not sure the reverse is true. Generally speaking, I am rather allergic to what is called – ah, these names, calls and what nots or rather knots – human touch. I seem to remember a film where heroes, heroines and their colleagues touch round the clock – by Andy Warhol, if I am not mistaken. Disgusting, isn't it? And you smell either perfume or sweat or both. Sometimes you are offered three unbearable smells at the same time, and they are distilled by the skin of the person you are facing. 'Disgusting, isn't it?' as Moliere's misanthrope says from time to time.

In former times you had to keep in touch (literally speaking) with your future sexual partner – a few question marks are *de rigueur* – in order to sleep with her one day, in springtime, in summertime, in a winter's tale. Now you can dispense with this luxury, thanks to the virus' omnipotence which forbids the representatives of the human race from keeping in touch in public – for fear of being arrested. A policeman is likely to interrupt your rite of spring and remind you that the virus we are talking about and dying from is active not only during so-called winter sports. You are in a joyful mood because you see a lot of snow on the slopes where your friends and partners enjoy themselves by tracing parallel lines as if determined to create an environmental masterpiece. And then you hear an announcement: 'No skiing. Shut, closed, forbidden, keep out and away, stay at home, no handshakes, no shakes of any kind.' The policeman asks you politely, 'Are you in love with each other?' 'None of your business,' you answer. 'Your hands are my business,' he says. 'Please interrupt this amorous touch. Warhol fans, are you?'

Holding hands is unnecessary as far as my libido goes; this ritual just irritates it, without giving any satisfaction to its impulses, throes, élans and aims. 'Satisfaction' is a term known not only to businessmen and inveterate lovers: it was current amidst duellists who kept their hands and gloves rather busy. You go from one ballroom to another, your servant carrying a bag filled with gloves: sometimes you do not vouchsafe to make use of your hands. ('Vouchsafe' is another key-word of duellists. 'I didn't vouchsafe to touch his cheek.') This is not *my* keyword: I can touch any part of my partner's body, provided this body is engaged in a sexual act; otherwise I am as distant as Hamlet or Onegin or Pechorin. In short, you go from one ballroom to another and next morning your adversary is shot in the heart and collapses on the snow or on the grass.

How to avoid these hostile encounters? At some point a misanthrope is bound to realise that any meeting with a human is on the hostile side, exhibiting a hostile mind, a hostile body, even if no one gets shot in the wake of this 'touch-and-go' episode. My colleague says this idiom is erroneous: one should not touch a human, even if

the coronavirus is no longer in the news. (A thing of the past, eh?) ‘You should just go, go, go until a horizon lies between you and him or her. One should build a bridge across humanity and walk on this bridge until the last human being disappears down below.’ On the other hand – its sound continues to elude you – you deprive yourself of an essential element which your cats and dogs indulge in whenever you look at them, let alone caress them for half-an-hour. It does happen now and then because you really love animals – even those who might devour you in no time at all. And if they needed *some* time to munch their way through your body, enjoying all your flavours, you would give them a required amount of time to let their taste buds experience *la joie de vivre* to the utmost. So why don’t you love any human, however intelligent, magnanimous and beautiful? Apparently you should not aim for anything definite and lofty – no lofty aspirations, great expectations, which always end up in a room invaded by cobwebs. Just open your eyes, get up if you feel like it or stay in bed till doomsday, which might protect you from a number of sins you are sure to commit if you go outdoors and do not catch the coronavirus at once. And if you stay in bed, you might fall in love with its canopy because love is universal and counts everywhere, if I may say so, on account of its globalism which has nothing in common with our proverbial village. Yet I cannot remove from my spirit and body the curves I see whenever my wife or my alchemical partner, the one I see in the pictures as I leaf through my books, deigns to allow me to touch her clothes, one by one (Andy Warhol’s touch). And then I realise, once the result I am yearning for is achieved, the importance of being surrounded by curves, by beautiful objects and subjects. And I cannot deny I am in love with them, if only in part; and I have no idea what part I am talking about. Dante was married. The divorce of Heaven and Earth.

I have no next of kin, no next, no king, and there are kings in Belgium, England and Spain; and emperors in Japan. That is probably enough for alchemical and terrestrial happiness, for you can become a king yourself, at least in the footsteps of Macbeth, rewriting however the denouement of the story. While lying in your bed and musing on the possibility of starting the day elsewhere – in your garden, for instance – you might say to yourself, ‘Why not fall in love with the first subject, man or woman, I find within my field of vision?’ But for all your efforts in which your goodwill is sincerely involved, you find no one within your field of vision where only trees, plants and cats disport themselves, even if they remain immobile. Is that what Heraclitus meant when talking about his river? One is allowed to mix his doctrine with that of Parmenides by saying that even when no wind helps your garden and its inhabitants – trees, bushes, roses – to relish the delight of movement, their inner force, *élans* and impulses provide an impetus which carries them far from the garden, sometimes as far as the so-called celestial spheres where they join their paradisiacal counterparts. And even if they stay on Earth, being faithful to their Mother, their internal movements make them feel the dual nature of the Philosophers’ Stone, its immobility and movement. What counts is the multiplicity contained in one or in the One so that, whenever you hear the One, you know they are speaking of the multitude that has nothing to do with democracy. What they have in mind is the world, nothing else, Spinoza’s world, the world where you should erect a monument to the Stone in the shape of the human body.

I gleefully enlarge upon my anti-humanism, but I do not think this definition fits my disposition, my stance and the attitudes I adopt in the course of my journey through days and nights, through retorts and crucibles. And if I am asked to supply proof of my undeniable attachment to my own species, I can evoke the presence of my charwomen whom I kiss on the threshold of my so-called estate – why not call it an estate? – whenever they come and go, bent on cleaning all the nooks and crannies of my house. Last week the epidemic we are talking about was already in full swing, which did not prevent me from kissing my charwoman upon her entrance and departure. I

did not have to accomplish this insecure rite: no code, no guru insisted upon my touching this woman's cheeks with my lips and mouth, flouting advice and the elementary precautions advocated by journalists, doctors and our next of kin. Isn't it an eloquent proof of my clandestine love for human beings? It is not as clandestine as all that: by displaying it in the presence of my trees, bushes and house I expose myself to the danger they write about on every page I glance at while leafing through their newspapers and magazines. They advise the old not to leave their houses, and I am an old man; at least I am aware that almost all my heroes, as Heidegger and Carlyle put it, were dead before celebrating their 70th birthday. And I am already 72, as I stated above (in the heavens, as my wife might put it). In Julius Caesar's footsteps I should acknowledge my overall failure: I have not yet achieved *their* results, the magnitude of their *achievements*.

So I kissed one of my recent charwomen, in spite of her incredible ugliness: you would never believe me if I tried to depict her monstrosity in great detail. Probably this remark of mine cannot be inserted into the golden frame where humanism and humane attitudes exhibit their qualities, but that is how it is and it cannot be modified to please John Doe. (And John Donne.) Well, yesterday my wife got a call from her and I heard a voice I did not recognise; yet it was my charwoman's voice. (We all know 'his master's voice', but there are other voices in the world, and we are to come to terms with them.) Her voice was so hoarse I thought I was listening to a terrible disease, and whenever one speaks of diseases today, everyone presumes it is the coronavirus that comes to the fore once again. The voice said, 'I have to cancel our appointment. You can hear my voice, can't you?' Does the coronavirus also turn you into a deaf man, a deaf woman? Once the voice vanished into the thin air of telephone liaisons, I asked my wife, 'Whose voice was this?' 'Your charwoman's,' she answered. Am I not humane? I kissed a woman who came down with bronchitis, and there is no doubt as to the origins of this bronchitis: there is a shortage of origins and sources nowadays. I said to my wife, 'I'm damned and condemned. When did I last kiss her? A week ago. So we have to wait for another day to find out if I am to die in the near future. And I have so many things to do to catch up with my heroes. Not with Alexander the Great, contrary to what Julius Caesar's admirers might presume.' It was not necessary to be more specific: my wife knows who my heroes are and she approves of my choice. That is what they call the *Entente Cordiale*.

Yesterday, on the day when my charwoman called my wife, I received another call and found a message on my answerphone or answering machine. Anyway, there are only machines around the world that I touched upon a few hours ago – quite recently, I might say. Yet I do not recall in what connection I touched upon the world at the risk of being contaminated once and for all. Incidentally, I wonder if my house and whatever I find inside it belongs to the world which is more contagious now than it was only three months ago. Cancer and influenza are forgotten, being totally eclipsed by the virus which I am tempted to call names in the light of the kisses I gave to my charwoman. Whenever you say 'waiting', you think about Godot and his incurable absence or nonsense, but for once Godot did not cross my mind. At least I did not cry, 'Here he is, here he is, your Godot! You're welcome to my abode, Estragon and Vladimir. In spite of the virus, you know. But let us forego handshakes, kisses and big bear hugs.' So I am waiting for the virus, and for nothing in the world will I ever welcome it, needless to say. But if it does come after all, I might shake hands with it, taking my cue from a dying dualist who salutes his adversary thus, 'Bravo, you're a good shot.' Whatever happens, I will not say to the coronavirus, 'Bravo, you're a good virus,' although it is undeniably good: it has already killed so many people.

I do not remember who used to kiss the leprous, but I suppose this kiss might be regarded as unmistakably Christian and humane. Humane, humane, humane, humane – that is what I hear all the time, even if no one talks

and the radio was switched off many years ago. The humane way of dealing with a suffering animal is to kill it quickly, as they point out; and they kill you and animals without asking you or doctors or veterinary surgeons if your suffering takes pride of place. They ask no questions. They are not afraid of lies – they could not care less about your lies – but they have no time to spare for your despair. They just kill you in one of the ways minutely described by Oscar Wilde in his famous, jail-engendered poem. They kill you by lending you money for a new car which is so powerful and speedy you take no notice either of your speed or of the road you took a few minutes ago. As a result of the loan, you sign your own death warrant by plummeting off a precipice. And your friends wonder who really signed this death warrant: you or the person who lent you the money. And they can kill you with a kiss, especially if this kiss contains the virus I have already dealt with on many occasion; and I am likely to deal with it in the near future – personally, this time. They also kill you by using their lawnmower round the clock and for once you feel like killing time, clocks and even circles, even if they are not vicious. They kill you by saying, ‘I’m in love with you,’ but when you ask them to take their clothes off and touch these clothes, which enables you to feel their curves before seeing them, they slap your face and say they will never see you again, if you resume your appalling ritual.

When in 1982 I flew over to India and stayed there for two months at least (I do not recall the dates and times) I had many opportunities to kiss lepers whose heads I saw in the cars that conveyed me to historic monuments and sites. They would squeeze their heads through the holes they spotted around them and open their mouths as if I were supposed to put money in between their teeth. I put nothing into their mouths, neither a piece of bread nor money nor a piece of clothing. Had I put a gold ingot into their pants or bras, no one would ever have said, ‘Here goes the most humane individual in the world.’ But kissing a leper is different, especially if you get the diseases in the wake of your exploit. It is not enough, however, to get sick and die somewhere, not necessarily in a ditch. You have to show your leprosy on television, saying you got it in India after kissing a fearless leper on the mouth. ‘Why fearless?’ a presenter is likely to ask. ‘Because the lepers often have their heads cut off by drivers or their passengers or both.’ Now you have to kiss a virus carrier or a dying woman – more pathetic, isn’t it? I wonder who deserves higher praise: a man who kisses a dying patient and dies in his turn or the organiser of a charity ball, a pianist who gives a charity performance. Is death a sledgehammer argument? Once again I am tempted to bring up my wife who sends her waves in all directions to appease the virus and the psyches affected by it. Oddly enough, she thanks the virus for its coming as if playing the role of a businesswoman who says to an importunate visitor, ‘Thank you for coming, but I’m really very busy.’ Actually the virus may answer as follows, ‘You can keep working – I won’t interfere either with your thoughts or your hands. Take no notice of my presence, otherwise I would feel guilty. My conscience would really trouble me if I perturbed your spirit. What did Hamlet say on the subject to his father’s ghost? Can’t remember. I hope you don’t mind.’

My former pupil called me a few minutes ago. I know she wished to invite me for dinner and I am happy to saddle the virus with providing excuses for my unwillingness to see any representative of the human species. And yet I cannot say I hate humanity because I have no intention of removing myself from the surface of the Earth. By the way, if you are really determined to eschew any contact with your fellow creatures you had better stay underground – not as a representative of the dead, of corpses: there are enough of them underground, at the bottom of every sea and ocean. Even at the bottom of a river you can stumble upon a few corpses, if you take the trouble to walk under water instead of swimming under it. There are people whose wish to be buried underwater may appear strange, if not nonsensical and ludicrous, but I suppose they are just reluctant to hear and feel – at least to

some extent – human feet; their shoes, boots or roller skates. A youngster may roll over your head, shouting, ‘Hey lazybones, get up from the sofa and join me in the cemetery! The dead are quiet this afternoon. No snoring, no bickering.’ But even if you are buried under water your spirits are bound to be perturbed either by submarines or by the mere fact of sleeping within the context of the Earth where so much suffering, so many ridiculous situations have been endured in the course of human history.

I might have paid more attention to Casanova and his way of dealing with love, death and other circumstances we encounter as we try to find our way in the midst of stupidities, refusals, rebuffs and other features of our existence. ‘I made my way through women,’ he said, meaning he did his utmost to create a tunnel through which one might travel as far as the Philosophers’ Stone. He dabbled in alchemy and in Fellini’s film we come across a few stages known as distillation or cooking the white. There is a woman in white and Casanova cooks her in his furnace, separating earth from fire. On the Earth there are Venetians or Parisians who continue to wage wars or work feverishly, yearning for the prosperity of their shops, restaurants and brothels. Casanova needs no brothels, no others; he meets a woman, invites eternal strife by falling in love with her forever, tries to commit suicide, comes back to life. And that is what happens in my life where so many women and other creatures have their niches where I pay them visits as I try to piece together the kaleidoscopic episodes of my personal history. What remains of it often amounts to a mechanism with which I dance as Casanova did at the end of the movie. Yes, I think there is nothing better than an automaton you can use for your libido and spiritual aspirations, for their temporary satisfaction. Most of the time the automaton is forced to bend to your will, but now and then it raises its arm which does not stroke your shoulders, contrary to what you expect. This automaton has a will of its own or rather half a will which suits your purpose and lulls your emotions into a false sense of harmony. For a while you might think your union with this half-will, half-body may be transferred to human beings, their wills, bodies and minds. And then you go out and stumble upon half-corpses that do not understand your talk, your walk, your destination. You recite a poem and they laugh at you, ridicule your words and gestures, your ideals, the harmony you hear in your mind and share with your automatons.

At the end of his life Casanova was a librarian and this variety of human occupation suits me too, in spite of my own library and the number of books I own. Often I watch films only to find out how old people walk and at what age they begin to use walking sticks or staffs – if their pilgrims or kings. A Zen Buddhist says, “‘Leaning on my staff I walk through crowds without taking notice of people, of their words, shouts and faces. I head for my mountains where I have an appointment with Zarathustra,” as Nietzsche would have written, had he studied Zen Buddhism in his youth; as I did. Did I? When did I first read this sentence, “There is no existence in the three realms of past, present, and future”? “Where is the mind?” Not the foggiest. Upon awakening you might say to yourself, ‘Only foggiest, foggiest, foggiest, fog, fog, fog. Nothing else, no mind, no body, no spirit. Only spirits, perturbed spirits.’ Where is the mind? You touch your head and say, ‘Here it is.’ But when you walk in the streets you come to the inevitable conclusion – and you do not jump to it, you come to it slowly, slowly – that there are no minds, only bodies or rather clothes. Even if you happen to spend an afternoon on a nudist beach, you might say to yourself, ‘Only clothes, no bodies. I could take these clothes and burn them.’ At the beginning of the film Casanova says to a woman, ‘Your clothes are out of tune with the harmony I hear and live through. Could you please take them off?’ In the course of my libertine life I have talked to many women, making a tremendous effort to tune them as if they were my piano – my automaton, in Casanova’s words. You can wrap your piano up, if you

wish, paying homage to Christ. You may leave it naked and play some Schubert or Chopin on it to your heart's content. Even Brahms' intermezzi are not out of tune.

I was curious to know how old Casanova was at the hour of his death, on his deathbed where no woman kept him company unless death is a woman, not a man. According to one of the sources I listened to during my walk around the area he died at the age of 80 in the bed he found in Bohemia or somewhere else – not in Venice anyway. I was slightly disappointed, thinking I was unlikely to reach this mature and satisfactory age, considering the full swings of the viruses I am exposed to, in spite of my solitude. But then I was reassured by another source which was far more authentic, judging from the details disclosed by this source. He died at my age, which might suggest a lot to any mind, not only to mine inclined to detect synchronicity in whatever happens now in the cosmos and outside it. He was 73 and my calculations cannot fail to convince me I have within my reach only six or seven months. The rest of eternity and time lies beyond my hands, brainwaves and feelings which are often focused on the bodies I am to penetrate in one way or another. What does all this amount to? To the staircase along which Casanova was going down, his walking stick trembling by his body's side and probably by his mind that was shaking not with fear, as might be presumed, but with old age imposing upon us its shaking and faking. We fake surprise or an orgasm, whereas we no longer feel anything and are unable to perform a sexual act.

The word 'androgynous' evokes the intricacy of the human psyche which flies over our base and impure instincts, determined to make us join Sophia and other celestial envoys – other means of transport, as they say. Sophia picks up our souls, bodies and the rest of our substances – every human being has many substances at his command, provided he is in command of himself – and we pierce a lot of clouds and stars on our way to the Almighty. 'The androgynous symbolises our unions. You and I have always been together, without knowing it. You're my body and soul. We are so alike I just couldn't tell our bodies, souls and what not apart. You know, when I was in prison I had a bizarre experience one morning. Upon awakening I felt an arm, a cold arm by my side. I thought they had put a corpse in my cell. It was my own arm, benumbed and cold. I must have slept on it for quite a while. You're my arm, my warm and delightful arm on which I'll sleep one of these days.'

I am looking at Casanova's legs, at the way he goes down the stairs, and I say to myself, 'I'm not yet as decrepit as he was at my age. No one pays attention to what I say and do, but at least I shall die in peace, thanks to this epidemic that might keep others at a distance for a long time, hopefully forever. And if someone ventures into my field of vision, I can always cough and shake as if performing St Vitus dance.'

I cannot walk properly, which implies a deficiency one might detect when watching me go to my car, open its door and position myself in front of the steering wheel. I hope I manipulate this wheel more or less correctly: my fingers and arms are in perfect working order, although 12 years ago I fell and injured my arm as I was skiing in Switzerland instead of staying at home, in Versailles. There are stones everywhere, as I said some time ago (not 12 years ago, as might be presumed) and not all of them belong to the sanctuary called the Philosophers' Stones. Some of them lie in the snow or just anywhere to injure you abominably, causing either your death or your long-drawn-out stay in a hospital where they always ask you if you can walk a dozen inches or pick up a spoon. My doctor was almost convinced I would never touch a keyboard again. He thought I would not be able to use my computer 'unless you content yourself with typing very slowly, with one finger only, with one finger that your left hand might lend you from time to time.' My doctor laughed and, naturally enough, I told him it was no joking matter: for all my fondness of playfulness, I do not crack jokes round the clock. And I am all the more reluctant to indulge in this pastime if I risk becoming a favourite object of self-deprecating jokes.

My former charwoman said to me once, 'I was crying yesterday. I thought about the staircase you have to use all the time, and I said to myself, "Poor man. In a few years' time he won't be able either to ascend or descend these stairs. He'll fall three times a day. And there'll be no one to help him up, to pick up his body. And what if there's nothing to pick up? Do you understanding my meaning, sir? I mean you can die, as a result of these ups and down to which you're chained in a way; at least as long as you stay in this house. And it is your house, isn't it? You're not renting it, are you? I would sell this house, if I were you. Of course the property situation is far from satisfactory, but it is better to lose money than your life. Am I right, sir? If I were you, I wouldn't buy anything. Why go on losing money? You lose money because a virus goes wild somewhere, in the area where you live and enjoy yourself. No one collects antiques any more. You have quite a collection of old pieces of furniture. Do you intend to sell the whole collection? Another client of mine wished to sell a chair. He thought the chair was an antique worth a lot of money, but it turned out to be a valueless replica.' So much for human relations, relationships and universal love.

When Casanova was in prison, he was deprived of sheets of papers and quills so he could not write letters to his cousins, friends, brothers, sisters – to any representative of our race. The guard to whom he complained about the situation said, 'You know, it's better this way. Why waste your time on useless correspondence?' Even in prison you should not spend your time on other humans, even if you are not allowed to read or to look out of the window so as to relish the beauty of Venice, Paris or St Petersburg. You cannot relish anything except your own thoughts, and they are far more entertaining than the letters you might receive from your fellow creatures. And what could you write to them about? Suppose you write to them about your communion with God, which grows more and more tangible as time goes on, in spite of your relative immobility. It is true you can move about your cell, but the space you have around you is so restricted you cannot really talk about 'walking around your cell'. You can just say you move from time to time to stretch your legs a bit. You also stretch your arms and even your head, let alone your thoughts: you stretch them day in day out. When your thoughts go numb, you say to yourself, 'This is the prison I've always been afraid of.' And you escape from this private prison by stretching your thoughts, by leaving the prison of thoughts. And one of the best remedies against this kind of claustrophobia is your relationship with God that you call the Conjunction of Natures. Indeed God's nature is an exact replica of yours and that is what the Bible hints at when touching upon images and their similitude. So you might write in a letter addressed to a human being, 'Here the Conjunction of Natures prepares for the separation of light from dark, the emergence of white from black, which is the birth of Mercury.' A week later you receive a letter from your correspondent. 'What are you talking about?' she asks. In your next missive you explain that Mercury is associated with men. 'And I am a man after all,' you add, 'for all my affinities with women. There is no denying that I am first and foremost an androgyne, but male characteristics are part of any androgynous substance. This is one conjunction, one union that I have in mind. The other conjunction of natures denotes my blending with God whose presence helps me survive in the prison where human beings usually die and are seldom or never buried. They are left on their cots and visitors enjoy these sights as if they were at Madame Tussaud's waxwork museum.'

Not many prisoners of the Gulag survived their confinement to tell the tale, and those who did expound their views on the treatment they were subjected to as follows: 'One torturer pounded the raw subject (myself) in a mortar. A group of torturers saw to it that I repeatedly absorbed my own distilled moisture. Yet another torturer, under the auspices of Hermes, was repeatedly "cooking the white" (*albedo*) until I germinated.' You are doomed to death unless you view your life in terms of an alchemical ritual. So whatever happens to you should be viewed

in this light or dark, and at first I do not know what you are dealing with because you are in the dark so to speak and so to feel, and there is nothing you can do about it except accepting the situation on its own terms. It is foggy and you haven't got the foggiest so everything is foggiest, as I might have pointed out somewhere, on some foggy night. Well, as usual you do your best (not worst, not worst) to separate light from dark, for you believe that inside you there is a source of light, at least my wife thinks so as she keeps on talking about Beings of Light and their invincible presence. But how to separate the dark you see all around you from your personal light, if any? On a sheet of paper you write: 'Foggiest, foggiest, foggiest, if any, if any, if any.' This reminds you of Kubrick's *The Shining* and the sentence written over and over again by Jack Nicholson. It is about Jack and his play, isn't it? If you write 'foggiest' day in day out, you are sure to walk in the fog you create on your own initiative; at least my wife thinks so and no one is able to convince her to change her mind, which is all the more difficult since, if resolved to change your mind, you should also change your body.

The prisoners of the Gulag had to become white so as not to perish within the space allotted to them and delimited by barbed wire. My appointment at the clinic was cancelled because of the virus, and my ganglions do not require immediate attention: in comparison with the victims of the epidemic, they are relatively innocent. They do undermine my health and my hopes for long-awaited recognition, but the virus does not seem to care about recognition, hopes and the other trash we are infatuated with. The only thing it does care about is our body, its tissues, blood vessels and vital forces, and it is pointless to say to ourselves, 'Mercury transfixes the king, and the fixed is thus made volatile.' In this case Mercury is the virus, not an ordinary or extraordinary man. And you are a king, and it is better to be a king, if only at the end of life, than to sing *Internationale*, marching through the streets. In the wake of your contamination and a brief sojourn in hospital you grow volatile and leave your bed – the one you were permitted to make use of at the hospital – through an open window, provided they do open windows to let the fresh air call on their patients' lungs. But even the fresh air is not fresh enough to *clean* their lungs, eliminating or rather eradicating the ganglions and their gangs, as Nabokov might have put it. So you say to alchemists, to Nicholas Flamel and Hermes, any of them: 'I offer you my ganglions instead of my body and its tissues. I hope you'll forgive me for this substitution.'

You fly, you picture to yourself stones, fires, waters, conjunctions and in the long run settle again on Earth: even mystics write their revelations in their cells, monasteries and lunatic asylums. Fellini shot a film entitled *La voce della luna*, if I am not mistaken on account of my partial, almost entire ignorance of the Italian language. At the beginning of the film one can see – on condition that one is sitting in front of one's computer or in a cinema – a woman whose clothes forsake her body as she discloses it to satisfy a few Peeping Toms. And the hero who was doomed to become Fellini's last alter ego seems to have escaped from a lunatic asylum. He jumps and jumps, higher and higher, but in spite of his best endeavours he cannot get an eyeful of the striptease going on beyond a window and a half-drawn curtain. I saw this film many years ago and therefore I do not remember if, frustrated in his terrestrial voyeurism, the protagonist does not decide, perhaps on the spur of the moment, to undress the moon: it is not for nothing that, according to the title, he listens to its (or her) voice. I wonder why Fellini did not shoot another film entitled *La voce della luna e del sole* (of *sole mio*, so to speak) which would have allowed the voice-over to announce: 'Here the protagonist is overcome and fixed by an antithetical pair: the solar and lunar warriors in slightly different guise. Here they are said to be his "brother and sister", without whom he can never germinate and become the Philosophers' Stone.' Why warriors? Against whom or what do they wage war? If children ask you this question, you can say, 'They fight the virus that can harm human beings. You're human beings now and

if you're not cautious enough, if you don't wash your hands every time you go out, you'll get contaminated and even the moon and the sun will be unable to help.' 'And if we just look out of the window? Should we wash our hands after enjoying the landscapes one can see without opening windows and doors?'

Today, you should communicate with your fellow creatures through fairy tales, myths and figments of your imagination, otherwise no one will understand you. So you declare that the moon and the sun can help us only if they adopt our methods, outlook, standpoint and way of life. We struggle for life, don't we? So, before leaving their orbits and landing on our planet, they (the moon and the sun) take lessons during which they are informed about our manners and the knowledge we juggle with when defending ourselves against viruses and their cronies. There is a medicine I take every night before going to bed and a friend of mine told me this morning that this medicine enables the coronavirus to survive in our intestines, even if we eat only fruit and vegetables. This medicine is consequently one of the virus's cronies and they (human beings) should banish it from their shelves as long as the virus is at large. My wife knows quite a lot about herbal medicines but she has not talked to me yet about Ibuprofen (is it the name of this crony?) because it is not herbal, and whatever is not herbal, organic and alchemical should be banished from the Earth.

Yesterday I drank two cups of tea in my wife's presence and she told me I should join forces with her and her friends to save the Earth from the utter annihilation brewing within the virus. 'What do you propose to do?' I asked. 'We'll just pray,' she answered. I started to pray a little bit earlier, anxious to be heard and taken notice of well before the other participants of the rite of the virus; of the anti-rite of the virus; of the rite of the anti-virus. 'Lord, please save our planet and her inhabitants from the omnipotent virus. And while Thou art at it, please save us too from half-wits, third-wits and so forth. And save us from ourselves, my Lord.' Prayers are a wonderful pick-me-up, but I wonder if the moments you spend on your deathbed are not devoid of anything and everything except themselves – just sheer moments, nothing else. You may count them, if you wish, saying to yourself, 'On the count of nine I'll die once and for all. I've never believed in my personal resurrection. Of course Jesus Christ accomplished this deed and feat, but I'm not sure he included me in his personal ritual. They say this ritual is not really personal – the whole of humanity (and also the dead) take part in it. Well, sometimes I get the feeling that some of the dead leave their tombs, fly, land up on a roof and begin to shout, 'I've been raised from the dead! On the Cross our Saviour, Jesus Christ, seemed to promise us the Earth. For many centuries we repeated the verb "to seem", and I'm not sure that, while repeating it endlessly we thought we were telling the truth and nothing but, nothing but. I also repeated the word "nothing", but the word "but" was never far from my lips. And I'm happy to announce to the world that it is this word, this "but" that has eventually triumphed over all other words. Nothing **but** the truth.'

But on the threshold of death you might forget our Saviour, being too preoccupied with your intestines or heart or soul. You suppose that after your body's untimely demise, your soul will go first to the moon and then God knows where, and you ask the moon to be considerate and indulgent: your soul should not perish in one of its craters. You might also care about your last words, saying to yourself, 'I should on no account say, "Go to Hell," because you can say this automatically, without thinking about anyone in particular.' You are so used to uttering these words, in this order, that you can utter them unintentionally, almost unconsciously, subconsciously. Your subconscious fears are focused on Hell, and you utter the proverbial formula as if addressing your subconscious or consciousness or fears or your former enemies. They are far away, all of them, and some of them might live in Paradise, given the mysterious, unpredictable character of the God-ordained lottery: the elect, the damned, and so

on (the inhabitants of Purgatory). However often you utter this formula, this slogan, no one obeys your orders and so all of them are here, on the Earth, standing around your deathbed on which your death comes to life, to the fore; your death is raised from the dead on your very bed, on the last bed of your life. And you recall all the beds you have spent your time on, either in someone's company or alone, prey to your dreams, fears, premonitions and sleepless nights. Last night I took a half-pill, which enabled me to sleep until 2 a.m. And then I had a choice: I could have drunk a bottle of wine instead of swallowing another half-pill of a medicine to which I am becoming addicted so that I can no longer sleep alone, without its partnership. Even a beautiful specimen of the human species will not guide me into the wasteland of sleep where you encounter verses, snippets of conversations, ideas and agonies. Not a dozen bits of angst, whatever you might hope for: there is no more time for angst. You know exactly what you are about to die from, and even if you do not know anything except a score of mathematical equations, you are dying and you know it by heart. You begin to count your seconds and for once you are right, and now it is also too late for repentance, for pardon, and consequently it is pointless to say, 'Forgive me *madre*, forgive me *padre*, forgive me my sister. Could you please tell me if I had any brothers? If I had five brothers, I ask their forgiveness. Please forgive me all my sins, insults, and kicks. Mark, Simon, Vladimir, Gerhard, Ivan.' Now, on this legendary threshold, you realise you are hard of hearing, and in spite of their eternal forgiveness, you continue to doubt your salvation. You put your foot on the threshold and say, 'You know, when you jump during the Olympic Games they do not accept your jump, do not validate it, if you step on the line, on the last line. You have to jump again, and again, and again. No one and nothing prevents you from stepping on this line, from leaving your imprint on it. They see this imprint, a vestige of your foot and say, "No, he's not worthy of Hell. Let him return to the Earth.'" So you are happy at first, but your doctors and relatives say to you, 'All right, you can resume your place in our midst, on condition that you can rise and go, you know. And you should carry your bed wherever you go, otherwise we'll not validate your return to the Earth, its surface and Paradise.' You make a tremendous effort and in the long run one of your feet succeeds in rising from the sheet, but even in the air it is unable to take a few steps, although no one asks you to fly. Just show us how you walked on Earth for so many years, they say, nodding their heads or their arms which you might mistake for their heads. You see their fists and say to yourself, 'They have so many heads, these people. They must be very studious, knowledgeable, gifted and wise.' And then you change your mind, you have a change of heart, and instead of seeing a number of heads, you spot a number of hearts – in close proximity to your eyes and conclusions. Actually you do not really have to jump to conclusions; anyway you cannot jump, considering your legs' incurable weakness. You are under the impression that you can fold your legs in half and put them in an envelope. 'Addressed to whom, may I ask?' someone asks. One of the hearts questions you on the subject of your correspondent. And you answer, 'I've written a letter to my guardian angel.' 'Your guardian angel died an hour ago. She thought you no longer needed her services.' 'Could you please send this letter to God?' you ask. 'What are you taking us for?' they ask, all of them. All these hearts ask you the same question. And you answer them, 'You're an irresponsible bunch of hearts.' 'You're mistaken,' they say. 'We are kings of hearts, queens of hearts.' You make an ultimate attempt to rise and go, as the poet says. You manage to put your feet on the ground which begins to move as if rocking you to sleep. You stand up and fall asleep. You wake up once again, find yourself on the floor, make another ultimate attempt to rise and go and pick your bed up. You accomplish this feat of valour and head for the door, open it and trip over another bed, a small bed designed for a child in all probability. 'To all intents and purposes the project is completed,' says someone. 'What project?' you ask yourself. And then you say out loud, 'Do you wish to convey me to my second childhood? Don't

you worry, I'm right in the midst of it. Where's mummy or mamma or *maman*?' And then you ask yourself the question you cannot answer, 'Why did they put a small bed in my future room? Do they want me to identify with my second childhood quite realistically?' If someone doubts your abilities, the authenticity of your reactions – 'What is it, mummy?' 'It is the sun. You shouldn't stare at it, otherwise you'll go blind,' – you may just point out that the size of your new bed answers all the questions related to your first, second and third childhoods. By the way, you ask your servants the following questions, 'How many childhoods do I have within my reach? And how far does my new reach go? Can it extend over horizons and time? Will God validate my jumps and the succession of my births?'

Yesterday I hoped I would be able to walk for an hour in the neighbourhood, along the street where I live and also in the wood where a few mushrooms grow every year. I went out, took a few steps and all but collapsed on the road which continued to stretch in front of me, invitingly or indignantly. Nobody said I would live forever if I could reach the end of this road, and so I retraced my steps – not for the sake of leaving their traces on the road and elsewhere. I had nothing to prove, nothing to gain from this walk except a sort of assurance that I can rise and go as far as my nearest lavatory. As for public toilets, I have never been fond of them. Are many people in love with public toilets? Of course both lesbians and gays like performing their dances within these toilets which add a dozen finishing touches to their volatile creations. So there are people who never or very seldom indeed make love at home, assiduously seeking other outlets for their libidos' manifestations. And if you ask them why they accomplish their 'matrimonial' duties in public toilets, they answer enigmatically, 'Whales become disoriented in shallow water,' meaning that disorientation excites them to the point of shaking their libidos and extracting from them whatever is needed for a rewarding sexual rite. And many of these dancers say before leaving their houses, 'I'm a whale today, you know.' 'And I'm a leopard,' answers their partners. Last night I saw a film about a matador for whom the women he fell in love with were bulls in disguise, not some alchemical females, as an alchemist might assume. He killed them in public toilets, in the streets and in the long run he got killed himself, although the coronavirus did not hold sway in those days, in the Eighties when the film was shot, when the matador was shot dead by another virus; or by the same virus. There is no point in trying to find out what virus your body and soul are dealing with: they will kill you all the same, all of you. Vitamin C may help protect against cancer, but nothing will ever protect you from viruses, even if you refrain from sending anything to anybody, saying, 'Don't blame me for my refusal to communicate with you at all costs, no matter what. Don't forget that the virus edges its way into envelopes, trousers, mouths, lungs and computers. Do you want me to send you a virus-contaminated email?' Incidentally, someone pointed out that one can disinfect one's email by writing about the virus in minute detail: how you got it, where you got it, how you died, and so on. Your correspondent may accuse you of the crime imputed to the virus-carriers: 'He sent me a poisonous email.' The virus prefers to hold sway without rivals, its own doppelgängers, as if wishing to announce from the same rooftops: 'I killed this man, this woman, this humanity. I did it single-handedly. Please feel free to hang me when you wish. I killed this matador too. He oughtn't to have done my job so obstinately.'

When asked why he was shooting movies, Andy Warhol said, 'It's much easier than painting. You just switch the camera on and walk out, letting it run its course.' I wish I could run my course; or walk it at least. I wish I could be a camera, walking, running, filming my own dreams, nightmares and poetical ideas. I wish I could walk out without running the risk of dying on a pavement, in the streets of any city or town. I wish I could walk almost automatically, feeling no pain, no regrets, no pangs of conscience. Our priests advise us to pray

continuously, even if we are not on our deathbeds, deathcouches, deathfloors, in our deathchairs, in front of our deathcomputers; even if we are not typing our last words. I wish I could switch on my prayer-machine and walk out peacefully, almost unnaturally. What is more unnatural than peace of mind? Such a project is not as blasphemous as might seem at first glance, for you have to programme the machines you switch on while walking out, riding off or just setting out on a long, long journey. Machines are not reliable until further notice; they are liable to go berserk in your absence – like adolescents or unruly husbands. As for the prayer machine, you should inscribe the entire collection of your sins on its genetic code, as you call it as if it were a human being, your confessor, your favourite theologian or just a guru in whom you confide every week. (One confessor is not enough.) Of course it is no easy task, given the number of your sins and their contents, but if you do not expiate them before lying on your deathbed you might not reach the gates of Purgatory. And if you do reach them, you are not sure to get an entrance ticket, for all the benevolence of the guardians. After exposing every sin in minute detail, you should finish your confession by asking the Almighty not only to forgive you this sin, but also to keep you away from other sins and even misdemeanours of no consequence. One never knows what consequences your errors might have in the course of your life and afterlife. Actually, it is better to have two machines of this kind to guard against *all* sins and temptations for which humanity is renowned throughout the universe. I seem to recall a machine painted by Klee, and I would not be surprised if this machine were called a bird-machine, for there are birds on wires connected to a sort of handle. You rotate this handle and the birds begin to warble and chirp, and I would not mind listening to such prayers: birds are sacred, otherwise the Almighty might never have provided them with clothes and food. Besides, they talked to St Francis as they did their utmost to recite his lessons or lectures by heart.

But what about us? Why did Pelagius believe we had not inherited Adam's sin and the other sins transmitted to us by the representatives of our race, as I usually say, when speaking of humans? Perhaps I had better not speak of them at all, but you cannot always speak of cats: you just look at them, caress them. Either I type my texts or my ideas, thoughts and contradictions, or I caress my cat who I do not caress when I see him fast asleep on one of the armchairs or divans. So only when my cat is asleep do I allow myself to go on writing this book which is consequently dedicated to my cat whose breed, I am told, is defined as 'Scottish fold' on account of his ears, I suppose. His ears are folded as if following the example of my legs that, contrary to my apprehensions, did not fold during my last stroll around our neighbourhood. (So many things happen *contrary* to everything else.) At this moment in time my cat is asleep and I am writing about original sin which somehow concerns every human – even if this human is not a being, just a human, a piece of nonsense – because Adam got involved in it despite the instructions he had received from the Almighty Himself (Herself or Itself, as we usually say, not to offend anyone, not even 'It'). Our children do not have real minds. If we say to them, 'You should not kill, with the exception of flies,' they will not listen to our arguments; the deficiencies of their brains (if any, if any) are so gigantic they are unable to understand anything, even the formula 'two plus two'. They cannot even say, 'Two and two,' let alone 'by putting two and two together'. They are perfectly capable of putting two toys together and breaking them simultaneously, which does not mean they are good mathematicians on whom you can rely when struggling with differential calculus. Nor are they aware of the commandment 'Under no circumstances must you kill a human being,' and consequently they often kill their uncles and grandmothers and go so far as to dispose of their bodies in the woods. And a judge says, shaking his head despondently, 'He felt no remorse for the murders he had committed.'

If you are not aware of the rules, of the code that rules human behaviour in the domain of murder, you can murder innocently, purely out of curiosity (What is there inside the human body?), but Adam had seen the fruit before eating it. And before biting into it – he was used to biting his nails, a customary gesture – he must have thought about turning points and their numerous consequences. Of course we cannot maintain that, while eating the fruit or what remained of it after Eve's macabre snake, he knew he would be sent to the Earth in his wife's insecure company; to put it mildly. Nor did he know what lay in store for him: earning his livelihood by the sweat of his brow. I suppose the Almighty might have told our Adam what monster was lying in wait for him on the planet called Earth. At some point this planet was our mother, judging from the legends and accounts related to the Age of Gold, but now she is not even our vicious sister (I am Cinderella, to some extent). And it is our fault, as many people have declared, reading about hurricanes, inundations and the illness known as the earthquake. Nor should one overlook the volcanoes: even humans do not behave so violently, when in the grip of World Cup fever.

God might have warned Adam about the acquaintances he would make on the surface of the Earth: he had no alternative but to meet other humans both socially and intimately, dining with them in his castles, villas and cottages. He was not supposed to partake of the forbidden fruit. There is only forbidden fruit on the Earth and her inhabitants eat it every day – not only for breakfast. 'That's why they're so vicious,' said the Lord. The tree where this fruit was born has nothing to do with knowledge: it is the Tree of Ignorance and petty bourgeoisness. Let us not forget that in French '*bourgeon*' means 'bud'. But I am not worried about Adam's destiny which Dante described in his *Commedia* – pitilessly and truly. Today I am not as downhearted as I was yesterday, for I was able to walk for an hour, if my calculations, my sense of time are not abominably wrong. You leave your place and take a few steps, thinking about the universe, the history of humankind, Adam, Paradise and all sorts of fruit. You pay a visit to Jupiter and call it 'The Odyssey of Space'. Upon your return, you boast about your legs' capacity to convey you to the other side of the solar system. And then you take a painkiller which might guarantee a few hours of fragile, unreliable sleep punctuated by half-nightmares. The point is our Adam must have forgotten whatever happened to him in Paradise, and that is the problem he endeavours to tackle to the best of his abilities. Whenever an angel deigns to pay him a visit, he bombards him with questions such as, 'Where do I come from? Why do I hate fruit?' 'You hardly ever wash the dishes and you rarely, if ever, do any cleaning,' answers the angel. 'And what about Eve?' asks Adam. 'Eve is a woman,' answers the angel. 'Don't you know that she is a member of a feminist club?'

Anyway, yesterday I had a walk and I might repeat my exploit today, if my legs are not determined to let me down. They let me down and I collapse on the road. I endeavour to rise and go, as they say, whenever they feel like mocking my limp – sure enough, I walk with a limp – but my arms on which I rely to the extent of entrusting them with the weight of my body, let me down too, and once again I find myself on the road, as Kerouac put it, if I am not mistaken. (Did he write a novel entitled *On the Path? On the Way? Our Pilgrim's Progress?*) I begin to crawl on all fours as if assured that any pilgrim's progress can be validated only if you reach enlightenment in this more or less childish posture. You identify with a child, convinced that only children and Christian martyrs are allowed to cross the threshold called *The Threshold of Bliss*. Before you dare penetrate the guardian's field of vision, you flagellate your body – to be on the safe side, you know, as you say to yourself. If St Peter says to you, 'You're not a child. You're not even in your second childhood,' you can show him the scars that adorn your body, saying, 'Can't you see? I'm a Christian martyr.' 'How much time did you spend in between the ritual lion's jaws?' asks St Peter. 'A quarter of an hour,' you answer. 'Go back and stay there for another half-hour, otherwise you'll

go to Purgatory.’ You crawl back, find a lion, throw yourself into his jaws and wait. The lion attempts to spit you out – your body does not agree with him – but you cling to his palate and listen, listen, listen. In the long run you hear the clock strike the half-hour and jump out of the lion’s jaws. You crawl back to Paradise and St Peter inspects your skin in search of the vestiges of the lion’s fangs. ‘These vestiges aren’t deep enough,’ he says at last. ‘The clock struck the half-hour,’ you retort. ‘It wasn’t *our* clock,’ he says. ‘A heretical clock.’

Yesterday – yesterday seems to have happened yesterday except my death, except my death, except my death – my wife and I went to the nearest shop to buy fruit and vegetables for dinner. There was a woman at the entrance, and she said we could not go in together, even if we are married and kiss before and after meals and also before turning in, before availing ourselves of our blankets’ warmth and hospitality. She said, ‘Your wife will go first and you’ll follow her a minute later. At least you shouldn’t do your shopping side by side. Please don’t touch each other in the course of your shopping. And if you touch an avocado, you have to purchase it, even if it’s not ripe. The same goes for bottles of wine. If you touch a bottle, you have to buy it. Suppose you can’t see the name of the wine or its vintage. You touch the bottle, turn it and find out that the vintage isn’t up to your standards. And yet you have to buy the wine, otherwise I’ll call the police. And even if, out of respect for your social status, I do nothing of the sort, your neighbours (and there are only neighbours in this shop) will talk about your misdemeanour, and your reputation will be destroyed. No one will ever invite you again, and if some of your tender-hearted neighbours say to each other, ‘Let bygones be bygones,’ and invite you to dinner, they won’t offer you wine, which would inevitably remind everyone of your atrocious manners. Don’t forget what I said about avocados, otherwise you won’t be offered vegetables during the meals you’re invited to in your neighbours’ houses. Suppose they wish to cook sauerkraut for dinner. Well, you’ll eat some sausages without any sauerkraut whatsoever. I’m not even sure they’ll allow you to add some mustard to your sausages. They might let you drink a bottle of beer, though.’

The cashier asked my wife, ‘Will you pay by credit card or in cash? Before you answer my question, I’d better tell you that we do not accept banknotes. You shouldn’t touch them either. And if you do touch them, you shouldn’t touch anything else before washing your hands with the anti-virus gel. It’s not enough to wash them in a lavatory, in a bathroom, in a Turkish bath, in a Russian sauna or whatever they call it. I’m told they sweat abundantly in their saunas and then plunge into a barrel filled with icy water. Even if you submit your body to this ritual, you won’t be allowed to walk along our streets unless you wash your hands appropriately, according to our rules, using our anti-virus gel. And if you really intend to go and spend an hour in a Russian sauna called “*bania*” (I read Mayakovski in the original) you’ll have to buy several tubes of this gel because your whole body will have to be disinfected. Your soul too, come to think of it. We don’t need Russian souls on our soil. Do you have our card, our customer fidelity card?’ I answered, ‘Yes. And I’m afraid I also have a Russian soul, one of them.’ ‘Which one? Do you sing Russian songs? Do you drink vodka? Do you rape young women? Do you bend your knees when dancing?’ ‘I’ve never been good at dancing,’ I said. ‘And now my legs wouldn’t allow me to dance a slow foxtrot, not even a very slow foxtrot.’ ‘Please read the number on your card. For nothing in the world would I touch it.’ What a pity I could not make her touch my Russian soul.

During my walks I may execute a few dances, provided I do not break either my knees or my arms or my neck and shoulders. I have already dwelt upon my knees’ penchant for showing that my legs are too weak to cope with my body’s weight. (And yet I lost nine pounds in the course of my last illness.) Suppose one of my knees bends and I remain on bended knee for quite a while as if preparing for a life-or-death declaration of love. Why

not execute a Russian dance, while waiting for a beautiful demoiselle? Bend-straighten-bend-straighten. Is that what a Russian sailor-dance looks like? It would be reckless to think in terms of this dance in which I have never been involved either physically or psychologically: I just watch it on television, now and then. Yet I wonder if my soul which they speak of so eloquently is not somehow connected to this dance – the Russian variety of souls. In my opinion, judging from the experience I had in my native country, the Russians are less preoccupied with this psychic original than their Western counterparts: their souls dance instead of keeping the same posture within their bodies, staring at God or at the Virgin Mary. I have never understood St Augustine's refutation of Pelagius, which abounds in repetitions. Objections, censure, condemned, objections, censure, condemned. St Augustine executes his own dance which does not seem to interfere with his contemplation of God or the psalms engraved on the wall opposite. (His deathbed.) You can be engrossed in your meditation and at the same time dance like a Russian sailor. When I meditate upon original sin, my soul begins to dance the angst-dance or the dance-angst. I have no idea what it fears, given that original sin is everything and nothing. It can be related to objects we touch or do not touch, to our thoughts wandering from men to women and vice versa. And every thought is an embodiment, a symbol of some vice or other, and I cannot help spotting original sin in every human eye I come across, I light upon. Whenever the light I have just switched on enables me to see a human eye, I recognise original sin, although this recognition is not necessarily linked to Catholicism, religious bigotry or sanctity. I am just comparing human eyes with the eyes of a cat, of a dog, of a horse where no sins can be found, even if all the lights you can lay your hands upon are on. Whenever I find myself in my cat's company, everything is on, with the exception of original sin. No sin, no coronavirus. It is odd, isn't it, that animals do not carry this virus as if allergic to it, as if reluctant to contaminate the representatives of our species. I wonder what I would do in their shoes. Would I contaminate my fellow creatures?

Let us suppose I am a cat and some of the representatives I am determined to contaminate say to me, 'Pussy, Pussy, come here!' as if longing to get the virus I harbour. Of course I come: the only purpose of my presence in the midst of these creatures and on the Earth, in the world, can be described in a few words such as, 'Death, the end of their world, the end of others, no more stupidity, no more vulgarity, no more pollution, no more destruction.' I show a lot of affection to 90% of humans and am delighted when they touch me with a view to putting my body on their laps. They caress me tenderly and I feel a particle of my virus leave my body, and I am also capable of seeing it settle in their bodies, in their perverted, inadequate minds. The virus literally pounces on their thoughts, emotions, movements, instincts and senses. Even their sixth sense is not safe from its lethal influence. Let us take and study the memory of one human being invaded, submerged and subjected to its rule by a particle of my ominous virus. At some point this human realises that he – let us spare the female of the species – cannot recall what he did yesterday or indeed two hours ago. Weakened and almost annihilated by the virus, he went to the *nearest* shop and had some difficulty in gaining admission, for the woman posted at the entrance thought there was something fishy going on in his body. 'I can't let you in,' she said. 'In, in? Why?' 'There's something fishy.' 'What fishy? But I ate, I think I ate –' 'So you don't remember what you had for lunch, do you?' 'Member, what member? Club?' 'Over my dead body,' said the woman. 'Dead? Have you got the virus?'

And if they do not pick me up, I jump up onto their laps – I wish all humans could sit down – and begin to lick their hands. I jump up again, reach their faces and lick them in the hope that the virus will promptly squeeze through their teeth, tendons, blood vessels and nerves. And often I just hang from their cheeks, allowing the virus to accomplish its duty conscientiously. Theologians and priests take advantage of the virus to affirm that original

sin is akin to it – to the point of weaving its way into our soul through every pore of our body. They might also compare it to Adam and his way of life on Earth: he did not till it, contrary to what many of us believe, anxious to preserve the sacred texts and God's injunctions, commandments and wrath. 'This piece of land has been tilled for hundreds of years by Adam's descendants,' says a guide, and we look at this patch of our Earth with veneration: no tractor has ever touched it. Then we catch sight of a man who tills the Earth as if alluding to his ancestor who was kicked out from the Garden of Eden by God Himself, not by one of His assistants. If questioned by journalists, this man relates the story, describing God's retribution and even His foot, which he does by looking at his own foot. And the tourists applaud his performance, saying he was faithful to the text and did not deviate from its sacredness as if disburdened of – and liberated from – original sin. He demonstrates his freedom by acknowledging his affinity with the Almighty – by drawing attention to his foot – and at the same time repudiates his ancestor. As usual, theological books are too complicated and readers fall back on the virus which explains everything: evil, original sin, our misfortunes, death and our labours immortalised by Heracles.

People are too lazy and they seldom take the trouble to visualise invisible things – with the exception of the invisible man about whom they must have read in books and other publications. So they imagine the virus in the shape of a cat or another animal and they keep all animals at a distance as if the virus could not hide in their children's bodies, among other bodies available to us. Actually, odd as it may appear, animals do not convey the virus to human beings, to their dinner tables, beds and bathrooms. Children, on the other hand, do not fall ill themselves, but carry the virus about as if it were just a piece of chocolate without which they could not live and prosper and grow mature. They kiss (or rather kill) their mummies and daddies, and the virus makes itself comfortable within the bodies to which it is conveyed. And we do not blame it for its love of creature comforts, for we cannot deny that the air is not a bed one might dream about, when searching for a bed and breakfast, for a pleasant evening and restful night. The virus does not mind spending a lot of time on planes, trains and suchlike, but whenever it finds a body, be it old, decrepit or full of vigour, it cannot help rejoicing, and we should understand its behaviour and moods. Don't we rejoice in our beds after drinking a bottle of champagne in our friends' company? Our joy is all the more pronounced if we share this bed with beautiful representatives of both sexes, and the virus does exactly the same. Of course we should not picture to ourselves either bottles of champagne or any other bottles – even a bottle of water does not seem appropriate in the context. Why? Because the virus eats and drinks whatever it finds within our bodies: our blood, our water, our sinews, our nerves. Our doctors say to us, 'You're a bundle of nerves, dear sir. And yet the virus is inside you. I wonder why it hasn't eaten this bundle so far. In my opinion, it is a bad sign. The virus must be eating something else, a vital organ. Perhaps it is eating your heart. Do you think you're in love with somebody, with one of your cousins? You're quite mistaken. It is the virus you feel all over your body, not love.'

The Fathers of the Church despise our animals and say that, however grievous and awful, our sins do not turn us into beasts. We sin not only on a regular basis but literally round the clock, so if you look at a clock and its hands you might come to the conclusion that these hands were created with a view to showing us our sins. Every minute, every line we see on dials as we meditate upon our perverted nature indicates a sin, not a measure of time (*Zeitmass*). In a way, our sins are eternal, otherwise original sin would have left us in peace a long time ago. But time is neither long nor short – it is original, in a manner of speaking. Whatever we do, whatever we think about is permeated by original sin, and the virus we are exposed to was born in order to remind us of the originality of our original sin. Of course there are theologians who affirm that original sin is not original at all: it is not in a class

of its own, in other words. Original sin is the most natural thing in the world, they say. And they add that, in spite of all our sins, either original or natural, we remain human and do not fall to the bottom of creation where only beasts can be found. 'And you should thank God for leaving you in the state which is defined as the highest stage of evolution.' So you murder whoever happens to penetrate your field of vision and fornicate to your body's content and 'our contempt', as the same Fathers point out. Nevertheless you are not a beast and you should immediately start singing the Almighty's praises. And as we give praise to God, let us remember those who are less fortunate than ourselves – plants or beasts.

In Italy they suffer from the shortage of priests as they die off like flies, literally devoured by the virus. The dying, instead of confessing their sins or singing God's praises, relate the adventures of the virus, its journey through their bodies – the pilgrim's progress of the virus. Yes, some of them say they do not need a priest to understand the truth of Creation, revealed by the virus that has already reached the core of their being. 'I am naked now,' say the virus victims. 'What you see in front of you is just an envelope – the contents are gone. These contents have persistently put a spoke in my plans so I've never been able to see the core of the world. Now they coincide – the core of the world and my own core. And I realise I am the cosmos itself, myself.' Yet the shortage of ecclesiastics is bound to get under everybody's skin: we cannot even die like human beings, they might say sooner or later. We are not beasts, are we? 'Do you know that American billionaires have their cats baptised? Each cat has his or her own priest, and when this cat dies, the priest performs the last rites.' 'All right, we don't mind being the cats you're talking about. But we have no idea how to set about it, about this metamorphosis. Kafka spoke to us of insects into which you can turn, if you follow in the footsteps of his famous character. But what about cats? We know a lot about the women who look and act like leopards. But being a cat is beneath their dignity, it seems to us.' 'You can turn into leopards,' answer idle observers. 'It doesn't really matter what kind of animal you choose to eschew the virus and its lethal presence in your intestines and elsewhere. When I say "elsewhere", I mean your body – it goes without saying.'

So they do their best to turn into the beasts the Fathers condemn outright as if hoping that no virus will ever contradict them, supplying sledgehammer arguments to their clients, listeners, to all churchgoers. Animals are spared by God – that is the truth they all learn as they look around them and see human beings die off like flies. And yet they do *not* die like flies that continue to fly around us and sit on the plates where our dinners, breakfasts and lunches await us. But the flies are immortal, as immortal as any beast, whether St Augustine speaks of his or her immortality or not. They eat our dishes and we fall like flies. The horses swish their tails to get rid of the flies hovering around them. And the flies in question fly off, but they do not die, contradicting the saying we have come up with in the course of our existence and history. No use swatting flies with rolled-up newspapers: we had better read these newspapers to find out how many of our fellow creatures died yesterday or the day before. We are also curious about the priests and their shortages, and we begin to wonder if there are enough musicians to perform funeral marches at our funerals. Of course we can resort to CDs and listen to Chopin and Beethoven without sending emails to orchestras and military bands. But it is no longer fashionable, and even after our death we should keep in touch with what is going on. Instead of praying for us, our friends and relatives should bring us up to speed with the latest developments. Of what? Even after our death we are likely to talk nonsense, neglecting what really counts, matters and can radically influence our afterlife which does not depend on the virus; nor does it really depend on worms and their speed, the duration of their meals entirely focused on our bodies. If we happen to land up in Purgatory – and we should never lose track of this possibility – their prayers may get us off the hooks one

may find in every nook and cranny of Purgatory. These hooks look invitingly as if trying to impart the truth of which you are becoming aware: it is better to hang yourself than to endure the intensity of the purgatorial fire. So you prepare a noose, put a chair under one such hook, loop the noose around your neck and hear one of your cousins who begins to pray for you. You fly off the handle (and off the hook, to some extent) and shout, 'What do you think you're doing? Why do you interfere with my suicide, moron, scoundrel, idiot? You like roasting chestnuts on the open fire, if I remember rightly. Don't you, don't you? Well, instead of roasting chestnuts, for once you should roast yourself. Then you'll understand the motive behind my tampering with hooks and nooses.'

I devoted a book to how one should behave in Purgatory to avoid the harm and perpetual death caused by the fire for which this kingdom of the Hereafter is widely known and even renowned. Don't they say, 'The fire of Purgatory,' or 'The flames that harm and heal'? In that book I might have touched upon the salamander who was believed to be able to live in fire, relishing its warmth. Whenever we spend a few minutes in fire, we either burn to death or sustain severe burns which, frankly speaking, are tantamount to death, for we will die from them, sooner or later. But the salamander is so fond of flames she seems to hanker after them as she positions herself in front of our fireplace, looking at us imploringly, if we are too lazy or busy to put either some wood or coal in it. So we might as well turn into a salamander whose resistance to flames of all sorts may come in handy during our life in Purgatory. I, for one, have nothing against this metamorphosis: many of my acquaintances think I am so cold I can put fire out – as the salamander does, when weary of warmth and Scriabin who composed a piano piece dedicated to flames. My friends say I have never performed this piece because I am almost sure I shall spend some time in Purgatory where purification is *de rigueur*. And nothing purifies one better than flames. You can sit in a sauna for hours and hours, sweating abundantly and deliciously, but on your way out you might realise you are dirty both internally and externally. No wonder – you enjoyed yourself instead of suffering, praying and crying for help and mercy. The coronavirus is often bracketed with the punishment one is believed to endure in Purgatory – not in Hell, contrary to what you may hear in television programmes devoted to the disaster. Presenters and their guests do not realise how eternal and irremediable our Christian Hell has been for centuries, whereas Purgatory is said to be a temporary punishment. Let us not forget that some of the virus's clients will not die, for all their screams, tears, writhing and squirming. The citizens of Hell are immortal; as immortal as flies.

'God, therefore, condemns man because of the fault wherewithal his nature is disgraced, and not because of his nature, which is not destroyed in consequence of its fault.' Everything is the other way round or anticlockwise, and what should be destroyed – our nature – glistens and glitters in the sun instead of hiding itself somewhere; or just letting itself be destroyed once and for all. In one of the Gnostic books I found the following curse, 'I shake the dust of your house off my feet, my hands and my face. Let your soul be as the dust of your house.' This curse may be translated into images which are far more accessible than words – in this day and age, in the age of infants, in the day of morons. You can see a man leaving your house, shaking his feet, arms and head, for during his stay with you all the members of his body seem to have gathered a lot of dust; and if he walks with you outdoors, he gathers moss, like an ordinary stone. Then he *literally* undergoes a radical shake-up – his whole structure alters, adjusting to new conditions, to his rejection of your ways – and your soul turns into dust and probably ashes except that no one buries you. Your charwoman works on you, removes you from the pieces of furniture where you settled after your torturer's departure and you end up flying off and landing up in Purgatory. The guardian looks at you or your soul, the remnants of your soul, and says to himself, 'No use throwing this soul

into flames: it has already undergone this punishment. Let it fly in the shape of a cloud. Let it think it was born in Vesuvius. Let it believe it is important enough to bury Pompeii and its inhabitants.'

There are others, other comments on the situation in the course of which you become dust and ashes without undergoing the ritual called a 'funeral'. They do not even let you lie in the fields after a battle, in the fields covered with corpses attacked by vultures and other birds of prey. Others are always there, lying in wait for you in the fields, on mountaintops and even beyond the clouds. But you just wonder how and why you have been turned into ashes, through no fault of yours, and they say it is better this way. Why? Because it is your soul they are contemplating from a distance, from the vantage point of your body. Your soul is lying down below, scattered over a field, a plain, a road leading nowhere, with the exception of Purgatory that is always at the end of the road unless you commit yet another crime and are sent to Hell, without further ado. And they say it is better for your soul because it can encompass everything from dust and ashes to stars and their twinkling, to falling stars, rising stars, the Milky Way, the Winey Way. If your soul keeps its spherical shape, after leaving your body it becomes a plaything of children and their parents who are sure to mistake it for an ordinary ball. And humans like kicking objects and subjects, otherwise they would not be accused so often of kicking a man or a woman in the face. They would not kick cats and dogs and buckets. They would not give everybody a kick up the arse. They are so keen on football that even in the starry sky they will find an opportunity to play a game of soccer, determined to score as many goals as is consistent with their yearning for triumphs and medals. And if it is a small ball they find on their way, they will just put it into their mouths, thinking it is a sort of chocolate, white chocolate they are supposed to relish as long as they can suck on it.

Stravinsky's diary was published at the end of the previous century, but the version known to his admirers is abridged: they remove what had been written between the lines. Here are those invisible lines ('I've been in between,' according to *Pink Floyd*):

Vetustam fecit pellem meam et carnem meam, contrivit ossa mea.

In tenebris conlocavit me quasi mortuos sempiternos.

Et repulse est a pace anima mea, oblitus sum bonorum.

Pars mea Dominus, dixit anima mea ; propterea expectabo eum.

Bonum est praestolari cum silentio salutate Dei.

Oculus meus afflictus est, nec tacuit, eo quod non esset requies.

Venatione ceperunt me quasi avem inimici mei gratis.

Lapsa est in lacu vita mea et posuerunt lapidem super me.

Invocavi nomen tuum, Domine, de lacu novissimo.

Adpropinquasti in die quando invocavi te, dixisti ne timeas.

Reddes eis vicem, Domine, justa opera manuum suarum.

Dabis eis scutum cordis, laborem tuum.

The so-called ‘between lines’ come from Stravinsky’s *Threni*. The Elegies of the Jeremiad are called ‘*Threni*’ in the Vulgate.

But if your soul turns into stardust, into hopes and paradisiacal feelings that can be found everywhere, in the light of what I have just written about dust and ashes and their aptitude to encompass everything, then you have nothing to worry about: no virus will ever be able to catch up with all your particles, grains or whatever. Poets see the world in a grain of sand, in a particle of dust, and such visions are all the more compliant and happy to oblige since the dust or ashes we are speaking of remind one of the universal soul in which you belong. A specialist might say, while looking at your dust, ‘I recognise the universal soul, the image of God in which we were created, once upon a time.’ But it is doubtless better to say henceforth: ‘Once upon eternity.’ Anyway there are opponents and sceptics; all of them point out that the process undergone by a human being (as a result of which she turns into dust and joins the universal soul) is far more complicated and should be dissected for the sake of others, our children and future generations. ‘We are not alone,’ as my wife says rather often, when talking, for example, about pyramids and suchlike. And the word ‘alien’ slips (ships) into her discourse because it cannot be otherwise: we would be irremediably lost without *those* others. (And we would live in deserts devoid of pyramids.) You encounter a man you do not know and invariably say to yourself, ‘Just another dimwit.’ Where is his light? you wonder. And then the truth – or a Gnostic doctrine – dawns upon you as you study yet another book where you find the following statement: ‘Then the living fire in him became changed...His splendour was impaired and dulled...See how the splendour of the alien man is diminished.’ Our nature is different, foreign to us – at least to *some extent*, for there are individuals (Gnostics and their followers) who realise how difficult it is to keep our previous, alien light on the Earth, in the world into which we were cast. The Gnostic text I lighted upon also depicts our decadence in unambiguous words, ‘Thou hast taken the treasure of Life and cast it onto the worthless earth. Thou hast taken the word of Life and cast it into the word of mortality.’ I ask myself if this text refers likewise to our sacred texts, to the Bible, the Upanishads, the Koran, and all the sacred books of the East I have in my library.

They say – and this time I am not speaking of what they call ‘aliens’ – that every word written in the Bible and the Koran was dictated by the Almighty Himself, which is certainly true, given the authenticity of the traditions we follow almost blindly. And it is certainly better not to look too closely at these traditions and the books themselves, otherwise we might disclose a few unpleasant truths; and even if we stumble upon a dozen untruths, it is much healthier not to welcome unpleasantness as such. So let us suppose the Almighty sits down in His-Her-Its rocking chair and the Almighty’s secretary says to her secretary, ‘Could you oblige me with a pen and a piece of paper, please?’ and the second secretary brings everything required for the Almighty’s dictation – even a bottle

of ink. The first secretary picks up a quill and starts writing, 'At the beginning was a bottle of ink.' Yes, this beginning is as justified as all other beginnings: in the days of bangs and bigs there were no computers – not even God had one. Actually God does not need anything of the kind; nor does He really need a secretary, let alone a second secretary. There flows in front of Him a river, and one might easily guess that we are talking about the river of ink, not the river of blood to which we have grown accustomed in the course of our bloody history and pre-history. Cavemen used to bleed their neighbours every day and, according to some sources, they began their daily labours by wounding their neighbours or utter strangers. Then they would look at their victims and shout, 'I see a few drops of blood! It is seven o'clock.' Sure enough, it was their way of measuring time so that time was not money to them; time was blood and our pessimists seem to have inherited this doctrine from cavemen and cavewomen.

So the ink-river continues to flow at God's feet and the latter (God, not his feet) utters a few words, and one can see how the river turns into a text, with no interference on the part of scribes, secretaries and other busybodies. More impressive and miraculous than computers, isn't it? On its way to the Earth, however, the text undergoes 'reconstructive surgery to rebuild its authenticity', as so-called commentators or rather falsificators (as I call them) put it. They claim to have heard God's words and so declare solemnly, 'We have experienced the Bible first-hand. The sacred text had been clearly falsified.' And if you question them on the subject, saying, 'Could you reveal the identity of the criminal to us?' they answer, 'Meteors, comets, shooting stars.' Indeed we can hardly picture to ourselves a body holding the text in the course of its or rather *their* flight, which might enable this body or rather its fingers to falsify God's injunctions and friendly suggestions. A shooting star, on the other hand, is perfectly capable of altering the text: it is enough to shoot at words and letters as if they were your favourite targets. You shoot arrows, bullets – whatever you can lay your hands on. And Satan says to journalists: 'The troops were told to shoot to kill.' And if you say a 'falling star' instead of a 'shooting one', Satan answers, 'Well, my troops were told to fall to kill.' Or to fly to kill, to walk to kill, to plunge to kill – whatever you do is rounded off by 'kill', and that is the way the world goes on and round. A life-giving or life-bestowing letter or word or sentence becomes its opposite, even if some scholars dare to declare that death and life are *not* poles apart. However, a dead letter is not a life or live letter, whatever Satan might say on the subject. And if we criticise him openly, he lays the blame on God, saying, 'The ceasefire treaty was a dead letter as soon as it was signed, as neither side ever had any intention of keeping to it.' After hearing this statement, Gnostics realised there were two Gods – they disregard Satan's involvement in our history – and the Creature depicted in Satan's discourse received the name of the Demiurge. (There *cannot* be two *Gods*, after all.) They say to Him, 'Thou hast taken the treasure of Life and cast it onto the worthless earth. Thou hast taken the word of Life and cast it into the word of mortality.'

I am not bent on studying anything, not even the subject matter discussed in this book: the universal harmony I am aspiring for might spare me a lot of effort in this domain. It is enough to *feel* this harmony with all your senses, discarding ('all' is one of the keywords of this book) all nonsenses which are not likely to make any sense, at any time. ('Any' is also a keyword of this book.) But in my opinion, which is far from learned, the Devil could give us a break, for the Demiurge is powerful enough to spoil our parties, fun and appetite. The Demiurge is responsible for his foul smells and weather: even caviar, lobsters and suchlike may become unpalatable in his presence or rather omnipresence. You had better not think *positively* about three-star restaurants where, for all their skills and experience, they cannot cook a decent lamb/bean/fish stew. And if you complain about the dish you are loath to touch either with your lips or even your fork, they say, shaking their heads apologetically, 'What

do you want, sir? The Demiurge doesn't obey our commands, injunctions and threats, and it is pointless to fine him \$1000 for putting you off our meals.' Luckily for us and other inhabitants of the Earth, there are Beings of Light (there is such a substance as a Being of Light) who often intervene on our behalf and invade both kitchens and wine cellars where they replace rotten corks with brand-new ones, saving our wines from decrepitude.

The point is any Being of Light on whom we may count in the course of our peregrinations is also exposed to the Demiurge's malicious rays and ways. It is because of his rays that he was mistaken for an army of Martians – in days of yore. In the footsteps of the Buddha, he has hundreds of feet, legs, arms, heads and thoughts except that his thoughts are of a murderous kind. To make matters worse, even the Beings of Lights that our true Christian God showered upon us were wrongly judged by the earthlings who were utterly poisoned by the Demiurge's skilful propaganda. And no one thought the Demiurge was guilty of brainwashing. The very notion we habitually resort to whenever turning our attention to totalitarian regimes was unknown in those days. Even now we do not think about the Demiurge, when enlarging upon this phenomenon which, according to our erroneous views, was triggered off by Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot. And we underestimate H. G. Wells' negative contribution to this aspect of human mythology: whenever we see a few points of lights, the marvellous, beautiful dots associated in Gnostic minds with Light and its Beings, we rush to our phones, computers and megaphones. A few minutes later the word 'Martians' resounds in the air to the detriment of all other sounds – and *positive* lights, I might say, in view of what is going on. Today, many of us think that these dots are somehow affiliated to the coronavirus so that, instead of talking enthusiastically about the proverbial twinkling star, they shout, 'Mummy, Daddy, Mummy. Another group of viruses is on the way. Please put me in some bunker or other.' And we must admit that in this day and age many children spend their time and part of eternity in bunkers where they learn multiplication tables, grammar and a few words related to the virus and the Martians depicted in H. G. Wells' one-sided novel. It is noteworthy that this English writer took no notice of the Gnostics and their clairvoyant teaching. Don't they talk about 'the living fire' which, alas, is liable to darken upon contact with our earthly affairs, environments and endless quarrels? 'See how the splendour of the alien man is diminished,' they write, but we do not see anything save the word 'alien' which, in our unlearned opinion, can save us from the virus. We spot a substance, point our cane or index finger at it, and scream, 'Alien, alien, alien, alien!' backing away. One of my acquaintances, upon seeing an 'alien' and after sharing this piece of information with a dozen passers-by in her high-pitched voice, backed her car into someone's garage door, wrecked this individual's car, and received serious injuries in the crash.

One wonders if the light we speak about with gusto, pointing to a candle, torch or streetlamp can always be identified with *our* light, with the light seen and to some extent analysed by our eyes. There is a thick, impenetrable darkness around us and even the stars do not twinkle tonight; and they might not twinkle tomorrow. But my wife goes on describing Beings of Light as if they were visible to the naked eye. You should not say every star is a Being of Light, waiting for the stars to fall on our Earth, allowing us to pick them up as if they were ordinary mushrooms. A song informs us about a star that a young man put in his pocket with the intention of offering it to his beloved, but the latter mocked him bitterly, expecting rather a diamond necklace. The star remained in the young man's pocket and he went about his business, carrying his treasure about. He committed a few murders, made love to married women, slandered the innocent and went to Hell where he realised that the star he had appropriated in his youth was part of the flames to which he was submitted now as a punishment for his naïveté: he believed the star he had in his pocket was a *lucky* star. (It was a symbol of Hell, a harbinger of Hell, a bad omen.) That is what they are afraid of – Beings of Light might be unlucky stars in disguise. After all, there are evil

revelations, evil constellations, evil galaxies; if put together, all these elements and aspects of our lives make up the evil universe where we live and seemingly prosper. But there are animals whose capacity to detect what my wife calls ‘astral bodies’ might help us distinguish astral bodies from bodies, souls from spirits, brains from minds. Once upon a time (the virus makes us think that the past is as far as this once, a time we can hardly remember) my former charwoman dashed upstairs where I was writing another book and, short of breath and perspiring, said to me, ‘Your cat growled at me like a dog. At some point I even thought he would snap at my ankles.’ ‘He never does anything of the kind,’ I replied. ‘It’s a pity he didn’t snap at my ankles, otherwise I might show them to you.’ But she did show me her ankles as if they were exhibiting a dozen indentations of my cat’s teeth. ‘I can’t see your injuries,’ I said. ‘But I’m ready to admit that an astral dog bit you on the arm so hard it drew astral blood.’

My charwoman was pregnant and so there was an entity in her bosom or belly or womb or whatever they call it when talking about embryos and wondering if they can kill them with impunity. My charwoman went around unaware of what was going on within her loins, tendons and genes: her whole being was already infused with a piece of brand-new life. Was it really an astral body? What do they mean when uttering these meaningful, awesome words? This notion puzzles those who believe that an armchair is just an armchair, and it is empty if no one is sitting in it. It is pointless to try and persuade them that nothing is really empty, that there are astral bodies on our divans, in our armchairs, in our beds – not only in our dreams, as many human beings affirm without batting an eyelid. Thanks to Heraclitus, we know that the world is brimful with the gods: you walk on them, crash into them in your cars, fall on them when roaring drunk. If some pagans – there are many remnants of the pagan world around us – reproach us for our inconsiderate behaviour, we say that the gods do not voice their grievances. ‘Had we heard their moans, we would have stopped in our tracks and invited them to a restaurant. By the way, is there a three-being-of-light restaurant in the neighbourhood?’

Be that as it may, my cat grumbled as he detected an embryo inside my charwoman’s body of which I was unaware, as Thomas Hardy puts it in one of his poems. Isn’t it odd that a cat knows more about your state of mind, body and soul than you, your husband and your sister? Your husband complains about your inability to give birth to a second child, and this child is already firmly ensconced in your uterus. And she – her name is Eve – will devour some leftover curry from last night’s meal. If I remember rightly, astral bodies are not material and so you cannot ask a tailor or even a woman who makes marionettes to produce this body. Its name, nomination and definition remind you of the French word ‘*astre*’, and if you feel like making a speech about *l’astre du jour ou de la nuit* (the day/night star) you are bound to draw a parallel between these bodies – sometimes they turn out to be busybodies – and whatever you see when glancing at the starry night. And if at such a moment you recall both the Martians and unlucky stars, you might spend a few minutes grumbling to your neighbours about your job, your colleagues and their evil ways and deeds. Well, I have no idea what an astral body looks like and my cat will not answer my questions for the simple reason that neither in my childhood nor on the threshold of the Hereafter have I learnt *their* language. (For once ‘their’ and ‘they’ do not sound ominous.) ‘One must not,’ wrote a Gnostic, ‘perform the mystery of the ineffable and invisible power through visible and corruptible things of creation, nor that of the unthinkable and immaterial beings through sensible and corporeal things.’ I do not know whether I perform anything when engrossed in a discourse on the nature of astral bodies, but I assume that, unless we wholeheartedly assume the role played by animals, we shall not perceive a tiny figure in a woman’s body, unless assisted by an X-ray apparatus.

Understandably enough, I am not interested in my charwoman's embryos and their development either inside her body or outside it. And yet I was unable to put up with her baby's presence in the course of the cleaning sessions that took place twice a week. She was holding her baby in one arm and accomplished or rather half-accomplished her duties with the other arm that kept dropping cups, vases and tins of caviar. But even if I had witnessed the doings and thoughts of this child of hers, I am not sure I would have performed the mystery of the ineffable and invisible power. I am told that it is enough to unravel one mystery linked to whatever happens around to understand everything under the sun, under the moon. (When we speak about what takes place under the sun, we omit to take into consideration the sun's disappearance at night.) Well, from this point of view, one bird is in a position to sing the oratorio of the universe and even imitate God's voice and His morning and evening songs. Even if I look at an empty armchair for weeks, I shall not spot any sign of life within its space unless the flies that stay and multiply in our neighbourhood come in their hordes to gambol on my furniture, on my computer. Judging from the results of my wife's magnetic performances – extra-sense performances, as they call them in Russia – the ineffable and the invisible are not only within her reach, but also within her *touch*. I am not sure she touches the entities she talks to as he cleans this or that house (geobiology, she calls it), but they leave in the long run; their departure might take a few months, especially if they are as old as Methuselah. I think I depicted one such departure; at least I must have touched upon the windowpane that started to vibrate as if duly participating in a Shostakovich symphony. Incidentally, whatever I put in brackets or enclosed between two dashes may be regarded as an astral body. That explains the profusion of *such* astral bodies within my text; after all, it is the only way to see and manipulate them.

It is true that whatever we touch and see in our ordinary life is corrupted to the point of keeping the coronavirus alive and kicking. A carrier touches my armchair, sits down in it and I get contaminated, although I cannot add 'in no time at all': the incubation period varies depending on the time of year when the eggs, the virus's eggs were laid. And when I resume my place in this armchair, one of my favourite armchairs I installed right in front of my favourite screen, the virus kicks me as hard as it can and I fall on a hospital-provided bunk bed. 'Why is it a bunk bed?' I ask. 'Too many patients, not enough room for all of you,' answers a nurse. 'Can I sleep in the top bunk?' 'Who do you take yourself for?' she asks. Another nightmare. Apparently in Egypt the word 'dream' comes from the verb 'to awake'.

In smallpox, there is an incubation period of 8-18 days between initial infection and first symptoms. Is smallpox more dangerous than the virus to which the earthlings have been exposed for several months, perhaps for a decade? If someone does not fall ill either 10 days after sitting in armchairs, on park benches, after kissing a score of female hands, this individual is a tourist from Mars. Or is it our astral body? I questioned my wife on the subject and she said that my astral body – the same goes for all astral bodies except for those of the Martians – is connected to my ordinary, normal, down-to-earth body. 'How?' I asked, naturally enough. 'They use a silver wire for this operation,' she answered. 'Who are *they*?' I asked. 'Beings of Light,' she answered. So, whenever I see a wire I think about my astral body, even if the wire in question is brown or blue. And I look for Beings of Light, for I do not think my wife will succeed in making me love humanity, in pulling me out of darkness, blackness and abhorrence.

No use going to museums and staring at the pictures that have been venerated for centuries, if not for millennia: they are as corruptible as other objects, subjects, even if they do not seem abject; *at first*, as we should add this time. Even at third they may not appear disgusting, corrupted and obnoxious – quite similar to whatever

has been created by the Demiurge. ‘Perfect salvation,’ according to the same Gnostic or book, ‘is the cognition itself of the ineffable greatness.’ I would not mind being saved *imperfectly*, for Purgatory is my favourite part of the *Commedia* – with the exception of the four last cantos of *Paradiso*. But these cantos are too far, too inaccessible, and I do not dare settle in one of them, for all my conceit and self-assurance. At first, at second. There are many appearances beyond all appearances, all conclusions, whether you jump to them or remain motionless as if in the presence of a divine, ineffable vision. What can it consist of, this vision? A number of silver wires, nothing else. They put you in the picture about your state of mind that keeps on looking for astral or subtle bodies. Why? Because their subtleties are far superior to all the tricks your mind is capable of. Your astral body contains the knowledge of Universal Being, and that is what the true salvation is about. Raw vegetables contain more potassium than cooked ones. Astral bodies contain more particles of Universal Being than down-to-earth bodies which are attached to the Earth and therefore cannot fly, as astral bodies do continually – not only at night, as some of us maintain. And the Devil uses rose wires for the purpose, and we cannot help singing the famous French song: ‘Life is a bed of roses / And if it is not / It is up to you to paint a rosy picture of it / For it just needs another coat of paint.’

Of course nothing is easier than looking at the starry heaven and choosing an appropriate star which may or may not become one’s soul in the middle of the vortex created by an astronomical number of forces. One begins to count them and gets lost in the middle of nowhere; and understandably enough, one asks oneself where this middle is located. The sky looks like a shop where an assortment of souls is displayed for passing tourists. We are all tourists unless we have a soul that sets us apart, endows us with *our* form, and stores its possessions in our pineal gland or elsewhere: it is up to her to choose an appropriate domicile, as she calls her dwelling place. ‘What are you doing?’ you ask. At the time of your *first* initiation, you can hardly distinguish between souls and bodies that resemble a ball, a mixture of everything; and at some point you might mistake this ball for your soul. Your mind is stuffed with wrong notions and forms, for you twist every appearance out of shape. In the long run, however, you are sure to realise that, but for your soul’s activities and benevolence, you will remain in this state of ignorance forever. You see a ball in front of your eyes and think it is your soul – in the light of what you learnt at school, at human rudimentary school where they say that the sphere is an ideal form selected by souls, the universe and so on. But a sage should ask himself the following question, ‘Shall my soul meet / This curve, as a bend in the road / On her way to form?’ From this piece of information we gather we should pave the way to the soul, to her advent and settling down in our sinews, otherwise she would not be able to store her treasures up. As usual we hear a voice, a *daimonion* or just our future soul that cannot help talking as she walks or flies towards our substance. On the way she asks herself, ‘Is it the substance or body I am looking for? Where’s the curve, for God’s sake? I can’t find the curve. The road bifurcates and I have no idea which curve to follow to the bitter end. Actually I’m not even sure it is a curve I see on the right and on the left. Are these curves sacred and therefore suitable for the rest of my journey? I wish I could store my thick sweaters and jackets away until next winter. Squirrels store up nuts for the winter. Am I in any way inferior to squirrels? I suppose the man I’m looking for prefers animals to humans, otherwise I wouldn’t have seen all those squirrels with my third eye. There are also a lot of cats, but they don’t seem to store up mice either for the winter or for the autumn. We should prepare the ground for negotiations, this man and I. No sacred curve may appear in the air or on the wrong road leading to Hell or Purgatory. Is this man bound for Purgatory? How to explain the absence of the sacred curve? On his spiritual map?’

When staring at the starry sky, you might say to yourself, 'I've got a lot of affinities with that star over there. To tell the truth, I can't bear twinkling stars – they're too agitated, nervous. Always on the brink of a nervous breakdown, it seems to me. The events of the last few weeks have put a real strain on my body. And I'm likely to go mad, if the soul doesn't pacify my spirits.' So you view your existence in terms of the curve you are supposed to create – out of nothing, in all probability. Of course you consult a lot of books – as usual, as is your wont – before setting about it. (In this context 'it' means creating an appropriate, sacred curve that will never lead your future soul astray.) You say to yourself that the curve they touch upon in sacred books must be related to ellipses, to the planets moving around the sun in full accordance with Copernicus' or Kepler's observations and conclusions. You are part and parcel of the cosmos which surrounds you on all sides, and so when you open your eyes – even if you see only your bed's canopy – you repeat out loud, 'My cosmos, my cosmos, my cosmos, my cosmos.' Actually your canopy helps your meditations and exclamations: an anonymous artist painted his version of the cosmos on it. And you are convinced his cosmos can be found in alchemical treatises, which makes things easier for you: every morning you turn your heavy, sleep-defiled body into pure gold. Incidentally, one of the curves you see overhead, on this canopy of yours, may become instrumental in your struggle with the void out of which the sacred curve must appear at the end of the week, at the latest.

And then you learn another piece of the sacred lore you are confronted with as you tackle the problem of your soul's birth and youth. 'If the soul,' you read, 'does not hold a precise thought-form, if its attention wavers from the task of building the vehicles of the lower-self, then a stillbirth occurs, because the soul has withdrawn its consciousness to its own level.' What does *that* mean? You regard the soul as the highest manifestation of a human being, of your being in particular, and then you come across two pieces of information that shake the foundations of all your beliefs. If left to its own devices, you read with astonishment and disbelief, the soul withdraws into itself and nothing worse can befall it. The same astonishment keeps you company as you realise that the soul is not Sophia, but just *it*, not even *ti* which might be viewed as a cup of tea or *tī* – Thou, in Russian. Throughout your life you have relied on your soul whose authority 'shouldn't be questioned', you are in the habit of proclaiming not only from the rooftops, but also from your divans and armchairs. 'I'm fully aware of my body's burdensome presence, and it is this presence that allows me to talk to you. Souls are deaf and mute, you know. But they give you impulses and guide your intuition through the labyrinth of worries and viruses.' These remarks of yours only go to prove how much you have been mistaken with regard to your soul's essence and substance. Actually, throughout this life of yours, you have managed to shift for yourself, and only your parents' and ants' judicious advice continues to save you from ruin and disgrace. Today you might realise that your misfortunes have always originated in your lack of precise thought-forms, for your thoughts are hazy, blurred and can hardly convey anything to your colleagues, let alone to the souls hovering over you: they still hope to settle in your body, annoyed by your brazen disregard for prosperity.

There is no shortage of souls in the universe that our eyes and other senses communicate to our minds and bodies, but the latter (the minds and bodies) can live without them, if what counts for human beings is confined to life itself, to the process called life. Of course there are many sceptics who, when catching a glimpse of some inhabitant of our planet, say to their colleagues (other sceptics), 'Is it really a piece of life we're looking at? Or is it rather a specimen of the living death they talk about in their treatises?' And if you happen to find yourself in the line of sight of such a sceptic, under his scrutiny, you retort immediately, 'You just glanced at me absent-mindedly, scornfully. How could your scorn and mental nothingness spot anything in my skull and heart?' We always talk

about the various bodies we seem to have within our reach and even inside our ordinary, physical and chemical body. After all, it has already swallowed and digested so many chemicals that we may justifiably append to it the adjective 'chemical'. Our chemical body is stuffed with toxic waste which has not yet discovered its true nature. In other words, the waste that has found refuge in our body does not say to itself, 'Britain produces 20 million tonnes of household waste each year. I am part of this waste. What should be done? My owner should go to the toilet or lavatory, as they call it. He should get rid of me. And I wouldn't feel guilty about my departure from my owner's body. On the contrary – I'd feel relieved. Both of us will feel relieved, as a matter of fact. Does my owner suffer from constipation? Strange as it may appear, I still don't know whether my owner is a man or a woman. Doesn't matter. Anyway, my owner should take two spoonfuls of medicine at mealtimes. On the other hand, every day 30 million gallons of untreated human waste flow from Ciudad Juarez into the Rio Grande. Perhaps I'd better stay in this body till doomsday.'

There are many soulless individuals around us, and I am told their soulful counterparts can also be spotted in a crowd, during a meeting of some political party in France. A soulless human, a soulful human – it is not easy to tell them apart: both individuals tend to give to charity at Christmas time. Some people – those who do not know the first thing about my character – think I am soulful and prepared to burst into a Russian song at the slightest provocation. For example, they inform everybody that 176 men and women died in France either yesterday or the day before, whereupon I open my mouth and let a heartrending Russian song depart from it and fill the air to the point of making it vibrate intensely and melodiously, mellifluously. And if I do not open my mouth, even when they pass on to England and the last press conference of the prime minister, they shake their heads, saying to each other (and I overhear their bitter remark): 'He's not Russian. And my fear is great – I think he has no soul at all. I wonder who deprived him of his soul. I wonder if he has ever had one, frankly speaking.'

How to find out if the men and women you rub shoulders with are soulful? I think one should try and sing a Russian song in front of them, a guitar in one's hands. And one should not worry about the clearness and pureness of one's voice: the hoarser it is the better. And even if one sings out of tune, which happens nine times out of ten, one should not grow despondent, for human beings (at least their soulful variety) are filled with pity to overflowing. And naturally enough, now and then this pity overflows its receptacle and edges its way towards a human being whose voice crackles like whatever they heard on the radio in days of yore or rather in the middle of the last century. Upon hearing such sounds, a soulful person sheds a few tears and says, 'That's what my grandmother listened to on the radio,' or 'That's how my grandfather sang Mozart's arias.' The point is I am a pianist, and if I undertake this experiment designed to find out how many individuals I may count upon in my hour of need, I might be ridiculed, considering the number of years I devoted to the study of music in Moscow. 'Is that what they taught you at the Moscow Conservatoire?' these individuals are likely to say, without interrupting their guffaws. 'No, but this is the song I perform whenever I recall my nephew and his tragic death,' I might point out.

I also learnt the following item of the sacred lore: 'If a deep, clearly sustained thought-form is held then a child is born.' Consequently those women who think it is too early for them to have a child should on no account sustain any thought-form – not clearly and deeply anyway. And their husbands or companions ought to question them about their thoughts every two minutes – to be on the safe, unborn-child side. 'What are you thinking about, dearest? A penny for your thoughts.' 'About nothing in particular.' 'What are you thinking about in general?' 'About life.' 'Is this thought of yours clear and deep? Could you describe its form?' 'The last 30 years seem to have gone by in a blur. No great men or women. No greatness anywhere. Humanity is visible only in outline as

light faces.’ ‘How many outlines can you see in the fog?’ ‘Very few. A dozen perhaps.’ ‘You should keep only two lines. One will direct you to our dinner room, the other to your bathroom.’

That is how we communicate today, in the day and age of the coronavirus. A third line is designed to convey you to the nearest grocer’s where you content yourself with whatever will prevent you from starving before the end of the pandemic. On your way to the grocer’s you may see a lot of people running helter-skelter away from your body and even from your soul which is also contaminated: to all intents and purposes, the virus’s project is completed. One’s soul often succumbs to temptations, diseases and temporal death, which accounts for the ambiguous notion of ‘the death of the soul’. If you say about a man, ‘His soul is dead,’ you might mean that only recently it was alive and even kicking, according to another notion, another expression, another linguistic definition of the primary element of our substance. You may contradict whoever dares make this statement by saying, ‘But this man’s soul is non-existent, and what doesn’t exist cannot die.’ Well, you just pick up your guitar and play the opening bars of a Russian song, which is not as demanding as one may presume: all Russian songs are tearjerkers unless you feel like dancing near the floor, almost on the floor or on the grass. And their opening bars have nothing in common with Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier*: just a dozen trin, trin, trin. Any notes would do as long as you do not forsake your seven-string mistress, as a bowel-rending Russian song has it. And if you are gratified by a response to your appeal on the part of the man in question, the dead soul in his own right – a few sobs at the end of the song – you should say to him and also to her, to his mistress or wife, ‘Your soul is of Russian origin, my friend.’

If you are about to die, you may discard your charitable disposition and give up your participation in UNICEF’s performances. You might go so far as to say to your spouse, ‘You know, I just don’t give a damn about starving children, Africa and orphans. I’ll leave them in peace, on condition that they return the favour.’ You speak for a while about France and those who compare the present war – according to the French prime minister, we are waging a war against our destiny symbolised by the virus – to the one our parents lived (and died) through more than half a century ago. ‘I remember the Normandy landings,’ says a man or woman. ‘First I saw one landing craft, then I saw two landing crafts, then I saw five landing crafts. And I began to wonder how many landing crafts I was likely to see in the near future. I was standing on a beach, but instead of swimming and enjoying myself underwater I looked at the landing crafts, looming up on the horizon. That’s what I feel today, and I’m likely to have the same feeling tomorrow. The virus we’re talking about is on the horizon. And the representative of this virus, the one looming up in front of us, is not alone. As I said a few minutes ago, we see one representative, two representatives, three ambassadors of the virus. Actually we’re dealing with warriors, not with ambassadors, I’m sorry to say. You know, this virus of ours also reminds me of the Martians we read about in H. G. Wells’ work. We also saw them on the horizon. One spaceship, two spaceships, three, four, five. I seem to have forgotten the multiplication table.’ ‘If you multiply seven by 15 you get 105,’ says another man or another woman. ‘O Lord, o Lord, o Lord, o Lord,’ you go on. ‘Please spare me the suffering associated with the virus and my evil ways, my bad, vicious conduct. I am innocent, as Miss Sharp puts it in *Vanity Fair*. I am innocent, innocent, innocent, innocent. By the way, have you heard the last report?’ ‘What? What?’ ask several people. ‘What *are* we talking about?’ you ask. ‘You’re talking about our Saviour,’ says a woman. ‘All right. Have you heard about this doctor from Marseille? About his miracle cure?’ ‘Miracle drug?’ asks someone. ‘That’s right, his miracle drug. The new pill will be used alongside existing medicines.’ ‘These pills I’ve been taking have done nothing for me.’ ‘But you’re not dead, are you?’ ‘Not yet.’ ‘Our Father, our Father, our Father, our Father.’

For several years I have had my share of drugs, pills and miracle cures which accomplish their various duties within my body. I cannot say it radiates health and happiness, but I am still alive and can work with satisfaction. As I have already pointed out on many occasions, my wife is good at the laying-on of hands, and she is always willing to cure my swollen lips, mouth and cheeks whenever I surrender to an allergy of which I know nothing. I have no idea what food is liable to wreak havoc on my tissues and other material elements of my body. But my wife is skilful and patient enough to handle this predicament properly so I am not disfigured by this ailment, this tiny curse of nature, of modern life. (Another chemical no doubt.) Is my wife powerful enough to cure me of other diseases? My legs cannot carry me to the end of the world to which young lovers are prepared to take their mistresses, notwithstanding the infuriating presence of borders and mountains. Every day I go for a walk which is not extensive, considering my legs' unreliability: I prefer to stay at home, away from fresh air. In other words, I prefer my confinement to the numerous falls I might have to cope with and endure if left alone outdoors where no one is likely to keep me company as long as we are at war with the virus. As for my wife, last night I resolved not to see her five times a day. She lives in the house opposite (I must have mentioned the fact many times) and so we are used to drinking coffee and tea together, sitting at the same table or just in the same living room that is perhaps spacious enough to dissuade an army of viruses from conquering our bodies. Yet I am prey to a shameful fear that is about to deprive me of my wife's company. The point is she goes on with her work, which is understandable in the context of the same modern life: you cannot survive without money and health. There are people who rely entirely on huge fortunes bequeathed to them by their grandfathers, fathers, mothers and numerous aunts. (Neither my wife nor myself can boast of such luck.) But the importance of being healthy is still on the agenda, judging from the number of clients my wife receives almost every day. 'They don't wish to spend their lives in wheelchairs,' she comments with a smile. In these hard times we are confined to our dwelling places and I am surprised at seeing the cars where my wife's audacious clients sit in the hope of being cured and protected by her miraculous hands.

I wonder if these hands are really capable of keeping at bay viruses and death himself, although my wife has already proved the authenticity of her relationship with higher forces. And I am almost sure she succeeds in channelling them properly, in full accordance with her patients' bodies and souls and states of minds. How many minds do we have? Three bodies inhabit our substance. How many minds are hidden within our head? These are idle questions, and I should rather investigate how my wife and her hands deal with forces, energies and waves that belong in the highest spheres of the universe. I suppose she captures these forces all the time, even when no client requires her indispensable, life-giving, death-destroying help. But what are the channels along which these forces walk or fly, determined to save our strong constitutions? The healer must be in a position to call upon the healing power of her own: it is not for nothing that we call her a 'healer'. (If you are not in possession of healing powers of your own, you are not a healer. You are just a drug dealer; or worse.) Suppose you call upon your healing powers and your computer shows you the following sentence (a sort of death sentence): 'No healing powers available,' or 'No healing,' or just 'No.' What could you do under the circumstances? Well, in this case you cannot act as a catalyst in the healing process, for the simple reason that there is no healing process to speak of. Of course no one forbids you to speak to your patients about channels, heavens, forces and the healing process that is under way, somewhere. 'Anyway,' you round off, 'I remain untouched and not overstimulated in any way by the forces that pour through me to you, my client – or patient, if you prefer.' 'Well and good,' says your client. 'Could you please tell me if I remain untouched by these forces? I wouldn't mind being overstimulated, you know.'

I am not sure I can be healed under any circumstances in which the virus I have been writing about for more than three weeks is involved. You are healed constantly through your wife's hands and their timely interference, but a virus makes its appearance (invisible appearance) and you realise you are just a baby lying in some cot or other. What is more (and certainly less), you are at the mercy of any hand that might ill-treat you on a whim. And there are individuals who indulge their whims day in day out, especially if they can do it with impunity. They see a baby and look around to find out if there are many people in the room where the baby is lying in his cot. And they say to themselves that no one can watch their deeds and the examples of their inborn, abnormal tendencies. Whenever they spot a helpless creature, be it a fly, a caterpillar or a baby, they yield to a multitude of temptations, pinching babies and swatting flies, wasps and other insects; or shooting birds at close range. They usually begin their exercises (as they call this pastime) by tickling the babies they set their hearts upon. The babies laugh and scream, and then they faint, being unable to suffer consciously – even if they are too young to be raped in their cots or on the nearest carpet. No, they are seldom raped, but there are other means of satisfying the irresistible urges displayed by their torturers' nervous systems. Armed with a penknife a torturer bends over a small, almost entirely immature body and this body ends up wriggling like a worm. In his childhood, our torturer was used to watching large worms wriggle in the freshly dug earth – for a while, for ten minutes. And then he would cut this worm (with the same penknife) in two, three and four pieces as if to feed somebody, some fish or other. 'Don't just hack away at the worm – cut it properly!' his father told him once upon a time, and the obedient child took notice of his father's good-natured recommendation. I wonder what his father might have said upon seeing his elderly son tickle a baby with his (the father's?) penknife.

It is said that the healer (my wife) must link her heart chakra with her soul and cause its energies to flow down into the heart. And what if your soul is located *beneath* your heart? In this case you should make your soul-created energies flow *up* into your heart, and every naive bystander thinks it is harder to move up than go down. For instance, it is much easier to go to Hell than to Heaven. That is why no one will ever say to you, 'Go to heaven!' or 'Go to the stars!' or even 'Fly to that comet up there!' Be that as it may, my wife affirms she can manipulate my energies and their ebbs and flows from the moon, and consequently her soul's whereabouts do not really matter – under *these* circumstances. I shall not be surprised if tomorrow she reveals the following truth, 'My soul is on Mars.' Anyway, the energies she has already gathered in her heart should be transferred to the Ajna chakra. Why? *Warum?* asks a German client. 'Because I'm duty bound to place my right hand over the chakra in your body.' '*Was für* chakra do you have in mind?' asks the German patient. 'The one which governs the area where the disease is lurking.' '*Was* about *ihre* link(en?) hand?' asks an Austrian client. 'I'll put my left hand on the other side of your body – opposite my right hand, not far from the disease.' During the sessions carried out by my wife's hands, waves and superior forces, I am lying on a sort of bed, hoping it is not the deathbed they speak of in their novels and poems. My wife's hands are suspended over my hair, but no hand is placed on the other side of my body. And if I ask my wife why she does not fit her ritual into the structure depicted minutely in many sacred books, she might answer, 'There are no other sides to speak of, you know. No other sides, no coins. Only sunny moods, sunny dispositions – the sunny side of life.'

She often speaks of light and its influence on our daily and nightly rounds, and one might conclude she thinks about life only in terms of light as if light and life were interchangeable. You say on your deathbed, 'I've had a wonderful experience on this Earth. Such a wonderful life or light, if you prefer.' Most people prefer life: they enjoy darkness to the extent of not been able to exclude it *completely* from their existence. They say, 'I enjoy

myself fully when I've got the opportunity to fumble in the dark, even if I'm not looking for anything in particular. The physical, Demiurge-created world is ugly and only darkness can struggle with its ugliness successfully. That's what my struggle for life boils down to: a struggle for darkness. Only here and there can I see a few elements inexorably linked to Sophia and our ascension to the spheres where light is not diluted abominably, where you see everybody face to face, body to body, where the body isn't a hindrance, an object you stumble upon in the course of your meditations, on your way to light.' But I cannot help wondering why she does not put her right hand on my back (she is left-handed) during her sessions. According to my recollection, we need two wires to give rise to electricity, to a shock producing a sound and also a particle of fire that they talk about in the books devoted to alchemy and Purgatory. One hand is powerless in this domain; it cannot work miracles on its own, and for once I admit the presence of the other, for no human face, no hollow eyes, interfere with the process. I questioned my wife about the Ajna chakra and asked her abruptly if she had made its acquaintance. She answered she knew many chakras, but could not memorise their names as if implicitly denying the importance of names. I spoke to her about the energies directed from the Ajna centre through the minor chakras in the hands. I stopped at that point because I had no idea what was the final destination of these energies which might disappear in the cosmos without leaving any *positive* vestiges in my body or rather in my three bodies. Actually my wife ought to have three hands, otherwise one of my bodies (I do not know which) is likely to be deprived of her healing powers. Suppose your physical body is in perfect running order. 'What do you do to keep fit?' 'I jog and go swimming.' All right, your physical body swims, dives, walks on the floor of your favourite swimming pool (your favourite exercise) and you dream about making love on the floor as if the other parts of the swimming pool you are so fond of could not offer you an ideal surface for your Kama-Sutra-inspired movements, postures and energies. But there are other bodies you are supposed to nurse and educate, trying to inculcate a team spirit into their members, cells and nerves. I light upon them, when leafing through books or plunging into my unconscious life where this trinity disports itself to their hearts' content. I think one of these bodies is called sidereal, which might mean that only one side of this body I am analysing at this point is real; other sides (dark ones, I presume) are unreal. Anyway, if one day my wife directs her energies and concepts towards this body of mine, she is sure to exclude from it dark chapters and dark predictions. And what about the subtle body?

Thanks to the gurus I have consulted throughout my earthly existence, I know that my animal body, the body of flesh and blood on which all sorts of viruses are so keen, is in itself dead. So I cannot help asking myself why they settle in it voluptuously as if yearning to have casual sex with my blood vessels and sinews. Are they carrion crows in disguise? One is inclined to think that the greatest pleasure a virus can experience resides in the process of destroying our flesh and its concomitants. A virus never travels alone and we habitually speak about an army of viruses that invades our bodies and turns them into dinner tables. And I, for one, would love to be a fly on the wall (sic!) when they sit down at these tables and start eating their dishes, alias our bodies. Are their bottles of wine filled with our blood? Do they ever drink white wine? Our urine? What are their appetisers? A few nerves, one blood vessel? What about sauces? Our gastric juices? Your doctor goes with you to an X-ray room and says after a while, after studying the photographs produced by the machine, 'Just what I thought. The virus ate your left lung. Don't worry your head – we'll replace this lost lung in no time at all. Come tomorrow at 2.30 and I'll put a new lung or life into your dead body.' At first the viruses – it is the same virus, but it multiplies and replenishes your dead body – are disappointed and say to each other, 'Do they expect us to eat this iron or whatever it is? We need human flesh, either dead or not.' And next day the doctor says to you and his doubting colleagues: 'The only

way to combat the virus is to replace *everything* in the body that has been ill-treated by destiny. We might also offer a plastic liver, a plastic stomach, a plastic penis.’ The doctor unwraps a number of packages sealed with sticky tape. ‘And how do you propose to connect these plastic organs to your patient’s flesh?’ asks a colleague. ‘With this sticky tape,’ answer the doctor. ‘You know, the virus doesn’t like this tape.’ ‘Why? Because it is sticky?’ asks the colleague. ‘No, the virus must think we underestimate it. After all, it contents itself with devouring a dead body and iron lungs. It says to itself we despise him for the way he treats the sidereal body connected to the stars. Sure enough, it disregards the sidereal body altogether as if it was a part of sideshow, you know.’

Actually it is the other way round – like everything else in our topsy-turvy existence. As a spiritual messenger, acting as a go-between for the parts of the universe involved in the poetic process (a poet contemplates the stars from his or her balcony) the sidereal body is far more real than the animal one which eats, drinks, swims, pays homage to yoga and dies, assuming it has not been dead throughout its life. The stars, on the other hand, are always alive – not only in childish songs where they twinkle to no avail; nor do they survive for the sake of our Christmas trees, Christmas carols and Christmas stocking where they might accompany chocolate and dolls. Children do not know the first thing about freemasonry at the centre of which one comes across the Blazing Star – the central manifestation of light – of the mystic centre and of the focus of an expanding universe. But for this star, we could not be regenerated after being devoured by the coronavirus and its stooges. Incidentally some of these stooges do not focus their energies *entirely* on the animal body: they are not as fond of animals as I am, as I have been for more than four decades. My love for their (animal) kingdom is doubtless at the root of my preoccupations with the body I nourish and send to shops and propel around the area where I have borne this life rather patiently for seven years. Recently I watched a documentary on Karajan who used to wake around six and pay homage to yoga and his swimming pool – until eight. I do nothing of the kind, and yet, when I compare the way the great conductor walked during the last 15 years of his life, I congratulate myself on my physical fitness. It is true that I cannot run after a bus, as I often did in my youth, but I have a car now and I do not have to run after it or after anything, to tell the truth. I no longer run after human beings, even if I find someone sexy and worthy of my animal body’s exertions; even if goaded on by my desire to demonstrate my ability to make love and have an orgasm at my age (in this day and age when so many humans look and feel repulsive).

I am told that between the astral and physical bodies lies the etheric body. Is it identical to the sidereal body? Does it also communicate with the stars on a regular basis, even in daytime? Apparently they refer to it as the etheric double, for its shape is similar to that of the physical form. That is why our doctors are worried about our state of health which may worsen at any time, dragging us down towards the gates of Hell and Dante-inspired inscriptions. ‘If you cross this threshold, you will never go out, pray as you may.’ ‘Too late to pray.’ ‘It is pointless to pay homage to yoga within our realm, within its impassable borders. Your exercises will avail you nothing. Just get some rest in our fires. Or keep inhaling the nauseating smell of rotting food. Don’t forget that you should eat this food, after inhaling it for nine years.’ Sure enough, our doctors are worried, because the virus might mistake our etheric body for its animal counterpart. Needless to say, our etheric body is far more precious than an anatomy lesson delivered by our physical structure and texture. To clairvoyant sight the etheric body appears as a fine network or web of energy streams, and if the virus drinks a score of these streams, they say, ‘He’s off his rocker.’ I remember a doctor, a woman, who told me I was mad or going mad, which often amounts to the same thing, considering that it does not really matter whether a madman says, ‘I’m Napoleon,’ while sitting in an armchair or walking along a corridor. I asked her why she thought I was mad. ‘All artists are mad,’ she answered. Her husband

was a doctor, not an artist, but he went mad at the age of 55, 25 years after she mentally confined me to a lunatic asylum. Does this wrongly attributed madness belong to the aforementioned network of energy streams? One of the streams got loose from the woman's remark and travelled as far as her husband's brain or rocker, as they say nowadays. This stream began to rock his rocker, shaking it more and more violently so that, after 20 years, the husband realised his rocker was no longer in the right place. His wife noticed that he kept touching his head as if annoyed by a splitting headache. 'It's an extremely effective cure for a headache,' she would say, holding out this or that pill. 'It's not a headache I'm worried about. You know, I think that my head is not on the right spot. Or my rocker, if you prefer. My thoughts are elsewhere, not in the rocker. Usually my thoughts dance rock 'n' roll, as you know,' and he roared with laughter. A few weeks later he said to his wife, 'Odd as it may appear, my rocker has a pair of legs so it walks faster and faster because its legs are on top form. I wish I could have its legs,' whereupon his wife said to herself, 'I know what he's driving at. In his youth a recurring knee injury impaired his chances of winning a tennis tournament.' And she asked her husband, 'Do you think your rocker would have won that tournament?' 'Of course, beyond a shadow of a doubt.' 'Do you think you would rise through the ranks and become our clinic's director, if you managed to join your rocker, to install yourself inside it?' 'Beyond a shadow of a doubt.'

Two months later, the husband asked his wife, after putting two hands on her shoulders, 'Can you see it?' By that time, his wife had got used to her husband's rocker, so she did not actually need to question him on the identity of the object he was pointing at. 'Your rocker? Yes, I can see it.' 'What does it look like, in your opinion?' asked her husband. 'Like an ordinary rocker.' 'Yesterday you told me I was too old for the job and to add insult to injury today you declare that the rocker I have in my possession is not in a class of its own. Just a run-of-the-mill rocker. Is that what you think and mean? A *fun*-of-the-mill rocker. Are you making fun of me?' 'I said it for a lark,' answered the woman. 'Are you making a lark out of me?' 'Sod that or a lark – I'm going back to Mummy,' said the woman. But on second thoughts she decided to stay with her husband, provided she did not have to share the same bed with him: even if you do not attempt to have sexual intercourse with your rockerless husband, you might feel uneasy and consequently spend a few sleepless nights in his company. Yet the woman was determined to get her husband back on his feet again; or rather get his rocker back so he might use it with more assurance and confidence: you cannot rely on your rocker, if you see it a few paces away, not far from an open window. You might think it is about to jump from it, disgusted with its solitude and your inborn foolishness and idiocy. Sometimes it does jump out of the window and you go down, your feet repeating their daily exercise as they are planted on – and lifted from – the steps you also know by heart. And you find your rocker (at least the woman's husband did) right under your window, which is a remarkable fact, considering that people, especially young people, are accustomed to playing football whenever an opportunity presents itself.

Well, the same husband had his own habits which did not include playing football several hours a day, although this husband's brother was a famous footballer and consequently might have inspired this husband, modifying his habits. At some point this husband got weary of his rocker's behaviour and struck up a conversation with it: he was sure the rocker he picked up almost every day, after going downstairs and opening the front door of his house, was *his* rocker and not *someone else's*. Today all rockers look alike and it is our overwhelming democracy that we should thank for these affinities and similitudes. But the husband never asked himself, whether the rocker lying under his window was really *his* rocker and not a rocker fallen *out of the blue* or from *Mars*. Of course it was always lying under *his* window, but its whereabouts were not an absolute proof of its identity: some

people might have kicked *another* rocker around. And this foreign (extra-terrestrial?) rocker ended its journey right under the husband's or the madman's window. Be that as it may, several years ago this husband (of mine) realised the rocker he was carrying upstairs might belong to another madman or just to another man: whatever happens in this day and age, we cannot maintain that all men and women are madmen and madwomen. So this madman of mine said to the rocker he was diligently carrying in the direction of his room: 'Are you *my* rocker, my dear fellow?' 'Who are you?' asked the dear fellow. 'I am John,' answered the husband. 'What about *you*?' he asked again. 'I am Paul,' said the rocker. 'Do you think you belong to my substance?' asked the madman. 'What's your substance? Where is it?' 'The hand in the palm of which you're lying is part and parcel of my substance,' said the madman. 'What about your madness? Is it also part and parcel of your substance?' Judging from this question, the rocker had a huge quantity of brain inside it, otherwise it would not have detected any sign of madness in its owner's substance. Actually we do not know yet for sure that the husband was the owner of the rocker he had brought to his room and put on his bed. At some point he said to himself he should sleep with his rocker – a sort of beauty sleep – and his wife approved of his decision, saying, 'Yes, my dear, you'd better sleep on it.' So her husband slept on his rocker for three nights in a row, but even at the end of these nights he was not sure the rocker he was sleeping on was really his and not his wife's or his nephew's. He was almost certain that the rocker was intelligent and therefore he did not mind admitting him to his substance which, in his opinion, could not tolerate nonsense. But any rocker may be compared to the soul, and we know that human souls search for their future owners before settling down on Earth. The same goes for rockers, although not all of them spend their childhood and youth in heaven, talking to saints, sages and God.

By the way, yesterday I talked to my wife about the bodies we are endowed with, as a result of our acquiring the status of human beings. I asked my wife if the etheric body was liable to leave our animal body and jump out of the window. 'What for?' asked my wife. 'Just for a breath of fresh air,' I answered. 'Why not? But usually it coincides with the physical body.' 'What about the virus?' I asked. 'I'm prepared to sacrifice my animal body for the sake of my salvation. Do you know that the Gnostics thought we should burn our body, making love to men and women alike – all the time, round the clock? Once our physical body is burnt, we can fly off and settle in Pleroma, not in Palermo, contrary to what my computer suggests, my spell-checker. By the way, how do you spell it? Pleroma?' My wife did not answer the question and so I still do not know how to spell Pleroma. Luckily for all of us, we do not have to know how to spell Paradise, Pleroma or happiness. Either we are assigned to Paradise or Pleroma or we are not. I am convinced that some citizens of Paradise cannot spell anything, being illiterate and obtuse. Well, my wife told me a story that seems to corroborate the hypothesis according to which the etheric and animal bodies live together, quarrelling now and then. One day my wife welcomed in her consulting room or surgery a woman who said she might have the coronavirus. 'It seems these ants can tolerate temperatures which would kill other species,' she said, showing my wife a box of matches. She opened it and my wife saw a lot of ants. 'As you can see,' the woman went on, 'I'm not in the midst of these ants. In other words, I don't belong to their species. In other words, I'm running a temperature and I can't tolerate it.' 'In other words,' my wife cut in on the woman's confession, 'you think you're about to die.' 'That's right,' said the woman. 'All right,' said my wife. 'Let us see what I can do with your bodies and chakras.' As usual my wife began by checking chakras and uttering mantras. 'There was nothing wrong with the woman's chakras and liver so I couldn't help wondering what was wrong with her. Suddenly I heard an atrocious sound. Do you remember your new trousers? The trousers I gave you on the day of your birthday?' 'It was at Christmas,' I said. 'Never mind. Do you remember what happened to

this new pair of trousers? They ripped when you bent down. Do you remember the sound they produced?’ ‘I do,’ I said. ‘Well, the sound I heard during the session I’m talking about reminded me of your trousers and your posture. What I heard was much louder, needless to say, but the timbre was the same. I heard the sound and saw a monster covered with blood. What’s more, even his clothes were soaked with blood. He held out two blood-soaked sleeves and showed me a tiny virus. “My son,” he said. “Let me introduce my son.”’ ‘Did you kill them? In double-quick time?’ I asked. ‘No. This woman needs a Muslim healer. She’s a Muslim, you know. And I think she signed a pact with a Jinn.’

The woman’s husband ended up erecting a barricade between the window and the rocker whose behaviour could not be approved of by any owner, mad or normal, killing time in a lunatic asylum or elsewhere. The rocker looked at the barricade and said, ‘This construction reminds me of the Commune, of the communards. Were you a communard in one of your former lives?’ ‘No, I lived at the Chateau de Versailles,’ answered the man. ‘Look here,’ he said suddenly. ‘I don’t know if you’re my rocker or someone else’s, but I do know you behave like an unruly child. So I have no alternative but to lay you down in a cradle.’ No sooner said than done. Now the rocker is lying in a cradle, in the attic of a country house where the husband used to spend his holidays with his mistresses. (Not with his wife, though.) Today his wife can be seen by her husband’s side, for she thinks she is duty bound to watch his gestures, deeds and thoughts which, if left to their own devices, can guide him towards another window or a revolver, a noose, a hummer and a nail. One day the husband said to his wife, ‘I wish I were this rocker.’ ‘Suppose it *isn’t* your rocker,’ said the wife. ‘Doesn’t matter. I wish to be rocked every day. I was so happy in my childhood.’ ‘Can’t you just wait for your second childhood?’ ‘No. I’m losing my patience. You might think I’m mad. But madness is *not* a second childhood. It has nothing to do with children. Children don’t suffer from madness. They’re autistic sometimes. I wish the coronavirus were autistic. Do you think we could calm the screaming virus by rocking it back and forth?’ By the way, the British prime minister caught the virus and is currently taking care of it at home. That is how my wife put it as she told me the news she had heard on the radio this morning. Taking care of the virus, not fighting it with antibiotics and prayers. Are prayers tantamount to weapons, bombs, rockets, battleships, Potemkin? Rocking the virus back and forth, singing a lullaby to it. ‘Sleep my dear, sleep my virus, sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet dreams.’ I wonder why all these ministers and princes shake so many hands, hug so many bodies. Why can’t they say to each other, ‘Let’s not kiss each other today. The virus, you know.’ My wife watched the news last night. She saw two prime ministers and one baron. They were sitting in a car, kissing and hugging each other.

I am tempted to put into this cradle the whole world (not the whole universe, mind you) and its incurable childishness. This childishness should be viewed as a vice, not as a manifestation of purity and insatiable curiosity. ‘What is it, Mummy? What is it, Daddy? How does that function? What is its function?’ The child in question – the one who questions – touches his vein and his father answers his question thus, ‘The function of the veins is to carry blood to the heart.’ ‘And what is the heart?’ Today our grown-ups are aware of the importance of charity and believe that the seat of humanity – the heart viewed in this perspective – is located within ballrooms, provided they are used for charity balls, not for shooting a film of *War and Peace*. Our world is an unruly child, but its childishness elicits no smiles and inspires no caresses: I am quite reluctant to stroke our world’s cheek. But let me confine it to a huge cradle and I promise that, instead of dropping atomic bombs on it, I shall rock it back and forth; I shall rock it to death. ‘Die, my dear, die, my die, he-he-he-he-he-Hell.’ He-he-he – that is how the Russians laugh, especially in books; and I am a Russian after all.

To my wife the advent of the virus signals the presence of a turning point at the heart of this day and age and even of our history. Instead of turning in 2012, as was predicted by the Maya's weird calendar, we danced and twisted, carrying on 'the good work', as we always say, whatever happens, whatever the consequences of what really happens. And if we happen to realise, sooner or later, that our work is rather bad and that we carry it on, notwithstanding the consequences and the Earth's alarming temperature or high fever – we are not the aforementioned ants, are we? – we just say, 'The Earth suffers from *hay* fever – nothing to worry about. Anyway, it's silly worrying about things which are outside your control.' Be that as it may – that is what we usually say after a major catastrophe – my wife is convinced we are about to change our ways, approaches, doctrines and broad-spectrum behaviour. According to her calculations and pendulums, our planet's vibratory rate (*taux vibratoire*) is so high our bodies (all of them) can hardly refrain from vibrating, shaking and so on. Perhaps we are just getting excited, inspired and are therefore about to write a dozen books of poems. As for myself, I have already written the text of the lullaby I am to perform, when flogging humanity to death. I might add a few couplets to it, if some representatives of humanity find my work unworthy of their dignity. 'Flog, flog, flog, flog, end of your cock, cock, cock, cock, cock-and-bull story. End of your clocks, clocks, clocks. End of your rounds.'

An American writer (I think his name was John Reed) wrote a book entitled *Ten Days that Shook the World* – about the Russian Revolution, if you please. Sure enough, those days and years did jiggle my native land; it looked and sounded like a rattle. And even now, 30 years after the abolition of slavery, the Russians say, whenever their babies wave around a plastic rattle: 'That's what our country sounded like for more than 70 years.' 'That's what it looked like too,' say other Russians. They recall the rattle of machine-gun fire – the sound of executions, firing squads – and also the way they were treated in prisons and in concentration camps. 'Confess, confess, confess, confess. Own up to, up to, up to, up to,' shouted judges, police officers and superintendents. And if a prisoner neither confessed anything nor owned up to his or her relationship with capitalists and their military forces, prison guards shook them violently. And when they eventually heard the prisoner's voice rattle in her throat (in the throat of Molotov's wife, for instance), they would write down in their notebooks, 'She was spying for Israel, the United States of America and England.' Historians still wonder why they did not reach the following conclusion: 'She was spying for a rattle.' Whenever they talk about the Soviet Union, they repeat, 'Gulag, Gulag, Gulag.' They have no idea how we lived in that distant country, in that Siberia where wolves (symbolical, metaphorical and atomistic) roamed around the streets and fields. I told them, 'The greater part of Soviet citizens died in prisons, camps and even at home, poisoned by red guards, black torturers and whatever came out of the blue, so one might say they were also punished by the blue. One might also say they were punished by all colours, all squares, all spheres, all nooses, all nails and hammers and sickles. But don't forget our everyday life, its torments and problems linked to queuing and buying empty counters, as it were. Often we had the feeling we went shopping to get a multitude of empty counters, and many of us answered, when asked about the dishes consumed at dinner and lunch: "Two empty counters, three shop assistants."'

Some old communists say, 'We admit to having flogged, tortured, deprived of food and drink a lot of people, but they were asking for it.' 'How?' we ask. 'You mean they were violating Soviet rules, accusing Soviet rulers of incompetence and murders?' 'They were literally *asking* for it,' the communists answer. And they recite the following text, 'I announce therefore to all you sages, that unless ye slay me, ye cannot be called sages. But if ye slay me, your understanding will be perfect, and it increases in my sister the moon according to the degree of our wisdom.' And then the communists – the old red, blue, black guard, as they call themselves – embark on a

spacious (and specious) interpretation of the alchemical treatise, which is often done in writing: these representatives of humanity are keen on 'river-novels'. Of course they emphasise the importance of killing, of murdering either by icy water or icy air. They say that both water and air are vital for the accomplishment of the Great Work because our body is made up exclusively of these elements. And if you point out that fire and earth can also be found in the human body, they answer as follows, 'Once we had finished cleaning the prisoner's soul, we squeezed his or her body out. Whenever we dealt with a female body, we got a lot of milk. The men gratified us with their urine. But whatever the result of our ritual, we said to each other, "A lot of water, a lot of water." You see, in an alchemical process all liquids boil down to water – at least within our Gulag. Of course we also resorted to the services of fire, thinking in terms of Purgatory and giving no thought to Hell. So when foreign tourists say to us, "Life in the Soviet Union was tantamount to Hell and its tortures," we answer, "We deny your accusation. The fuel we used in the course of our fire-torture spontaneously ignited on account of the high temperature and pressure borrowed from Purgatory, not from Hell, as you seem to assume. And once our prisoners were dead, we buried them in accordance with Christian traditions, loath to deprive them of the fourth element called 'earth'. Besides, we thought we didn't work for vultures, for *their* meals. But we allowed them to enjoy the leftovers.'"

And what about the monster my wife caught the sight of in the course of her memorable session? The virus emerging from the Muslim woman's body? My wife must have said to herself, 'Interfering in other people's relationships is always a mistake. The monster is in love with this woman whose involvement in alchemy should be praised and preserved for posterity, for the cloudless future of humanity, for the accomplishment of our Great Work. Apparently she wishes to be liberated from the monster's tyranny. Yet she confided in me that she had formed a pact with a Jinn.' I might rejoice at my wife's decision to renounce the use of her power which might have restored the woman's physical, superficial equilibrium. But her salvation was at stake, and I am tempted to point out that my wife's salvation also depended on her treatment of the virus, on her refusal to prolong the woman's existence on Earth. 'What are you driving at?' asked my wife. 'Do you think we should say to the virus, "I announce to you that unless ye slay me, ye cannot be called a sage"'?' 'No need for you to talk to the virus. Just let it live.' But all these scientists and medical students beg to differ, and they differ as soon as someone – an optimist of sorts – invites them to a television studio where they talk about our immortality as if it were already waiting for us in their pockets. They empty their pockets in front of television cameras and a multitude of immortalities and eternities cover the floor that is immediately shown to television viewers. These remain sceptical about their (the pseudo-scientists') claims, 'So they promise me immortality. If I hold out for another 20 years, according to their views, researches and nonsensical talk, I'll be endowed with millions of years by their plastic surgery or whatever they call their interferences in my private life and body. So I hold out on my own, without their plastic and scrap iron until 2020, and they come into my room, my immortality lying peacefully on their plate. I'm sure I recorded this documentary in the early nineties of the twentieth century. Actually I think we should use letters and not digits when writing numbers – we'll live much longer, considering that we depend heavily on languages, on written words, letters and sounds. The longer our texts, the more immortal we grow, as a consequence of this artificial length of ours. Well, where's my immortality, my dear Sirs and Madams and Misses? My muses hover around my writing desk and I take this opportunity to thank them for their unflinching loyalty. But where's my immortality, may I ask? You promised it, you, bastards, you, whores. The horses I meet every day when walking around my house and the area where I live haven't promised me anything and consequently I have

no reason to mistrust them, to hate them. I think immortality or eternity defends itself against human aspirations, inspirations and high spirits by letting a virus escape from a laboratory.'

We do not hear these words, such talkers: as soon as they get close to television studios, they see a lot of bodies that bar their paths. A lot of hands rise and come to a standstill in front of their faces as if to impart to them the following truth, 'Our sweet dreams sugar the pill. Don't destroy them once and for all.' And if you do not switch your TV off, you go on listening to their sales talk, 'You should buy this plastic liver. You should buy this iron heart. Do you wish to become an iron lady? Did you admire Margaret Thatcher? Do you wish to become a prime minister? Our contraption works in other countries too. Come to our studio to take advantage of our doctors and their skills.' You go to the studio and a lot of hands show you the way to a world-renowned immortality-specialist who asks you at once what kind of immortality you are looking for. 'Are there many kinds of immortality?' you ask. 'Well, I can immortalise your present body and mind. But I'm not sure this would be the best solution to all your problems. In the first place I'm not sure your mental qualifications are up to our immortal standards – you can't talk nonsense within eternal limits. I mean inside the kingdom of immortals about which both H. G. Wells and Borges wrote a lot of rubbish. By the way, your memory will never be immortal, and our plastic memory, the one we can insert into your skull, might turn out to be as unreliable as your present memory. Never mind – you're permitted to buy two memories, a plastic one and an iron one. They're interchangeable, you know. Even if your plastic battery isn't dead yet (or flat or gone) you're allowed to replace it by an iron battery.' And then the surgeon provides you with another piece of advice which is sure not to affect your bank accounts irremediably. Suppose you say to yourself, referring to your memory, 'It's not working – I don't think the battery is charging.' It is *not*, as a matter of fact: you seem to be right for once. But this conclusion to which you jumped or walked does not guarantee that you will always draw appropriate conclusions from whatever happens before your eyes: even immortals are not infallible, for all their experiences, failures and traumas.

All your life you have counted on silver linings. Even now you cannot count on anything else: there are only clouds in your life and also overhead; above *your* head, at least. Those who have no joys, no toys within their reach may experience a flash of pleasure, when toying with words, objects and humans. They often recount how they endeavour to turn a cloud hanging over their heads and destinies. They fetch a ladder, climb towards the cloud they see, fear and long to submit to their wills, grab hold of it and turn it upside down. It is probably better to acquire a few plastic or metal organs in the hope of surviving before the end of the pandemic I have been enlarging upon for quite a while. ('As long as you enlarge upon it,' said my wife, 'it will grow larger and larger.') You buy two plastic lungs and they install them in your chest, after consulting a dozen X-ray photographs. You leave the clinic (or the television studio) and hear their voices, wishing you 'good luck' and adding that you will certainly need it, although they are convinced their hands, skills and minds have done an exemplary job. 'You did it, you did it, you did it,' you say to yourself as you recall *My Fair Lady* and the colonel whose name escapes me as usual. (But I remember Liza Doolittle and the street where she lived.)

I opened the front door of my house and my wife said, after studying my face rather closely, 'I'm yearning to compliment you on how well you look' (*sur ta bonne mine*). 'Ma chérie,' I said, 'I'm impatient to boast about a brand-new pair of lungs.' 'Plastic or metal?' she asked. 'They're not my own flesh and blood, if you see what I mean.' And I depicted for her sake the situation faced by the virus that might pay me an unexpected or rather expected visit: we should not overlook the magnitude of the epidemic. The virus penetrates my body (breaking and entering) and looks around as it habitually does before making itself comfortable. A pair of lungs looms ahead

of it and, unable to rein in its excitement, impulses and urges, it rushes towards them, hoping to devour a slice of my flesh, and my lungs fend it off. The virus bounces off my lungs into my intestines and all I have to do is go to the lavatory, as they call it politely. And what if the virus keeps bouncing off my lung into my liver? Will this unwarranted game end up giving rise to cirrhosis of the liver? ‘Perhaps I’d better not have my lungs replaced by plastic ersatz or any other satzs,’ I say out loud as I picture to myself the game unfolding inside my body. Instead of staying in my lungs, of sitting, lying and dining in them, the virus may jump from one organ to another, ending up in my brain. It is already in my brain, I presume, considering the number of words I have dedicated to it ever since my wife broke the Chinese news to me and her sister. I had been in Taiwan before the virus’s birth; at least that is what I thought in those days, during those nights. Yet I had every reason to suspect that the Chinese authorities were keeping the truth under wraps – just a communist custom to which they are loyal, for all their billions and billionaires. Today, thanks to the Japanese truth-seekers, we know the virus was born much earlier as if to catch me unawares during my concert tour in Taiwan. One might say Taiwan is an independent country, but there are so many Chinese tourists within its borders I do not shake my head in disbelief, whenever my wife affirms, ‘You’re immune to the virus.’

Incidentally – this piece of news fits perfectly into my wife’s universal network – I cannot get rid of the song performed by Smerdiakov in Dostoyevsky’s masterpiece which was despised by Nabokov. *A, tsarskaya korona / Bila-bī moia milaya zdorova/ Gospodi pomiluy eyo i menia/ Eyo i menia.* (Ah, the crown of the tsar / May my beloved be healthy / God, have pity on her and myself / On her and myself.) I am not certain it is ‘Ah’ I should sing at the beginning of the song. To tell the truth, I have never heard the tune appended to the text; nor am I aware if this ‘Ah’ is sung at the very *beginning* of this masterpiece, of this chef d’oeuvre in its own right. Or in its own wrong, being sung by a future murderer. Perhaps it is ‘Ha’ one should sing either at the beginning or in the middle of the song. Ha-ha-ha – that is how the Russians laugh in books and also in real life. So do the French. Ha-ha-ha, hi-hi-hi. You think about humanity and the immortality promised to it. And then you realise that the virus does not seem to be on the same wavelength with doctors and optimists. And you say to these preservers of hope and millennial projects, ‘The coronavirus, alias the destroyer (no wind can hold a candle to it) wipes out waves, lives and the foundations honoured by W. B. Yeats. It has already wiped out all our profits for the previous two years.’ The song performed by a Dostoyevsky character, however, does not deviate from the optimism we often witness on television where miracle cures appear almost every night. A doctor points to a crucible and says, ‘Let us postpone the goal of our dreams, its result that puts a lot of gold and eternities on our tables, in our houses and gardens. We hoped that our fountains would spurt our youth and riches all over our parks and avenues. Unfortunately, for the time being, we have no alternative but to collect the blood they spurt day and night. Some of us think it is Christ’s blood we receive as a present, and so they (some of our fellow creatures) drink this blood and fly off, carried by Sophia Lauren to heaven. Others think it is their own blood they come across when walking around their estates, and they guard against excesses of enthusiasm, wine-drinking and meat-eating. They sincerely believe they’ve been devouring their bodies for some time now, ever since the beginning of the pandemic. But look in the direction I’m showing you with my fingers and thoughts. At the end of this direction, of the path indicated by my gaze and scientific awareness is a retort where your medicine is about to see the light of day. The light of day emerges from darkness and the medicine sees it, captures it, and the light of day invigorates it so you can take advantages of its *élan vital* which you seem to have forgotten almost completely. You swallow our pills and recall the *élan vital* that carries you first to a series of banks, to the accounts you have in these banks. You lay

your hands on the safe deposit boxes you find in the banks where you land up in search of your sustenance and happiness. Then you draw sustenance from your religious beliefs, and you feel yourself prepared for the end of our alchemical process. And for the end of the coronavirus that coincides with all our ends.'

I was at the beginning of my journey through the virus and its ramifications. It took place at the beginning of December 2019, and in the hospital I found myself in no one knew the first thing about the virus which probably did not know itself, ignoring the Ancient Greeks' recommendations. I remember I was lost in my own house during that period, that prelude which led me to a sojourn in the nearest hospital to which I was conveyed by my wife's car. Before coming to my place and calling two doctors, she saw my astral body and also its counterpart (our counterpoint) at her place and thought, 'If he isn't rushed to the nearest and dearest casualty without more ado, he might see his blood flowing from the taps in his bathrooms and kitchen. What could he do with all this blood?' she asked herself. 'Will he listen to Bach's and Mozart's *Masses*? Will he drink this blood to make atonement for his sins? Will he say to himself, "Jesus Christ made all the atonements we needed a long time ago"?' Why should I drink this wine instead of Claret and Burgundy?

I was lost in my own house or rather I did not recognise it; and I did not realise what was going on because I asked myself no questions, although I was not afraid of lies. Lies make you live in a fairy land where nothing is certain and everything should be taken with a pinch of salt; and looking for a pinch of salt you might use on these occasions is a pleasant pastime. What does it really matter how you kill your time, provided you do not get killed in the process by a virus or a bullet? I might already have been in the Hereafter where you just live and, contrary to what Dante surmised and touched upon in his *Commedia*, do not really care about your former lives: you can care for them only if you look for a number of future lives and incarnations. In the Hereafter you settle once and for all, and whatever happens to you takes place in the Hereafter – not in the Thereafter, as one might presume, when musing on karma and metempsychosis. I was going up the stairs in my house, but I recognised neither the steps nor my own legs that were even more disobedient than usual as they did their utmost to make me collapse and breathe my last breath. It would be fun to count one's breaths on the brink of one's life – much funnier than running a newspaper. Actually I still do not understand what pleasure one can draw from running a newspaper, from talking about nonentities. In brief, I did not collapse on one of the steps leading to the top of the world, so now I must be on the top of the universe that overlooks a number of other universes: the cosmos is as infinite as Giordano Bruno's doctrines and legacy.

Coming back to Smerdiakov and his song, I wonder if it really belongs in my wife's network where only positive, luminous forces act and triumph, anxious to ensure our happiness, eternity and immunity to viruses. '*Tsarskaya korona*' means 'the crown of a tsar'. This reminds me of Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* where, for a while, the son of a sinister woman wears a crown put on his head by one of Ivan's stooges – for the fun of it. (Much funnier than running a newspaper.) The son walks around as if he were a tsar or even an emperor, and then someone, another son of another woman, raises his dagger and plunges this instrument of doom into the Mock-Ivan (Mock-Tudor) body. Should I draw parallels between this state of affairs and my life that offers me promises, happiness, wives and immortality only to snatch all these crowns from my bodies and souls? All of a sudden I find myself in a house I do not recognise in spite of the crowns I see on the walls. On staircases, on banisters. And so I sing with Smerdiakov, 'What do I care about the tsar's crown! Let me at least live until the end of this work of mine, of this walk through my Dantesque or Dantonesque woods. What does it matter whether I recognise my dwelling place or not! Let me recognise letters and the alphabet: I'm loath to share Ibsen's sorry plight.' It is

noteworthy, however, that in Smerdiakov's song which, in a way, is a forerunner of the coronavirus's sway, a crown and health meet and hug each other, flouting the orders we received from our authorities two or three weeks ago. They call it 'confinement'; I call it 'the refinement of our misery'. And what about 'Dear God, do have pity on her and myself, on her and myself'? I have no idea who 'her' is in the context or out of it, but I do pray God on my behalf three times a day. This is my second prayer, to be precise. And being precise in these matters is vital to your being. And being imprecise in these matters is *fatal* to your being; or vital to your *non-being*.

I was inclined to say a few words about the moon and the lunatics I enlarged upon at some point, at some dot situated on the moon, in one of her craters. (Is the moon feminine in all languages with no exception at all? *Der Mond*.) Short of space, time and inspiration, I consulted my notes and saw the words 'God' and 'govno', the latter meaning 'shit' in Russian. For a while – I have no liking for my whiles that have nothing in common with Bergson's duration – I paid homage to a sort of guesswork from which I could not extricate myself. This time I cannot say 'for all my efforts', for I was aware of their uselessness, of the futility of any undertaking I might carry out in this domain. But the solution or relief can (and usually do) come out of the blue to which I offer my abundant thanks – on my knees, if you please. 'Thank you so much, my dear Blue. I thank you from the bottom of my heart and from the top of the universe.' And then I remembered what I had been talking about some time ago – to my wife, of all people, in my house, of all places. Actually it is the other way round, as usual, as habitual, as everywhere and everything, as immortality and eternity. What else can you have in all your eternities? Only ways, their rounds, *their* others – not just *others*, hopefully. My wife talked to me about outlets, outs, outings, tings and ous and just osssss. She said most of us human beings, earthlings and what we call 'our fellow creatures' sojourn, live and kill time, space and its inhabitants in the fourth dimension to which we are used, thanks to the soap opera called or entitled or titled, *The Twilight Zone* ('*La Quatrième dimension*', in French). My wife said, 'Contrary to what you see on TV and in our newspapers, the fourth dimension has nothing to do with what we call "being wide of the mark" or "being elsewhere".' 'I think it largely concerns the use of the term "being" which, according to Heidegger –' At this point she interrupted me to say her speech was not centred on Heidegger's books, lectures, legacy and controversial glory.

On what is my life centred? You can say 'focused on' and if someone uses this word to describe my predicaments and discomfitures, I shall recall my abortive adventures with cameras of all sorts. Perhaps I have never wished to stop any moment because all of them have always been bad and dead and mad – much more so than Lord Byron and the protagonist of Browning's poem. Actually, if compared to music, literature seems and sounds bad and mad; not dead, to all outward appearances. The other day – there are so many other days in my life – I was watching a film based on *Vanity Fair*, and I watched and heard Miss Sharp or Mrs Crawley or whatever or whoever perform Purcell's aria from *Dido*. I cried and said to myself and not to everybody, unfortunately, 'Music can't create anything because everything and everybody (alas) has been created already. But it can and does erase our doubts and the memories of our sins. Not the sins themselves (alas).' I hope it does erase, remove, rub out our sins. From what? I wish You (Thou or Miaow) could cross my name off the guest list. I still wonder why Stravinsky preferred the process of composing music to music itself, for I cannot say I neglect Plato's dialogues or Shakespeare's tragedies for the sake of my inspiration and its figments. And I certainly do not prefer this paragraph to *Timon of Athens* which I intend to comment upon in the near future unless this future is no longer mine. As Beethoven said once, 'If you wish to know what I mean by my *Sturm Sonata*, re-read Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.' If you wish to know what I mean as I write this book or essay or poem, re-read *Timon of Athens*. I no

longer know if I prefer writing to reading, and I honestly wonder whether I ever knew the answer to this enquiry, the solution to this problem, assuming it is a problem and not a bad joke, a firmly tongue-in-cheek look at my inner world. I know that he prefers watching rugby to playing it; yet I do not know who he is and I am not tempted to add 'or she' for the simple reason that, in my opinion, women do not play rugby. Unless I am utterly mistaken. I also wonder if Stravinsky preferred his own works to Haydn's quartets. Robert Craft states unhesitatingly that he preferred the animal kingdom to the human. Did he ever hit upon the idea of serving human bodies to cannibalistic dogs? One of them makes his appearance in a Hogarth painting touched upon by Baudelaire. And Stravinsky was very fond of Hogarth, of *A Rake's Progress* in particular. Why not compose an opera entitled *A Dog's Progress*?

PART THREE

of the quantity of mud you have eaten or drunk already, you are thirsty, hungry and you eat a mouse you find under your feet. And then you eat your feet because you have nothing else to put under your tooth.

A stone is lying and probably dying unless it is dead already. How to find out whether it is dead or not? No use talking to it: either stones are deaf and mute or they do not wish to waste their breath on trifles, on talking to humans and their brothers and sisters. Of course you can try and bury it, provided you have enough time for burials, for other burials: so many humans have been buried ever since the pandemic broke out, breaking our bones, lives and indistinguishable hopes. A little boy asks his mother as he points at a star, 'Is this object called a "twinkling star"? Am I right, Mummy?' 'I'm sorry to disappoint you, my little boy. It's just a hope.' 'Why is it twinkling, Mummy?' 'Because its substance is very fragile. Besides, it is not as self-assured as your Daddy. It really must assert itself more, whenever human beings are allowed to see it on a cloudless night. Has Daddy already put you in the picture about falling stars and their astrological weight?' 'No, Mummy.' 'Every falling star informs humanity about a representative of our race who has just given up hope.' 'Why do people say, then "Hope springs eternal"? Are they stupid?' 'Not quite. Some falling stars fall and bounce off the surface of the Earth, only to fall down again and again.'

As for stones and their lives or existences on Earth, they may turn out to be alive: all depends on the method you use when testing their capacities to respond to your provocations. If you eventually decide to bury them, in spite of the problems you are sure to encounter during the ritual – no spades, no other instruments designed for the purpose – you should spend a few hours by the fresh tomb. The dead stone begins to shout, 'What have you done? I'm alive, alive. Apparently they buried Gogol while he was still living and thinking about the third part of *Dead Souls*. I'm not a dead stone, you know. Nor am I one of his dead souls.' I wonder why Gogol was not tempted to write about a stone which rolls throughout a short story as if to rival Gogol's nose for vivacity. According to the Russian writer, a nose can leave your face and wander about St Petersburg, flouting conventions and decorum. Nothing prevents a stone from saying 'goodbye' to a pavement, in St Petersburg or elsewhere. In one of the Moscow streets, you come across a rolling stone and look around to make sure no teenagers are playing a game of soccer. They cannot afford a real ball and often use stones, taking no notice of their sharpness and clumsiness. Sometimes they get hurt and bleed, letting a dozen red drops enliven the pavement, its irritating monotony, but they mind neither their suffering nor the angry looks of pedestrians. But this time no one seems to be playing football; at least within your field of vision. So you yield to the well-known and reasonable temptation and raise your leg which gathers momentum. To your astonishment, however, the ball eludes your kick by fleeing, by rolling faster and faster. First you think you have lighted on an ordinary rolling stone, left behind by a stroller who is fond of rolling stones and even collects them. Then you pass on to philosophy, theology; oddly enough, you do not hit at once upon the ideas related to alchemy. Indeed, owning the Philosophers' Stone is essential to your life and anyway it is much more significant than a game of football, played in the streets by a bunch of layabouts.

However, you end up drawing a parallel between the rolling stone and the last stage of the ritual to which this book is devoted, if only in part. The root of all things is green, said the Arab philosopher Haly. You glance at a garden, at a blade of grass, leaf through Walt Whitman's masterpiece and realise how well-founded and poetic the above remark should appear not only to the Arabs, but to everyone. You can lie down in your garden and spend several hours in this posture, forgetting your obligations, duties and hungry children. You feel a multitude of new, fresh-as-a-daisy thoughts and impulses. For once you have no urge to fly like Dedalus or his son; or a bird which travels around the globe without undergoing a lot of tiresome and mortifying controls. You remember the

importance of the Earth and her motherly tenderness. Often, without noticing it, you pick up a blade of grass or a leaf and put it into our mouth; and a few hours fly by or rather walk around you as if to prove the tangibility of circular time. And you envy the trees you see everywhere, saying to yourself that every tree is a tree of life, whereas you are a tree of death, to put it mildly. Once again you cast a glance at the seven green poppies and think, 'In due course, these poppies will become one golden bloom.' I have no idea what I would say to myself in my garden, lying in my grass. Today the weather is splendid, but I fell down the stairs and my vertebrae counted the steps rather diligently. So I can neither walk in my garden, nor even enjoy the freshness of the grass. But my books and interior monologues are still available, despite the confinement imposed on humanity and even on our possessions. The use of my car is restricted – not only because of my legs that cannot operate the pedals; with the exception of my piano pedals. (Even after my death, in my tomb I shall play the piano.) Well, I cannot install myself in my car and cross the French border. And that is the only border I would like to cross, to tell the truth.

My interior monologue talks about the King whose robe is red, being the sign of the state of perfect fixation and fixed perfection known as the Red Rose. And the stone I was about to kick this afternoon? Where did I find it, considering that I cannot go out: there is too much risk involved. Anyway, it is not worth the risk; as so many poets have already said, I have the whole world with its leaves of grass in my head. And as long as I have my head, I shall avail myself of the beauty of a leaf and also some bathing beauties. By the way, I wonder why I was anxious to count my staircase's steps with my vertebrae. The staircase is not very long, and I can count its steps easily, without resorting to my back and its treasures. I suppose that a person sitting on the grass may feel like counting leaves and blades of grass and clouds – just for the fun of it. But I am not so idle as to count matches, birds and even the money I have in my bank account. On the other hand, I may dream about the red stone I did not describe; I just touched upon it, without touching it. Was it alive? Was it the Philosophers' Stone? Perfect fixation, fixed perfection, the Red Rose. You follow a red rolling stone and gather a lot of moss – just to contradict a wise saying, to question the wisdom of common sense, the wisdom of wise guys. You worship contradictions and exceptions and within your interior monologues two and two make either nothing or eight.

For obvious reasons, I am not keen on the colour red, probably because it is used to denote passion or danger or slaughter. At least in the Soviet Union we ran many dangers, and the individuals at the helm were passionately resolved to exterminate the population of my native country. In a way, the regime we had to endure was in the state of perfect fixation: no metamorphosis was under discussion in the course of the Party unions and reunions. If one felt like comparing this regime to an object, one might say, 'It is a red stone lying in the middle of a thoroughfare or in the middle of Red Square. It is not a motionless stone, but whatever you might do and think, it will not roll in any direction. You'll never set it in motion.' But history is unpredictable, contrary to what Marx and Marxists affirmed: something or someone is bound to kick it, sooner or later. History rolls (and rocks) as if aping Time and its frolics. Oddly enough, it is also motionless; in other (Plato's) words, Time is a rolling image of Eternity. And Eternity is a stone you can trip over in the middle of Red Square. Or in the middle of nowhere – anywhere, as it were, for Eternity is associated in many minds with death and his eternal sleep. I do not mean to say that death is eternally asleep on a couch, on two cushions – far from it. Frankly speaking, death is far from couches, sofas, divans and deathbeds, for the simple reason that he cannot die. On the other hand, death is very close to all other deathbeds, deathcouches, deathbenches, and so on. One might say he literally sleeps with us round the clock. One might even go so far as to describe the situation we are involved in as follows: we are never alone, and whenever we are in our wife's company, shamelessly she betrays us in our presence. In this case

one might and must use the word ‘threesome’, and no one will blame him or her for using this notion, this emotion linked to our intimate orgy. What is more, our wife is also unfaithful to our sacred union in our absence: as I pointed out earlier, we are always in death’s loyal company. She walks in the streets and death takes advantage of her back, of her buttocks and makes love to her in any fashion he chooses and pleases. Some say that death may rape our wives only on beaches, during the three or four hours she spends soaking up the sun and its wholesome, beauty-producing rays. The sun glances at a beautiful, quasi-naked body and a beauty spot makes its appearance on the entirely submissive skin. But these optimists and humanists are bitterly mistaken because no clothes will ever prevent our death from raping our body, using all our orifices (and all his artifices) for the purpose. The same optimists fail to realise that death sleeps with us, even if he does not feel like sleeping with us or anybody else. He may even hate our body, our soul, our face covered with pockmarks. But we should not forget that death is duty bound to kill us either with cancer or with kind words, as in Oscar Wilde’s poem and in Schubert’s famous lied. These optimists think that death arrives at the appointed hour, sits down astride our belly and inserts some poison or weapon into it. We must be aware of death’s eternal presence, and this presence is no doubt the only proof of our immortality.

The so-called ‘dread of death’ is omnipresent, and I know only two persons who did not seem to fight shy of his presence: Pina Bausch and Ludwig Wittgenstein. I am almost sure that Wittgenstein did not scream when told he was to die in a week or so. But even Goethe, for all his Olympian calm, screamed, cried, insulted his doctors at some point in the middle of his life journey. (Dante seems to have predicted this point and Goethe’s fear.) He shouted at the doctors, accusing them of crass ignorance. ‘You don’t know the first thing about medicine, and the disease I’m suffering from has always escaped your notice. Actually you take notice only of your fees, of the money my servant puts in envelopes and hands you before you leave my house. Tell me frankly what bugs, microbes and viruses lodge in my throat, stomach, legs and nose. I would thoroughly examine my intestines, if I were you. Do you know the word ‘coronavirus’? Do you ever listen to the radio? Your computers must be kaput too. You’re kaput as well. You’re dead, my dear doctors. What a pity I have no alternative but to submit my body to your incompetent hands and brains. Do you have brains? I can see your hands, but I’m not sure you have them, the brains. Just an optical illusion, you know.’ After a while he was weary of his speech addressed to the doctors and medical workers ill-treating their patients throughout the world. His inner gaze inexorably turned towards his contribution to the glory of God’s creation. He thought he might finish *Faust* and also *Mephistopheles*. He deplored both his shortness of time and of breath. At that point he was short of time, space, God’s help, God’s indulgence, God’s forgiveness. ‘I ought to have devoted a few cantos to your magnificence. I ought to have written the *Divina Commedia* instead of enlarging endlessly upon Mephistopheles’ tricks. My Martha or Margaret or Thatcher or Greta is no match for Beatrice. She is just Gretchen, nothing more, and “*greh*” means “sin” in Russian.’

Ten years ago I finished a huge commentary on the *Commedia* and for two decades at least I did my best to paint my Beatrice’s portrait. Then I realised that Giovanni Bellini and Fra Angelico were far more suited for the job. Our union is depicted in a 15th-century painting. In a castle which represents the philosopher’s furnace, Lady Alchimia dwells in state with her consort the Athanor King. No generation without corruption. She carries a shield with the head of Medusa, emblem of the black putrefaction which is indispensable to the alchemical process. Below she reappears in the guise of Iris; and on the right Venus stands on her scallop shell, her body all roses: the red flowering out of the white. Following in Beatrice’s footsteps or rather wingflaps, my Beatrice died many years ago, and I think now that one cannot live without an angel or Sophia who comes down and goes up again – like

the star I mentioned in connection with a little boy and his learned mother. Some of us like the Earth, her pleasures and displeasures; for all its allurements and ecstasies, heaven is inferior to its younger sister and that is why we came up with the idea or notion of the 'yo-yo'. This toy makes our children aware of what exercise we are supposed to devote our time to, if we long to travel between heaven and Earth without toil and trouble. All right, you prefer the Earth to heaven's lakes and bushes and ladies, but now and then you might remember Beatrice and her angelic, Maria-like appearance. You say to yourself, 'I'll spend my holiday in heaven. Great artists and virgins used to come to Paradise to take the waters, for even virgins are not entirely pure.' So you look at the yo-yo acquired by your mother and imitate it to the best of your abilities. Swiftly and decisively, you raise your arm and the yo-yo soars into the sky. So do you unless you are not on top form and suffer from rheumatism or a strangulated hernia. And if you do suffer from these diseases, you open your prayer book and say your prayers distinctly. You should not ignore the distance lying between you and God who is inaccessible, incomprehensible, indescribable and what not. Theologians affirm that God is a not and not a what. God exists and therefore we cannot say God is not. He is *a* not or a knot or the Gordian knot. That is why our life is full of knots, and day in day out we must play the role of Alexander the Great to survive in this turmoil, in this mess and death. It is not for nothing that God is often called 'the king of the jungle'. In the Sixties I heard a piece entitled *Bang*. There was a table in the middle of the stage. At the beginning of the piece, the composer banged her fist ferociously on the table. Then she stopped and the audience heard another bang-bang-bang. Outside a door was banging in the wind. There were three drums on the stage: a bass drum, a snare drum, a kettle drum. They were banging for half-an-hour at least. After the performance, the composer explained her intentions, ideas, standpoints and aesthetics. She thought – and she was right – that the audience failed to grasp her masterpiece's central concept. She said that you could find a multitude of themes in her work which started with the Big Bang. 'According to Jacob Boehme,' she said, 'God created the universe in a fit of anger.' The Big Bang was followed by a series of small bangs that corresponded to the creation of planets, plants and winds. 'Plants and trees are full of blood. They really pulsate with blood and life, otherwise they can't grow properly, to their full heights. The same goes for people and our life in general. You hear bangs all the time. Students clash with the police, boxers beat each other to a pulp, idle pedestrians beat their fellow-creatures' brains out and you hear, "Bang, bang, bang, bang, out, out, out." Drum, drum, drum, Macbeth doth come. Does it ring a bell? Do you have bells in your heads? What will you hear if I beat your brains out? Before they are out?'

We spend the coronavirus era under house arrest or close confinement, and so we have enough time to find out if our relatives, wives and children are of great worth, of small worth, of no worth at all. And if 'no worth' beats its adversaries to a pulp, we say to ourselves, 'Should we get rid of our unworthy, loathsome companions? In the course of this era, they're our companions in misfortune, and we'd rather cope with these misfortunes on our own. Every person I see day in day out is a misfortune in her own right, and I have every right to exclude this misfortune from the Big Bang I get from God.' That explains the number of bangs we hear, whenever we do not turn a deaf ear to the world, to this ominous era. We turn a deaf ear to all of them, to all the worlds available to us in this bloody world and this world shouts or screams, 'Do you have no compassion for your fellow creatures? Thinking only about animals and plants, are you?' And they make you drink the blood of this world. For all your sincere efforts, you do not manage to find any salvation in this blood. Yes, a man realises at last that his wife is a whore, if only within her interior monologues. There are brothels in these monologues of hers. In addition to the sexual acts she performs in them, in their private rooms, you can find her on every street corner, winking at every

pedestrian – even at women. (Her version of feminism.) After reading such interior monologues, some men come to the conclusion that all women are whores. And they habitually add a post-scriptum to this conclusion: ‘And if once in a while one lights upon a virtuous woman radiating the purest light imaginable, this exception proves the rule.’ And if you light upon a multitude of virtuous women, the rule grows so incontrovertible that you give up looking for virtuous women.

And what about my wife and Sophia? Recently my wife shared with me yet another piece of her secret and sacred lore. She thinks there are several generations, and the worst of them is called the Fifth G. There are only worst dimensions and generations in the world, but never mind, never mind: my wife will never listen to reason. The Fourth G is a thing of the past when all sorts of waves and bangs and toxic materials reflected the previous stage of technological progress. Telephones and televisions are not as inhuman as computers and their games; and their waves; and the waves emitted by mobile phones. They are so mobile that our skin is literally punctuated by them, and you can hear their action in the abovementioned piece of music. These waves, games and bangs belong to the Fifth G, and apparently we have already reached the Sixth G which is tantamount to the coronavirus. In other words, they are identical twins. Last night I felt a twinge in my knee, and I said to myself (another example of what they call ‘interior monologue’): ‘I got a particle of the Sixth G. But there’s such a thing as the Fifth D, and this D may save humanity on the very brink of its annihilation. My wife said, ‘The fourth dimension is nothing in comparison with the number five.’ ‘I’m aware of “number nine,”’ I said. ‘In my youth I knew *The Beatles*’ songs by heart. You know, I don’t care about humanity, and in spite of space and time, I’ve always felt cramped on the surface of the Earth. And the confinement we are chained to changes nothing, as far my life and feelings go.’ ‘Aren’t they identical twins? Your life and feelings?’ ‘I often live without feelings and thoughts. Anyway, it is enough to focus your attention on an object – on a stone, for instance. You roll this stone as you climb a mountain. You reach the top of the mountain and the stone becomes a mountain. Then you roll up the mountain and reach Mars or Venus or whatever: any star would fit the bill. And then you say, “Summon me from this life over to eternity.”’

I also analysed the situation in terms of linguistics. Let us take the Fifth G and view it from the point where the Cabbala is located. Let us visualise a mountain on the top of which stands a series of books where each letter is designed for a spiritual Big Bang. G is God – at least in English. Human beings, for the most part, believe in technological progress which is their God or the Almighty. In the light of recent events, our optimists, our staunch believers in physical immortality – a monkey’s heart transplanted into a dying patient – must feel ashamed of their theories. (A monkey’s heart or a plastic heart, a plastic liver. ‘Plastic immortality’, I call it.) We cannot even contend efficiently with the coronavirus. And death is far more powerful than any virus unless we regard him as a virus in his own right, as I usually say. Of course we may ask the Grim Reaper the following question: ‘Is it ever right to kill?’ But he can answer, ‘Of course it isn’t. But I do what I feel like doing. Free country, isn’t it?’ You live with a monkey’s heart, a lion’s bone, a squirrel’s soul, and you have no idea where your other bones or souls come from. They come from the hospital where you expected to die in peace. Alas, they never leave you in peace which might allow you to reach the top of the mountain, the top of the universe. They say humanity is wonderful and life beautiful, and therefore your criminal thought or wish (your wish to die peacefully) is inhuman and ignoble. And it is out of the question anyway. And if you ask them, ‘Why?’ they are likely to answer, ‘Because.’ Luckily for us they will never succeed in their undertaking: immortality is inhuman and this assertion makes sense and renders the word ‘inhuman’ intelligible at last.

There are questions and problems that seem to be on the agenda, considering the horror of the crisis we are facing in the near future. Some futures are distant: harmony, communism and a few giants in the domain of the arts. (And also in the domain of science, contrary to what many of us think.) Yet my wife says the coronavirus is a positive element in the history of humankind – even in financial affairs. ‘We didn’t know we had so much money,’ she said. Logically enough, billionaires hide their money and bank accounts in New Zealand and other remote countries and islands, not within the reach of those who need them badly; on their deathbeds, for instance. Or just in their flats where they do not even have a number of empty fridges. There are no fridges in their empty flats or huts. And so they need the money hidden on desert islands or just in deserts. Of course the needy cannot afford to buy tickets and travel far from their dwelling places, if any, unless their legs are strong and used to taking part in the New York marathon. But even if they *could* buy an expensive ticket and reach those deserts and islands, they would be greeted with anger. ‘Can’t you see where you are? You’re in a desert. There are no banks within a thousand-mile radius of this geographical spot.’ The needy go to a travel agency, find a travel agent and say to him, ‘Could you please sell me a ticket?’ ‘Where do you wish to fly?’ asks the agent. ‘Just outside of this radius.’ ‘What radius?’ ‘A thousand-mile radius from this geographical spot.’ ‘The points of the compass are North, South, East and West. Which of these points have you chosen?’ ‘Doesn’t matter. It’s the distance that counts.’ Thanks to the coronavirus, however, they get a lot of money in the nearest hospital, provided there are vacant beds (or floors, or rather spots) in that hospital, clinic or crematorium. Why do billionaires part with their money? Because they need humans for their products. They also belong to the needy, in a way.

Confinement is the golden rule of my life, and there are no exception to this rule, with the exception of my wife, Sophia and my books, my CDs, my DVDs. I listen to Schoenberg’s op. 31; I enliven and enlighten my solitude as best I can. And I can do a lot in the domain of enlightenment. My wife lives in the house opposite and switches her lights on every day: she does not travel extensively. And now you are forbidden to travel, even if you have enough money for a journey to the moon. I continue to go up by rolling stones and even footballs; after all, I was a good goalkeeper in my childhood. I was a wretched attacker, but you do not have to score goals if you long to reach the stars. You fly up and become a mountain, a shaft of light; and you repeat some koans to boost your ego. I am the only person worthy of being respected. Standing up, the pupil points one finger to the sky and another finger to the Earth, and recites, ‘Between heaven and Earth there is nothing nobler than I.’ Whatever I recite, say or do, I shall die in the near future; not in the distant future where harmony is situated, where fountains adorn groves and copses (and corpses) as they do in the Parc de Versailles. Whatever I do or feel, they will go on gushing out of pipes and statues, and I think I had better join them in their flights instead of picturing to myself my ascent or ascension, my days in heaven, far from the Earth.

According to my wife, however, it is better to be in the *nether* part of creation, for the Flood comes from above and the intensity of its downfall will not permit us to fly up, to climb mountains and accompany fountains in their flight towards God. My wife reminds me that Noah’s Ark was not the battleship Potemkin, but a gigantic submarine, and I suppose it was painted in bold colours – crimson, purple and blue, with a view to animating the confinement of the elect. But as usual we should not forget alchemical colours, adjusting them to our predicaments, otherwise we might perish even in Noah’s Ark, despite God’s magnanimity and all-forgiving nature. In Noah’s Ark you could find only kings of all kinds: a king of lakes, a king of forests. And also a few queens: the queen of clubs/diamonds/hearts/spades. The queen of spades was dedicated to Pushkin and Tchaikovsky; these three guests of honour had their meals at the top table. At the same table you could also see and admire the queen that sings on

the throne of nights. She had her meals in Mozart's company, needless to say. During masked balls Mars held a gold-handled, red-sheathed dagger and a silver and gold sword; his scarf was white. And whenever he was the king of the ball, Noah's Ark displayed these colours. Noah, however, never disregarded the importance of death which was doubly important on account of his hospitality. But for his generosity, death would already have died, like the rest of humanity.

My wife may be right; she is perhaps always right, given her connections with superior forces, energies or simply the cosmos. She says that, along with her friends and children, she is connected, and I think the connection she alludes to does not involve ordinary people who catch viruses, go to their offices and die in deserts, deprived of medical care, dollars and lullabies. For a while we were not on the same wavelength, because I am not sure I am connected to anything or anybody except Beethoven, Haydn, Bach, Schubert, Brahms and many other composers. I am also connected to Dante, Plato, Spinoza and many other representatives of poetry and philosophy. But my connections with the stars and astrology in general are limited to childish songs such as, 'Twinkling, twinkling, tickling, tickling.' So I think I had better follow her advice and plunge into the ocean called 'The Next Flood' (not The Next World) where I am sure to find a submarine, although Captain Nemo or what's-his-name is no longer alive, I suppose. His name evokes the Russian word '*nemoy*' or '*nem*' which means he is dumb; if my memory serves me right – it often serves me wrong, as I always say – he spoke from time to time, giving commands, saying, for instance, 'Don't forget we're bound for Ararat.' For once, my wife asked me what I was talking about: she was in the dark, which happens rather seldom, as far as her life is concerned. She seems to be always in the light. Ararat is traditionally associated with the mountain on which Noah's Ark came to rest at the end of the Flood. I asked her if a submarine could reach the top of a mountain, even if assisted in its efforts by water. She said, 'Yes, of course. Actually I've heard about this story, about the mountain top on which a few traces of the Ark can be found. There are also a lot of ghosts wandering around the area as if in search of a new life. Some of them didn't find it at once, upon arrival.' Oddly enough, our conversation reminded me of Coleridge's poem, of his Ancient Mariner who happens to be one of my favourite literary heroes. I am the Ancient Mariner to some extent; and yet I am neither a good sailor nor a bad sailor: I am no sailor at all. I do not have *le pied marin*, as the French define this phenomenon or its absence. I do not have the seafoot, as *I* put it.

This poem outlines the dangers one is likely to encounter in the open sea, and no foot will ever help you in such circumstances.

*And now the STORM-BLAST came, and he
Was tyrannous and strong:
He struck with his o'ertaking wings,
And chased us south along.*

With sloping masts and dipping prow

I am afraid I have to stop right here, for fear of vomiting up my lunch and dinner. Perhaps this noisy and filthy rite is also included in what we call 'alchemical initiation'. There are alchemists who are persuaded that the Philosophers' Stone is already in their bowels and intestines; so they do their best to vomit lunches, dinners, snakes and all the croissants they habitually consume at breakfast with the intention of extracting the stone from their

entrails and dropping it into a bowl designed for this purpose. You can also place it directly in a retort so as not to waste your time analysing the stone, putting it under a microscope. The ignorant mistake it for a kidney stone which has nothing to do with spiritual elevation, gold and alchemical kings, their greenness and redness. Anyway, if in the course of this procedure, you manage to remove your kidney stone from your organism, you will not have to spend a day or two in a clinic, talking to unpleasant nurses and arrogant doctors. However, if you are sure that your kidney is the Philosophers' Stone you have been looking for ever since your adolescence, you should undergo several operations and extract it from your physical substance to enjoy its etheric and otherworldly qualities. Of course some of the doctors are knowledgeable enough to recognise the philosophical qualities of your kidney stone. In this case, they will do their utmost to purloin it under most shameful pretexts. They might say to you, 'If you keep this within your reach, you'll be poisoned and die at the end of the year, convulsing with pain.' Actually no Philosophers' Stone is owned by anyone – even at the end of the process. So it is dangerous to keep it unprotected, exposed to indiscreet eyes and minds. And malicious intentions, I am sorry to say. As soon as you reach the last stage of the process, you should snatch the stone from a crucible or a retort, put it into your pocket and lie low until everyone forgets about your very existence. Then you leave your hiding place and, radiant with joy, go to the marketplace to let everybody admire and worship your new essence.

Of course many alchemists lie low for a long time, if not forever, guided by Taoist principles that emphasise the invisibility of sages. But a sage does not have to spend his life playing the part of Wells' Invisible Man or Woman. Plato was visible; so was Master Eckhart. Nor did Dante hide his light under a bushel. He kept walking through many Italian streets and passers-by pointed at him with their walking sticks, saying, 'This man paid a visit to Hell, came back and now he walks through our streets. Perhaps he is the Messiah, Jesus Christ in person. My doctrine sounds credible in the light of what he did after visiting Hell. He went to Paradise, if you please. That's what Jesus did.' 'Shall we ask this man to save us?' 'And what about the Cross, Golgotha?' 'We may nail him to the Cross in Ravenna. Do we have to go to Israel or Palestine? What's the name of this country now?' 'Palestrina?' 'No, we're not talking about music, are we? We're talking about our salvation, Paradise, eternity and so on.' 'Why do you say "so on"? Is there anything beyond eternity?' 'Don't be so pernickety.' 'By the way, as a poet, Dante is extremely pernickety about using words correctly.' 'We're not talking about literature, are we? Let's find a cross.' 'And a few nails.' 'And a hammer.' Jesus was also visible, come to think of it. Even his Cross was visible. And his blood, his wounds. What a pity we do not *always* speak of music, musically. What a pity the cosmos is not a musical box.

I have neither time nor the inclination to re-read *L'Île mystérieuse*, though I might have read it in my cradle: I began to read rather early, and I would not be surprised, if someone showed me a photograph: my cradle, myself, a book in my hands, my eyes riveted on the words; on the Logos, if you prefer. In the Soviet film I watched or re-watched last night, Captain Nemo – '*nema*' means 'nothing' in Ukrainian – says, 'I regret not having spent all these decades with my fellow creatures. Fish are not the best companions one can dream about.' I agree with him, though not completely: cats are superior to fish, even if they keep devouring fishes and birds. But humans are far inferior; yet some of them decide to turn vegan after watching a documentary about how poultry is raised. Anyway, I would not mind spending the rest of my earthly existence underwater on condition that my cat and my wife might keep me company; not necessarily in this order.

At some point the Ancient Mariner speaks of the spirit that follows the crew, the ship and himself. ('The Spirit that plagued us so.') It is one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither a departed soul nor an angel.

The visible inhabitants plague me, whenever they have enough time to turn their heads in my direction. However distant I might be from their gazes and fields of vision, they find me, plague me and put many spokes in all my wheels. They go so far as to prevent my rolling stones from rolling and reaching the frontiers of the incomprehensible, from crossing these frontiers. Would they find me in the submarine I talked about this morning as I tried to shake off the pernicious effects of my arthritis, rheumatism and hematomas? With the help of the Flood this submarine might reach the top of Ararat and give rise to another humanity, a new race of men and women. That humanity should be called differently, I suppose, otherwise we are bound to have a lot of inhumanities in our midst. Humanity. A contradiction-ridden humanity. What we call humanism is so hypocritical I am tempted to add 'in' to it, 'in' or 'un' or 'no' or '*niet*'. Or just nonsense, *nietsense*. A Beckett character feels he is entangled in a net. Human beings are entangled in *niets*, in their own denials. At the end of his tragic life, Einstein said, 'If bees disappear from the surface of the Earth and even from her bowels, our race will perish four months later.' Did he say 'four years'? It is a pity he did not say four hours. Anyway I think it is worth our while to destroy all of them; I mean to destroy both bees and humans. By destroying bees we shall at last get rid of humans and of the bees they have in their bonnets. And their shallow, ludicrous businesses, busyness.

Speaking about invisible beings, things, about invisibility as such, we must admit that we always remain in the domain of Zen Buddhism – in the Zen-zone, so to speak. Being is a mere name, and so is non-being. *Niet* is a mere name, for there is no such thing as *niet* or *da*. We can call Nirvana a dream, and I had one of these dreams or nightmares last night, if I remember rightly. Or three nights ago, five *kalpas* ago. I distinctly saw my cat lying on his back, his legs sticking out of his body, motionless and odious. The sight was odious, I mean – all the more odious as my cat's legs, paws and the rest of his body are beautiful. As if someone had driven four sticks or posts into his body, depending on your angle of vision. What is more, this someone had disembowelled him. Or another someone, another body. And then I found myself in a ballroom where both men and women were dressed to the nines. I was wearing a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. 'Are you forgetting your manners?' someone said; the same someone, I presume. 'Manners are a mere name. You're a mere name. What's your name, by the way? Johnson? All right, you're a mere Johnson, nothing more, nothing less. Do you like this tomato sauce? Let me pour it all over your dinner jacket and face. Do you like its taste? Does your dinner jacket like it? Your dinner jacket is a mere name, and its name is Mr Dinner Jacket. And the sauce I covered you with is called Miss Sauce Bolognese. As a Buddhist philosopher puts it, "This truth knows no hindrances anywhere." You can say whatever you like upon hearing these Buddhist words, this sutra, if you wish. Whatever you say or do, I'll go on pouring this sauce over your face, shirt and underwear. Are you wearing anything under this dinner jacket of yours? Whatever you may wear or unwear is a mere name. Or unname. It is unnamed, I mean.' And another last night I had another nightmare or half-nightmare. I was in a kitchen (not in *my* kitchen, in *our* kitchen) and I knew I was not alone: wine bottles, dirty dishes and vegetables (not *rotten* vegetables, mind you) were strewn across the kitchen table, dinner table and the floor. I was waiting for my wife and eventually she came to say she could not stay with me because 'there was somebody else in her life'. Probably a woman, I said to myself. 'Let's not talk about it,' she added as if to allow me to answer thus, 'I had no intention of talking about it.' When I told her about this half-dream, she said, 'Your dreams relieve you from your nightmares. For instance, I'm often asked by men, "May I relieve you of that heavy bag?" and you believe I betray you with these men and also with women. I refuse, politely but firmly, so I always carry these heavy bags myself because you're busy writing or playing the piano. This dream is helping you get rid of your suspicions and jealousy – in the manner of Beethoven's *Fifth*, you know. Ta-ta-ta-ta

is not a call of destiny, a leitmotif of *fatum*, contrary to what musicologists maintain. This motif repels, repulses, drives back one's worries, obsessions – stress, as we commonly call this phenomenon. And then comes: Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta – like a machine gun. Pushing away, pushing away, pushing away.'

As they say, reality is like a vacuity of space which is not hindered by anything, for it refuses to accept any predicates. You can walk through walls and ceilings, for you are also a piece of vacuity, a masterpiece no doubt; hopefully so. You are not forbidden – no hindrances, no obstacle races – to walk through yourself, your body and mind, leaving the soul in peace, however. You walk up or down, towards your personal submarine, and even if you go down, providing it is the submarine you have in mind, you go up and the frequencies you can play with to your heart's content (or vibrations, if you like) increase dramatically, drastically. According to my wife whose knowledge in this domain is boundless, the larger your vibrations, the more information you gather as you progress through space and time, as they usually say, linking these two notions. Do time and space declare in unison: 'United we stand, divided we fall'? Suppose they grow divided, gradually, little by little, big by big, and lo and behold – they are divided; to such an extent that not only do we abolish the Einstein-positioned hyphen, but we literally draw them apart, putting them on different pages, leaving a blank page between them. Let us draw them apart microscopically:

SPACE

TIME

Now they are supposed to fall. I think I wrote this sentence some time ago: 'I fell down the stairs and injured my back;' probably on the day of the accident, assuming I can give it such a grandiloquent name, this occurrence of no importance; except that I am in constant pain and no pills help to ease it. The pain, I mean; my suffering. Well, I hope that both time and space injured their backs, as a result of their respective falls. I also hope – I am even praying for it – they injured their shoulders, their shoulder blades, their stomachs, their livers (their lives, according to my spell-checker), their legs, their hearts, their souls, their subtle bodies, their gross bodies, and what not, and what not, and what not, and what not. I stopped here and switched my computer off: I felt like a cup of tea that the English traditionally offer to their guests or mere visitors. A guest – a mere name, a visitor – a mere name. But if some day our extra-terrestrial foes or friends pay us an impressive number of visits, these visits, visitors and guests will not be mere names: extra-terrestrial, extras, visitors, visions, visible, invisible and so on. They will be real, far more real than the humans I see on screens and in the streets. They will be our saviours, our messiahs, even if we come across no crosses, however miniscule, toy-like, in their spaceships. Well, I went downstairs (this time I injured neither my back nor my legs) and opened a book that my wife had brought to my kitchen this morning. I should admit I had no intention of going on with my narrative entitled *The Destruction of Time and Space*: I thought I had done enough to refute both of them rather efficiently and enthusiastically. Just for the fun of it, I can go on for a little while, before embarking upon my analysis of the book my wife had lent me.

How to annihilate time and space, once and for all? They are invalids now and I have no room for them in my private hospital. (The sign reads 'No humans, no time, no space'.) But they are still alive and their members – minutes, inches – quiver, shiver and wince now and then as if to prove that both space and time offer us still, in spite of everything, their services. An inch quivers and you say to yourself you can spend your holiday in Switzerland or in Scotland. A minute shivers and you realise you should shorten your holiday because of an unknown or known virus that is about to penetrate your pores and orifices. And you wince all the time as if to remind your brain that life is a painful experience which leads to death, to Hell. So you go from one Hell to another,

from the Earth to a sort of underground hut where fire and snow reign alternately. And you are naked – your brain should never omit this detail from the list of your worries. And this list is long: injuries, rheumatism, rotten teeth, no teeth at all, no gums, no lungs, no respiration. You are short of breath, but this shortness is counterbalanced by the length of your suffering. And your train of thought should not obliterate the suffering you are bound to experience in the Hereafter where you will be punished not only for your sins, but also for your innocuous intentions – for *everything*, in other words; for the very fact of your existence. You exist, think and eat, therefore you sin and should be punished. All right, you stop eating, you go on a perpetual diet or hunger strike; and you hear a voice that proclaims the following truth: ‘You’re not in a free country. You’re in the City of God. No strikes, no rights.’ So you stop thinking and Descartes starts turning in his grave, confirming that both time and space are alive and kicking. Why do they kick? What for? Descartes kicks his coffin, setting time and space in motion. In short, they are not dead yet. And what about thoughts? I do not think, therefore I am. I am in my garden, therefore I am.

You set about the definitive version of your murder, annihilation and liberation. You go and fetch your hammer and a sufficient number of nails. You gather the time-pieces together and nail them to your doors and floors. You look at their immobility and smile from ear to ear, exclaiming, ‘Hey – I did a great job pinning time on the walls. Well done!’ But as you let out this shout you realise that time is not dead yet, for this ecstatic cry lasted a few seconds. And these seconds are part of time, not of your walls, floors, doors and ceilings. So you sit down in your favourite armchair and shut your mouth forever, vowing never to interrupt this silence of yours by an imprudent utterance. Nothing doing! Your rheumatism is back and it lasts, for all your efforts to pin the pain on any wall. Time is a staunch friend and ally of your rheumatism; and vice versa. The silence you tried to create an hour ago is broken most piteously: you are screaming with pain and disappointment. Incidentally, your rheumatism is far from motionless. It starts in your back and then starts out on a round-your-body cruise. So space is alive too, you think and even say out loud – to yourself, in all probability. Of course you are loath to invite anyone to your place; for many reasons, obscure and crystal-clear. You cannot bear humanity and its representatives, and if you think about Sophia, now and then, you say – not out loud, this time – that she is not a human being, although she takes care of humans, like a good nurse, a perfect Nightingale. Moreover, someone’s presence in your abode is bound to create a piece of space, destroying your inner and outer peace. And if someone sits in front of you, you either talk to this individual or grow impatient and furious. And this growing denotes the omnipresence of time. Even if you do your best to rein in your irritation, fury and all the sounds you are about to produce, you cannot make time stop in its tracks.

Coming back to the book I touched upon some time ago, I read a part of it yesterday, and the part I am concerned with speaks of Einstein’s last conference in Princeton. Once more he was tempted to speak of time and space, and he yielded to the temptation, saying something along the lines of, ‘We’d better get rid of these nothings, coming up with a theory that is destructive enough to exclude them from our thoughts and activities. But where could we come across such a theory?’ I lighted on this passage right after writing *my* version of their annihilation. (I am reluctant to give utterance to their names.) Does it unquestionably shed light on the network my wife is so fond of? She often uses the word ‘connection’ or rather ‘connected’: ‘I am connected’ or ‘I am not connected today and so cannot speak to you either on the phone or in your garden.’ ‘How do you operate the remote control unit?’ I ask her, unable to restrain my desire to tease her a little bit, diverting her attention from cosmic networks, from extra-terrestrial visitors of whom she is also very fond. Now she often talks of the twelfth planet, but that is another

story, assuming there is a story to tell about the Sumerians and their connections with those light-hearted visitors. Why did they come to our planet and make it ours, creating a few races of humans and destroying them through floods, world conflagrations and so on? Why did they *always* resume their creative work, after destroying us? Why not destroy us once and for all? I suppose it is much easier to destroy humanity than time and space, our travelling companions, our permanent misfortune-carriers. (They always carry viruses, nothing else.) Of course I keep on building staircases and pushing time and space, my sworn enemies, towards them. My wife says, 'If you really want to get rid of them, don't push them brutally or otherwise. Just invite them to these staircases of yours.' So sometimes I try my utmost to be polite with these arch-enemies of humankind, saying to them, 'This way, please. Don't you appreciate the beauty of this staircase I built for you, for you alone? It is tailor-made for you, you know.' They look at my staircase and say nothing at all instead of breaking into rapturous applause and shouting, 'Bravo! Well done!' So I have no alternative but to aim a kick at their buttocks. And then they tumble all the way down and lie at the foot of the staircase as long as I procrastinate and give them no helping hand. Sometimes I am so disgusted with their outlines and guts that I do not even take the trouble to look for my hammer to smash their skulls. It is easy to rise from the dead if you are neither dead nor buried. I might bury them in my garden, come to think of it. On second thoughts, however, I decide against this: one of my cats is buried in this garden, and I have no wish to profane his memory by putting time and space by his side. I might be reluctant to profane my own existence and substance by killing them once and for all in my house. Should I build a staircase outdoors, in one of the adjacent streets? What answer would I give to police officers, if I asked why I'm making so much noise? (Once again I shall have to resort to hammers and nails.) Of course it would be absurd to talk to them about my allergy to space and time – or just about space and time. I might say, 'I'm trying to rebuild the Tower of Babel.' 'What for?' 'To lodge a complaint with the Almighty.' 'What kind of complaint?' 'He's our Creator, isn't He?' 'Do you believe in God?' 'We must thank someone for the mess we're in.' 'What kind of mess? What are you talking about?' As you can see, it is useless to talk to policemen and other representative of the disorder reigning in our world.

Of course I might just invite them to a restaurant and, once out of my estate, plant a multitude of blows on their jaws, chests, groins and other parts of their material envelopes, all the while listening to their groans. But apparently we resurrect, come back to life and its misery, thanks to the memory called (and misspelt) 'akachik' which contains our history, past, present and future. We are raised from the dead – this memory literally pulls us out of our tombs – and here we go, *mon kiki*, as the French often say. If our corpses keep their hair, the memory uses *them* for this purpose, for its grip and pull. Our bloody akachik. It is probably chic; at least we boast about it to plants, trees and horses which, according to our beliefs, do not possess this memory: only superior beings are entitled to have and use it. Unfortunately it is not anarchic: it is orderly, spick and span, so we recall all our crimes and misdemeanours; and even our menial jobs. All our miseries, all of them without exception. And here we go again. And there we go again: every incarnation we come across in the course of our wanderings makes us live through Caesars, murders, murder trails and trials, terms of trials, trials and errors, errors and trials, Antony and Cleopatra, their corpses, poisons and swords. Whether you call these tribulations karma or nonsense, they come and do not go as if they admired Soviet leaders and their cronies. We cannot do otherwise, they seem to think and even to say out loud; at least I often hear a voice that tells me this truth to remind me of the immobility of history. It is as if we and our ancestors and our offspring were nailed to doors, walls, coffins, churches and history books once and for all. Human history may be reduced to these four words; four-letter words, rather. Just leaf through

Vanity Fair and you will come to the inevitable conclusion: we do not change, whatever machines we have in our rooms and tool sheds. Money, money, money, money. Children, children, children, children. Patriotism has gone out of fashion, apparently, but money is still with us, in our offices, in our salons, in our beds and in our dreams. Ever since the beginning of our close confinement I have been hearing the radio of my *distant* neighbours: their house is 150 yards away from my ears. They just turn their radio on and open all the windows, anxious to fill a huge quantity of air with contemporary trash. They are not content with listening to their CDs or radio waves at home, within their walls, in the presence of their children's dolls. They need a huge volume of entertainment, diversion, distraction, otherwise they might die of angst, of what is usually called *Totentanz*. Death executes a few pirouettes and you say, 'Aha, now I see what you mean!' You say it either to yourself or your relatives who have always warned you against your pernicious habits such as smoking, drinking Burgundy, Claret and Whisky – when there are no other bottles in your cellar. Even after your death one might come across a few bottles in your cellar, and you regret it bitterly, sighing deeply and heavily.

Speaking about death (and we always speak about death, as someone said) we must take stock of the situation created by the coronavirus. You can no longer die decently, assuming there is such a thing as a decent death. Of course you can invite an orchestra to your funeral, asking its members to play Wagner or Beethoven – not Chopin, not the third movement of Chopin's *Sonata in B Minor*. You may also ask your wife or husband to buy an expensive coffin and invite a lot of people to the meal that in Russia traditionally rounds off any funeral, however poor-looking and cheap (in every sense of the word). You may also ask your favourite priest to deliver an exceptional sermon devoted to Paradise and the hymn performed by thousands of angels in honour of the deceased. And yet, whatever you undertake in your own honour, you just *cannot* die decently, even if the number of wreaths they are supposed to lay on your grave far exceeds its dimensions and the size of your corpse, of your former thoughts and hopes. Today, however, the gravity of the circumstances produced and carried on by the virus exceeds the sizes of *all* corpses, of tombs and cemeteries. You began to invite a lot of people to your funeral well beforehand – before any sign of the coronavirus or ordinary cancers cast a shadow over your so-called life. They go to your favourite church and show their invitations written in beautiful italic script. And two guardians say 'No' to every one of them. 'I was his nearest and dearest –' 'No.' 'I was his last mistress.' 'I was his late duchess.' 'No.' 'I was his first girlfriend.' 'No.' 'I was his boyfriend.' 'No.' The number of noes grows and grows. Of course they understand the logic of the restriction that prevents them from praying with their friend's favourite priest and his wife, his children. But even his favourite uncle crosses himself outside of the church. So they resign themselves to this exclusion, to the confusion they experience in their minds and bodies. The logic of the restriction? The quantity of the air one avails oneself of in a church, however big and majestic. The matter stands differently with the open air which enables you to breathe deeply, without fearing viruses and their inhuman progress. But the same guardian, posted at the gates of the cemetery, says the same 'No', in the same tone of voice. This predicament makes me think of two funerals that are poles apart, in terms of numbers, though not in terms of greatness. Robert Musil's funeral was attended by eight persons, which might be regarded as a negative judgement of the writer's contemporaries. Today his wife might say to her relatives, 'You know, my husband is one of the greatest writers of the century, perhaps the greatest. But the coronavirus barred the way to thousands of his fans who stayed at home, praying and crying.' Beethoven's coffin, on the other hand, was followed by ten thousand people. Today, only ten persons would be accepted in the streets of Vienna, at the cemetery where he was buried. Which cemetery is honoured by his tomb?

You are confined, isolated from the multitude which is always right, although, as some of us know, this multitude (and all other multitudes, with the exception of angels) is mostly wrong, wide of the mark. Where is the mark? Obviously it is one point and we can meet this point either after our death or at the end of our interior monologue which is everlasting, as a matter of fact. And this fact is miniscule (just a dot like that .) or infinite. You die or lie on your back, listening to the sound of the wind continually sighing in the trees. And you realise you are moving, going in the direction of an image, of your own self. Do you need anybody by your bedside, lying as you are on your deathbed? You need only yourself, your own image you are about to meet at long last, once and for all. This image has caressed you throughout your life. It stretches out its arms, touches your face and strokes it. These Its meet and embrace each other. You are just It now, but what does it matter? This It includes everything (not everybody) under the sun, above the sun. You see a fair maiden in front of you, behind you. You question her and she replies as follows: 'I am none other (no others, no others) than thine own personal conscience. Thou hast loved me...in this sublimity, goodness, beauty...in which I now appear unto thee.' For many humans (and *l'inhumaine*) this experience is prompted either by death or by the coronavirus. But this meeting can take place elsewhere, in your ordinary life which is extraordinary to many extents and extensions. The more I look and live with my wife, the better I feel the link between us which is not confined to this confinement, to primitive exchanges of kisses and grins. And 'how *are* you today, dearest?' And 'how are *you* today, dearest?' And even caresses, a mere stroking of cheeks are the strokes of my pen so it is not just a limited edition of love you can find almost everywhere, under any parasol on a sunny day. Yesterday we dined in my garden or our garden, and once again I met myself, which has become an ordinary experience as if I were just waking up and opening my senses. By the way, last night I had a cocktail dream where Paris was mixed with Moscow somehow, though I do not know how. I recognised what I saw and I do know which buildings and streets were mixed to the point of becoming one city, one sensation; I am perplexed as to the possibility of such a combination. Combinatory games will never go out of fashion in the domain of dreams, but there are limits to these mixtures, for even in our dreams we are alert and unlikely to accept utter absurdities. Anyway, my wife and I were looking for a restaurant, and I know which restaurant we finally came to. But the streets we had walked along had nothing to do with Moscow: they belonged in Paris, in Parisian habits and beauties. So we came to the restaurant only to find there was no room for us, although the restaurant I had in mind and in the dream (Praga) has many rooms and salons situated on five or six floors. So we had to wait, and while waiting I had a short chat with a waiter who told me that all the clients waiting for vacant tables in the rain would be given 50 euros.

So last night, at dinner I had a conversation with my wife about the Tower of Babel: I was still thinking in terms of ups and downs as if our meeting (or my meeting with the fair maiden, alias my consciousness, soul, soul mate or my wife) were situated above the clouds, not far from the nearest and dearest star. I commented upon the well-known theory according to which the Tower was not really a tower or a building of any kind. It was a launch pad or even a rocket, a spaceship, a space shuttle (up and down, up and down) designed to convey human beings to their ancestors; or the gods, in other words. We should not forget, however, that God and even the gods are different words – not altogether, as might be hastily assumed. But whatever mystics and Dostoevsky's heroes believe and talk about, we are not the Almighty, for all our technological innovations. We are perhaps a number of clay idols that can be thrown into a rubbish bin, for they do not deserve a decent fireplace, its flames and purification. What I like about the idea materialised through this spaceship is the *material* aspect of the problem traditionally confined to a mental image, an imaginary journey to the moon or Venus or a starry sky. 'What is the

use of mythological knowledge that has no practical application?’ we may ask ourselves. Of course we can visualise all sorts of staircases or towers leading to God or high, unreachable spheres where Sophia, Maria and Beatrice await us with many cups of tea. But there is no sense in such extra-terrestrial visions or dreams. Instead of wasting our time on these toy staircases that can abolish neither time nor space, we had better realise we were created by the gods – not *in their images*, contrary to what they say everywhere. We have our own images to cope with, to get rid of, if necessary: these images are often cumbersome, shameful and downright criminal.

It is noteworthy that the images related to Gagarin’s flight (I was still living in Moscow) are saturated with filthy details such as vomiting and cursing destiny and Soviet authorities bent on imposing their beliefs on the rest of the world. You just vomit and say to one of the mikes: ‘Our Earth is very beautiful indeed. A breathtaking view. I’m out of breath, you know.’ Well, someone recorded this nonsense in a studio and we heard it in our tiny rooms, relishing every word, every intonation and timbre. What does all this rubbish amount to? Yet it is preferable to Enoch’s narrative and visit to heaven where he went from one space to another, looking at angels, saints and demons. I think Origen said that demons would be saved in the long term. Actually I have no idea what Enoch really saw: I am neither his biographer nor his travelling companion. What counts is your departure from the Earth and the distance you create in the course of your space and spacious odyssey. Flying away from the Earth, as far as necessary to obliterate its landscapes, ecology and inhabitants. Marcion was asked the following question, ‘What did Jesus Christ save us from? From the demons, from death, from sin, from the flesh?’ Marcion answered, ‘He has saved us from the world and its god in order to make us children of a new and alien God.’ I have just watched a Soviet film dating back to the Thirties, and I said to myself (sometimes it is not pointless to speak to oneself, even on Earth): ‘Our present culture or anti-culture is inferior to the Soviet stuff. The only difference can be detected in the gulag and also outside it: before landing up in a prison camp you were arrested either in the streets or in your tiny room. Today, in our democratic world, nobody rings your bell at night to add a pair of handcuffs to your body as if your wife kept complaining about your ugliness, saying, ‘Something must be missing from your hands and wrists. They’re so ugly.’ Did *she* call the police to say you were an English spy? But the thoughts, their network, as my wife might put it, are more or less the same. Tesla dreamt of universal electricity supplied by ether, by Tesla and ether. When they announced the news to Morgan, he said, ‘Where are we supposed to install the electricity meter?’ It is better than Stalin’s purges and other Soviet trials, but Tesla was harassed so spectacularly that only the gulag seems to be missing from the list of his torturers.

Morgan’s meter is everywhere; and so is Trump’s – to such an extent that our last dinner, the one we had in my garden, was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The pollution did not poison the air and our senses, our lungs and thoughts. Apparently now you can see some fish in the rivers which looked deserted and despised for decades. Even anglers forsook them. Was this world created by a benevolent creature? Wherever we go, we trip over meters, and if we look up, eager to worship the stars and their beauty, we see a number of meters hanging overhead, from walls and trees. One wonders if an oak-tree differs from a birch-tree, from any bush or blade of grass. You walk in the midst of meters and whenever you see none either overhead or at your feet, you say to the nearest pedestrian, ‘I’m lost, I’ve lost my way. Where am I? Which meter is it? Where’s the nearest meter? I’ll faint, if I don’t see a meter within a few metres. My jacket for a meter, my Rolex for a meter, my Rolls for a meter.’ ‘What kind of meter are you asking for?’ ‘Any meter would do – an electricity meter, a gas meter, a water meter.’ ‘The electricity meter is under the stairs.’ ‘Where are these stairs?’ ‘Straight on.’ You walk, come to a standstill, look for a meter, for the stairs the pedestrian told you about, see a few steps, lose your footing and tumble down the stairs. And

under the stairs you find at last the electricity meter you have been dreaming about for eternity. You touch it, caress it, kiss it, make love to it and die in its embrace.

I need neither Morgan nor his meters to feel how ludicrous and inappropriate our world is today; and the coronavirus is not at the root of our inborn inadequacies. Generally speaking, I am at sea with the human mentality, thoughts, feelings and utterances. People talk a lot about the Tokyo Olympic Games that may not take place next summer, due to the obstinacy of the virus. The chairman of the Olympic committee said to journalists and the whole world, 'Human lives are more important than the Olympic Games.' This utterance means you should live at all cost, even if what they call human dignity cannot afford this cost. And the presence of the Olympic Games in our midst is almost as important as the life of our species. We do all we can to organise these Games, removing all obstacles from our stadiums and airports that are already prepared to welcome international and national visitors. But the virus cannot be removed so easily, and we wonder if we could sacrifice our lives for the sake of the Games. We cannot sacrifice them for the sake of Christianity, of our native lands. We can and should sacrifice them for the sake of our children – that is for sure. So we ask ourselves whether the Olympic Games are as important to us as our children. Some of the chairmen and sponsors have no children so they might say, 'To Hell with children. We can't afford to lose eight billion dollars. If your children die, your wives will offer you many other children. In a Soviet film an actor says to his wife, "The Arab Emperor died two weeks ago. All his children, 900 boys and girls, attended his funeral. I'd like to see his wife. Must be a magnificent woman."'

During the meeting of sponsors, chairmen, famous sportsmen and women, you can see a lot of children in the hall, despite the explicit instructions dictated by the omnipresence of the virus. At some point, a woman stands up and 30 children follow her as she walks towards the stage, steps on it and proceeds to five microphones. 'Look at these children,' she says, pointing to the boys and girls standing behind her. 'They're still alive. But if your bloody Olympics take place, you and their history will be steeped in blood.' 'Children can't die from the virus,' says one of the chairmen, rising from his chair. 'And what about *you*?' asks the woman. '*What* about me?' asks the man. 'You're sure to catch the virus,' says the woman. 'Are you so sure I'll catch it?' asks the man. 'Of course, if your virus-riddled, virus-permeated Olympics take place. Imagine the number of visitors and competitors.' 'According to official figures –' 'I'm not interested in your figures, either official or unofficial.' 'I see,' says the man. 'What *do* you see?' asks the woman. 'The meaning of your words,' says the man. 'If you're able to see meanings, you can't ignore the children standing in front of you – very close to your eyes, as a matter of fact. And if your eyesight is deficient, you can *smell* their presence – they are as fresh as a daisy. Do you know their smell? Do you remember what a daisy smells like on a beautiful sunny day?' 'I'm afraid my powers of recollection aren't up to your standards, dear lady.' 'With your permission, I'll remind you of the smell under discussion,' says the woman, walking towards the man and kissing him on the mouth. 'You're not allowed to do that,' cries a doctor. 'Your behaviour is indecorous and unchristian,' says a priest or a monk. 'Does my perfume ring a bell?' 'No, I'm sorry, your odour doesn't ring any bells with me.' 'Blow your nose on my hankie.' 'You're not allowed to do *that*,' cries the doctor.

Once this ritual is over, painstakingly the woman explains to everybody what will happen if the bloody, virus-overburdened Olympics takes place. Every chairwoman and secretary will be contaminated. The athletes receive their medals from all sorts of presidents. They also receive flowers from bathing beauties. Unfortunately, however, these beauties do not bathe every five minutes so their hands and the rest of their bodies carry the virus and dutifully transmit it to the winners who carry it around the world as they continue to run, jump and win a lot

of medals. 'Some diseases are transmitted from one generation to the next,' the woman points out. 'You know,' she adds, after much soul-searching. 'So search your souls and hearts before taking any decision,' she says as she turns her head towards the chairman and chairwomen. This episode makes me meditate upon children, their egos and destinies; and our attitude towards them, which is as grotesque as the rest of our attitudes. As usual we prove to be addicted to extremes, going from God to insects. We idolise our children, but there are many idolatries and idols in our miserable world, and children are what they are, no more, no less. (It does you good to talk rubbish in a bourgeois style; now and then.) Often we treat them like dolls we can put on our laps and tickle as the fancy takes us. We tickle their heels and stroke their armpits; they laugh and wriggle like worms, or cry and scream and bite our fingers and arms. We either attribute majestic, God-like powers to them, or just pinch them as if they could say, 'Ouch! Stop pinching me!' They just scream and we show them to our friends and comment upon their reactions. 'You see, she's just a baby.' Or we say to a journalist, 'If there's a shortage of food, we won't eat anything for a week or ten days to allow our children to live and prosper. And if there's a shortage of shirts and trousers, we'll go naked and they'll wear sailor suits.'

My wife is taking care of two brothers one of whom (an eight-year-old boy) was ill for quite a while. Kidney trouble, apparently: I cannot memorise all these diseases and organs and often confuse spleen with kidneys, livers with stomachs. And even cancers are interchangeable, to some extent, within my mind and imagination; and apprehensions. I do not know how long he suffered unbearable pain coming from his kidneys, but at some point he felt better – thanks to his brother who, for no reason at all, began to wilt and would fall on his knees, now and then, as if about to pray and ask the Almighty's forgiveness for the sins he could not have committed. As we all know, Roman Catholics go to confession to purge their souls from sin. The boy's mother was a Roman Catholic and, understandably enough, she could not control the urge which literally pushed her towards churches and priests. So she went with her son to her favourite church where her favourite priest said bluntly to the boy, 'Now let us get down to brass tacks. Are you in the habit of masturbating, whenever in the presence of girls?' 'He's only five years old.' 'All right, all right. So it's another sin you commit on a regular basis. What laid the basis for this sin, may I ask? You see, your sincere statement will form the basis for our discussion, your recovery and salvation.' Well, my wife believes that this boy was withering because of his brother whom he tried to help by withering, wilting and crying at night. He might have continued to die, had not his brother realised that his brother was dying for his sake. Had he been dying for a beautiful girl's sake, he would have helped him anyway: they were like communicating vessels. So the other brother began to wilt in his turn and thus they were wilting, withering, recovering, mutually saving their bodies and souls. A beautiful story, isn't it? Boys will be boys, brothers will be brothers. Rascals will be rascals, vessels will be vessels.

The point is (the vessel is) that all these vessels exist until the advent of knowledge that usurps our artless communications and warns us against superfluous philanthropy. What can you get for helping your brother by withering and growing pencil-thin? It depends on what you can get *from* your brother. Usually you can get something from your *parents*, at least at the age referred to in my wife's story. As you grow older you lose your capacity to wilt on account of your brother's kidney trouble, especially if you know nothing about his kidneys and his share in your mother's legacy and generosity. But if you give 10,000 dollars to charity, you can count on your colleagues' unconditional support during election campaigns. And if you do know something about his kidneys and their trouble or excellence, you ask yourself what you should do to buy a luxurious villa, a luxurious car and an ordinary plane. To tell the truth, even in your childhood you were interested not only in toys, but also in their

cost. While walking with your mother (and your brother) around your area of the city, you would ask your mother the following questions, ‘Mummy, how much is this car? How much is this helicopter? How much is this monument to Caesar? How much is this hotel? How much is this beach? How much are these female bodies?’ And you got into the habit of memorising your mother’s answers: your notebook’s pages were covered with numbers, dollars, Swiss francs and pounds. After your parents’ untimely disappearances (you and your brother are still suspected of their deaths) you began to eye your brother warily as if he was going to steal your share of your parents’ money. So you decided to forestall his theft by murdering him, by inheriting his fortune. But you did not know how to go about it. My wife has always said that, whether you are a black or a white magician, you should make use of your thoughts and sense of direction. Of course you always have myriads of thoughts in your head: you are neither a yogi nor a Buddhist and so cannot create a semblance of void in your mind. You may be disoriented, however, in ordinary life which is too ordinary to be really taken care of; but when you have a rival or a beloved, you must concentrate all your energies either on death or salvation. And this death, this salvation should not be scattered over plants or *other* humans instead of reaching their objects (hatred, love) and accomplish their duties. You hate somebody – your neighbour, for instance – and you hope to make him wither and die through your death-rays proverbially cherished by the Martians and many other invaders of the Earth. You focus your thoughts or rather rays on this neighbour of yours who is just taking a walk in his own huge garden. Of course you do not expect him to die on the spot: you cannot expect to get everything you need at the push of a button, as they say. There are many buttons you have to push to make your neighbour fade away, like an American soldier. But what happens under your very eyes is so horrible you do not manage to come to terms with it at once. You thought your neighbour might at least trip over a root to boost your ego where your gifts are enclosed; your black powers, among other gifts, poisons and deaths. Your neighbour continues his walk unperturbed. Now and then he stoops down and smells a flower, uttering an exclamation that amounts to a repetition of O. Apparently he is reluctant to confirm the efficiency of your approach, of your rays, thoughts and élans. Rather, he seems bent on invalidating all your powers, including those that enable you to hold out in the world where only viruses thrive and carry on in their own bitter-sweet ways. One of your favourite trees, on the other hand, begins to crackle, which reminds you of the logs crackling and popping in your fireplace. But you did not bury this tree in your fireplace: you love it to distraction and have no intention of parting with it – till doomsday. Yet the tree no longer seems to be rooted to the spot as if its roots had been gone forever, for some obscure reason. Normally everything reminds us of something else. This tree (in its present state) conjured up images of your Russian past. At closing time many drunkards would reel out of cafés and fall down on pavements where they were likely to spend a few hours, unnoticed by pedestrians and police officers. At last the tree identifies *completely* with those drunkards that inhabit your past and you trip over it on your way back home.

It seems that some people still believe in sorcery and black magic. My wife believes in white magic and often reveals *her* powers, inaccessible to many benefactors of humanity. Of course she is aware of black magicians and *their* powers, so she often puts me on guard against them, saying, ‘You should concentrate on whiteness, on angels, on white dresses, on your white dinner jacket.’ She probably does not say anything of the kind: I do not know human beings and often I just invent them for the sake of our communication, denied by Antonioni, as people usually say to show they know *something* in the domain of the arts. I am a psychological idiot, as I usually point out, and when people ask me what I mean by this utterance or statement, I say I cannot dissect the souls, hearts and psychological structures of those I am supposed to meet, for some reason or other. (I wish I could know these

reasons, which might lead to their elimination.) Children learn by observing adults, and recently I came to the following conclusion: I did *not* observe adults either in my childhood or in my adolescence. In short, I have never observed anybody, with the notable exception of animals and plants. When I first met my wife's son-in-law, I said he was a rascal, a brute, a good-for-nothing, a good-for-*everything* in the empire of evil. Yesterday I saw him in my wife's garden and I said to myself (and to my wife), 'He's adorable. How lucky you are to have such a son-in-law. Your daughter is lucky too. And their children are beyond compare.'

Let us go back to our brothers, one of whom is determined to murder the other, which often happens in the world where humans meet, talk and do a lot of business with overseas customers. Some of them just pick up a hammer (why waste your time on looking for axes?) and strike their colleagues, friends and utter strangers, idle observers – just anybody who happens to penetrate their fields of vision. So one of our brothers (the potential murderer) constantly guides his death rays towards his peaceful and bountiful counterpart. And yet his brother, this counterpart, continues to enjoy the whole paradisiacal spectrum that we are in possession of, provided we believe in what they call 'paradise on Earth'. He eats, drinks gorgeous wines, goes to three-star restaurants, and his brother does not even succeed in removing one star from these restaurants and the delicacies they offer. And whenever his brother invites the black magician to one of these places, the latter cannot even bear the sight of the dishes put on the table as if his so-called black magic had poisoned his existence once and for all. The point is your magic, your evil thoughts, are liable to backfire, leaving you stranded in the country of the miserable, to paraphrase the title of H. G. Wells' famous work. Luckily for the future victim, his murderer was unable to commit an *ordinary* murder – by striking his brother with an axe (*topor*) of *Crime and Punishment* fame. (There are no other axes in the world.) So he resolved to put infinite trust in the coronavirus by exposing his brother to danger whenever a danger of this kind was looming on the horizon. At this point I might remind the reader that the most intricate, sophisticated black magic is mixed with virtue to the point of becoming a sort of black-and-white photograph or film. Only unprofessional devils are black-hearted villains. In the kingdom of evil you are required to mix virtues and sins, to create such cocktails that even professionals are at a loss for a reply, when asked, 'What's the name of this cocktail, please?'

So the villain reminded his brother that the dead were often angry with the living, if the latter had failed to attend their funerals, to say a few comforting words to their unfortunate relatives, friends and mistresses. There is no denying that ghosts are mostly unkind to the quick – not only because the latter are still in the land of the living, in our paradise on Earth. 'You didn't attend my funeral.' 'You didn't say I would live forever.' 'You didn't contradict my doctors, their diagnosis.' 'You didn't supply me with a vitamin pill.' 'You didn't sugar the pill.' 'You didn't sugar my suffering.' 'You're not in the habit of saying "hello" and "adieu" to the dying. And I was your lover for five years.' Try as you may, you will never convince the dead of your innocence; and yet they know a lot about the restriction imposed on the representatives of our race in times of viruses, especially if our bodies are submitted to the coronavirus: we should not forget that a few populations of endangered humans have been decimated. (And the dolphin population has been decimated by tuna fishing.) All around you there are only infants who carry the virus wherever and whenever they go either on all fours or just on two. They will fall ill in due course and say to their descendants, 'Don't kiss anybody, don't go out, wash your hands every five minutes.' Well, our evil brother kept on talking about the dying, about their souls, about the threshold of death on which so many humans were standing at that particular moment. (This moment goes on, I am sorry to say.) 'You should go to the crematorium, even if you meet only guardians at the entrance door. Anyway, you'll be able to catch sight of the

deceased and say goodbye to her or rather to her relatives. But you're aware, aren't you, that her relatives are deeply distressed by the news of her death – to the point of willing to join her in the Hereafter? You should talk to them about the Hereafter and its fire.' 'And what if they're contaminated?' said the intended victim. 'I'm afraid of the virus,' added the same victim. 'Never mind – you have a very strong constitution.' 'Could I at least wear a mask?' asked the brother. 'It's impolite to wear masks at funerals unless you participate in an Aztec or Maya rite.' 'I'm told they despise death, mock death.' 'We're not Mexicans, are we? We should respect death, the dying, the dead, the virus.'

The future murderer also wrote a text for his brother, a text designed for the dying, instructing their souls. And he told his brother, while handing him the text, 'You should recite this in the presence of the dying person, not far from her ears. Don't forget that the dying are often, not to say always, hard of hearing.'

THE SPEECH ADDRESSED TO A DYING PERSON

My dear dying sister! I can't hide from you the fact that you are now standing or rather lying supine on the threshold of death. Actually you're lying on your deathbed, but never mind, never mind. You're lying somewhere – on the threshold of death, to be exact. I'm not lying to you, you know. Why should I lie to the person whose life is over or almost? But even the few seconds you still have in your possession count on account of the speech you should listen to so as not to make too many mistakes in the anteroom, in the here of the after, so to speak. Even after crossing the threshold you'll be partly on Earth, and therefore you may count on our prayers and rely on our broad-heartedness. Alas, no amount of praying will ever bring you back, enabling you to live on Earth – whatever they might say about reincarnation, metempsychosis and eternal recurrence. Frankly speaking, I don't remember exactly what they say about all these things because I've never been really interested in nonsense and rubbish. You know, rubbish bins are more useful than our foolish talking, the talking we often indulge in for reasons best known to ourselves. I don't know these reasons and have no desire to know them. Why should we waste our precious time on crazy, unnecessary monologues? It is true that your time is about to die. You're both about to die, you and your time. Actually your space is also about to expire unless you are resolved to take the space awaiting you in the Hereafter seriously. What lies ahead of you (in store for you, if you wish) is a sort of void or rather the void of sorts, for the void we can profit from is related to Buddhism and its tenets, not to death as such. You can die while living, and this is beneficial too, otherwise no Father of the Church would ever have touched upon this kind of death, this kind of life. But they all touched upon it, although no one can really touch the void. Makes no sense, does it? Why should you create your personal void, if anyone can touch it, enter it, walk in it, eat in it, desecrate it? Well, let us get down to brass tacks. The death I'm talking to you about has nothing in common with the Fathers of the Church and their teaching. You've sinned a lot, my dear sister. You've sinned throughout your life, without giving any thought to repentance, God, retribution and final salvation as if you had known for sure you would never be saved. You might be saved (in the nick of time) if you listen to my speech. God Himself asked me to deliver it to you. So if we both shirk our duties now, the situation will just be that much harder to deal with in the near future. And the future I'm alluding to is very near, I can assure you. Once again I can't help hinting at your forthcoming death. It is coming, it is coming very fast and no doctor can do anything to delay its entrance, advent and triumph. Of course we're used to saying, 'Death, thou art dead,' and so on. Just another instance of foolishness and foolhardiness. But let us not be fools on the brink of what some of our gurus call 'our irremediable collapse'. Do you remember your falls on various staircases? Your body must remember your falls and even your screams

and cries for help. Well, no one can give you a helping hand now, at this particular hour of need. No one can say, 'Get up and carry your deathbed as far as a new life.' Or the same life – renewed and corrected. But I can tell you this and it is my duty to describe the obstacles you're about to encounter in your afterlife to you and your family. The first obstacle lying in wait for you is an identity crisis: you just have no idea who you are and what name your whereabouts have already deserved. Are they nameless? What does it matter! You encounter monsters whose jaws frighten you out of your wits, and the only consolation you find in this hell of uncertainty is the absence of your wits or any of your other belongings. You are literally in the nude, and looking for clothes would be a vain activity. You seem to understand your predicament and therefore do *not* look for anything. But you can't help looking at the monsters as if they were staying within your eyes; and yet you have no eyes, no ears – no nothing, as they say in some books. Having no nothing means something, just the opposite of nothing, and you make a tremendous effort as you visualise the books on scholastics you read in your mature years, assuming there have been any years somewhere, with the exception of Hell. Of course some philosophers declare that Hell is the only corner in the universe where time doesn't exist. In Paradise you dance and sing, and both dancing and singing are meaningless without measure, which is time in disguise. You just *stay* there, once and for all. (In Hell, not in Paradise.) Not once, but for all. You even wonder whether you haven't stayed in Hell throughout eternity. At this point a monster interrupts your musings to ask you a pertinent question, 'Do you feel the sharpness of my teeth?' 'Of course I do,' you answer. 'Do you think they're sharp enough?' 'Quite enough.' The answer is wrong: you must wish to suffer to the utmost, given your Christian upbringing and burden; and the pangs of your conscience to boot.

Whatever happens, whatever comes to pass, is doomed to remain unfinished. It is unfinished at birth, it is unfinished at death, it is unfinished in the Hereafter. Often, when talking to spirits, to ghosts – in short, to the dead (the dead are always short, short of something or just short) – we come to the conclusion that they have not yet reached the end of the road, which might mean there are no ends, no roads. Just a sort of permanent rising from the dead or from the quick. You rise and fall, fall and rise, and one wonders if it is not better to remain motionless, in a state of stupor, because it is stupid to wish for a metamorphosis, a movement, a continuation. To be continued, as they say. So many names and calls – for nothing, just for nothing. Not even for nothing. So everything is unfinished, not only Mozart's *Requiem* and Musil's masterpiece. I am not even sure we might call all this nonsense 'our requiem'. Why should we call it anything at all? Call it names, if you wish. Call it Petya, Micha, Grisha. Call it John and Jean. Call it a pair of jeans or a sailor suit. Or a tailored suit. And Schopenhauer's *Wille* goes on and on, and even if we cut Wil off, he will continue its walk through the cosmos as if nothing had ever happened, as if something had ever happened, here and there and certainly everywhere, until we have evidence to the contrary, unless this evidence is not evident. Unless the proof is not waterproof. A tiny quantity of water leaks from some pipe or other, from *another* pipe, and the proof gets soaked to the skin. A scientist finds the piece of paper on which these words are written and says, 'To our ancestors every object was alive, had a body, a skin and internal organs. Not only the soul, mind you.'

What is predestination? Is there such a thing? You do whatever you wish and decide that today you will eat only three croissants at breakfast, after drinking two glasses of orange juice and three cups of coffee. You drink, eat and say to yourself – isn't it irritating, this habit of ours? – that everything is all right and your free will is in perfect working order. And your legs are in perfect walking order too: you rise to your feet and go somewhere, you do not know where because it does not really matter. What counts is your free will and consequently your

legs' capacity to walk, even if your stroll lasts only a quarter of an hour. And of course you collapse even before the end of this short walk or stroll, for your free will is as non-existent as the much-vaunted, much-wanted *perpetuum mobile* to which Carl Maria von Weber dedicated the last movement of his *Piano Sonata in C Major*. You lie on a pavement or in a garden: it does not really matter *where* you lie or die. What does count is your lying and dying, either from the coronavirus or from a tsar's tyranny, from his crown *corona*. You will die anyway, as someone says somewhere; I wonder if this someone is God or just Mr Death or your interior monologue that sounds true for once; for the last time, to tell the truth. Your pride is measureless and even you have no idea where it begins, where it ends, for your will to self-assurance does not end at all; in other words, it is endless and may lead you as far as the highest celestial spheres. Now you think that even your birth was your own work – your masterpiece, to be exact. Somewhere, in some limbo or other, you resolved to be born in order to save humanity, to become its saviour. But this project did not end on the cross, contrary to what might be thought in the light of what happened many centuries ago. No, your free will is so self-sufficient that you think you have your own voice, your path which can deviate from the New Testament and the Fathers of the Church, whatever their significance and spiritual weight in the rest of the world. No cross is obligatory, you say to yourself, and you even take the trouble to write it in your notebook, determined to preserve your writings for posterity. You also describe your birth in minute detail, but you do not know who should come to your room and honour your appearance in this vale of tears: kings, queens, billionaires, artists of genius, scientists, Einstein, Tesla. You put a lot of names on the pages of your notebook, hoping that future generations will take them into account, when inaugurating your monuments on every continent imaginable. Even your posterity, descendants and fellow creatures whose destinies will cover the 24th century, the 25th century are subject to your free will. Incidentally, now you think that this term is not fit for your free will's requirement. Your pride and arrogance are not happy either. So you write in your notebook, 'From today onwards my free will will be called "The Freest Will", and everybody should write its sacred name with capital letters. My Freest Will thus written and uttered is the only will in the world where there are so many worthless wills and deals, where so many ills and viruses poison the life of our planet, of our Mother. Actually I wonder if the Earth is really my mother. Did I have one? I am aware that Jesus had no father: God was *not* his father, in my opinion, according to my Freest Will. I have no mother, no father, which means I am my own father and mother. So I do not need the nourishment of the Earth and her moral support. I do not need anyone's and anything's support.'

Meanwhile the life of our New Saviour proceeded with caution so as not to offend or harm His personality and Freest Will. But now and then an unexpected occurrence saw the light of day and a few twilights into the bargain as if the Freest Will in the world was not as free as all that. You think you are free, and then someone calls you to say you have an appointment. And if you answer, 'I'm otherwise engaged,' your correspondent may remind you that you will lose a million dollars if you fail to meet your benefactor. And if you answer, 'I'm my own benefactor,' and your correspondent hangs up on you, you lose a million dollars. And you regret your stubbornness, your obstinacy and even shed a few tears that obliterate the importance of your Freest Will. At least you realise your will is not as free as all that. Perhaps All That is much more powerful, considering that the million dollars you lost belongs to him or to her. You end up believing that every letter of the alphabet has more room for manoeuvre than your so-called free will, your free thoughts and your free actions. Whenever your actions spring from your mind and body, you are surprised by the severity of the sanctions. You fall ill, your legs kill you as you begin to walk towards the kitchen, being harassed by your stomach and other internal organs that proclaim, 'I'm

hungry, you fool. Do you want me to die? Don't you think you'll die with me? Don't you think we'll be buried in the same tomb? Or do you wish to be cremated?' Your rheumatism is back and you wonder if it has ever left you, if only for an instant. And then a brick falls on your head inside your own house, and once again you start wondering, not wandering – this is out of the question. Yes, you wonder if you have any will at all: you are not willing to drop a brick (any brick, for that matter) on your head. 'I don't want to be hit on my head by a brick and I wonder where all these bricks that fall on my head come from. Whose tricks are they? I wonder who dares play all these nasty tricks on me.'

A child may believe for a while that he is free to cry and bite his mother's breasts. And if she procrastinates and does not gratify her boy's free will at once, this boy sets about biting her fingers, elbows, cheeks and the rest of her anatomy. The boy does not wonder why he bites his mother and what enables him to bite her as often as he wishes. He does not even know if he *wishes* to do anything at all: he just does this and that. He cries, bites his mother, destroys whatever he can lay his hands or feet on. When the time comes, he orders his father to buy him a bicycle and a toy Kalashnikov, for he yearns to destroy his family. Now he is aware of his wish, resolution and willingness to destroy whatever he sees, hears and smells. But he does not call this impulse, this unquenchable desire, 'my Free Will'. He does not have to: he just does whatever comes into his head. Something comes into his head and this something is immediately put into action: the wheels are set in motion, as they put it. He does not put it at all; he just acts by screaming, brandishing his fists, snatching hammers from wherever they may lie. 'Hey lazybones, get up from your couch and help me to destroy this house and kill my parents! Hey lazybones, hey lazybones, hey lazybones! All right, I'll snatch you from your bed of roses, but I'll punish you severely for your laziness and boneness.'

Once upon a time, however, this boy of ours hit his own fingers – instead of hitting his mother's eyebrow. And then he began to wonder, to ask himself questions such as, 'What's the matter with the hammer?' At this point, his father cut in on his interior monologue to say, 'Some scientists believe that there's about ten times as much matter in the universe as astronomers have observed.' 'What, what, matter, what?' babbled the boy. 'You don't understand, do you? It is high time you realised you're not alone in the world. What's more, you're not all that powerful. God is far mightier than you are. That's why we call Him the Almighty.' 'God, matter, God, matter, mother –' 'Stop blabbering! Listen to what I have to say to you. Ignorance is bliss, but I have every right to deprive you of this bliss, for I am also God, to some extent. To this extent.' And the father (God the Father) touched his son's shoulder. 'You see a certain quantity of matter around you, and you just hit this matter. And that's what's the matter with you, you know. You must learn that matter hits back. God hits back too, if you dare defy His prerogatives. And whatever prerogatives there are in the world are God's prerogatives, my dear boy, my son and heir. You should realise you cannot handle the world in the way you extend your arms, for instance. Even *that* might get beyond your control, some day. I do hope you'll never be paralysed, but this *might* happen, for everything lies in God's hands. And if you *are* paralysed, you won't be able to move either your hands or your legs. Now I'm about to say a few words about so-called free will. Some of us – some human beings, that is – overestimate this notion and forget about such diseases as paralysis, cancer, brain haemorrhages. They also omit to pay attention to God in Whose power lies your brain, hands, fingers, fingernails and stomach. If you suffer from indigestion, you should pray to God thus, "My dear God! Please forgive me my sins on account of which I'm suffering today from indigestion and an upset stomach. And I'm also expecting an attack of diarrhoea. My Lord, please don't attack me in this way or in any other way. Please don't attack me at all. I'm a fragile human creature deprived of everything,

down to free will. My free will is Your will, Your predestination. You're my destiny, my Father and Mother. Please don't chastise me. I promise I'll never again bite your breasts. Actually I haven't bitten my mother's breasts for at least two years. Please don't punish me for my former sins and crimes." Anyway, even if God didn't exist, matter wouldn't allow you to use your free will at will. Don't forget the bricks that fall on people's heads in the films I showed you last month. Matter is omnipresent and only the void is void of it, as they used to say in days of yore. In a way, matter is God in its own right.'

You grow, mature, and the doctrine of predestination welcomes you with open arms as if you were its prodigal son. You *are* its prodigal son, for you wandered for a while in foreign lands, in the lands of freedom, wills and deals, as I said earlier. You thought you could have projects conceived and carried out on your own initiative. Suppose you come up with an idea and follow it through, execute its details thoroughly, and for once no brick falls on you during the process. The whole history of your project and its execution seems flawless, immaculate – as immaculate as angels and other celestial creatures. And suddenly – nothing is sudden, according to the doctrine I am talking about – you trip over a root and squash something you put in your pocket a few minutes before beginning your walk in the Parc de Versailles. And the object you squashed irremediably was the result of your long and fruitful labours, your Philosophers' Stone, although it had nothing to do either with philosophy or alchemy. And when your friends congratulate you on your achievement and ask you to show them this object, you just say, 'Well, I'm a perfectionist, you know. I've destroyed the result of my work because I thought it wasn't up to my standards. In a few months' time, I'll show you how high my standards are.' But what do you yourself think of your failure, of your fall in the Parc de Versailles? Have you realised at last you are not as free as the birds (as the Russians say)? As if birds were really free, as if hunters did not shoot at them day in day out, as if they were not picked up by dogs and hunters themselves, as if they were not eaten by dogs and hunters and their wives? All right, all right – they are eaten, destroyed and disappear from the surface of the Earth and even from its atmosphere (or *her* atmosphere, as a mummy's boy would say) and the only consolation I find when my thoughts turn to the global disappearance of species sounds thus: 'The death of *one* animal is heartrending, intolerable, and we can't protect all cats, dogs, horses. We can't protect ourselves either, let alone our Mother Earth.'

You continue to grow mature and to fail: whatever you undertake falls through and you believe your failures are solely due to your intentions, your volitions. Sometimes you go so far as to say, 'Vengeance is mine and I will repay.' This project is mine and I will succeed whatever the cost. The cost is very high and you lose money every day, even if no virus attacks your numerous bank accounts. And when your colleagues question you on the subject – on the subjects, rather – you answer, 'You know, money doesn't really matter. Actually matter doesn't either. What really matters is spirituality, our devotion to spiritual values and God Himself. Don't you believe in God? Don't tell me you go to church every Sunday. This is not enough, my dear brethren. You should believe in God within your heart of hearts. Your heart is made up of many hearts which lodge inside it. And you have to go through them, resolved to reach the very last heart of yours. Even your penultimate heart won't save you from matter, from matters of fact, from facts, from this base down-to-earth existence. Don't judge life and its values in terms of money! Don't be so greedy and foolish. Can you take your belongings with you? Do you take yourselves for pharaohs? Do you think *they* (the pharaohs) profited from their riches in the netherworld? Be that as it may, in the upper world only spiritual values are cherished and rewarded.'

In the meantime you successfully lose three members of your family. When your religious friends point out that, considering the number of victims, these members repose now on the lap of God, you either nod your head

pensively or say nothing. But when your daughter passes away as well, you blaspheme for a week or so. You curse both God and Satan as if they were in the same boat. For a while you do your best not to say anything to anyone, for fear of being shut away in a lunatic asylum. I know I'm not crazy when I maintain that the world is crazy because you cannot live without hope and daughters unless you have never had any children. But if you used to play with your daughter and her dolls, giving her a series of houses for *her* children and pets, you're sure to go crazy almost instantaneously upon hearing the news of her premature demise.' If you lose in succession a daughter, a dog and your job – you lost it because they mistook you for a madman – you cannot help becoming one, even if you are a woman. What I am trying to emphasise can be defined in a few words: your destiny is erratic, unfinished and blurred. Every event blurs the line/distinction/boundary between reality and fantasy, destiny and chance, God and the Devil, life and death. Sometimes you do not know for sure whether you are dead or not, and you hope you are, although your experience whispers into one of your ears that your expectations have never been fulfilled, for all their smallness and insignificance. Last year, in a fit of pique or in an act of desperation, you said to God, 'As you can see, as Thou canst feel, my new expectation is very small indeed, much smaller than an ordinary ant. As a matter of fact, you need a microscope to see it. But you need neither microscopes nor telescopes – the whole universe comes within the scope of your brain and its visions. So you must be aware of the grain of sand I'm talking about. It's a speck of dust, frankly speaking. For me and my welfare, however, it's a speck of *must*. Don't say to your archangels and other errand boys it is a speck of *mist*. No, no, no – I *must* have this piece of luck, otherwise I'll die, as Jonas put it. You can't say, 'I mist have it,' can you? Even you, Thou, Tao can't, assuming that "can't" can be found in your measureless dictionary.'

Those who read Martin Buber in English constantly measure the difference between Thou and It; four letters, two letters. If you say 'Thou', you are tempted to follow it up or through, adding, 'Wow', with a capital W. When you say 'It', even if you capitalise it, you just add, 'That's it,' and that *is* It. Buber concentrates more on Thou than on It because, in his opinion, for years and years Thou was ill-treated to the extent of becoming a mere *hou* – not capitalised, mind you. And often it (I mean 'Thou') was reduced to a mere *h* which is insignificant unless you put 'bomb' after it. 'It' is you, and you are *not* Thou, however often you may speak to God, saying, 'Thou, Thou, Thou, canst Thou hear me? Thou, listen, listen carefully –' and so on. Ever since the advent of democratic regimes and egalitarian mentality, we have always said he or she, when talking about human beings. We never say, 'It went to Brazil and died over there,' even if the man in question is really it, nothing more, nothing less. But what does it matter what you were, if you are dead and buried? Or not buried at all? What does it matter to *you*? Actually it is easier to die, if you are a mere 'it'. Of course you do not say to yourself, 'I've never feared death because I'm a mere it – not a great loss to the Earth.' Anyway, you are not lost to the Earth where you will spend an eternity of sorts, being eaten, soaked through and cursed by your relatives to whom you have left no money. They curse you as long as they live, but your eternity will go on, if they ask their descendants to curse you in their turn. After all, they have got nothing from you either. Simple-minded and ignorant of Buber's doctrine, they say about you, 'Nothing.' In other words they are not intelligent enough to say, 'He was a real It.'

According to my wife, the Earth is not our mother only at the moment of our birth and after our death. You can see a mother whose face radiates from pictures, paintings, monuments and photographs. This emblematic mother holds on her lap a warrior, a child, a dying man of no distinction. We often forget that mothers nourish us not only before and right after our birth, but also after death, and the Earth is just a doppelgänger of this universal mother. (I am weary of the word 'cosmos' – not of the cosmos itself, though. The cosmos *herself*.) What we hear

in the Hereafter does not sound like a hymn, praise, a dance, an eternal chance to be in the presence of God. We hear a lullaby and luckily for us we just sleep as if we were still on the Earth, on our mother's lap. Nothing is better than lullabies and often I hear them in Beethoven's and Haydn's quartets, let alone in Obrecht's works. Even in the midst of a storm you can hear a lullaby, on condition that you are attuned to it eternally. You can say that Nirvana is a lullaby and the state it leads us to can be materialised only through a mother's hands and lips and breasts and breath. So if you happen to be awake, after crossing the frontier of death, you can talk to your mother about your moods and ideas; and that does not seem unnatural. And if eternity exists outside our books, it is this eternity I am longing for. And I am probably ready for it, although you can never say you are ready for anything. You are always unfinished; and so is your readiness, your clairvoyance. When they speak about ghosts and their voices captured by mediums or ordinary passers-by, I always think about mothers; and if there are no mothers within my field of vision, I become one myself as if it were my mission on Earth, under the surface of the Earth, and even in the air, in the atmosphere which is also situated underground, in our mother's bosom.

So you hear a voice and you have no idea where this voice is coming from. And you automatically assume it comes from the Hereafter because nothing is left for you in this world, and what you hanker after is situated outdoors, in a series of afterlives in which you believe – almost automatically, instinctively. Your sixth sense gets under way and you follow in its footsteps, for you have nothing else to do either today or tomorrow. As a true philosopher who follows his argument, without proposing any preconceived ideas, you follow those voices that speak to you of other realms, of other fountains and dales, situated, as you rightly assume, after, after, after; and beyond of course, of course, of course. Is that what your lullabies mean? You just repeat, 'Here, here, after, after, life, life, after, after, beyond, beyond.' Well, it does not really matter, as long as you hear these voices you are talking about and to, for you cannot remain silent, eager as you are to learn more and more about what is lying in store for you. Of course the voices you hear now and then talk to you about their own lives, saying, for instance, 'You know, whatever they might conclude, I was quite happy in that life of yours, on the Earth, on this rotten planet. I'm happy now too, for such is my soul, my psychology, physiology and the constitution of my biological compound.' Then you hear a number of equations, of numbers which mean strictly nothing – at least within the framework of your constitution, whatever it is and has ever been. Oddly enough, these ghosts often try to convince us they were happy in this world as if we had ever questioned this apparent truth. Of course they can also try and arouse our compassion by narrating the events where their suffering often was at fever pitch. They were wounded, forsaken, insulted by their superiors and inferiors, humiliated by their own dogs whose intelligence was far superior to theirs. They were misunderstood, ignored, left to their own devices and masterpieces about which no one cared, no one thought, not even once in a while, a tiny fraction of a second. They were really kicked in the streets, even when they were not drunk, and their cheeks were frequently slapped, although they never turned this way or the other. They never turned anything, not even a hair; and yet they were ill-treated to the point of being excluded from clubs, from chats and even from maps. 'Just consult any map you can lay your hands on,' the voice says. 'Can you see my name on it?'

Of course I am thinking only about myself, and one does not need to know what opinion I have of our world, of today and its inhabitants – you inhabit time even more than space – to realise I am just honest and nothing is more honest than thinking about oneself. So, even on this occasion, in this context, I continue to regard myself as the centrepiece of this moment. And I do not have to think I am the cat's whiskers, for I *am* the cat's whiskers and also a cat, perhaps my own cat, the one I own, the one that owns me. So I become one of those dead who have

an itch to communicate with the quick, although it is much more natural to enjoy the peace and quiet of the Hereafter, without bothering about what they think and feel on Earth, nor under it. (Let us forget about the Earth's motherly aspect for a while.) Suppose you are dead, which is easier than to imagine you are alive, and you feel lonely in the Hereafter, for all is fire, rain and frozen seas where you swim to expiate your misdemeanour, one of them. Well, from time to time, you walk out of the sea and sit down on a beach of sorts where no one keeps you company, not even a minor demon. So you have no alternative but to recall the adventures you lived and died through in this world of ours and probably of yours, considering that you have an urge to communicate with it. It is true that the frozen sea and the frozen beach may give rise to such an urge; we may even call it 'an aspect of escapism', if we wish to attribute a name to it. (Adam's complex.) Well, you recall your former life and so do I; anyway, I am always speaking about myself, despite the quantity of names one may come across in my writings. I write about myself, and the world that pops out – when you open the box, a clown pops out, as they say – resembles neither myself nor the world where I still put my slippers on: I seldom if ever go out. And even when I do, I keep my slippers on: my wife lives in the house opposite, as I stated somewhere, probably in this book, within this train of thought. So I think (my train of thought does) that I would not be tempted to communicate with the quick, when sitting on that frozen beach and eating a morsel of frozen food. Nor would I itch to share my tales of woe with any infernal or celestial creature on a sunny beach located either in Paradise or at the end of Purgatory where you feel the odour of sainthood.

Yet I am not loath to reminisce about a few portions of my life, especially about my Parisian years which, in the light of their festive character, seem to deserve my attention far more than the decades I spent in Moscow, either with my parents or without them. By the way, they have not communicated with me for at least 15 years, according to my calculations. I wonder why they are so reluctant to put me in the picture about their otherworldly life, and the only explanation I can supply to this phenomenon or tendency boils down to the absence of any picture, of anything you can write home about. Influenced by Dante and other visionaries, we always *picture* to ourselves this, that and it; and yet the greater part of the worlds we can be in touch with is not picturesque. Those worlds are almost invisible, and often you just speak of blurs, of blurred landscapes, of mists, of convoluted routes that lead nowhere. You speak of them, if you feel like speaking; and yet a lapse of concentration, a memory lapse, describes them much better, much more faithfully than any poem. Even *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (let us not omit the fact that I identify with him) does not do justice to this mixture of blurriness, ice and death. My wife says my parents are the Beings of Light, but I suppose that injustice reigns everywhere, even at the core of Paradise. So I would not be surprised if one day my parents broke their silence to tell me they are sitting on a frozen beach instead of exposing their souls to the life-giving, bliss-bestowing rays – the rays continually streaming from a multitude of suns and moons, not from the Martians' weapons.

Speaking about Paris, thinking about Paris, crying, crying. David Hockney's picture *La place de Furstenberg* is on my dinner table and everywhere else, for I cry, thinking about Paris, about what I have lost. My publisher was near this place and in Versailles my address sounded almost exactly as it did in Paris. Square de Furstenberg. Or Furstemberg. Where are all these sounds, I wonder? They are in the midst of sounds that are not of this world; not of *my* world anyway. David Hockney painted my deficient memory and I see mostly plaques or slabs or parts or fragmentation or whatever or what. Never ever, mind you. My publisher was on the left; my collaborator on the right. Everything was somewhere and even everywhere: there was nothing else in my life. What is there now? In my life? I wonder if my life itself is somewhere. David Hockney has no time to paint it, and

I even wonder if he is still alive. But even the dead can paint something, if they are inclined to do so, being bored to death within their death and even outside it, outside their coffins that will always remain within their cemeteries. You can say that everything and everybody is within cemeteries, but we do hope there are cemeteries beyond the cemeteries we know almost by heart, if not by body. And those cemeteries allow their tenants to go on a spree from time to time and become immortal as if you could become immortal on the spur of the moment, on the spur of centuries. And what if everything were a poem of God? ‘Everything / Everything / Everything / Everything.’

Suppose that, ever since my transference to the Hereafter, I have learnt something about the structure of the universe and its eternal enigmas. Actually I wonder if there is something *eternal, immobile* in the universe, with the exception of our false ideas and Parmenides’ theories. Sometimes you get the feeling there are only rivers around you, inside you, and your blood supplies a good instance of what goes on everywhere. Mystics call this ongoing process ‘the bloodbath of the universe’, meaning you should bathe in the light you find at the core of your visions, numerous bodies and what not. I am often tempted to say ‘what not’ when my wife exposes her theories about life, light and what not so that it is tautological to add ‘what not’ to a lot of whatnots that punctuate her monologues, interior as well as exterior. And I think the same goes for the rest of monologues, molecules and what not, for my life can be the subject of a huge book (any life can, especially if we think of animals). But you can just enumerate the items you light upon in any museum collection and add ‘what not’ to the list. I would not object to any series of items you choose, provided they come from a respectable museum. If an item or an episode crops up in your head in relation to such and such an individual, you can add ‘what not’ to it too, thinking in terms of one episode only. That is immobility for you – only one episode, one event unfolds within the bounds of one’s life and we devote huge volumes to this event as if resolved to supply a detailed account of the history of humankind. And this is also true: every life is the whole history of humankind, even if it is the life of an idiot, told by another idiot. To some extent our life already sounds like that and it looks like a crowd of idiots talking about each other, pointing at each other, laughing at each other, taking each other seriously, giving alms to the poor, giving alms for the sake of newspapers and television cameras. You show your alms to the cameras and say, ‘These alms will be given to the poor, their children and to their children’s children, even if they’re not as poor as all that. Some of them might get the coronavirus in the distant future, and we should take this possibility into consideration. Just consider how many children grow up, unaware of what future lies ahead of them. The future I’m talking about is called “the coronafuture”. So these alms are destined for the relief of poverty, for the poor’s pockets. And if they have no pockets, no clothes whatsoever, I’ll buy some clothes for them first. And then I’ll put these alms in those pockets.’ “Alms” is an old-fashioned word,’ a presenter points out. ‘Shall we just say “money”, otherwise some television viewers won’t understand what we’re talking about.’ ‘Just show them the money I put in this envelope before joining your crew in this television studio,’ says the benefactor of humanity as he opens the envelope and begins to count the money in front of the cameras.

Let us go back to the Hereafter where one and many no longer need either money or jewels to survive and prosper, at least to *some* extent. What does ‘some’ mean in this context, in the context of the Hereafter? ‘Some fire,’ they usually respond, sighing and crossing themselves. ‘Some rain’, ‘some ice’, ‘some icy roads’, ‘your car that skids and hits some tree or other, some rock or other, the bottom of some precipice’, ‘some tree that falls on your car’, ‘some of your houses that burn’. What does ‘all’ mean in the context of the Hereafter? ‘All your belongings are burning, so are all your bodies and souls.’ Suppose one of my bodies and one of my souls are still available to my detailed analysis. This material is bulky enough to enable me to dissect my afterlife as if it were a

mere rat. It is perhaps a mere rat: no one knows what metempsychosis' whims are able to offer us. Even in this life of ours or theirs – no one knows for sure to whom this life belongs – we often experience the phenomenon called 'déjà-vu', and even if we have not seen anything at all, we repeat 'déjà-vu, déjà-vu' as if hoping to create thereby a semblance of eternal life; or eternal life itself. Well, suppose my glorious body is glorious enough to allow me to incarnate the supreme masterpiece of the creation: a Human Being. What does my soul feel now and here, in the Hereafter, after the here? It feels the here and endeavours to step over it on its way to one of the regions, described, depicted and visualised by Bosch and many other travellers who, not content with still lives, with all these apples, glasses and wild ducks you see in picture galleries (or in theatres), show you the products of their sweet dreams and the bitter fruits of their nightmares. I have no idea where I am, and this is the state of affairs we might be confronted with in the Hereafter. Why are we so sure it is divided into two or three zones? You are not in this world; at least you hesitate as to your whereabouts, and that is enough to plunge you into despair – not entirely devoid of exhilaration, though. The very idea of being elsewhere, not in this world, in its financial or ideological clutches, makes you feel exalted, although this unawareness, incertitude might lead to a circle of Hell. It is probably a square you will vainly search for in books; and yet I think that Swedenborg alluded to it in *his* account of the Hereafter. To square the circle – that is what it boils down to. Dante spoke of circles, but you are almost convinced it is a square lying in wait for you somewhere, not necessarily in Hell. Where else? In Paradise of course. And then you begin to doubt everything as if you were Descartes or one of his followers, as I usually say, anxious to prolong my narrative beyond its own bounds. This is a habit of mine which might enable me some day to become if not immortal, at least as old as all those figures we meet, whenever leafing through the Old Testament, which is called 'old' on account of these figures, as one might suppose.

Well, I think that Swedenborg warns us against the smoke that seems to come from nowhere; at least there is no fire in the neighbourhood, only mist, mist, mist, mist and snow, mist and snow. But we feel (I do anyway) there is a bonfire in a corner I cannot see, and I direct my steps towards this fire. These steps are not as airy as might be presumed; yet I am getting closer and closer to the source of the fire and smoke, to the furnace from where everything and probably everybody come. And eventually I see this furnace, and I am even permitted to open it; and as I do open it I realise I opened much more than a mere furnace. I do not know what I can call this opening or what squeezes through it, but everything seems to flood the room where I am standing now. Suppose you leave the bath running and flood the bathroom, but I am not in a bathroom; not in *my* bathroom anyway. Be that as it may, I seem to have left everything running, and everything does run, here and there, and I swim in both here and there as if there were no ordinary swimming pools in Hell or Paradise; or even in Purgatory. Paradise is said to be literally punctuated with swimming pools around which myriads of bathing beauties carry towels and bottles of champagne. I know nothing about Hell except that a lot of screams resound in its nooks and crannies and dining rooms where a number of devils munch on their victims, as Satan does in Dante's immortal masterpiece. Demons are crunching noisily on human bones and tissue, saying and repeating, 'When it comes to the crunch, when it comes to the crunch.' Another devil brings in yet another victim who says to his torturers, 'It hasn't come to the crunch yet, it hasn't come to the crunch yet.' And his torturers answer thus, 'It has, it has, it has, it has.' But I am not in the Devil's mouth, in between his teeth; not yet, not yet. I see no teeth overhead; they might already be *inside* my head, for all I know. *Are* they? I ask myself. How could I check their presence or absence inside my head? Of course I am not prevented from focusing my attention on teeth – on the Devil's teeth, on this particular occasion. I wonder if we should not always take into consideration the Devil's teeth which are everywhere, judging

from my bitter experience. You walk around your garden and admire a birch tree. You walk towards it and realise it is one of the teeth you can find in the Devil's mouth. You are reluctant to search for anything in this hellish mouth of his or hers; besides, you do not know how to open it. But the Devil is only too happy to oblige and soon you see the interior of his mouth bristling with teeth and machine guns.

So I continue my walk in the garden I found myself in some time ago. But I am not sure it is a garden, not a mouth, not the furnace I was thinking about. When? Where? No idea. Actually I ask myself if I really have any more ideas in my head or outside it, and I begin wondering if one could have ideas outside one's head. Could one have a head outside one's head? How many heads do we have? And what about our teeth? Ah, these eternal questions, as philosophers say. You spend your eternity counting someone's teeth, and you have no idea whether the teeth you count are your own teeth or the Devil's teeth or the teeth of God. Does God have teeth? Of course, considering that we have as many as 32 teeth. But for these teeth of ours, we would not be able to crunch on anything, not even on an apple. Do we need to crunch on an apple? Are we hungry? Who *are* we? Who are *we*? Swedenborg thought we might keep our senses, sensations and memories as long as we plod along eternity – on Earth, under her surface, in Hell, in Paradise. A saint asks another saint or martyr, 'Who are you?' And the second saint replies, 'I'm St Francis. Who are you?' 'I'm St Sebastian. Can't you see all these arrows?' 'I can. But I thought they were Cupid's arrows.' 'What do you take me for?' 'For a man whose heart overflows with love. Actually I see love seeping out of your body.' 'Do you?' That is how they kill time in Paradise and probably elsewhere – even within the confines of *this* world.

Why don't you recognise this world, that world – any world? What you see around you does not look like anything, for the simple reason that it does not look at all. We may say about a woman, 'She had a worried look about her.' This time, however, we cannot say anything of the kind – of any kind, to be precise. She or he or anybody has no look either about her, him, it, or anything, anywhere else. Gradually, however, we come to terms with our senses, falling back on our second childhood, first childhood. We see a bicycle which we often mounted at one period of our life. Why? To ride off, naturally enough. It does not seem natural, though; nothing seems natural today or tomorrow. It looks spiritual, somehow, so we say to ourselves, 'We've become spiritual and probably glorious. What about our bodies?' We look at our bodies and find none of them: neither our astral body nor our physical body (we were about to say 'our physical soul') keep us company. We are so used to our bodies we do not really need to say they keep us company. But as nothing sticks to the rules we are so accustomed to we get the feeling there are only exceptions to them, which does not mean that anything really exceptional can be enjoyed within our field of vision and action. We stretch out our arm and touch a tree, but we cannot say we are enjoying this tree and the sensation we receive from it, probably because we do not know for sure it is a tree and not one of the abovementioned teeth. Which one? Doesn't really matter. We should steer clear of *all* those teeth lest we get beaten abominably. You vaguely recall what your mother told you some time ago (what does this 'some' amount to?): 'If you give the Devil your finger, he'll eat your hand, your wrists, your elbow, your arm and the rest of your body. He'll also eat your wife and your children. So never give your fingers to the Devil. You could give him some chocolate, though.' 'Does the Devil like chocolate?' you asked. 'No, he prefers human fingers, arms, bellies and feet. But if you give him a bar of chocolate, he'll think you're a nice boy who should come to no harm.'

Little by little the outlines of your former lives or existences loom on the horizon and you recall someone's words, 'We could see a row of camels silhouetted on the horizon.' Could *you* see anything of the kind? Have you

ever seen a camel in your life? In a zoo perhaps. You rode a dromedary in Egypt, according to your recollection. But are your recollections in accord with reality, with any reality? With that of your dreams and nightmares? It is odd, isn't it, that even the row of camels someone spoke about is endowed with another dimension as if they could not be just silhouetted on the horizon without being attached to something else, to a thought, to a spiritual upheaval. Yet are almost sure you spotted the Virgin Mary on one of those camels, or on all of them. So you could say, 'I saw a row of Blessed Virgins silhouetted on the horizon and even beyond it.' Even if your eyes fall on a paperweight, you get the feeling the paperweight you apprehend is far weightier than any paperweight you came across on Earth. It is so heavy you cannot lift it, let alone use it, as it is usually used, although you do not remember how it is used, either usually or unusually. You even hesitate as to the meaning of the verb 'to use'. Does it mean you just have to *apprehend* it? What does 'apprehend' mean? Do you have to arrest it? Could you arrest a paperweight? What for? Did it crash or squash anyone or anything? And then you say to yourself, 'It is an image of my sins that I've written on different sheets of paper. Whenever a sin is committed, you inscribe its name on a sheet of paper. You do it yourself and you need neither a quill pen nor an inkstand to do it. Nor do you need a sheet of paper. You just *inscribe* it, that's all. Your life keeps all these sheets together and your death puts this paperweight on top of them to keep them in position. So they're kept in position until the last judgement in the course of which you will remove the paperweight from the top of the pile. But I'll say to the judges or to the Judge, "I can't remove it, Your Honour." And your honour will ask me, "Why can't you remove it?" "It's too heavy, Your Honour." And your honour will say, "You've sinned all your life and even before it, in your former lives. Your karma weighs around 15 tons. I hear you're rather neurotic about your weight – you go on weighing yourself three times a day. Even in the Hereafter where there are neither days nor nights nor times nor spaces you weigh yourself three times a day. I wish you could be so careful about your behaviour." "Your Honour, I promise that from now on I'll be as obedient as an obedient dog. Please don't send me to the gallows." "To the gallows? Are you bent on giving us a specimen of your gallows humour?" "Far be it from me –" "Were you known for your coruscating wit? In the Herehere?" "Not the foggiest." "To which part of the Hereafter do you think I should send you?" "To Purgatory, my Lord and my Honour." "Well, after careful consideration of your proposal, I regret to say that we are unable to accept it."'

Then you say to yourself it is just another nightmare, and the paperweight you are unable to lift is not metaphorical, symbolical or even divine: it is just a paperweight. All right, it does keep some pieces of paper in position, but what of it? You have no use for these papers and so you can throw them into the nearest rubbish bin; and even the farthest rubbish bin will do, as long as it is a rubbish bin and not a bloodbath. You lift the paperweight – rather easily, contrary to what you have presumed so far. You just lift it and it squashes flies, fruit, birds, humans. This paperweight squashes whatever comes its way – even the objects and beings you cannot actually see or feel or smell or touch. Oddly enough, the whole picture of your life and sins voluptuously bathes in the light streaming in through the open door. You do not remember this door; nor have you ever opened it, to the best of your recollection. So, once again your meditation or your train of thought, to put it modestly, takes over and it says the first thing that comes into your head, naturally enough. It says to you that only God could open this door for you, for your future or present salvation, and consequently He has forgiven you all your sins, including your insolent behaviour during the last judgement. Then you grow more scientific and recall Einstein's words, repeated many times and in many centuries, 'Energy, energy, energy. It's so intense and abundant it overflows all the receptacles we imagine, the universe included. Our life is nothing in comparison with the universe and its numerous doubles

and triples. So we're doubtless immortal.' The energy mentioned in sacred books (Einstein's words are as sacred as the Upanishads) continues to stream through the door, and shortly afterwards, after the beginning of the episode, you see the sky and what they call 'pie in the sky'. But even this elusive and pernicious pie radiates a lot of light that literally and fraternally embraces all your lives: former, formal, frontal (related to the frontal lobes of the brain, not to reality) and fatal. You ask yourself whether there is such a thing as fatality – within the bounds of eternity where you seem to reside right now. Then your interior monologue reminds you that eternity has no bounds, and consequently you still have no idea where you are and what fraction of the second (of this particular second) your body stays in.

Going back to energy that ensures immortality, eternity and our cosmos's life with all its insects, buzzing and droning, I must admit that a few minutes ago I had the intention of killing a wasp or a bee or a wasp not, as I was going to write. First it came towards me and I started flailing my arms around. For a while, my arms kept on flailing as if the wasp could be done away with by two flailing arms that belong to one timid, helpless, mortal individual. You notice a wasp and begin to flail your arms instead of flying to Paris in your private helicopter. But when this wasp comes to a standstill on your windowpane, you hesitate to the point of leaving your slipper where it is – on your right foot. You have just had a change of heart and the wasp lives on as if, in the space of a few seconds, it had grown as harmless as a butterfly. In this connection you remember the effect this butterfly's wings can have on hurricanes and suchlike – at least in the United States of America. As we know, this chaos-born butterfly does not dare flutter about in the sunshine (unless it is the divine light we are dealing with) so as not to give rise and physically support a hurricane or an earthquake or just a quake of such magnitude that houses and trees begin to fall before anything really happens. Their sixth sense warns them (butterflies, elephants, crocodiles) about the forthcoming, forthflying danger, and they decide to bow to the inevitable before it destroys them forever, for all our and their immortalities. Generally speaking, bowing to the inevitable is a sort of prayer and whenever God realises that our bows are not meant for audiences and their applause – they pay homage to His justice, to the predestination activated on His orders – He relents and lets us live, if not flourish. And our thought continues to push and even guide its train so we connect this butterfly to the Hereafter where there are no hurricanes, no worries – at least within Paradise and its realms. True, there are lots of butterflies around, for we would never agree to spend our eternity in a butterfly-devoid land, even if this land is universe-famous for its milk and honey. I still remember how my second cat – he died three years ago – spent his time in my friend's garden. He would sit back and wait for something to happen, and this something usually appeared in the shape of a butterfly. And this butterfly (or just another butterfly) positioned itself rather close to my cat – within striking distance. And my cat was indulging in his somnolence he took no notice of the beautiful creature that seemed to offer itself to him. And then he did strike, gently, sluggishly, as if to show he was in love with this butterfly and had no wish to harm it in any way. In the twinkling of an eye, the butterfly disappeared, but my cat did not even take the trouble to wink his eyes. He simply withdrew his paw from where the butterfly had been sitting and availing itself of my cat's laziness. He withdrew his paw and also his thoughts from this butterfly-chosen spot and continued his reverie or musing or whatever 'what not' we set our heart upon this time, this space.

The point is a scoundrel, a maniac, a stupid jerk may spoil the fun and everything else – even within the bounds of the Hereafter where we are not protected from stupidity and perversity, for all our hopes and the bets we persistently put on a better future. A stupid jerk gives utterance to one of his thoughts and our eternal happiness jolts to a halt. Even in the kingdom of eternity we need *some* movement, and we might even *wait* for this movement,

for a metamorphosis, in our eagerness to enjoy yet another delight. This waiting is paradise-infused of course, having nothing to do with impatience and stamping feet. The stupid jerk interferes and our eternal happiness deviates from its course and a series of misfortunes that may also last for a sort of eternity rain on our parade and we have no alternative but to beg for mercy in the middle of nowhere. And what about light to which we have grown so used in the course of eternity? It does not seem to come from the same door, and the door, its whereabouts are so important that even angels depend on them as they say to each other, 'We can't find the person on whom we should train this spotlight to make him worthy of paradise.' And then everybody realises that not only time is abolished in the Hereafter: space is flawed as well. It gradually dissipates into the atmosphere, and the atmosphere dissipates into a black hole, and the black hole dissipates into the Holy Trinity. And again we hear the same old song sung by our forefathers and foremothers – by Erda, in one of Wagner's operas. 'If you don't love each other, you'll perish like the gods betrayed by Wotan's greed – by pagan gods, in other words.' Do I really need all these pieces of absurdity, incompatibility, stupidity and utter dumbness? Perhaps I should roll faster so as not to gather so much moss. Try as you may, however, you will always gather moss because there is one 'however' here, another 'however' there; in the cosmos and even outside it. I should go on walking through myself, getting out of myself at the earliest opportunity, at every opportunity, for transcendence and existence are synonymous. Transcendence-existence, existence-transcendence. Don't they sound alike? And even if they do not, for some obscure reason, I should go on, up, down and out.

Humanity dreams a lot, and some of its dreams concern the dead with whom we yearn to communicate at all cost. And for once the cost we have in mind is not too high, given the scale of other costs we go through (the labyrinth of costs, as someone said) to get this and that. And often this and that disappoint us to the point of making us swear that we shall never desire anything else in our lives and settle down in a desert, following the example of St Anthony. If you speak of human presence in a desert, you inevitably recall St Anthony and the women he was assiduously fighting, judging from Bosch's painting. But inviting the dead for a cup of tea is a more or less widespread custom, and during these high and low teas a lot of tables turn; and the cups are often broken and the tea is spilt all over the floor. And sometimes we do not turn tables; we do not even turn cups, for the progress of technology has already influenced the way in which we communicate with the dead. We have a machine that enables us to talk to the dead and hear their voices without interrupting our tea-ceremony or dinners or even our walks in gardens and parks. Sure enough, there exists a *portable* version of this machine that we carry around, all the while enjoying the beauty of nature. And from time to time we ask the dead if they enjoy the same beauty too, and they answer, 'We have other beauties within our reach and field of vision.' And then they begin to describe the Elysian fields, and we lose track of the question we were about to ask them. Most of our problems are centred upon topography and creature comforts, but sooner or later we realise that the dead we are talking to just quote sacred or unsacred books as if they had no personal experience to lean upon. And they often exact revenge on the quick, on their relatives, friends and colleagues who, according to them, devoted their lives to destroying their happiness and doctrines. 'Tell this bastard,' they say, 'that I'll never forgive him, in spite of my present state of mind and body. I am in the middle of Paradise, you know. Please tell him I drink Romanée Conti every day. And eat caviar every night.' 'Are there nights and days in Paradise?' you ask. 'They're all in the mind. Everything is in the mind. I haven't lost an instant, an inch of my life. That's why I remember every insult, every piece of criticism. Please, tell this whore –' And so on and so forth.

Swedenborg wrote, ‘Whatever we remember in the Hereafter is wrapped in spiritual light. Every thought of ours is gift-wrapped. The gift of God, you know.’ But the people who spend most of their time with the dead – one wonders if they live at all – are surprised at the brutality of the monologues they hear and record for posterity. The dead often send the quick to Hell, and they add, ‘We know what we’re talking about. And we use appropriate words and formulas of which you’re blissfully unaware. Our words are vehicles that convey these bastards and whores to the circles and squares about which your Dante never wrote, being an ignorant ape.’ They talk about their wives’ and husbands’ betrayals and go into detail in spite of our demands to spare us indecency, dirt and intimate nuances. ‘We don’t wish to know where you put your penis,’ we shout. ‘We don’t care about her tits and the bits of chocolate she put into her lover’s mouth. Nor are we eager to hear about the whereabouts of her external/internal/reproductive organs.’ ‘What *are* you eager to hear about?’ asks our correspondent. (One of the dead who deigns to communicate with us.) The dead are supposed to talk to us about the music of the spheres because we believe that harmony is reflected mostly in music. And if you wish to know what happens in Paradise, you have to listen to Bach’s and Mozart’s works. And if you are determined to teach humanity a lesson, you have to put *their* recordings on, turning Bach and Mozart into what they call ‘the saviours of humankind’. ‘Every note is instructive. Every note speaks to us about immortality, eternity, God, angels and the lakes in which we bathe every Saturday.’ ‘Do you also go fishing, now and then?’ we ask. We must admit that our talks degenerate rather quickly so we encounter a lot of violence in the documents related to these communications, to *their* moods and states of mind. ‘Why do you mock us so viciously?’ we ask them. ‘Yes,’ we go on, ‘we worship the composers you mention. And we do think that music can save the world. Not Stockhausen’s masterpieces, though. Yes, we do hope that humanity will come to its senses in the near future, anxious to avoid its utter destruction.’ ‘Do you have senses?’ shout the dead and even some of the quick. ‘Do you know what the ninth sense is about? You don’t even have the very first sense. And if you have it, you don’t know how to use it. You’re always wide of the mark. You have no idea where the mark is and what it looks like. Anyway, in *your* world, the mark doesn’t look like anything at all. Morons, morons, morons.’

The specialists assure us that the dead speak mostly about vibrations, in terms of vibrations, and they say we should listen to the Earth, our mother, father or brother. Some of them (of the dead, of their specialists?) say the Earth is our big brother, and we wonder if the specialists just recall the Soviet Union and its relationship with what they called ‘satellite countries’. And I often say to those specialists, ‘I’m fed up with the vibrations that you compare to Bach and Mozart instead of treating them on their own terms. In your opinion, the dead just repeat your books and acquire your tastes in the domain of music. Why don’t they ever speak of Schoenberg?’ ‘Because they don’t like Schoenberg,’ answer the specialists. And the dead go on, ‘You should listen to every tree, and as soon as you hear the wave on which you live with this tree, there’ll be no more pollution, no more aggressions in the world. And don’t forget that the ray of light comes from the harmony you’re looking for. If this ray is straight, it comes directly from God. If it deviates from its trajectory and exhibits a lot of curves, it comes from Einstein and its followers. The same goes for space. If space engulfs you *directly* and you’re allowed to put the cosmos on like a coat, you’re connected with the superior forces I’ll enumerate next time,’ say the dead in question. ‘And please note that I was happy on the surface of the Earth, otherwise I wouldn’t be happy in the Hereafter. Happiness is an eternal gift based on predestination and determinism.’ ‘But the elect are mostly unhappy in this world of ours,’ I answer. ‘What do *you* know about us?’ says one of them. ‘Even in *your* world I felt a spark connected to my present condition. And one could see this phenomenon sparkle in my navy-blue eyes.’

If you have to choose between this nonsense and a series of quotations from the Book of the Dead (from its Tibetan version), you might put up with the former for a while. Or they say (while enlarging upon the stages they walked through) that at first you do not succeed in removing its 'earthly garment' from your soul. 'Don't think your soul is stark naked – it wears a garment that contains your material experiences. Your soul is partly material, and this part should be removed, otherwise you'll never be in a position to receive benediction; or light, as we call it.' So the first stage you are supposed to deal with (on your terms, on its own terms) is more or less exterior to your spirituality: you go through the motions, as it were. You continue to work in your office, and your bank account grows bigger and bigger unless you buy whatever you see around you, especially in the course of your extensive travels. And you work for it energetically – that is the difference between your earthly condition and the celestial atmosphere in which you bathe, according to the spirits you get in touch with. After a while, you write in your notebook, 'These spirits are very keen on the verb "to bathe". I'm under the impression they spend their afterlives in swimming pools.' I have no swimming pool in my garden so one cannot accuse me of transferring my own experience into *their* dead heads. These heads and glorious bodies bathe in light and even in ordinary water unless their water is so extraordinary that we can on no account compare it to the water running from our taps. Yes, I have a gut feeling they fly from one swimming pool to another, and I even wonder if the light they insist upon is always the same. Don't they bathe in different lights, in various colours, in a sort of gigantic rainbow? Or perhaps their lights, the ones they persistently take advantage of, are structured differently. Even their molecules and quarks might be different, for all I know, thanks to my frequent talks with those creatures; of no flesh, of no blood, I am tempted to add.

There are many theories that teach us how to live, to die, to cross the thresholds we see in front of us, never behind: we cannot reproduce our experiences exactly, instant by instant. We just *remember* them, and every remembrance is immersed in the atmosphere of incertitude, although we might be convinced of our memory's reliability. It is a reproduction we are confronted with, instead of a real thing, a palpable object or subject. We cannot *touch* our memories, and that's what renders them so blurred – and spiritual, to some extent; but only to *some* extent, I'm afraid. Even Paris exists in my life only as a photograph I might chance upon in a book devoted to Proust's magnificent life and work. (I left the city of lights seven years ago.) To tell the truth, I am delighted: meeting the people whose *divertissements* lay in wait for them at the beginning of the 20th century is far more rewarding than dealing with my contemporaries. And yet they all belong to the human race, which puts me on guard: I should not automatically denigrate and despise my fellow creatures. Indeed, apart from Plato, Dante and Giotto there have been other humans in the world where I burst into laughter or tears several times a day, unable to withhold them as I look around me or read a newspaper. So I prefer to look into my soul which, in the long run, should get rid of its material aspects. And as I do look into my soul, into its heart of hearts, I remember my aunt and the love I felt in her presence. Yes, our memory unobtrusively displays a certain quantity of flesh and blood, otherwise it would be of no use to us on Earth. After all, its duty compels it to establish a relationship between the divine and the material, and if the latter aspect of my existence is absent from the picture, I might have to fall down on my own one-dimensional version; and hopefully it is not the *definitive* version of my being. Mostly our soul contents itself with sparkling, bathing and sunbathing beauties. But if our soul were wholly holy, we would live in Paradise from beginning to end, from eternity to eternity, from light to light. Alas, we live mostly in Hell and consequently our soul suffers from real, material wounds as it tries to cope with our predicaments and frustrated hopes.

So I was in love with my 55-year-old aunt and this passion may shed one of the lights on my interest in older women, against whose very presence Schopenhauer seems to rebel – for the sake of our species’ endurance. Is an older woman only an appalling reproduction of her younger self? I think we live in the world of reproductions, not in that of our representation; and even our will is not mighty enough (or it is has already fallen in comparison with Ancient Greece and Israel) to make us experience reality itself, whatever it is, whatever it might ever have been. We look at an object, a subject or whatever – we mostly look at *whatever* in this world of reproductions – and our reception of it, him, her and whatsoever is off target. Where is this so-called target? Our senses, our eyes in particular, send a number of arrows in the direction of a woman, and what we get amounts to a mere reproduction, part of which has always been stored in our mind. It is a mixture of us, of yes, of no, of other women, of Schubert’s melodies, and we might call this cocktail ‘representation’; and yet I opt for the term ‘reproduction’ because I am loath to represent anything, with the exception of a bottle of wine. (And needless to explain what wine I have in mind.) I cannot help opening my eyes so as not to fall into a black, grass-devoid hole in my garden. Do I reproduce this hole, the one into which my foot and shoe may fall, if I take no notice of it? My will turns the world into a series of reproductions that are far less dangerous, far more pregnant with meaning and layers, with dimensions and divine figures. I put a halo on the world instead of saying hallo to it. You add one letter and gain admittance to a paradise located either on Earth or in another galaxy. They say I grossly oversimplify the problem: you have to become *innocent* in order to penetrate any paradise, however ludicrous and rudimentary. Aren’t all paradises rudimentary? A few birds, a few flowers, a few scents and a lake with swans and Tchaikovsky’s music. You can also tolerate within its bounds a forest with a sleeping beauty who is intolerable: you cannot raise her from the half-dead without asking her permission to do so with impunity. (According to feminist standards.) Well, according to our purists who go on talking about oversimplification, we should first become innocent, otherwise no paradise will ever open its gates to us; as if we were still a bunch of notable coronavirus-carriers. Actually you can enter a paradise, even if you carry a dozen viruses, provided your innocence is above suspicion. And what about the viruses you carry? From time to time you shoot them from your body as if they were bullets; and you shoot to kill, needless to say. But no one says anything because you are innocent and consequently (St Augustine once again; or the Gnostics) can do whatever you wish, without incurring the wrath of the gods. Or the Gnostics.

Somebody said our passage from here to eternity (or from eternity to here and down, not out) is a bridge one can see in Venice, if one faces it instead of walking along it to the famous prison depicted by Casanova, if not by Savonarola. All prisoners are alike, so are all prisons; but bridges are different because on some of them there are the gods – I touched upon *Das Rheingold*, didn’t I? Where? – on others you come across a lot of terrestrial, earthly, human prisoners who sigh, sigh, sigh, sigh. (*Aïe, aïe, aïe, aïe*, as the French say from time to time.) This bridge, the last one – not the *very* last one – is called ‘The Bridge of Aïes’, or the ‘*Ponte Dei Sospiri*’. *Aïe, aïe*, my life, they sigh. So do some of the gods who, at the end of *Das Rheingold*, proceed from the surface of the Earth to Valhalla. At the end of gold (if there are no more gold mines on Earth, at the end of some century or other) we are also likely to say ‘*aïe, aïe, aïe*’, if I am not mistaken. Goodbye to our eternal youth, goodbye to immortality and whatever you may hope for without crossing the threshold of death and of the Hereafter where no eternity has the same intrinsic and priceless value. Our linguists, on the other hand, deem it appropriate to emphasise the importance of the first syllable of *Sospiri*: Save our souls. But my former friends who have sworn by semantics for almost 40 years, say we should not forget their bodies and so, according to them (and the bodies in general) the future prisoners thought only in terms of their frivolous or sexual games. ‘Save our bodies’ they would have

shouted from the bridge, had they been allowed to shout. Alas, their freedom, if any, did not stretch beyond the sighs admired and recorded by an impressive number of chroniclers who turned a deaf ear to gondoliers, to their songs. ‘*O sole mio, o Venice mia, o gondola mia.*’ They were fed up with these syllables, dissecting only *sospiri*, sighs, groans, moans, screams and *aïes*. Even today they affirm that in Italian operas you hear only orchestras and whines, whimpers and complaints; and shagurata. They do not always know how to spell Italian syllables, but what counts for them – and for us, according to their doctrines – boils down to what they call ‘the human condition’ which you express chiefly through whining and whimpering and saying, ‘O God, o God. *Warum, warum, warum, warum?*’ What is more, orchestras do not overstep the bounds symbolised (semantically and otherwise) by the aforementioned groans and tears. So, instead of a beautiful melody and strings you hear a man who cries himself to sleep by his mamma’s corpse.

Well, let us go back to our world where innocence is non-existent and can be found only in books – not even in monasteries. In what books? (Apart from Blake’s poems.) In Swedenborg’s books, for instance: he often talks about innocence, but he does not say exactly what he means by this term. Is it just a lack of guilt he had in mind, when writing about them? But in this case you are just guiltless, not innocent. Innocence as such presupposes a sort of elevation, of aura and halo that guiltlessness is not permitted to boast about. All right, you have never broken a vase or a law, but you have no halos in your possession. You have never been found in possession of explosives, but you have no halos either in your possession or above your hair or baldness. By the way, I have no complex about being bald, probably because this state of affairs has never prevented a saint from wearing a halo. And I think many saints were bald, although painters added a few hairs to the crowns of their heads as if to discourage you from comparing them to skinheads and Yul Brynner. When I say that the world is my reproduction, I do not mean it was created in my image, for I am more or less in between the worlds, which reminds me of Klee’s tombstone where the same truth or falsehood is engraved. Actually I think there are not many in-between individuals nowadays: humans are either down-to-earth or they introduce themselves as follows, ‘I am a newborn Christian, and I’m proud of my brand-new identity.’ And they go straight to heaven, sometimes in their pyjamas because they firmly believe that pyjamas prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that their conversion is much more important to them than money and other worldly considerations. ‘We don’t consider,’ they seem to declare, ‘we just look at God and our faith grows so irresistibly we can no longer stay on Earth. We aren’t keen on the laws of gravity and by flying to heaven we rewrite these laws. How can they be re-written? You just have to profess ignorance of earthly structures, saying that nothing whatsoever weighs you down, neither your sins nor your greediness.’ All this is repugnant and no wonder I have done my best not to recite the multiplication table imposed by God in the Bible; hopefully not outside it.

I have not multiplied myself so far, and I am not likely to change my mind: I do not have to change my body for this purpose, not yet. Some people are old-born, and they stick to their guns, to their way of living, to their ancestors. I am probably of their number and every newborn baby seems to accomplish a duty disconnected with the past, with our tradition, dignity and honour. Usually they say, ‘I don’t want to augment the quantity of suffering in the world. That’s why I use condoms and my wife has a lot of contraceptives under her pillow.’ My wife is as old (or young) as my aunt was when I fell in love with her at first glance, and consequently she can no longer conceive a child, even in her mind that is attuned to harmony and the salvation of our globe. (Not of humankind, mind you.) Before going on and telling you how my wife meditates on the future, I had better say a few words about my aunt, Schopenhauer and the beach on which I saw my aunt in a bathing suit – a turning point

in my life. Sometimes your turning points depend on how a woman you are in love with behaves in front of you; it also depends on your whereabouts, and beaches are quite propitious for all sorts of bloomings and blossomings, as I have always said, when recalling my aunt's half-naked body. She was literally turning this way and that, although she had no intention of aping either dervishes or the tables that allow us to listen to the dead, without opening Dostoyevsky's book or enjoying Janacek's opera. She was talking to my mother who must have attracted her attention to the sea and the houses one could see from where they stood. Anyway, I was overwhelmed by what *I* saw, and I am convinced that whatever I feel towards my wife, her body and thoughts are literally based on the turning point I am analysing right now, for I have nothing else to do. Besides, this point is so omnipresent that no table, however talkative, could replace it this morning, in my study; and even if I rise and go to the kitchen, the turning point will rise in its turn, turn in my direction and follow me – to the end of the world, as lovers usually say. While I am at it (and I am always at it) I might affirm that the Earth – at least *my* Earth – turns only on account of the ecstasy I experienced more than 60 years ago. I think W. B. Yeats wrote something on the subject, and I seem to have already quoted his verses and sentences. Gyration, turning, gyration, falcon, falconer. I hear only my blood and this turning point; and all other points. They *are* in my blood, otherwise they would be nowhere.

Schopenhauer's books say that our libido does not function properly when we find ourselves with an old woman, or rather with a no-longer-young woman. Under these circumstances a sparkle in the eyes is not enough; at least according to Schopenhauer's doctrine. You visualise an old woman whose eyes begin to sparkle, and they go on sparkling for at least an hour. But your libido sleeps like a log: you do not budge from where you sit and nothing stirs anywhere except your anger, irritation and intolerance. 'What are you doing in my room, you, old woman?' you are about to ask, and only a tremendous effort rooted in your upbringing enables you to recall your manners and forget your frustration and incapacities. All this you can find in Schopenhauer's masterpiece. I cannot quote you chapter and verse but I am sure this old sparkling hag, this sorceress stems from Schopenhauer's mind, from his *Wille* and its *Vorstellungen*. I do not mind being in the same room with an aged woman whose body preserves the outlines of beauty, the curves of wonder I experienced a long time ago as I looked at my aunt on this faraway Odessa beach. Perhaps it is her body I still meditate upon, whenever such a woman – not a hag, just a beautiful older woman – appears in front of me; and even if she does not turn this way and that, I begin to sparkle, although my eyes may remain as dark as they always are. It is not for nothing that my father and uncle called me 'A dark lady.' Well, Schopenhauer's masterpiece thinks we do not stir in the presence of older women because we react only when some vital forces are involved in the process. What process, which forces? Of course he always thought in terms of his *Wille* and its abolition, obliterating the importance of music that wills nothing except itself or except my life, as I always say as if to pay homage either to Hamlet or to his creator. So Schopenhauer wrote about his omnipresent and omniscient *Wille* that, according to him, is not mighty enough to drive us towards elderly women who are unable to supply us and themselves with offspring. And even if they do give birth to children of both sexes, these children die very soon; they are doomed anyway, and it is better not to perform Wagner's *Ring* at this stage of your life, when you should rather talk about dawns and springs, not about dooms and *Dämmerrungs* (whatever the spelling of this particular twilight.) Swedenborg, on the other hand, says that the inhabitants of heaven, our fellow-creatures whose life on Earth was as innocent and pure as Parsifal, always move towards the spring so that older women grow younger and younger; and I cannot help wondering if they do not lose their sex appeal during their season-stuffed wanderings.

I wander too, from the autumn to the winter or the winder, I'm afraid: in my case, Wagner's *Ring* is not out of season except that no hope can be heard in *my* music, in *my* bitter, almost perverse harmonies. Incidentally, instead of using italics in the last sentence, I might have written, 'My, my, my, my, my, my, my.' Anyway, there is nothing else in my life, in my writings; even in my piano playing. While wandering, I wonder if these older women do not lose their sex-appeal as they get closer and closer to the Boticcellian spring. They might recover some of their nerves and tendons, but what about their twilight beauty, their personal Dämmerungs? The succession of m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m-m is an appropriate sound in the context: that is how I habitually express my admiration, my desire, my irresistible urges. I do not underestimate freshness and its constituents, but freshness and maturity have never been incompatible, and older women have already acquired what old wines share with you: their wonderful twilight or rather downright darkness, *ténèbres*. Six days ago I drank a bottle of Haut Brion 1955 which, in the space of four hours, passed from the first act of *Das Rheingold* to the ending of the *Götterdämmerung*. The Chateau Margaux 1983 I drank two days ago followed the same Wagner-traced itinerary. At the beginning of the cycle you meet three bathing beauties, but my libido – and I will not add 'if any' under the circumstances – is far more sensitive to Erda who affects every aspect of my life, whenever she emerges from the Earth. I wonder why Wotan takes no notices of her body, concentrating only on her rather hollow prophecies. You can say that about everybody and everything, and some of our dead correspondents seize this opportunity (being questioned by the ignorant quick) as they impart their so-called secrets to us: 'Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah. You're going to die, all of you. You should give your riches back to the poor workers who get sick in your factories. Ah, these workers, ah, these workers, ah, their families, ah, their children. They starve to death and you buy Ferraris. You have no idea what danger lurks in the future they have already stored up for you. All that glitters is not gold. The peace of mind I have often talked to you about also glitters, twinkles and shines. Where's your peace? Where's your mind, my dear Wotan? A storm is brewing in the distance. Do you think it is just the storm one hears at the beginning of *Die Walküre*? Not at all, not at all. The workers are setting the wheels in motion. Revolution, revolution, and once again revolution, as Lenin put it once.' And Wotan asks rather timidly, 'What should I do? I've always valued your advice. That's why, now and then, I conjure your image and also body.' 'Does your libido still function? Does it function when I come to the fore? Shall we have sex to pay homage to days of yore? Do you know that my assistants complain about all the sex and violence in Bayreuth?' 'My dear Erda, my libido is no longer in good working order.' 'Is it at least in *bad* working order?' 'No, it's *out* of order – forget about it.' 'Your salvation, your salvation. You still hope to worm this piece of information out of me – for the sake of your peace and mind. Well, I was going to talk to you about Bach and Mozart. Don't listen to Wagner – he is too noisy and wicked.' 'What about Palestrina?' asked Wotan. 'I think he is even more harmonious than Bach and Mozart put together.' 'What about us? Why don't you wish to put *us* together? I think I have a recording of Palestrina's *Mass* in the west wing of my underground chateau. Could this recording boost your libido?' 'It is your judicious advice that might boost my ego.' 'Is your ego identical to your libido?' 'I'm not a sex maniac, I'm not Georges Simenon.' 'Well, in that case I have nothing to tell you. What's the use of talking about love to a person whose libido can't be boosted either by Palestrina or by Bach?'

Erda is likely to teach you a few lessons, if you happen to come across her not only in Wagner's operas, but also in God's opera called life, existence, karma, nuisance. She tells you, 'Let go of yourself,' whereupon you begin searching for another question – in your eagerness to understand exactly what she means, what God and His angels talk about. 'Should I let go of myself or let myself go?' 'Don't go too far,' she might answer. (She does

answer thus.) ‘How far could I go?’ ‘Don’t overstep the bounds of the libretto.’ ‘Of the libido?’ ‘Of the libretto.’ ‘Where *are* they?’ ‘The last chord, you know.’ ‘But if I let go of myself, my body will remain on the stage forever.’ ‘Don’t you worry – they’ll throw it into the rubbish shut at the end of the act.’ And then Erda says, ‘You should let things happen in the psyche.’ ‘Does my psyche coincide with your stage?’ ‘Yes, and you should accept whatever happens on the stage, in the opera. Do not judge, do not judge.’ ‘I’ve always disagreed with Spinoza on this point, in this domain. We ought to have judged the so-called Russian Revolution and Hitler’s advent to power instead of laissing their fairings prosper and bear fruit.’ ‘Why did you touch upon Lessing? And upon fairies?’ ‘Do you have anything else to impart and reveal?’ ‘You should receive the world.’ ‘With open arms?’ ‘With open arms.’ ‘I can’t help receiving the world. But I’ll never open my arms.’

My wife talks about love rather often – all magnetic healers must talk about love because no universe is conceivable without it. Once more we come up against ‘it’, but this time we had better embrace it heartily, with every fibre of our being because all theologians and mystics say we should be in love with love; otherwise we might breed hate not only within our reach (or hate’s reach rather) but everywhere, throughout our universe. But I ask myself if my wife realises to what extent one must speak about love, if there is any extent one must refer to during one’s monologues centred on love, for love is not an extension cord. True enough, love is everywhere, and if it is not, there is no point in speaking about it. ‘If there’s only one spot in our universe where love doesn’t reign most fully and truly, we are doomed,’ says one of the mystics whose books you can consult at the Library of Congress. Well, I am not sure my love speaks about this sentiment from a Christian point of view which is dominated by cheeks and their dervish-inspired movement, in my opinion.

So love reigns in the world governed by my wife and her co-workers who pray for our world (or their world) and chiefly for our planet three times a week, on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Three weeks ago I crossed the narrow street that isolates her house from mine and found her in a sort of deckchair – sunbathing as usual. (My wife sunbathes even on rainy days, even during storms and hurricanes. I wonder what she would do in the middle of a Siberian snowstorm.) She did not seem to hear my footsteps or indeed my voice, but her meditation had been perturbed through my vulgar and noisy intervention, however adamant she might look in her deckchair. So she rose to her feet and said, ‘Well, if our planet suffers a relapse, you’ll feel guilty about this interruption.’ And then she revealed the purpose of her meditation and sunbathing: even an ordinary, vulgar person takes part in the universal hymn, when profusely exposed to sunrays. And my wife’s meditation is so esoteric I do not even try and question her on the subject; and whenever I do, she answers, ‘You just think about it, that’s all.’

She always intends to make things easier for me because she must be aware of my incapacity to meditate, to focus my thoughts either on God or on a single, almost isolated angel, assuming there is such a being. (Angels and archangels usually flock together except when they have an announcement to make, a piece of news to impart.) So, in the course of our next dinner, I might tell her about the bottle-game which can be played in solitude, provided you are surrounded by your favourite objects. You just have to rotate the bottle lying near your feet and wait for a few seconds, before asking, ‘What’s the verdict, bottle?’ The bottle points to an object you may not be in love with, which does not significantly modify the progress of the game. Anyway, you have to embrace this object heartily and kiss it, thereby proclaiming your universal love, your love for everybody and everything, down to heavenly bodies. The point is the bottle often points at *them* and so you have no alternative but to blow a kiss to their outlines and lights. Some of my wife’s colleagues say it is not enough to blow kisses: you must not only brush against a heavenly body, as many comets do – you are supposed to embrace and kiss it, otherwise your

initiation into the mysteries of love will always be incomplete. Of course it can never be completed, for love is as infinite as Giordano Bruno's universes – one infinite universe is quite enough, in my opinion – and so can multiply itself *ad libitum*. But theologians do not accept my thesis wholeheartedly, for they say that Christ could not have crucified himself in many universes: being a mortal man, he had not enough time to do it. Besides, he could not be in many places at once, although the feat is sometimes achieved by human beings such as that woman they always talk about, when discussing doppelgängers. She was in England and in Germany during the Second World War, and she was caught in Germany by Hitler's cronies because she was spying for England and the United States of America. As a spy and agent provocateur, she was tortured in Berlin and Munich, and her other body, the one getting rest in a castle, in England, suffered (if only in part) from the pain inflicted by the tortures. 'Remarkable, isn't it?' they always add after such a narrative, looking at you askance: they are not sure you believe in such stories. Anyway, Christ might have done it many times, throughout the universe and universes, considering that an ordinary (or an extraordinary) human can perform this trick very easily, at the push of a button. Many wonder which button should be pushed on this occasion, but I, for one, am not interested in such escapades, in cutting my personality in two or three. Two heads are better than one, and you are reluctant to display two heads on the same body: it is not very sexy and may therefore put off a lot of your admirers.

My wife asked me if I thought that trees had egos. This question is probably good, but if you set about analysing this notion, you have to go very far indeed; otherwise you might remain within the bounds of our abominable social life which is unworthy of my attention. It goes without saying that if I go out and try to embrace someone I shall be taken to the nearest police station, given the gravity of the virus situation. Yesterday, during my customary walk, I encountered a few policemen, but they asked no questions, contrary to what might be expected under the circumstances – under all the circumstances described in this book, the virus and all. Yesterday I also talked to a friend of mine living in Moscow, and he said they needed electronic permission to leave their house unharmed. (Policemen are usually associated with the words 'harm', 'vulgarity', 'stupidity', 'cads'.) 'Every time you're about to go out, you should call them to say why you need to forgo your walls' protection.' (It is rather pleasant to use the verb 'to forgo' in this context.) In Belgium where I happen to live now, after spending 33 years in Versailles and enjoying Parisian life to the utmost, they allow you to walk around, even if you have a sufficient number of trees in your garden. My wife's daughter comes to see her almost every day, accompanied by her two sons and one daughter waiting for her birth in her mother's hospitable womb. And in Moscow there are no more pedestrians as if the word itself were obliterated once and for all. 'I wish they would never reappear within my field of vision,' my friend pointed out. 'Let them go shopping and earn millions outside it. At last I can see some fish in the Moscva River. What a pity they arrest all those who go fishing.' But they (the Belgians) have not arrested my wife's daughter and her children; not yet. So now she comes with her husband and his cousin; and his cousin's daughter. No one is arrested and the virus goes on a spree not only in the streets, but also in the house opposite.

So the problem of identity with which all egos are concerned came to the fore once again; and we are unlikely to get rid of it through peaceful means unless we remember the following koan I chanced upon once again, when leafing through the aforementioned book: 'Prince Nata tore up his flesh and returned it to his mother, broke up his bones and gave them back to his father. Then he revealed his original body.' The point is my parents are dead so I have no idea to whom I might give my flesh and bones, in case I decide to remove them from my substance or nonsense, as say all those who discard or underestimate scholastics. Of course I might give them to

my wife, after writing on a sheet of paper, ‘When asked about my last will and testament, I invariably answer, “I still have something to do on the surface of the Earth.” Well, here it is: for once I am eager to come up to the requirement dictated by the human race, by its customs and nonsense, as I always say, when talking about my fellow creatures. For instance, music lovers (most of them) admire the conductor who goes by the name of Jansons. Well, I call him “Nonsense”, if you please. I bequeath my flesh and bones to my wife, not to a museum, as they used to do in former times. Sure enough, at the end of a Russian novel or even in the middle of it, when the hero is still the picture of health and innocence, you may chance upon the following sentence, “I bequeath my corpse to the Museum of Homo Sapiens.” I have not yet put my wife in the picture (the picture of sacrifice) about my intention, but I had better postpone this discussion: I have not yet finished this book which is probably my last will and testament. I suppose she might inquire about the purpose of this unusual act (after all, we are not in Japan). If she does, I shall answer thus, “I’m yearning to reveal to you my original, ego-purified nature.”’

I have read many times about this state of mind and body, and the authors of the text I was duty bound to read and study, said I had to strip myself not only of clothes, but of whatever pertained to my nature. And the original nature I was dreaming about had a lot in common with an oak tree exposed to the rigour of the Siberian winter. (No point in talking about other winters: they are autumns in disguise. And sometimes there are no disguises at all.) You have to go down and down and down to reach the state where we all hid ourselves – from Creation, I suppose – before the Big Bang. At least we should find and relish the atmosphere offered by the *small* bang, as one of the books and authors put it. Of course you have to find out what the small bang means, at least within the context you are engrossed in to the detriment of current affairs, but I have never been able to reach any state on this road leading to peace, quite, a sort of nirvana – to vana, as I say modestly. And I add that nir is only within the reach of specialists, of those who seldom forsake their lotuses or their lotus-embellished lots. Well, we went on looking at the oak tree I mentioned earlier and probably a dozen times, and I said to my wife, ‘This tree displays an overweening pride/arrogance/vanity. Or ego, to put it mildly and succinctly.’ ‘Why do you insult this oak?’ she asked. ‘I’m not sure,’ I answered, ‘that it is well-versed in the Christian lore, in its meekness and submissiveness to the Cross. It might have remained shy and unassuming, short and ugly. Look how majestic and presumptuous it is, in spite of our garden’s size and lack of pretension.’ ‘When a tree has enough room for its growth and magnificence, it grows – sometimes to the detriment of its fellow creatures.’ ‘I think Thomas Hardy said something to this effect. Did he speak of a lark on that occasion, in the same breath? Can’t remember. My memory grows as dim as the light we receive from distant galaxies.’ ‘And yet you should try and kiss those galaxies,’ she said. ‘Let’s put all these bear hugs aside,’ I answered. ‘For the sake of what?’ she asked. ‘For the sake of my nudity. Don’t forget I’m supposed to strip my bones off for your powers of judgement’s benefit. Actually it might be enough to follow this tree’s example. Doesn’t it stay at least half-naked in wintertime? Shedding one’s leaves is the harmless way of revealing one’s inner nature. After all, “*effeuillage*” means “striptease” in French.’

I am a prolific consumer of sacred books and no wonder I know a lot about *effeuillage* in every shape or form. One of its shapes is related to our sensations, impulses and thoughts which usually bar our path to bliss and what they erroneously call ‘our paradise on Earth’. (There are no paradises anywhere.) You suffer from a strangulated hernia and, instead of undergoing an operation, you just remove two discs from your body. These are not a pair of ordinary discs so you cannot listen to them, to their Bach’s cantatas, but it does not really matter: you have enough of these cantatas in your library and even in your bedroom as if you could not spend a peaceful night

in their absence. Be that as it may, now your gait may be justly compared to superman's elegance, strength and exploits, although you are still unable to fly and defend ordinary people. Then you remove the other disks about which your spine seemed to boast only this morning as you took your daily bath. And you feel so disposed to fly, as a result of your removal, that you execute a few jumps in the hope of leaving your house through the hole in your roof connected to the hole you are prepared to drill in your ceiling. You continue this ritual which, in your opinion, is far more efficient and spectacular than the yoga exercises you lighted upon in the aforementioned books. And you say to yourself you should do it in your wife's presence, otherwise it may not look as spectacular as you wish. Of course your inner voice – your *diamonion* or guru – is likely to interfere at this point to remind you that what you intend to do has nothing in common with theatricals. The doctrine of eternal recurrence – and this statement of mine is also recurrent – is one of the key concepts I bow to so as not to disappear forever from the surface of the Earth. This variant of deconstruction appeared in several works I finished a long time ago, but I am still in one piece that means I have never tried to remove anything from my body; and getting rid of bones and flesh is a feat one can accomplish only after a long meditation based on renunciations and a series of memories lapses. You remove one of your bones, and when they ask what you are holding, you just answer, 'A bone. Affected by my old and decrepit tissues, my body now exhibits a lot of memory lapses. This is one of them. Soon I'll be able to show you my spine, the whole of it.' 'What are you doing this for?' they might ask, puzzled by your unheard-off procedure.

This reminds me of Nabokov's posthumous novel where the protagonist does a series of exercises centred upon his own destruction. So he eliminates his toes and relishes the void that seems to have replaced them. My procedure is quite different because I do not meditate on the bones I remove from my body: any dog can do that much better than I or humans in general. We are not bone-specialists and even on the brink of starvation we are not likely to dig holes and bury our bones (our own bones) in them for a rainy day, for a sunny day. Even if a multitude of sunny days is arrayed in front of a dog, she digs holes and gathers up all the bones she has collected in the course of her last bone-hunting journey. And she puts these bones into the freshly dug holes, in spite of the sunrays that proclaim: 'Tomorrow the weather will be fine and no one will die of starvation.' Apparently you can use the sun not only for your electric car, but also for your stomach: you are allowed to fill it with the sun as if it were a mere cocktail or a bone sucked by a dog or a starving human. So you should not remove your stomach, even if a dozen of your bones are already outside your body – on your dinner table, logically enough. For whose sake did you put them on your dinner table? Your dog's jumps are not remarkable and cannot enable her to eat whatever you put on your tables and chests of drawers. Your cat, on the other hand, often forgets the floor and spends his days and nights on tables, beds and couches; and on top of cupboards where you often forget the *crème fraîche* you hide from your cat who is on a diet, being too fat for his age. So you put the *crème fraîche* out of his reach, but 'his reach is everywhere', as you wrote in your diary, and actually this is your favourite pastime: for hours and hours you watch your cat who jumps, climbs and licks the *crème fraîche* while sitting on top of the world, as you wrote in the same diary. Then you recall the injunction you read in some book or other: if you remove your bones from your body, you should not leave them unattended. Nor should you drop them into a rubbish bin. You should offer them to your mother and father. Of course it is better to gratify your mother with a few morsels of your flesh. If, however, upon removing them you find that the rot has already set in, you had better switch your attention and generosity to your bones and offer your mother your spine, for instance. In Nabokov's posthumous novel, the protagonist keeps the dead organs to himself as if he had nothing to bite into, with the

exception of his own body. The novel is unfinished, and Nabokov might have intended to end the novel with a huge offering of bones and flesh, letting the poor and some mothers and fathers take advantage of his literary labours. At least Hogarth allows a dog to eat the intestines of the man lying on a table where his body is tortured by a student who eviscerates a human body for the first time in his life. All around him one can see a dozen professors, a dozen other students, so the performance is watched and partly admired by the audience that is bound to applaud at the end, beyond the engraving, in its hereafter, so to speak. Hogarth must have given a thought to the offerings which are part and parcel of every ritual, especially if a quantity of human bones lies in it. First they stick to the body where they have spent all their lives and then a hand removes them from their dwelling places to put them somewhere, not necessarily in a tomb. Well, you are in love with your bones, and even if you agree to remove them for the sake of your enlightenment, you refuse to let them lie about, in spite of your inordinate love for dogs, among other animals. So you bury them in your family vault, not far from your parents' corpses, and engrave on the tombstone the following explanation of your act: 'Here lie my bones. I removed them myself. I am enlightened now. If you wish to see my light, I shall draw the curtains. But you are not allowed to cross my threshold: I hate humanity and its representatives.'

Whenever I look at the tree upon which I meditated alone and in my wife's presence, I think of the leaves it sheds every year as if to offer them to the two of us: no one else is permitted to walk in our garden. But we neglect them: instead of arranging them in a vase, we just trample them underfoot, for my wife must believe it is pointless to add them to our menus, to the leg of mutton I indulge in now and then. My wife is adamantly vegetarian and she often scolds me for my inadequate consumption of sheep, chicken, birds of all kinds and fish. (In Russia they now say: '*Adekvatno, neadekvatno.*') What is *adequate* in this domain, I wonder? Don't vegetables suffer when you munch them before sending their bodies to your gastric juices? According to Jacob Boehme, who seems to suggest an *adequate* meal, we must return our soul to heaven from where it was taken for some obscure reason in which Sophia and even Piotr (whoever he is) are involved. Or are they involved in the soul's *return* to heaven? Not the foggiest. Anyway, Jacob Boehme informs us that our soul is *not* in heaven at the present moment. Oddly enough, it is at the core of our body, and our sacred duty consists in removing our soul (not our bones) from where it sleeps and dreams. By the way, I still remember the book I read in my adolescence: *The Soul and its Nightmares*. So the soul is somewhere, and the only thing we know about it is related to our body, to the soul's whereabouts. Descartes was also sure that our soul was in our body, in its pineal gland – not in heaven, contrary to what some Fathers of the Church believed. (Not in the ether either.) 'We must introduce the soul again into heaven, or else there is no possibility,' says Jacob Boehme. No possibility for what? For our soul's prosperity? For heaven's plenitude? Will the stars go out, if our soul remains in our body forever? Even when our bones are removed one by one? All right, I am willing to remove my soul from wherever it dreams. Actually I suppose it is easier to remove the soul; I am still thinking in terms of my body. If you remove your soul from wherever it is, you do not have to overcome your tendons' resistance. And your blood vessels do not mind this departure either, judging from the immaculate purity of your sheets. (At least *my sheets* are pure, you say to yourself.) You do not even have to *squeeze* your soul through your bones or tendons because your soul is flexible, pliable and almost invisible. Actually it *is* invisible and grows visible only when you need its visibility: when you wish 'to pluck it from the Tree of Death,' as Boehme put it. Sure enough, your body is a tree of death, one of them; one can even go so far as to say you should bury it at the earliest opportunity, even if you have no family vault, no room within the cemeteries you are aware of. You hear now and then – and it is not Jacob Boehme you hear – 'I'm afraid your

confidence in your own body is misplaced,’ and you wonder where this voice comes from, although you have been told myriads of times that all voices come from heaven or from under the earth, from underground. It does not really matter where they come from as long as they are right or wrong, and this time the voice you hear must be wrong, otherwise you would not suffer from indigestion and other calamities momentarily linked to your body. No wonder you say to yourself almost every day and every night, ‘If I had no body, I wouldn’t suffer from indigestion, from constipation. I wouldn’t go to the toilet ten times a day.’

In short, I think I have found an adequate meal against which my wife will raise no objection, for it corresponds exactly to her visions, doctrines and views. Well, once your soul is outside, detached from your body, you can manipulate it at will and to your heart’s content. And your heart will never be fully content unless you convey your soul to heaven, restoring it to its primeval, pre-Big-Bang condition. If asked, ‘What could you find in the world before the Big Bang,’ you might answer, ‘I could find my soul in heaven, playing cards with other souls.’ ‘In which part of heaven?’ a theologian may ask you rather indiscreetly. ‘In the most prominent part, *natürlich*.’ (The theologian is of German extraction.) ‘You mean you met Moses and Plato, while looking for your soul?’ ‘That is correct,’ you answer. In short, for a while you are unable to transfer your soul to heaven, for it is reluctant to set off on this perilous journey: your soul is overburdened with sins and it is afraid they might burn it at the stake as if there were such a thing as the Inquisition –in heaven, of all places. In the meantime you have grown hungry and so cannot wait to see a dinner table laden with exquisite dishes. You know that such a table is already set for you and your wife at home, in your dining room or in your garden, weather permitting. But you are determined to have your meal in heaven, and even a bottle of Haut-Brion 1959 might not come up to your expectations unless you can enjoy it in the most luxurious restaurant our heaven can offer. (A peace offering or a music offering, as Bach might have said.) You talk to your soul, you push it heavenward, but your soul is obstinate, and you have no alternative but to do the opposite: you should bring down not only the stars, but also the sun and other implements of heaven. In other words (and actions), you should insert our heaven into your soul. What is more, you should kill it with all its stars and moons. You should assassinate heaven, for your soul will not be able to eat it unless it is dead – as dead as the corpses you see in the course of alchemical rites. And if your soul refuses to partake of heaven, you should deprive it of food for at least a fortnight. At the end of this stretch of time, it is unlikely to refuse any food, however stale, rotten and unappetising. And if your soul is so obstinate it still refuses to partake of heaven in spite of its hunger, you remind it that the appetite grows with eating. And if once again it shakes its head, you take it to the mountains that someone evoked within your hearing many years ago, ‘We worked up a real appetite climbing in the mountains.’ So you take your soul to the mountains and after a while it says, ‘I don’t mind my going on a sensible diet just as long as I don’t starve myself.’ So you put a morsel of heaven on its plate and it takes a nibble to see if it likes the taste of heaven. It makes no comment but you can tell from its pout it is not very pleased. Of course you explain to it – now you wonder if you should not say ‘she, her,’ instead of iting it, as you say – that she should not be fussy about food or indeed about the body where she finds herself after spending some time on the moon (as the Hindus believe) or in a tomb. ‘Besides, heaven is always delicious, even when it rains and pours. Just look at the stars, at the constellations painted by Joan Miró. You can even avail yourself of Van Gogh’s proverbial *Starry Sky*, or whatever they call it. Anyway, even if heaven were *not* delicious, as tasty (*savoureux*, as the faithful say) as caviar or oysters, you should eat it, relish it, enjoy every morsel of it, for it is a morsel of your salvation you’re eating.’ I am not convinced the soul may ask for a glass of wine without which no meal is dignified enough to bestow upon us the honour of salvation and eternal life in Paradise, on one

of its benches. (I have no idea why, when talking about Paradise, they often limit their descriptions and trances to its benches as if they were in Gorky Park.) Your first reaction, as might be assumed, concerns Jesus Christ and his blood – can we speak of red wine without referring to Jesus' blood and Resurrection? – but you obliterate this blasphemous idea in the twinkling of an eye and replace it with a bottle of white wine, for you are certain that white wine fits the heavenly regions much better than its red counterpart. Whenever you write a long sentence, they say you are an admirer of Proust (or Henry James), but I just wish to follow the tortuous path leading to my soul's core or soul of souls. Our relationship depends on my knowledge of her character and whims. And her whims presuppose an almost Proustian treatment, although one can express oneself in three mighty, weighty words revealing the truth of the universe and the sorry plight of its inhabitants. No need for subordinate and dependent clauses.

Eventually, the hunger strikers were force-fed, you say to yourself, quoting an old newspaper you crumpled up many years ago, convinced that you would never reread its news. Little by little, you have renounced all contacts with the news of the world, which was not really new, being part of the same eternal recurrence, of the same vicious circle. There might be virtuous circles in the universe, but they are irremediably poisoned by the only circle that counts in our lives: the return of evil and pain. Well, the soul is force-fed, spoon-fed and perhaps a few particles do now lodge in her intestines, for we should not forget that our soul is made in the image of our body, otherwise it is of no use to it. Of course it could talk about spiritual matters for hours and hours, but talking presupposes the existence of a mouth or a hole through which your thoughts may pass on their way from your lungs to the fresh, open air. We usually imagine our soul in the shape of a ball as if our juvenile football games were to haunt us throughout our earthly existence. (Do we play soccer in the cosmos, kicking the stars and catching them?) But what about the mouth? All right, let us settle for a hole, any hole, and even lungs are not essential to produce sounds and speech. Suppose our soul does have a mouth, a hole – call it what you wish – and then we begin to wonder why it does not cry, for it would cry day and night, if it had a mouth on which one relies, whenever one feels like crying, shouting, screaming with pain. You invariably remember Laocoön and what was said (on several occasions, by several people) about his incapacity to cry in spite of his vile predicament. One may even call it a catastrophe, a tragedy: the Greeks were renowned for their tragedies, for cries, blood and tears. But Laocoön does not cry, when we look at the sculpture which reproduces the bear hug he was submitted to at the very end of the Trojan War. One can hardly assume he enjoyed this manifestation of love, and I am not even sure that Schiller and Beethoven had this episode in mind when singing their hymn to hugging and kissing and lovemaking. And no music lover says, after listening to Beethoven's *Ninth*: 'Laocoön wouldn't have approved of this recommendation.' Yet Laocoön does not cry out and that makes me wonder whether my soul follows his example for reasons best known to itself. What can these reasons be, I am likely to ask myself? Usually they enlarge upon Winckelmann's and Lessing's comments which focus entirely on the sculpture, on this work of art – on *any* work of art, come to think of it. Lessing explained Laocoön's silence and apparent stoicism by saying that crying is incompatible with beauty. Of course one immediately remembers Zadkin's *Cry* and says, 'This is incompatible with life and its cruelty. But considering our life's broad-mindedness – it has enough room for tortures – we must admit that art's duty is to reflect these tortures most eloquently, sometimes by opening all the mouths, by having all the statues we come across in our museums and galleries voice their grievances.' So I come across Venus and realise she also tries her best to cry, for she knows she will be raped sooner or later, given the number of rapists walking around our cities. And what about Apollo? Why *does* he cry? Because you chance upon one of his statues in London, and

our hero (many dead share his ignorance) is lost in the kingdom of time: he thinks he lives in the Fifties, in the 20th century. And he is aware of the torture inflicted in Great Britain on the inventor of computers and their games, although his name – he does not remember his own name either – must have slipped his memory a long time ago. This inventor was given a medicine that killed him in the long run – in the long program, as he put it. Why? Because his loves and their tendencies outrageously jarred on the representatives of what they call ‘our English decorum’. So Apollo thinks he might be administered the same drug, with the same purpose, although he is almost sure he is not homosexual. So he cries, ‘I’m not what you’re taking me for. I love Venus. I’ve been in love with her all my life, or rather from the moment I saw Botticelli’s painting.’

Of course we cannot forget Francis Bacon’s *Innocent X* and frankly speaking, we make no effort to forget him. Why should we? He reminds us of our suffering, but this is not the purpose of our memory’s uncharacteristic tenacity. We say to ourselves that even a Pope can scream occasionally, perhaps all the time. Of course we know he does not scream, when talking to the crowd gathered in front of his palace in Rome, although his *orbi* and *urbi* is a sort of heartrending scream. In such moments we might realise that whatever glitters is not always gold and even if your mouth is shut, you scream inwardly, with your guts and nerves. All of them scream daily and nightly, but your mouth remains stubbornly shut for the sake of the manners you are not supposed to forget on any account. Even if they say to you, for the fun of it, ‘You can forget your manners for a while – we don’t really mind, you know. If you feel like screaming and shouting, do scream and shout to your lungs’ content. But first you should insert some ear plugs into our ears.’ I know a few music lovers who carry in their pockets a dozen earplugs without which they never go to concerts. If they do not like a pianist they have to listen to, they stuff these earplugs into their ears, being reluctant to disturb the members of the audience. And they explain after the concert, ‘The piano was just screaming with pain. And we’re not fond of this kind of screaming.’ So we are entitled to ask ourselves why Bacon’s Pope screams. He is not about to starve to death: there is enough caviar in his fridge, and if he prefers salmon and sturgeon, there are nine kilos of these fish – smoked and unsmoked – in his second fridge. Do his doctors forbid him to smoke? After all, he needs his lungs for his *urbis* and *orbis* which do not belong to the domain of chamber music: they are rather identical with orchestras, choruses and the *Missa Solemnis*. According to the historians, however, Innocent X never smoked because he was afraid of God and lung cancer – like the Germans, come to think of it. (If I go on like that, I shall think about the whole universe, about all its nooks and crannies.) So once again I ask myself, ‘Why does Bacon’s Pope shriek?’ When working on these portraits, Bacon felt like shrieking, say his admirers. ‘Why?’ you may ask. Because he had problems with his lovers, they answer. Actually you might find out how many lovers Bacon had by counting his popes and their screams. Let me count my own screams instead.

And what about my soul? Of course I am aware of its absence in Francis Bacon’s estate, but you can live, prosper and pray, even if this wonderful artist never took the trouble to paint you alongside his lovers, acquaintances and himself. My soul is overburdened with my sins and this state of affairs partly accounts for its lack of appetite. And yet my dinner table on which I installed the whole of heaven is even more luxurious than that of Innocent X whose meals were more or less similar to those of Putin. I am told it is a bad sign, a bad omen. ‘What?’ I often ask, surprised by this statement. ‘Last week you told me about your soul’s hunger strike. I think it is a bad omen, considering that you offer it Paradise, heavenly lakes and beaches.’ ‘I’m not fond of sunbathing,’ I point out. ‘Your soul is,’ they answer as if they were acquainted with my soul that I am unlikely to introduce to anyone, not even to intimate friends. (If any, if any.) And then I ask myself the following question, ‘Has my soul

grown so fat? Of course it has been on a diet for quite a while, but there are other ways of growing obese.’ And I remember an alchemical treatise I read last night. (I do not remember what I read the day before yesterday.) I think I put it on my dinner table downstairs, and I am loath to use my staircase when I can avoid this death-or-life exercise which might do a lot of good to my muscles right before my fall and death. In that book someone talks about the poisons to which the Philosophers’ Stone or my soul is exposed as it walks around, admiring trees and other aspects of the scenery offered by archangels to my miserable fellow creatures who can relish only what they see from their windows. The coronavirus, our confinement. I have said enough of these dire straits; the rest can be found in the newspapers. But I have Schopenhauer’s masterpiece or just ‘piece’ to lean upon – instead of a fragile banister that accompanies me downstairs – and I learn from it a lot about beauty and even about Lessing whose works I am hardly acquainted with. Apparently Lessing tried to explain why Laocoön does not cry out, and someone else said, ‘He doesn’t cry out because he is already on the threshold of death. What you *can* produce on your deathbed amounts to an immature death rattle. You haven’t practised this rattle enough to make it sound mature and accomplished.’ Does that mean I have to practise this death rattle instead of writing about it? *Memento mori, memento hori*. Do all these wise sayings and accounts mean it is not enough to remember death, saying and sighing, ‘I am dying, I am dying’? ‘Death, I remember you. You’re the only thing or being I remember because you do your best to rekindle my lust for life, for immortality and eternity. What a pity I cannot avail myself of eternal joys without dying, without a burial of sorts – no military honours in my case.’

Laocoön is not in love with the serpents that do their best to remind him of the tortures to which one and many are exposed in the vale of tears. Of course you do not always die in their (serpents’) embrace – not only because you do not care about their passions and love. And I suppose that Laocoön did not think these serpents would turn into bathing beauties upon hearing him say, ‘Gram, tram, pram, dram, dame.’ No, there are other ways of making you cross the threshold I have been talking about ever since I embarked upon this work or leisure. Well, my soul goes on crying out and I think she (it) began her (its) hymn to suffering even before my birth, well before my death and sojourn in my mother’s womb. Whether she opens her mouth or not does not seem to matter much; yet I would like to see my soul identify with Bacon’s Pope. (Dignity and spirituality are always on my agenda.) The painter added the open mouth to Velasquez’s portrait (or Pope) and I wonder if I could carry out the same operation, the same surgical feat. I did not even ask myself how my soul would swallow the morsels of heaven: this meal is spiritual to the extent of foregoing all implements and supplements. Screams and shrieks likewise belong to spiritual realms and heavens and gods, but I would not mind seeing my soul’s mouth and even her teeth. The point is I do not permanently see my soul, even when I feel like tampering with its sluggishness and down-to-earth tendencies. I was going to write: ‘Down-to-Earth tenderness.’ I supposed that if you are in the throes of death, you might express your love for our Mother Earth more unambiguously, with more transports, in expectation of your forthcoming union. Of course you do not kneel down and kiss her, as many Russians do upon their return to Russia, even after a short visit to foreign lands, but you might say a few words to the effect that you have always loved the Earth and condemned fertilisers and other poisons which poison our lives as well. The Earth will survive, on condition that she gets rid of us rather promptly, without paying too much attention to the pity sincerely advocated by Schopenhauer and the Buddha. We are doomed to die, even if Trump is not re-elected and our industries get a rough deal from the Almighty. Incidentally, in the documentary I saw a few minutes ago, Francis Bacon talks about his obsession with mouths, moving or immobile. (I wish my soul’s mouth moved when consuming heaven with its stars and comets.) He even mentions the glitter he seems to spot as he looks at the

mouths arrayed in front of him by his friends and foes. The latter wish to eat him alive, literally and metaphorically. I have never been tempted to eat this wonderful painter, but I must admit I did not appreciate him at once. So I left the exhibition they had set up in the Pompidou Centre; in the Eighties, if I remember rightly. I was probably horrified by the ugliness (or beauty) of his portraits, crucifixions and cages where popes and their subjects had posed for him.

Well, I wish I could see my soul's teeth and the glitter issuing from her mouth – a particle of divinities that preside over our miseries. In the middle of the 20th century, in the Soviet Union at least, many old people were in the habit of opening their mouths to show they had some gold among their teeth. In those times our dentists did not try to imitate nature, making us look like human beings, not like treasure island. So an old woman would embark upon her monologue and everyone could see at least five gold teeth in her mouth. And she was fond of meals during which she also had an opportunity to open her mouth, and whenever she opened it one was amazed by the glitter one could attribute to God, to Good opposed to Evil, and to virtues depicted by Socrates in his instructions. But if I take the trouble to talk about mouths and their capacity to move, I do not think about gold teeth; nor am I interested in the glitter, whatever its source and value. Your mouth glitters, but your soul remains as dark as your judgement, your evaluation of what is going on in the world and probably elsewhere. At any rate, after Giordano Bruno this 'elsewhere' is almost everywhere so you cannot talk about the universe that hangs above our heads without adding, 'Of course there are other universes we should take into consideration.' I think about mouths and their openness only because of the shriek I wish to hear, for deprived of this feature the world remains blind to its own nature. And my soul's silence would disturb me beyond measure. So far I have believed my soul is part of my substance and resides in my body, not on the moon about which a lot of alchemical treatises warn us: the new moon is dangerous and not only infants are exposed to its pernicious influence. Inwardly I scream all the time, and I do hope it is my soul I hear, not my lungs, bowels or liver. Cirrhosis of the liver does not talk and so many Russians continue to drink vodka, thinking they will outlive Biblical characters. And then they die, screaming with pain; as usual. Incidentally, one should on no account underestimate, let alone despise, one's bowels and intestines. (Excrement, excrement, excrement.) After all, David prayed to the Lord not to forget his bowels; and it is not about indigestion he was worried in those moments of concentration, meditation and supplication. Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke of the 'sounding' or the 'troubling' of bowels as if to emphasise their affinities with the Japanese who still affirm that the soul is enshrined in the abdomen.

Well, let us finish the discussion centred on meals and my soul's acquaintance with heaven lying on my dinner table in expectation of my soul's appetite. The lack of my soul's appetite. As if I was not eager to partake of heaven's bounties and magnanimity. And once again I ask myself if I am really connected to my soul. If so, in what way are we linked to each other? Of course if my soul is just my internal organ, we are brothers and sisters; anyway we *are* related to each other to the point of sharing the same air, the same food. If I eat a lot of rotten meat and vegetables, I vomit for days and nights, and my soul is bound to get involved in the process: she will go with me to toilets, lavatories and bathrooms – not only with a view to showing her commiseration. But are we related spiritually? If you take Francis Bacon and his brother, you may realise they were not really connected and many people thought they were not related at all in spite of their names and whereabouts. Francis was a militant atheist and when asked if he believed in God, he would answer, 'What a stupid question to ask,' which did not mean it went without saying or answering: of course, of course, of course. Not at all: he thought the question was stupid because you do not usually talk about non-existent things or beings unless you think they might appear and do you

a lot of harm, like malignant ghosts. There are so many things and phenomena to take care of within the world exhibited for the sake of our senses that talking about God Whose existence is not even open to doubt – it is just closed, according to Francis Bacon – is sure to disclose a streak of madness, a mental defect you are not aware of. Francis' brother, on the other hand, was very religious and ended up in a monastery, if I remember rightly. (And I think I remember wrongly or do not remember anything related to his brother.) Hopefully my soul is my real, true and loyal sister: I would be distressed to the utmost if I were to learn that my soul spends her life in a convent, whereas I still walk around my house and meet my terrifying neighbours. But let us concentrate on one detail only – my soul's eating habits. Suppose she does partake of the meal I am offering her and so a part of heaven I brought down for the sake of her education disappears in her guts – let us call her insides simply and vulgarly 'her guts'; for argument's sake. Suppose I am sitting by her side and watching the meal without taking part in it as if I were unable to eat heaven with all its angels, archangels and pagan gods. Should I swallow my soul after the meal? How to get her back, reinsert her into my life that needs her badly? I know from bitter experience that my body cannot live without my soul; not to the ripe old age of 110. (The figure I saw in my last dream. I immediately associated it with my life-span.) I read a lot of books devoted to heaven, its bliss and *material* advantages such as sunny beaches that I do not appreciate at all; and beautiful women you meet whenever you open the Koran. But if my soul finishes her meal, she will have the *direct* contact with heaven advocated by Master Eckhart, among other gurus. I think he said, 'Let us God eat you. And then you should eat God – not out of courtesy, mind you. If God is not in your guts, He is nowhere.'

The documentary I refer to now and then is based on Francis Bacon's life and works, and it is in this documentary that they talk about his brother. At the beginning you watch a bullfight, and I know a lot of people who cannot bear the sight of this criminal sport. It is a match opposing an animal armed neither with a revolver nor a sword against a man who wishes to conquer the hearts of women who are prepared to offer him flowers, provided he remains alive at the end of the unequal combat. The bull is on his own: no one is supposed to help him if he gets hurt by the hero of our times or their times. I am told that recently those doubtful triumphs were drastically curtailed so you are no longer allowed to cut the dead animal into pieces and offer these pieces to the ladies whose admiration knows no bounds; even the pieces of the dead animal do not bound these ladies' transports. They yearn to eat them, showing their admiration for the hero realistically and symbolically. (My soul should imitate these ladies' appetites.) Anyway, the forsaken animal is literally thrown onto the arena – Heidegger's *Geworfenheit* – and the hero awaits him, a sword (or rather Notung) in his hand. And this sword often glitters like my former fellow-countrymen's mouths. I think I know the difference between a toreador, a matador and a picador, and I heard about all these heroes in my childhood. My father had quite a collection of LPs that featured mostly operas – to the detriment of quartets and trios, I'm afraid. But it was not my father's fault: in those times you could not easily find chamber music in Soviet shops or concert halls. I often put on the Soviet recording of *Carmen* and the words 'toreador', 'picador' and 'matador' resounded in my room, assuming I had a room of my own. To tell the truth, I do not really care about their appellations, for all of them carry weapons and are determined to murder the bull in the end. In the meantime they position themselves in the vicinity of the fight, prepared to interfere whenever a spot of blood makes its appearance on the matador's immaculate clothes. (The only immaculate part within his substance; or rather *on* it, *outside* it.) And the chorus sings (in Russian): 'Toreador, get a move on. Pluck up the courage to do away with the bull. Away with him, away with him. You should know that a multitude of ladies' eyes will sparkle during the fight. Don't forget that these Spanish ladies are watching you closely. Even if

you're fatally wounded, you should have the last laugh.' And then I saw the matador (or toreador) in the air as if he had been summoned to the arena to demonstrate how Simon the Magician flew over the Vatican. Of course Simon needed no horns to send him flying over arenas and churches, but Simon and his like are not born every day so that matadors, toreadors and even picadors are badly in need of launch pads, otherwise they might never demonstrate anything except their vicious, non-existent valour. They throw their sticks, swords and lances and are thrown in their turn into the air which does not seem to welcome them, otherwise they would not return to their Mother Arena so promptly, so noisily. You can hear bang, pluf, plaf, crunch, and you watch the bull whose conduct throughout is irreproachable. Of course I wished him to tear his adversary into pieces and offer some of them to the same ecstatic ladies. In my opinion, the bull ought to have also paid attention to the matador's cronies running around with red tablecloths and napkins. I know I should not gloat over the matador's discomfort, but it really serves him right. Actually I do not know anything except that this abomination should stop, even if the participants – all of them with the exception of the bull – end up in the air. (Not in Paradise: they certainly do not deserve it.) I just gloat, gloat, gloat and *jubile* because I do not know the rules of the game. It is neither a game nor a match. Of course you can play with yourself, if you have no partner, and I know several individuals who enjoy playing against themselves as they sit in front of a chessboard or a table covered with cards. They can go so far as to challenge themselves to a game of poker, but we should not discard and despise the ladies who sit around the arena and watch how the man they set their hearts upon murders an animal. Perhaps we *should* despise them and that is what I do because I no longer gloat over the matador's sorry and well-deserved plight: he was replaced by one of his cronies armed with a lance and surrounded by *his* cronies and their napkins. They wave their napkins, tablecloths and even handkerchiefs in the hope of getting closer to the bull's head, without actually getting closer to it. The bull comes, stops and my soul begins to scream, although I still cannot see her mouth. Let *them* see her mouth, its glitter, its divine origin! Let them see *their* divine origin! In the image of God, in the image of God. In the image of What, may I ask? What kind of What were you born from? Why were you born? Is this your karma, your vocation, your duty? Is this your predestination? Let me curse it once and for all. And if this predestination is related to me in any way, being common to all of us, let me curse it too.

Replenish the Earth, replenish the Earth. But if the Earth is our mother, she should *replenish herself*. Anyway, it is a useless, pernicious commandment: we had better *not* replenish the Earth; only the Germans can do it with impunity, on condition that they limit their ambitions in this field to their own *Lebensraum*. My wife's daughter is about to give birth to a third child for whom neither she nor her husband has sufficient *Lebensraum*. But whenever her mother draws her attention to this deficiency, she answers, 'God said I should replenish the Earth.' 'You should prepare and use land for growing crops. You should grow crops. You should harvest crops. You will work your guts out. You will sweat your guts out. My cathedrals will be built by human toil and sweat. You will die from hunger, cancer, heart attacks and injuries, but before dying you will murder an innocent animal. You will not murder him outright. You will take a lance, a sword, a number of short sticks and you will wound his body and soul before killing him once and for all. No resurrection for animals and other inferior creatures. They are *unter-creatures*, if you must know. Only men can understand My work and sing a multitude of hymns in churches and valleys. And in ravines, on mountain tops. So you will murder the bull and a multitude of beautiful ladies will bring you flowers.'

There was a moment when I almost pitied the toreador, alias the matador. The bull was about to attack him once again; not in earnest, I'm afraid. The matador stretched out his arms and touched the horns as if to push their

owner away. Only Hercules could do that before being torn to pieces and offered to young and middle-aged ladies. Did our defeated hero really believe he might protect himself from the horns? By repulsing the bull's operetta-like, soft attack? (Soft, all-too soft.) The bull seemed to react positively (negatively, in my opinion) to this gesture of goodwill. He stopped in his tracks leading him to the matador's timely death – not only salesmen die in this world – and a crony whose hand continued to wave a sort of napkin succeeded in wiping out the vengeance-usurped portion of the animal's will. After all, he could have avenged himself not only on the sword-handling enemy, but also on all his cronies, including the organisers of the butchery, the director of the slaughterhouse. And also on the King of Spain, on a number of presidents and prime ministers. On courts of justice. On the members of the audience sitting around the area, on television viewers, on film directors. Well, I did not take pity on the matador: that would have been beneath my dignity and what I stand for. And even the Buddha would have declined to consider such an act, saying, 'You have to choose between the bull and the matador, and the latter is my second choice. You can't pity everyone unless you're a Christian martyr for whom it is the only way to get to Paradise.'

Apparently Simon the Magician was brought down and therefore killed by St Paul who envied him the gift that, according to him and many others, could be made the most of only by Jesus. So he uttered a prayer and Simon turned into a falling star instead of showing how our aeroplanes and spaceships (and the Martians) would conquer space. What would St Peter have done, had he seen a matador in the air, flying around a bull's horns? He would have said, 'If he flies off, I'll convey him to Paradise, for he made the sign of the cross before entering the arena.' What did Francis Bacon (not St Francis) usually say, when watching a bullfight? 'I could spare him (the matador) the trouble of fighting the bull. I can injure him myself. The matador.' What is the difference between such a bull and Francis Bacon? The former can kill the matador, the latter can only injure him through his paintings. What is the difference between such arenas and Bacon's canvases? There are no beautiful ladies on Bacon's canvases. But there are many beautiful ladies *around* them, one might point out. So, all things considered, there is no difference between such arenas and Bacon's canvases.

In the arena where matadors fight their enemies and fly over them as soon as an opportunity presents itself, the bulls are vigilant, and they communicate to their fellow creatures the contents of the fight they have to endure for the sake of beautiful ladies and their flowers. In what vases will these flowers be put, if all the bulls they have chosen for fights stay alive and continue to kick and kill matadors, picadors? The bulls say to their colleagues, 'We are in the arena now and there is a matador in front of us. As usual he carries a red tablecloth and he waves it before our noses. Don't pay attention to the colour and the cloth. You should attack the matador and kill him outright. Don't postpone his death, whatever he does. Sometimes these bastards stretch out their arms and grasp your horns as if trying to appease your anger. They call it "the human touch", and they hope we appreciate this gesture of goodwill to the point of leaving their bodies in peace. Please don't leave their bodies in peace. Just tear them to pieces, otherwise they'll carry out the same ritual, using your body as an object of their pride, of their uttermost desire.' Actually the bull I saw on television really took those bare hands into consideration instead of finishing his enemy off, then and there and not elsewhere. He was very considerate, this bull of ours, and I bitterly deplore his misplaced humanity; in other words, he was human, all-too-human. (I have used this definition of Nietzsche's over and over again as if I believed in humanity, in what they call 'humane'. These words and definitions are useful whenever another charity ball is on the agenda.) Yes, I suppose the matador trusted the bull's humanity and thought the Almighty had infused a huge quantity of commiseration into this creature's soul. He thought that even the bull had been created in God's image, for God has a lot of images in His studio. And there

are a few bulls among those images. On the day of the bullfight, God chose the image of the bull that our matador was to fight a few hours later and said to Himself, 'What a pity my angels aren't within my hearing. It's the other way round, actually. Doesn't matter. I'm not within their hearing, but I am within my own hearing. I'm always within my own hearing. And I hear the following words I utter, determined not to forget them under any circumstances, "Today I'll save the matador and kill the bull. I'm a Saviour after all. And a killer. I shouldn't forget my duties.'" That is what God said to Himself; at least the matador thought so as he was lying, dying, lying at the bull's feet, at the bull's mercy, pleading for mercy. He thought that human touch was the most powerful touch in the universe. 'Even this savage, stupid creature must know what our human touch is about. Of course he doesn't read Nietzsche's works, but one doesn't have to read them to experience the warmth and tenderness of my hands.'

The bull did feel the matador's tenderness and humane tendencies, and as soon as he felt them his will to kill faded away (like MacArthur's old soldiers), and a picador drove yet another stick or lance into his body. (Why do we always recall MacArthur when using the verb 'to fade'? If we hear 'faded away', we immediately see a soldier flying away from us as if we were attending a military parade. Yes, a part of these parades is called 'Flying Soldiers'; not Flying Saucers.) So their communications, the vibrations sent and received by bulls waiting for death outside the arena, are useless, given the merciless superiority of matadors and inborn humanity of bulls. They are humane and no amount of cruelty on the part of humans dealing with them in arenas can restructure their minds. Outside the arena I saw they are rather aggressive and think that no picador, however insignificant and ugly, will ever escape the intensity and justice of their wrath. But whenever they see a supine body and feel a pair of human hands, they yield to the temptation and become all-too-human – like a lady giving one thousand dollars to the organisers of a charity ball. 'My buddies think I'm too soft on matadors when they misbehave – and they misbehave all the time – but I just can't help it.' And of course the bull realises he is dealing with a representative of what is called 'the summit of Creation', and if this representative deigns to touch him with his bare hands, leaving aside all those implements of war we are acquainted with thanks to arenas and cameras and cameramen and women, he is proud to have been involved in this project. (Swords, lances, sticks – not walking sticks, mind you – hammers, nails and so on.) As I said earlier, all those weapons are no longer manipulated by the matador's hands. It is these bare hands that the bull's horns feel and the message is far more powerful than the warnings and recommendations issued by his buddies. He is honoured by a human who, in days of yore, right after the Big Bang, climbed the ladder (Jacob's ladder) and installed himself on its top which was called 'the summit of Creation'. And today, this afternoon, a bull appeared at the foot of this ladder, and the superior creature, the superman, took the trouble to rise from his throne and descend the stairs with a view to touching this bull's dirty, foul-smelling horns. 'Should I really kill him?' the bull asked himself. And he shook his head and his horns, saying to himself, 'No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.' And a picador took advantage of this interior monologue as he drove yet another stick into the bull's all-too-vulnerable back. And another matador entered the arena, unsheathed his sword and headed for the bull, for the bull's head and horns. The ladies-in-waiting (waiting for the execution of the bull) touched their flowers, providing yet another instance of the human touch, and the bull collapsed accompanied by tremendous, thunderous, earthquake-like applause.

My wife thinks the coronavirus is just a warning sent by the Almighty or Mrs Destiny whose solicitude is well-known by the representatives of lower classes – by animals, in other words. They leave their native lands on the eve of a major earthquake, whereas humans stay at home. Animals say to one another, 'We'll leave this land

as quickly as possible, and no one will be any the wiser.’ Sure enough – whatever happens is *sure enough* in the kingdom of destiny – our humans do not get nervous as they look at the running animals. ‘What’s got into them?’ they ask themselves. Sometimes they run after their sheep and cows, unwilling to lose hundreds of dollars. Sometimes they begin to shoot and some animals collapse as if they were in the arena I wrote about at some length, once again disgusted by the human species. Well, I say to my wife, ‘Do you really think the coronavirus is just a warning? What kind of warning is it? Why call it a “warning”, considering that our fellow-creatures – they’re certainly not *my* fellow-creatures – die from it? What’s more horrible than death? Or do you think the virus is the harbinger of another Flood, Deluge or whatever? What could this “whatever” be, I wonder?’ I think I caught this virus during my recent trip to Taiwan and Japan. It is true that I did not play concerts in China, and I am not inclined to deny this truth, whenever they point out I could not catch the virus outside the Chinese borders. But I remind the people I talk to on rare occasions – I talk mostly to myself, needless to say – that one is exposed to all sorts of viruses and deaths at airports, on planes and even at five-star hotels where Chinese tourists take pride of place; let alone three-star restaurants. I neither felt nor heard any warning, I must confess, as if my guardian angel were asleep – in the midst of his or her master’s personal tragedy. (The virus had already taken pride of place, in my case.) My guardian angel ought to have warned me thus, ‘Don’t take this plane, don’t fly to those countries, don’t play in those halls. Let us skip this tour altogether.’ But I am sure I would have answered him and her as follows, ‘It is my sacred duty to play Schubert in Taipei and Haydn in Tokyo.’ Perhaps I did have this conversation with my guardian angel: we should not light-heartedly discard the unconscious and its insidious interference in our affairs. And if my hypothesis is right, I wonder why my guardian angel (while he was at it) did not touch me with his bare hands. After all, his instincts must be even more refined than those of the matador lying before the bull whose horns did not accomplish their duty. She should have touched my hair, my shoulder and chest, tenderly pushing me away from Taiwan and Japan, from all the airports I was to visit, unmindful of viruses and uncompromising death. I am not hard of hearing, but now and then my ears get blocked and consequently I cannot hear my guardian angel’s voice; at least I might miss some words and recommendations. On that occasion I must have missed the word coronavirus; or perhaps I did not miss it: I just did not know what it meant. And guardian angels (and angels in general) do not always take into consideration our ignorance of the universe and its contents. We do know something about the stars and black holes, but I am not sure I would recognise its depth, a black hole’s mouth where no glitter is likely to welcome cosmonauts, astronauts or strollers, if I suddenly found myself in front of it. I hope that my guardian angel keeps guard by the entrance of every black hole I may encounter on my way to eternal bliss, and this full-time occupation would explain her negligence that allowed me to play a few concerts in those distant, virus-inhabited countries.

My wife did not put me on my guard either; and yet she meditates a lot, and I touched upon one of her Earth-immersed meditations that I unwillingly interrupted by entering her garden and heading towards her deckchair. After a few sighs and melodious grunts, she said, ‘Luckily for both of us, I had neither the time nor the opportunity to leave my body,’ whereupon I thought about my perilous journey in the wake of which I landed up in the casualty ward. I suppose she must have travelled extensively before my departure for Taiwan, and her journeys were inhibited neither by passport controls nor by the lack of tickets: her body was still staying in the house opposite and probably smoking: my wife used to smoke 12 cigarettes per day. I do not know whether her body eats in her absence, but I suppose it can hold out without salads and water, being in a sort of trance or paralysis which, however, did not prevent it from smoking. (For a week or so my wife has endeavoured to stop smoking

and eating chocolate.) So I continue to wonder why my wife did not detect the latent existence of the coronavirus – in the atmosphere, under the surface of the Earth, within the nearest cloud. Or didn't she travel as far as the Far East? But her astral body must be kept posted about whatever happens in the universe – through vibrations and other agitations. In comparison with distant galaxies and nebulae, Japan is right on our doorstep. Besides, the vibration rate of our planet is much higher now than before the advent of the coronavirus, and probably this ascension (Jacob's ladder?) began well before we were put in the picture about the virus' destructive force. Once again I ask myself the same question, Why didn't my wife put me in the same picture? I would not have spent ten days in the hospital where I was put on a respirator – a part of the same picture – and listened to death rattles round the clock. We all know what *memento mori* means, but not everyone knows how to *memento* this *mori* of ours. Even now I walk for an hour around the area where I am dying slowly and surely, and I listen to CDs while walking and talking to myself. Actually we should listen to death-CDs, thanks to which we might listen to the rattle I am writing about; at least in the course of our daily walks. While walking and listening to the CDs in question, we would say to ourselves, 'I'm listening to death, to my own death. That's how I'll rattle on my deathbed. And they'll say after my death, "The dying man's voice rattled in his throat."' "

A lizard can regenerate its tail, and this is a gentle way of starting a debate focused on our return to the Earth after another world-conflagration. But I am not thinking about the human species which is not entitled to any space, however dirty and nasty, in my brain and also within my soul that could survive human presence, considering its immortality and legendary endurance. This morning my wife showed me a lot of photographs where half-forgotten, half-obliterated species came to the fore again, disporting themselves and spoiling their offspring on the beaches forsaken by humans. The coronavirus holds sway over the Earth, and in this day and age (unfortunately, it is just a day, not an age – the virus and its sway will not last, alas) inferior animals whose reputation has always been bad hold their heads high: unlike superior animals, alias humans, they cannot be contaminated and killed by the coronas and other viruses. Call the coronavirus what you wish: a dispenser of justice, an upholder of the law, an unknown divinity, a well-known pagan god or just God (He might have changed His mind and also His heart). Whatever the name you give it, its sway and choice prove beyond any reasonable doubt that animals are superior to humans and even to their children who can transfer the virus to their elders and betters; and worsers, as I usually add. But for these sensible additions, our accounts would have nothing in common with truth and a lot in common with its nothingness. So animals regenerate and replenish the Earth, taking advantage of our temporary absence. They might think we have gone forever, and this belief partly explains their joy and the way they gambol around in the spring sunshine. But they are mistaken and soon they will realise their joy is short-lived and I am sure it will not survive our resurrection, our invasion of beaches, streets and woods.

But let me return to my illness about which I spoke at length in my recent French book devoted to Purgatory where I might spend yet another eternity of mine. The symptoms I went through on the eve of my departure for the hospital are depicted (as usual) in an alchemical treatise: I might belong to the group of individuals whose lives can and must be depicted through alchemical symbols; otherwise they would lack both rhyme and reason, the individuals and their lives. I saw the toad they speak about, and this toad was under my feet wherever I went, so I was always about to trip over it and fall downstairs, even if there were no staircases around me, overhead, under my reeling body. Of course I repeated the words I knew by heart: putrefaction, death, resurrection, the toad is gold. It is so called because it is an Earthly Body. Why is it an Earthly Body? Am I an Earthly Body? I asked myself. A Toad full ruddy I saw, and that ruddy Toad was my body and also my soul that I constantly saw under my feet. I

said to myself she was under my feet because she was at the root of my being, and you are always in danger of tripping over your own roots. You always trip over yourself, fall on yourself, kill yourself, and whenever they accuse you of murder, you can say it is yourself, your own body you killed, for you no longer needed it. In the meantime your soul went on drinking the juice of Grapes. And then you saw a line in front of you. You were in the presence of a book, and all you had to do was related to its contents – to your own life, in other words. Of course you did not fail to say to yourself that everything is your life, even the pollution and virus you condemn and damn daily and nightly. You are your own virus, and there is nothing you can do about it. You are conveyed to a hospital and they photograph you and give you a multitude of injections. So you can say the injections multiply themselves, for God said to them, ‘Multiply and replenish the Earth, otherwise the human race will disappear from her surface and even from her entrails, from her bosom, from her stomach, her sex organs. And if humans disappear from the Earth’s sex organs, she will never be able to resurrect them, giving birth to another multitude of humans and their offspring. Spring, spring, spring, off, off. And I am too old to give birth to anybody or anything. I think Schopenhauer said that old people and old gods should not give birth to whatever comes into their heads. Whatever comes into their heads should stay in their heads, otherwise a lot of poison will replenish the Earth. So I shall restrain myself, I shall rein in my libido, urges and élans.’ And then you read the following line in the same book, ‘Till over-charged with the Broth, his Bowels all to brast.’ At least I did come across this line and I hesitated as to the identity of the being whose bowels had just blasted – in my presence no doubt, upon my word, cross my heart. God is dead, God is dead, sang a chorus, and I said to myself I was fed up with this declaration, for the simple reason that it is I who keeps dying, not God, not the Almighty, unless I am both: God and the Almighty. Then you learnt (so did I) that, overcharged with the broth, the Toad burst asunder, and you heard a clap of thunder. And this clap reminded you of Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* where a minor god brandishes a long stick as if about to finish off a celestial bull. In other words, on the eve of my departure to the clinic I lived through a nightmare that did have something in common with alchemical rituals, whatever they say and do to prove the contrary. They say there is no such thing as alchemy. They say all alchemists are dead and buried, and no one intends to bring them back to life, for life is loath to receive them into its bosom. For more than two centuries life and reality have been pushing them away as if dealing with a bull and his horns, and that is why we often read in newspapers, ‘The enemy attack was quickly repulsed.’ And if you talk to them about the juice of Grapes, they say, ‘You’re just a drunkard. Just before midnight, the square filled up with drunken revellers, and one of those revellers was you, you bastard. We recognised you, we recognised you. Hopefully you’ll explode one of these days.’

‘And after that, from poisoned bulk he cast his venom fell.’ That is what I was trying to do day and night: trying to shake off, get rid of the venom flowing through my body. I vomited this venom and it filled my toilet, bathroom and covered my sheets as if I could not go to sleep without its help. If you ask death to lend you a helping hand, he just fills you with poison, to the brim, to the brim. Now and then this poison overflows its receptacle, alias you, and you have no alternative but to disgorge the venom into your bath, your sinks. ‘The pipe was found to be disgorging dangerous chemicals into the sea,’ you read in newspapers. And you also read the following line, ‘For grief and pain whereof his members all began to swell.’ You look at your members and, sure enough, they are swelling right under your eyes. Your eyes get in touch with them so as to see more clearly what is going on, and your members’ insolent growth literally brushes against your eyes as if to prove they are swelling in earnest. Oddly enough, your penis does not swell; it does just the opposite. Contrary to what might be expected, you do not rejoice. You do not say to yourself, ‘My penis is growing thinner and thinner, smaller and smaller, shorter and

shorter. Hopefully my members will model their behaviour on its diet, on its gracefulness. I'm sure my penis would be a wonderfully graceful dancer if the director of the Bolshoi engaged it. Dancers shouldn't be tall and massive so my penis fits into the picture perfectly. What picture? Any ballet will do: *Giselle*, for example. My penis dances first with a peasant girl and then with a countess. In the second act it is sure to dance with the dead – the dance I'll perform for centuries, I suppose. And the dead will say, "What a graceful little penis. Where does it come from?" And then I'll rise from my tomb and show them the body which carried this penis for years and years and even danced with it until the penis was ready to drop. (Not my whole body, mind you.) "And it dropped," I'll say to them. "But this fall didn't entirely originate in what they call exhaustion, you know. My penis had always been fond of dances, ballets and suchlike. But it had never gone to the Christmas disco. My penis is highly cultured, refined and graceful, as you can see, while admiring its technique and romanticism.'

My members continued to swell and so, after a while, after another eternity, I was unable to go upstairs; but I could not do otherwise: my bed was upstairs, my computer was upstairs. Of course I did not write anything during that period situated between life, death and Purgatory on which I am still relying, whenever my thoughts meet and embrace my afterlife. 'With drops of poisoned sweat, approaching thus his secret Den.' Actually I *was* sweating like a pianist who does his best to cope with the problems he can neither overcome nor obliterate. His sweat drops on the keyboard and his fingers start to slip, for the keyboard grows more and more slippery and the pianist cannot help pushing the wrong keys, only the wrong ones, only the wrong ones. Another nightmare I went through slipping, sitting in my car, skidding on some ice and hitting a lot of trees, the wood where Dante found himself at the beginning of his interstellar journey. And in addition to all this, from every member of mine there dropped the poison minutely described in the book I kept on reading as I stood right in front of it. Drops of poisoned sweat, drops of poisoned sweat. What kind of sweat was it? There was piss all over the floor and I was wondering where it had come from. We often ask ourselves this question, 'Where does it come from? Where does it come from?' The answer is simple, logical and evident, 'From us, from us, from myself, from my body, from my soul, from my inner purgatory, from my hell and paradise, from my unlucky stars.' Yes, there was piss all over the floor and I reflected upon the situation, upon the phenomenon I was facing and staring at. Where did it come from? Usually, before going to the lavatory or toilet – not only to wash your hands – you say to yourself, 'I need a piss.' And if you belong to what they call 'polite society' – and toilets are never mentioned in polite society – you think along the following lines, 'I believe I'd better head for the nearest lavatory in the hope of being able to relieve myself there.' But this time – that time, rather – I did not say anything of the kind; either to myself or to my wife or to my guardian angel. Actually I ought to have shared my predicament with this angel whom I often touch upon in my writings as if paying homage to her efforts and unremitting loyalty. 'And from the which in space a Golden Humour did ensue.' This golden humour slowly filled me with horror. This gold had nothing to do with the Philosophers' Stone and the result of alchemical labours: alchemists are not in the habit of relieving themselves in the middle of their laboratories. I was limping along a corridor and suddenly – as we all know, nothing is really sudden in our lives and afterlives – I came across this golden humour; a golden puddle, rather. We say something and then we correct ourselves, adding 'rather' right after the correction. That is what our literary and mental styles are about.

Our veterinary surgeon says that cats are the most emphatic creatures in the universe. He probably says 'in the world', but my wife always corrects her friends and relatives, saying, 'Not in the world – in the universe!' So my cat decided to live up to this principle and left a golden trail in the corridor where he walks to and fro, thinking

about my discomfitures and diseases. This time (that time) I was on the threshold of death, which required a particular effort on the part of my dear Moosey. So he did not content himself with leaving his urine by the door or at the end of the corridor: he poured his heart out (so to speak) from one end of the corridor to the other. Apparently a lot of amateur alchemists mistake this base liquid for a herald of gold, for an ultimate triumph of their art. They open the retort, smell the liquid and break their apparatus which can bring them only unhappiness, disgrace and disgust. But a true, professional alchemist knows that even the urine he finds in his machines is part of the overall process – more or less identical to what they call ‘putrefaction’. ‘Whose falling drops from high did stain the soyl with ruddy hue.’ At first you might misapprehend this line, thinking you are fatally ill: your urine contains some blood which is a bad omen I came across almost twenty years ago. Someone said, ‘Our life is just a catalogue of our diseases,’ and this man or woman was probably right: according to philosophers and mystics, even our triumphs display a huge cancerous growth, for these triumphs are worldly and consequently unworthy of Taoists and alchemists. A Taoist sage hides himself and also herself: he or she is as androgynous as God Himself and Herself. A professional alchemist stays in his laboratory – even if her body and soul are prepared for Paradise and its inexhaustible landscapes. (In Paradise no one knows for sure if this and that tree are really trees and not human beings in disguise.) So the alchemist I am talking about – he has nothing to do with relatively recent bestsellers – stays at home, a large pile of gold glittering on his writing desk. A male servant might say to him now and then, ‘If I were you, my dear Sir, I would sell one hundredth of your treasure. Don’t you know that the price of gold has risen sharply? Because of the coronavirus? And it will go on rising, rising, rising, rising.’ ‘This gold is inside me,’ answers the alchemist. ‘Do you want me to sell the contents of my soul?’

The problem of immortality is no longer on our agenda because we cannot replace our whole life with a series of plastic members such as a plastic soul, a plastic love for Beethoven, a plastic understanding of Dante. Of course you can say, ‘A human being is just a plastic bag into which you can put whatever you wish, provided you do not put too many objects and subjects into its rather modest insides. Otherwise you might trip over the objects and subjects that are bound to drop from it, falling overboard at the earliest opportunity. A failing memory cannot hold a poem memorised in one’s childhood and it falls overboard as its former owner strolls along a boulevard either in Paris or in Moscow. And other strollers or rather their bodies begin to cover the pavement, unable to cope with the obstacles strewn over their itineraries. If you happen to walk through a city *embellished* with human bodies – apparently the human body is beautiful – you realise that this makeshift cemetery originated in a forgotten poem, in a memory lapse of which its former owner is often unaware. Anyway, they decided that they should not turn their cities and even villages into charnel houses: there is no shortage of such houses in the world. You cannot always find a suitable house or room for your family, but if you wish to spend a few days in a charnel house, you find its doors open; and you enter it, expecting neither a bunch of flowers nor a perfect execution of Chopin’s *Funeral March*. Actually many corpses are so ignorant of music that, if you resolve to offer them Beethoven’s *Funeral March* from his *Third Symphony*, they suddenly leave their coffins and say, ‘What kind of music is this? I refuse to install myself in my tomb unless you perform Chopin’s masterpiece.’ I, for one, would refuse to lie down either in my coffin or in my tomb, if it is Chopin’s masterpiece I heard on my way to the cemetery. I shall say to the mourners, ‘You should put on Furtwängler’s recording of Beethoven’s *Funeral March*. Or Knappertsbusch’s recording of Wagner’s *Funeral March*, the one you’ll hear in the third act of *Parsifal*, if you take the trouble to put this recording on. I prefer the 1951 version of the opera. You know, he conducted *Parsifal* every year, in Bayreuth. If the corpses we are talking about consented to listen to Beethoven and Wagner before

their final *Geworfenheit*, I might congratulate them on the happy ending of their earthly existences. “Nothing in his life, nothing in her life, nothing at all, not even the number of charity balls he or she gave his or her money to, not even the number of overfed, obese children, beggars and tramps, not even the non-existence of bugs and viruses in their dwelling places had been so magnificent as their deaths.”

Well, they are resolved to get rid of the virus, but our specialists – their armies and legions – say we need much more contaminated humans. Why? Because if we do not have within our reach at least 60% of dying men and women, we shall be unable to eradicate the virus radically, once and for all. Why? Because you are supposed to array all these people in front of your machines, and once you see this legion or army in front of you, you can ask them to inhale the air they find in the immediate vicinity of their noses deeply. This goes without saying, needless to say, but you say it all the same, for there are people whose minds remain intact and almost virginal, untouched as they are by the wisdom of the world. So they are perfectly capable of asking you if they should not go to California and spend a few days on a beach, inhaling its air, its sunrays and also the waves licking and tickling their feet. You answer them, ‘No, you’ll stay here and inhale our polluted, rotten air, deprived of the ozone and so on. What we are interested in concerns the virus that don’t mind living in our disintegrating atmosphere. On the contrary – it prefers this air of ours to whatever you can inhale in California and on the Bahamas, while eating some bananas, according to the famous song.’ So the members of the legion you survey and control begin to inhale whatever lies and floats and flies in the immediate vicinity of their noses. At some point you say, ‘Stop. Hold your breaths.’ It is too late to ask them how long they can hold their breath underwater, but it does not really matter. So they hold their breath for a while and then you shout, ‘Exhale the air, the virus and death!’ And the members of the legion obey your command, for they think that your test and professional labours will save the Earth, allowing their children to become Nobel prize-winners and billionaires. So they exhale the air they have just gathered into their lungs for the sake of your command and future efforts, and the virus springs from their mouths, lungs and other internal organs and begins to disport itself on the grass or in your laboratories. First you build a huge laboratory in your eagerness to welcome as many individuals as possible – they call these individuals ‘one-foot ones’, for one of their feet is already in the grave – and a multitude of feet walk into your brand-new building, disposed to let you detect the virus and kill it in their presence. Oddly enough, all these individuals sincerely believe there is only one virus inside their bodies and so, when they exhale the air from their souls (they believe in the immortality of their souls and in the present death of their bodies) the virus is bound to come out, expose itself to the instruments of its doom and perish like a hero on the floor of the laboratory; or on one of its walls. Why did such an idea penetrate their skulls and settle in it instead of bursting into laughter and saying, ‘We are legion, you know. You are legion, we are legion. And even if one of our comrades perishes for the sake of his comrades’ freedom, we shall not follow him into the grave. We’ll just bury him with military honours and play Beethoven’s *Funeral March* in his tomb’s immediate vicinity, over his tombstone, if you wish. And then we’ll continue our games and wars, and you’ll spend your days and night in hospitals, coughing up blood, spitting blood and venom.’

When asked, ‘What’s all this fuss about?’ the doctors and other specialists say, ‘We are aware of the widespread misunderstanding rooted in our legions’ misconception. They believe in *one* virus as if influenced and fatally affected by their monotheistic religion or religions – we’d better always speak in the plural as long as we live in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society. We live in a free country where viruses do whatever they like unless we interfere and inform them that, now and then, we opt for dictatorial regimes. In Vietnam they cope

almost perfectly with the coronavirus – and other viruses, diseases and calamities, come to think of it. So sometimes we just come to think of it – of communist countries, that is, and adopt dictatorial measures instead of adopting the virus as if it were an orphan left to its own devices in our streets. We ask a few legions to join us in our laboratories because these viruses are sure to fall, whenever they're united. So we unite them in a huge hall and ask our patients, alias the members of our legions, to cough up blood where millions of viruses swarm, ignorant of the danger lying in store for them. As soon as we spot these viruses disporting themselves before our very noses, we draw the instruments of doom out of our pockets and suitcases and kill them outright. Or we put them in a huge alchemical retort and begin to putrefy them. Are you following? First we ask our patients to cough and their coughing corresponds to the following verse where it is reflected minutely and perfectly: "Whose falling drops from high did stain the soyl with ruddy hue." Don't forget that our patients aren't lying in their beds – they're arrayed in front of us, like real soldiers or prisoners. That's why their blood drops "from high" and not "from below". And then our battle gets under way. In the treatise we have quoted for some time it is depicted as follows, "Two Dragons bite one another cruelly; and never leave from the time they have seised one upon another; till by their slaving Venom, and mortal hurts, they be all of a gore bloud, and then being stewed in their own Venom, are changed into a fifth Essence." Many neophytes believe that our machines are so powerful and sophisticated we don't have to do anything at all with our bare hands. Don't make us laugh, you neophytes and laywomen. Sometimes we have no alternative but to strip our clothes off, allowing our bodies to feel the virus more acutely. So, for hours and hours, our legions and our bodies face each other, concentrated on the viruses swarming and swearing in the air and often within our lungs. Not all of them are prepared to jump out of their hiding places and so they smile upon seeing our instruments and resolution. Some of them remain entrenched within our legions. And they are legions too, we're sorry to say. There are legions everywhere, but we shouldn't confuse them and their statuses. Our legions are the legions of honour – you shouldn't forget that! So, if you understand us rightly, we need to change these venomous, devilish viruses, these sons of putrefaction into the Fifth Essence or Dimension. You may wonder, however, why we need so many viruses to accomplish this metamorphosis. You might point out that an alchemist is often cramped for space, and what really counts is his mixing bowl or call it what you wish. In this bowl he mixes the stone he ought to remove from his gall bladder and the Philosophers' Stone. In other words, the former turns into the latter, sooner or later. Well, we need myriads of viruses because it's much more complicated to fight a sharpshooter than an army. Have you seen the film entitled *Stalingrad*? Do you have any idea what I'm talking about? Wasting my breath, am I? Well, in this film you are invited to a game assiduously played by two sharpshooters – a Soviet sharpshooter and a German sharpshooter. The city lies in ruins after months of bombing and the Soviet army is buried under these ruins and even in the midst of them. You can occasionally see a corpse lying there, his arms outstretched as if to welcome the afterlife. And then you spot a soldier who crawls in between the ruins, looking in one direction, in two directions, in three directions, and one wonders why he doesn't look in *four* directions. Why does he neglect the fourth direction, the fourth dimension, as they often say now? His mind-rays (you can see and appreciate them in the movie *The War of the Worlds*) are focused on the German sharpshooter that no one can see, not yet. And yet he is also in the midst of the same ruins. Then the Soviet sharpshooter sees him, kills him and the Soviet army as well as the Soviet government celebrate their victory – Stalin's victory, as they used to say. In short, the Germans had many more problems with one soldier, namely the Soviet sharpshooter, than with the Soviet army. That's why we need an army on which we can drop atomic bombs.'

One might point out, however, that this method suffers from a latent defect which usually has a detrimental impact on the environment, if not on the whole of humanity. If you gather together so many people and ask them to expel from their substances a legion of viruses and their cronies, they might contaminate not only nurses, doctors and other scientists and specialists, but also the very building where the experiment is staged for the sake of humanity and its future. No hall, however gigantic, can accommodate so many viruses without provoking them, without sowing the seeds of universal discord. The sheer pressure of the legion may pulverise our bones and send us to Hell instead of curing us of the virus which, with the passing of the years, is bound to die of its own accord, submitted to the second law of thermodynamics. Didn't Ebola expire a few years ago? But even if we discard the possibility of a major discord insidiously creeping into relations between molecules, atoms and quarks, a note of discord is bound to perturb our harmonies and the peace of mind we are always aiming at, especially during the periods indelibly marked by viruses and social upheaval. And we focus our attention on whatever sounds like this note of discord, and often we need someone whose ears are endowed with absolute pitch that allows us to isolate this note from a symphony or an oratorio, let alone from a quartet. This note is similar, almost identical, to a solitary virus which, for reasons best known to itself, floats in the air, even if there are no humans within its reach. In the world where we continue to live, in spite of viruses and their substitutes – and any object can become its substitute, any subject – we often use the expressions 'within reach', 'out of reach', 'for reasons best known to himself or herself', which all denote the uncertainty of our life and its principles. A virus floats in the air and probably it feels at home, even if there are no other viruses around it; and we utter this sentence as if convinced that viruses cannot hold out on their own, as if they had to play cards with their fellow creatures; or drink tea with them. Incidentally, we also resort to the expression 'our fellow creatures' which denotes a matter of considerable concern for myself and exceptionally for the entire international community. Usually these fellow creatures flock to the castle where you live to ask you all sorts of ridiculous questions. Even during your walks you are assaulted by other strollers who ask you if you play the piano, if you are a professional pianist, if they can play a Beethoven sonata for cello with you. Even I may become an object of curiosity, for all my privacy and secrecy reflected on my face and even throughout my body that also looks like a castle or even an impregnable fortress. But people pay no attention to these words: they assault me and I have no alternative but to say, 'Well, you can slip your address into my letterbox.' And they always take advantage of this suggestion and permission so that I find a lot of slips of paper in my letterbox and even under my gate, within my garden. But today this mechanism, this assembly line of communication is impaired, and whenever I meet someone in the course of my walks around the neighbourhood, this someone vanishes into thin air, and I wonder if there are still humans around me or even in Australia and California.

Well, we do our best to focus our attention on the note of discord, on the isolated virus. We can hear this virus during a concert, when a pianist plays one wrong note in the middle of a perfect scale, and we say to ourselves, 'Here's the virus. We should catch it before it vanishes into thin air, like those who fear death in the course of their strolls.' So we ask the people in charge to interrupt the concert or recital and set about chasing the virus that, according to our calculations and suppositions, floats in the air, not far from our hands and surgical instruments. (We carry them about in expectation of such meetings.) I am not sure my wife is capable of seeing the virus herself, but she must know some individuals whose capacity to see the dead and other ghosts – there are a lot of subtle bodies floating around us – may astonish us and often make us change our attitude towards the visible world. This capacity of theirs may also help us come to terms with the virus by catching it inside a concert hall. And then we

realise that what we heard, what caught our attention during the concert, is just a wrong note which we wrongly associated with the coronavirus. So we apologise to the pianist and the recital goes on as if nothing had happened. This is another expression we use rather often – as if nothing had happened. And yet everything happens all the time: not only our death is constantly present by our side, but literally everything is there and everywhere. Well, all this seems to corroborate our hypothesis that informs us about the method we should resort to during our virus hunting. Of course we are so affected by the virus' omnipresence that we literally hear and see it everywhere: in every wrong note, in every grimace and grin. We cannot listen to a piece of music, even if it is just a Beethoven bagatelle, without saying to ourselves, 'Here's a virus, here's a virus, here's a virus again.' And if we attend a Wagner opera, even the props remind us of the virus, and often we call an opera house to ask if there are many props on the stage. 'On your stage, during the forthcoming performance of the *Götterdämmerung*.' 'No,' answers the person in charge. 'Our singers walk around an empty stage. It's very modern, our production. Don't forget we're dealing with the death of the gods, not with their births and opulence.'

That is why I say it is much easier to deal with an *army* of viruses than with individuals – with their (viruses') heroes, as it were. Such a hero does not need his buddies' assistance and therefore can kill you on his own by jumping into your mouth and squeezing through your cells, resolved to install himself in your lungs. All right, you see an army of coronaviruses or ask my wife if she detects their presence in the neighbourhood. She says, 'I can't see them, but I feel the multitudes. And the multitudes I feel don't belong to the human species.' Reassured (you are not supposed to harm a human being) you drop a few atomic bombs on the multitudes my wife has just detected in her body's immediate vicinity and say to yourselves, 'We've done a good job of it.' But what about the human race? How to remove it from the surface of the Earth? You can remove one individual from it by pointing at him and saying, 'He committed two crimes against humanity,' or 'He killed his grandmother in the hope of inheriting her castle, money and jewellery.' And what about millions and billions of humans? What about their karmas which induce them to wander around the Earth in search of jobs and adventures? Of course some of them are willing to leave us or rather me (I wish to be left alone, in my mind's company, in my peace's company) and they fling their bodies out of windows. Luckily for us (for me, for me) there are enough windows around us and so whoever wishes to taste the Hereafter and its delights, its fires (Cocteau, among other people) is irresistibly attracted to those windows which I can open for him, her and them at the earliest opportunity. Usually I wake around three in the morning and write until six, after taking my bath and putting in order whatever should be in order to allow me to work to my heart's content, without being interrupted by virus-like dissonances. Weather permitting, I open some of my windows and the fresh air penetrates my lungs; and I am not worried beyond measure upon receiving this air with open lungs: I have already paid homage to the coronavirus. But no one – no human, that is – is tempted to use my open windows as the means of transport destined to convey anybody to the Hereafter and its tortures. Apparently in the United States they no longer wish to be confined and say that death is part and parcel of life: 'And consequently it is high time we lived again.' But first you should jump out of my windows to fulfil the prophecy contained in the first part of the sentence you cherish so much, to distraction. So be so kind as to jump out of my windows, and I advise you against using one window only: after a while, there will be so many corpses under that particular window that the new jumpers' lives might be spared. And I can bear with your, with your presence in my house only on condition that you die, as a result of my hospitality. And I am sure my gardener will bury you. Without military honours, I'm afraid. If you wish, however, I can put on a recording of Chopin's *Funeral March* – Rachmaninoff's version of it, if you wish. But if you jump, fall and groan

under this window of mine, I shall suffer the torments associated in my mind with the lowest circles of Hell. And I ask you not to forget that my final destination is Purgatory, not Hell and its ordeals saturated with others and their tales of woe.

So I count on the Earth, to tell the truth. According to my wife and her colleagues, our planet vibrates more and more hysterically as she inhales the exhalations of our exhaust pipes and our exaltations. For the moment we can hardly feel these vibrations, but with the passing of the years every human might execute a series of jumps, taking his or her cue from the matador I described some time ago, anxious to quench my thirst for the annihilation of the human race. Is the Mother Earth inferior to her creatures, to the bulls walking and running around her arenas? Can't she settle old scores with her opponents, alias humans? It is pointless to describe our crimes in graphic detail: it is enough to *open* our newspapers; you do not even have to *read* them. So the Earth intensifies her vibrations, and she does not have to justify her doings, I could point out at this point. She just vibrates, vibrates and we jump into the air because we cannot help it, even if we are rooted to various spots. But first I should ask my gardener to distribute a few billion bulls' horns throughout the European Union and the rest of the world. These horns should be driven into the Earth and after a while – everything will inexorably happen after a while – I shall see a billion human bodies on these horns. For a while they are sure to wriggle on the horns, but sooner or later their pains and groans will subside, and I shall finally enjoy my peace of mind and also the peace in the world, the peace of the world on which my peace of mind depends fatalistically and pathetically. That is how this episode of human history is described in the abovementioned treatise: 'And then the Corps begin to lack breath; that is, the Fumes begin to cease: for with oft ascending and descending the Spirits are somewhat fixed, and turned into Powder or Dust, and are now in the bottom of the Vessel, drawing fast to Putrefaction: Nor do they for a time ascend, but remain below.' Sure enough, so far human beings have kept jumping for joy (it's a wonderful life, it's a wonderful life) going up and down, up and down – in the absence of horns. But now the matter stands differently: there are billions of horns all over the surface of the Earth and these wonderful lives are bound to come to an end – on the bulls' horns, of all places. Of course, on my way to purity, silence and the absence of nonsense, I might have to overcome a few obstacles linked to the shortage of bulls: so many of them were killed in bullfights. They say one might use sharp sticks for the purpose, omitting justice from the ritual: bulls should be avenged. Humans cannot fly with impunity and even the superman they show in their movies should think about the horns, for his energies, however boundless, superboundless, are not infinite and so he is to come down and die on the horns, sooner or later. Humans are used to dying on the horns of dilemmas (another easy Shakespearian wordplay) as they hesitate between a villa and five Ferraris they might give to their nephews and nieces. But unfortunately they do not die in the process, while weighing up the pros and cons, a Francis Bacon triptych and a yacht, as I usually say in the chapters devoted to riches and their owners. To tell the truth, I think I should spare the superman's life, for he might have originated in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, not in the minds of Hollywood's producers and filmmakers.

We can say to our victims: 'You remain below for the time being, as our Scriptures point out. And then you'll go on jumping for joy, higher and higher.' This is a lie advocated by Plato in *The Republic*, and Machiavelli agreed with him explicitly, permitting us to say to the doomed individuals, 'You're going to live forever in your castle.' And if the dying man to whom we talk and talk, carried away by our humane élan, lets us know he has no castle, we can say, 'All right, you'll profit from one of the castles you've built in the air, ever since you realised you're a master builder. You'll live in one of your joyful castles.' As usual I am speaking about myself: on the eve of my departure for the hospital, my 'Corps the force of vital breath began to lack' so that, if enjoined to exhale

whatever air I had in my lungs, I would not have exhaled anything except a death rattle or a few sounds such as, ‘HraHraHraHraHraHraHraHraHraHra.’ Nothing to do with ‘hurrah’, I’m afraid. But I remained below for a few days only, and at the end of my sojourn in the casualty ward I was certainly alive; and even kicking, to some extent. Unconsciously I must have followed the following instruction: ‘Wherefore govern your Fire, that your Spirits be not so exalted, and climb so high that the Earth want them, and they return no more: For this Operation is, as *Morien* saith, a drawing out of Water from the Earth, and again a returning of the same to the Earth, so often and so long till the Earth putrefie.’ If you embark upon a commentary destined to shed light on an alchemical treatise, you are likely to spend your life at some writing desk or other, often far away from home. Many years ago you came across an ideal place where your crucibles and retorts feel at home; at least you yourself have this feeling, and feelings, instincts and a number of senses (the sixth, the seventh, the eleventh) count in this matter, in this *Materia Prima*, in this environment. You understand your death rattle, your HRA, HRA, HRA – it is an ABC. H is as easy as A, R is as easy as B, A is as easy as A or C. Anyway, you realise you cannot say anything else, and the last words you are to utter on this Earth boil down to these sounds that do not express much; they express nothing but your death, and this is universal, all-embracing and also nothing at all.

This morning I went to my wife’s kitchen, house, abode and heard her coffee-maker or whatever they call it in their language and jargon. The sound I heard was a death rattle, the HRA, HRA, HRA I described in minute detail a few minutes ago. I asked my wife if she could do something about it, about this something and HRA and death one could hear, if one took the trouble to visit my wife’s house opposite my house – opposite the House of God, as someone put it. (My house is also opposite His House, the same person said in the same breath.) My wife said she could cope with it and actually there was no coping, no effort at all involved in the procedure called ‘Restoration’ or ‘Resurrection’, and so you just rise from your tomb, without further ado. I mean the contraption, this machine I am talking about, rises from its tomb and serves us two cups of well-deserved coffee. Did I need to see this machine’s tomb and its ascension to my wife’s kitchen? I did not. My wife and the machine were obviously on the same wavelength and so I asked my wife to put this coffee-maker on my deathbed, hoping it will generate the same waves, lengths and vibrations into which I shall plunge headlong. My wife plus this machine. Two generators might be quite instrumental in my survival unless the Devil Himself puts his foot down, thereby cutting off the flow of eternity.

What kind of vibrations did my wife use on that occasion? I suppose it is her eyes or rather their glitter that she resorted to, although I am not sure she did it consciously. Yet she must be aware of this glitter’s efficacious, almost omnipotent energy called either ‘vibrations’ or ‘black or white magic’ which operate in the world where strings and the theory appended to them play such a role, such a symphony. What continues to surprise me in this universal context is the role played by human beings you do not really need, if you can talk to coffee machines and dogs and cats and birds. You do not really have to talk to *them* about the Scriptures which they know much better than any human, otherwise God would not have given them so many variegated clothes. You just send them your vibrations or open your eyes, provided they glitter – not only when engulfed and benignly treated by sunrays and moonbeams; or by Debussy’s famous prelude *Au clair de la lune mon ami ou mon amie*. My wife adores both animals and plants, and it is not for nothing I composed a poem where I set off her optimism, ordinarily based on nothing. (On what could you base your optimism in this day and age? On a leaf of grass, like my wife?) For instance, a few days ago she sent me the statistics related to the havoc wreaked by the virus, and I was horrified to learn from those numbers and equations that for almost two months the Belgians were dropping like flies, even

within a one-mile radius from my house. Of course I have not seen any corpses during my walks in the neighbourhood, and whenever I got the feeling that other strollers were about to fall, judging from their bodies' inclinations and general momentum, I thought they were doing gymnastics. 'I quite liked gymnastics at school – doing handstands and cartwheels and jumping over the apparatus,' my wife said to me at the very outset of our relationship, its ups and downs. (Jumping over happiness, as I define this feature of our married life.) 'That's why I was tempted by swimming pools, by swimming and the Olympic Games. I used to swim 10 miles every day in Vichy.' Never mind, never mind – she no longer swims and so I can forget about my inferiority complex that does not bother me in other domains – with the exception of the domain devoted to martial arts. But I shall not talk about them and my incapacities now: I have already strayed too far from open doors, vibrations, coffee machines and other subjects I find on my agenda. Well, I drew my wife's attention to the figures I lighted upon (in her presence I speak of light as often as possible) and she said, 'There has been a steady decrease in the number of the dead so the statistics are wrong.' 'Do you mean to say a number of the dead have been resurrected? Like your coffee machine?' 'Ever since they introduced the confinement.' 'But no corpses have been raised from the dead, from their tombs or plucked from the air. We're not yet living in the area described so brilliantly by Tippler and Deutsch. We can't yet realistically mix times, epochs, our world with the Hereafter, the dead with the quick. We do speak to the dead, and I suppose you can do without tables and their turns. I also suppose it is easier to speak to animals, to our cat and even to your coffee machine. Our language is unreliable, misleading and downright harmful. A doctor says to you, "If I were you, I would take an aspirin tonight." And you swallow some poison instead.' My wife did not deign to comment upon my inquiry, upon the question mark I see whenever she manifests a huge quantity of love in the presence or even absence of humans: it is enough to utter such and such a name to admire my wife's smile: 'Mary, Mary, yes, yes,' she says as if her smile needed an accompaniment of sorts. Or 'Yes, Peter, yes, Peter,' or 'No, Michael, you shouldn't, it's not good for your health,' whereupon I point out that Michael is not immortal anyway – for the simple reason that we have not yet reached the stage where the quick talk to the dead without being frightened out of their wits, without breaking their tables and other pieces of furniture. The first encounter of this kind situated in a faraway future is bound to be rounded off with a party where much drinking and backslapping will go on for hours, if not for years. Incidentally, my wife said this morning (a comment on the coffee-machine episode), 'Frankly speaking I can repair any machine. And I'm also a good plumber.' 'There's no denying that you can also repair a lot of humans. But some of them resist, saying you're a fraud, a sham – not a shaman, mind you. They're even prepared to denounce you as a sorceress and call the police, if you don't go back on your resolution to cure not only animals and plants, but also humans and their babies.' I also said to my wife she should not start smoking once again, otherwise her intention of repairing anything would not be taken seriously. So she resumes her nicotine-dependent habits, has a change of heart, vows never to touch a packet of cigarettes again, buys one packet and asks me to keep it for her. Then she can set about repairing anything, even the world, if she feels like it.

Well, you are supposed to govern your fire, and my fire goes on spreading all over the world as if determined to engulf it, provoking another world-conflagration. How many times have I endeavoured to come to terms with my contemporaries, with whatever surrounds me and my wife? Do I have to react every time I encounter a piece of nonsense, a piece of crass ignorance, a nasty piece of work? The point is your fire often ignores your efforts to bring it under control. In Wagner's operas and also elsewhere, in some mythology or other, you just have to rely on the god of fire, Loge, who comes whenever you shout, 'Where are you, for God's sake? Come here at once!

You should burn all these structures and textures, otherwise I won't be able to sleep for a few months to come!' Loge comes and a multitude of flames spring from nowhere and come out of the red as if borne by the most perfect colour associated with the Philosophers' Stone. And the world burns as if nothing had ever happened, as if neither Beethoven nor Dante had ever been born and worked for humanity and themselves. According to my wife, however, it is enough to think about fire persistently, for a few hours in a row, to make it visible and (what is even more important) efficient. Of course my wife thinks in terms of our defects and shortcomings which might be burnt by such flames, on condition that they are born within yourself and not in a box of matches. In the meantime, I just listen to my inner music and hear, 'Fire, Loge, fire, Loge,' and Wagner attends this performance, anxious to put a few finishing touches to it. And every finishing touch annihilates a castle, a god, a maiden, a waterfowl. And then my wife says, 'No use burning anything. It's already been burnt – we are within the Seventh Cycle. Everything and everybody are over, but neither does anything nor anybody feel this void, nothing, death without resurrections. You should understand this truth, this nothing: it is all over and done with. Done with, done with, done with.'

In Purgatory I shall endure the flames for which I am more or less prepared: my infatuation with the Gnostics allows me to regard them as a sexual act, as 'the burning of the body'. It is true (at least to some extent) that the body is not always hand in glove with the spirit or the soul or even the astral body, astrality as such. So the Gnostics advised us to burn our bodies in beds and elsewhere – even on the grass, in the wake of a succulent Chateaubriand *aux pommes*. In Purgatory you are often roasted side by side with the dish you are about to partake of, and this ritual is meant to make you realise you are just a dish – a dainty dish to set before the King of the Universe. But you are not ready yet, not prepared, and so they put you in their fireplace where you burn to your body's content: oddly enough, your body *is* content because it is more or less spiritually (and physically of course) involved in a sort of sexual act. And in Purgatory both sides of your being, physical and spiritual, are intermixed, as much as everything else. Only in Hell and Paradise do you encounter pure substances, entities, lights and darks; and some of us are requested to keep up with the Darknessess. There is an army of them, and this army advances slowly on the city of God in your chest, breast, soul and even throughout your body, provided this body of yours has been reduced and kept to a minimum during your tailor-made torture. It is up to you to repulse this army, conquering thereby the Kingdom or City of God, peacefully, blissfully; conquering peacefully, blissfully, lithely. From now on you will keep up only with the lights. Call them Beings of Light, if you wish.

I wonder if I am still on speaking terms with the Earth from which I continually detach my aspirations and hopes. I cannot say I am floating around the sky, for I can neither float nor fly, and even if you throw me into a pool to see if I can remain on its surface for five minutes at least, I shall sink – not like the Titanic, but imitating a piece of dirt, some dirty old man. Now they say you should not attach yourself either to your body or to the Earth that continues to bear your weight instead of burying you in the midst of her entrails. Now they say you should on no account lose touch with her, otherwise you might disappear on your way to the constellations, devoured by the void or celestial dragons. Besides, you have no idea how to deal with other planets, comets and so forth; and even if, during your flight, you encounter a sputnik or something of the kind, you will be unable to come to terms with its crew. They will ask you, 'What are you doing up here? Have you been invited? Where's your invitation? Are you supposed to join us? What for? What's your mission?' Of course you are permitted to reply as follows, 'You know, I'm fed up with the Earth and its inhabitants whose folly has far outgrown Erasmus' masterpiece. My mission remained on Earth. I am what they call "*Weltverbesserer*" in German unless they call it differently and probably not in German or any other language. I think they no longer call it anything at all as if it had never seen

the light of day, this world, this man, this superman dancing on mountaintops. You do your best to improve on this, on that, and then you realise you have always done your worst. You're tempted to leave the Earth so as not to see the remains of your deeds that make you suffer from your sindust, as I call them, my sins, my misdeeds, my fruitless worries, projects and impulses.'

Anyway, my spirits should not get too far from the Earth because their duty is somehow centred on her putrefaction, which is tantamount to your personal purification. You purify yourself when you are bent on putrefying the Earth, and alchemists assure you that this procedure, this 'making a terrible mess', as they call it, does her a lot of good and consequently is good for her health, our Mother Earth's health. It is as if our mother said to us, when scrutinising the disorder we have painstakingly created in our room, 'I hope something good can come out of this mess. Well, my dear child, go on, go ahead, go to Hell or rather to Mess. You should make a *complete* and *utter* mess of it! You should make a Mass of it.' And so you go on putrefying your room, yourself, your mother and the universe lying all around you. Is that what they call euphemistically (and mystically) 'alchemy'? Actually I wished to entitle this book 'Name of God' because I talk only about names, not about things, as Shakespeare pointed out some centuries ago. Is it so important, as important as Adam's name-oriented efforts thanks to which we just utter names after names instead of acting, of doing something, of changing everything and everybody for the better? You put a few names together and others say to you, 'You've built yourself a beautiful castle where you'll live till doomsday.' That is how all matters should stand instead of falling all the time. Well, my wife thinks that everything *will* change for the better in the near future, for 'a gate was opened in heaven, a gate, a door – call it what you wish'. (Last night she told me everything was over and done with. Truth is always in parentheses.) All right, today I feel like calling it a 'gateway', for the simple reason – and this reason is not as simple as all that – that gateways symbolise our passing from one state to another, from one world to another. And our mind is said to fly from the known to the unknown, from one sputnik to another, from darkness to light and also from light to darkness, contrary to what many of us believe, allergic as they are to the seamier side of life and light. And of course we are reminded of God's promise about which our sacred books have been talking to *urbi* and *orbi* for centuries. Yes, a door opens of its own accord, and yet the Almighty stands behind it, prepared to open or close it in accordance with His whims, moods and doctrines. And we know – and we believe our knowledge is what they call first-hand experience – that beyond this door there is a table laden with food, fruit and presents for everyone, not only for obedient children. Of course some children do congregate around this door, and some of them are quite disobedient and even boisterous; yet God lets them in, for He is very fond of children and beggars – not always of their betters. We also come and congregate around the door, see the eye of a needle in between our bodies and this door, squeeze through this eye (and through God's eye, as some of our mystics say) and penetrate a huge, light-invaded hall; a positive invasion, as they define this phenomenon.

This open door is an invitation to a voyage into the beyond, but some of us refuse this invitation, saying, 'I don't like the beyond – it stinks of death and utter rottenness that have nothing to do with noble rot. I adore the Earth and her fruit and also the fruit of my labours on her surface. For nothing in the world or rather in the cosmos will I separate myself from our planet, be she our mother, or father, or nephew, or just he.' 'Do you know,' we ask them, 'that, in the symbolic sense, this door denotes a passage from the realm of the profane to that of the sacred?' 'We couldn't care less about the sacred,' they answer. 'We enjoy being in the realm of the profane where we have two castles and five villas with lots of garages and swimming pools and fountains and statues among which your eyes habitually single out Hercules, Apollo and Zeus.' It is pointless to speak to them of cathedrals and *their*

doorways, of Hindu *torana*, of the gateways of Khmer cities and temples, of Japanese TORII (whatever that is) and so on. Anyway, if you touch upon *torana*, when talking to these dimwits, they are sure to answer, ‘What? *Tarama*? We like *tarama* very much. We’re also very fond of hummus, aren’t *you*?’ ‘I hope you’re also in love with Tamara, the heroine of Lermontov’s poem dedicated to the emperor of Demons,’ you can point out, resolved to hold these people up to ridicule. You hold them up, but they go down, irresistibly attracted by the Earth and her phoney pleasures. They are soon replaced by a legion of old fogeys who literally shower you with their points of view, legends and mystical interpretations, thinking they are offering you presents, treasures, treasure islands and the key to the truth. They must be brought up to speed with our civilisation and *my* point of view which does not altogether exclude their embroidering upon the sacred lore of our ancestors. So we may speak for a while about the Almighty standing in the doorway or by the table where an array of venerable bottles greets the illiterate and other neophytes, all poor, pitiable spirits and also some pitiable bodies. For a while we *should* say, ‘The gateway in question is that of the Sun’ and it is also the smoke-hole of the tent through which passes the World Axis. If you happen to broach the subject in front of the poor in spirit, within their hearing (not their understanding, needless to say) they usually question you about the use of this axis. They yearn to know if they can use this axis (axes) during their combats with others, with their neighbours, foes and what (who) not. One might wonder if this axe could replace the horns I talked about earlier, yesterday or the day before. After all, the shortage of bulls is sure to prove fatal to my old, most unfortunately out-dated scheme. The point is this axe is in a class of its own or rather unique – the only one available on the market, as they say nowadays. If you take the trouble to rise and go to the market and ask a few people in charge, ‘Could you please sell me the World Axis?’ they may answer you thus, ‘This Axis is not for sale. Anyway it’s so expensive that neither you nor our market can afford it. So you have no alternative but to build a tent and drill a smoke-hole in it. And then you will spend a few days and nights, waiting for the World Axis (and a multitude of axes, as Dostoevsky put it, *muzhiki, topori*), for its descent from heaven or from the blue about which so many sayings and hopes talk to us day and night. Every now and then you ask yourself upon seeing a line in the sky, ‘Is this the World Axis I’m waiting for?’ After a while the line disappears and despondently, hopelessly, you shake your head. You are so exhausted and exasperated that even a rainbow, just an ordinary rainbow, can lift your spirits, becoming a real boost to your confidence. You remember Wagner’s gods walking along it to their celestial abode, alias their castle, alias Valhalla, and you ask yourself if you should not set off on a journey (in their footsteps) to your own castle; instead of waiting for the World Axis – rather pathetically, not to say pitifully. By the way, you could use the World Axe to chop down the old Tree of Life.

Of course the problem of humanity can be resolved as follows: you do not abandon the World Axis, even if, for the moment, you are incapable of laying your hands on it. Of laying your feet on it, rather. Don’t you wish to climb to heaven? With the aid of this Axis? One should not be too conceited, thinking one can reach the heavens in a rocket, spaceship or via one’s imagination – in no time at all. With the aid of the Axis, however, one *can* do it, provided one has enough time and patience in one’s life and psychological make-up. But there are interpretations and comments related to the door standing either ajar or wide-open, while most of humans are still kept in the dark about what is going on, assuming that something has ever gone on, with the exception of corruption and destruction. Once the World Axis is in the right place (and time is always wrong in this domain), one can fling human bodies into the air and let them fall on this Axis: its top is very sharp and so comes up to the poor spirits’ expectations. They fly up and down and settle all along the Axis. You go on as long as is necessary for our humans to feel comfortable in (on) their new abodes. Let us allow them to have a series of housewarming parties. They

can even indulge in sporting activities, provided they do not spoil my fun and unsettle my nerves. To whom could I offer this human kebab?

I may be asked why I hate the human race to the point of willing its utter annihilation traditionally linked to atomic bombs and probably to viruses; at least in the wake of the coronavirus's advent and partial victory. I do not think I really hate it, and if I do think about the human race at all, I say to myself, 'I've lost faith in this race, in this humanity. Hopefully there's another humanity at God's disposal, but I've lost faith in this possibility too.' When did I lose this particular variety of faith? It is a long story which probably began in the Soviet Union where absurdity (I do not like this notion) seemed to have reached its peak, its Himalayan summit. And yet, throughout my youth, I believed in the existence of another world, if not of another humanity, for I thought I should not condemn humanity to death light-heartedly, offhandedly. There are other songs beyond Soviet borders, I thought, and now I laugh, whenever I recall the state of mind that reigned in my mind and to some extent in my body; a long time ago. There are other songs, other hymns. There are no other songs, and if there are some, somewhere, they are not sung by representatives of the human race. (I wish I could say 'if any' in this context.) There are hymns sung by my mind and a few other minds, but I have no idea where they are, assuming that they *are* and not that they are *not*. Lies, betrayals, firing squads, Lenin's incurable stupidity and hypocrisy are eternal, being unlimited, omnipresent: it is red, blue, blue in the face, black and even white, contrary to what Russian émigrés believed. And Mussolini? The crowds listening to him, cheering him in Rome and all over Italy? His self-assurance, his Leniniada, as we used to say in the Soviet Union? Of course Lenin was puny, sickly, but even he managed to seduce a beautiful woman, Ignès Armand, if I remember rightly or wrongly. (Not Agnes Irmand, according to my recollection.) And Mussolini paraded his body, his cars, his girlfriends, his ludicrous, self-centred speeches, and very few people said at the time, 'The centre cannot hold.' (Toscanini was one of them.) The point is we are always beyond good and evil because both sides are evil and so there is only one side of the coin; and probably there is only one coin in the world; in the human world at least. Actually in the animal world there is only one coin as well, and this coin is called the Philosophers' Stone. Mussolini had a huge collection of defeats which might be exhibited in *Le musée de l'Homme* or in *Le musée d'Histoire naturelle*: there is nothing more natural than the global defeat – not the global *village* – of Man. (And their faith in globalisation is supremely, superbly undermined by the coronavirus.)

Let us leave women out of this horror. Where shall we put Ignès Armand? And what about Claretta Petacci? She insisted on being with him (with *Him*) to the end, but we should not draw a parallel between this initiative and the journeys made by the Decembrists' wives who followed their husbands and consequently settled in Siberia where many of them died instead of dancing in St Petersburg. Mussolini tried to cross the frontier, disguised as a German soldier, in a convoy of trucks retreating towards Innsbruck, in Austria. But he was recognised and, together with his mistress, he was shot and killed on April 28, 1945. Their bodies were hung, head downward, in the Piazza Loreto in Milan. Claretta (Loretto) Petacci. One of the most beautiful women I have ever looked at. Hanging in the Piazza Loreto. Or on Red Square – it makes no difference. Head downward. How many red partisans raped her body? Before and after her death? I do not think they raped Mussolini's body, although there might have been a few women in their midst; or a few homosexuals. His body was still in good shape. He still looked like an athlete or a Roman emperor. Anyway, they would have worshipped him in any shape or form. They carried out an autopsy. His head or rather what remained of it looked and probably tasted like boiled meat or rather like a portion of human stew. Did they really have to play football with his head? This Italian team won the World Championship too.

Only one side, one coin. A huge portion of human stew, of boiled meat. Actually Mussolini disguised himself as a German soldier much earlier. In 1938, following the German example, his government passed anti-Semitic laws that discriminated against Jews in all sectors of public and private life and prepared the way for the deportation of some 20 percent of Italy's Jews to German death camps during the war.

Nobody tried to explain or justify the Holocaust because, to some extent, to many extents, it was worse than the Flood and so could not be put down to the omnipresence and omnipotence of our sins. What kind of sin corresponds to the gas chambers, to the slow and fast tortures inflicted on the Jews in Warsaw, all over Europe; with the exception of Switzerland where the German bank accounts saved them? You rape and kill several women. You throw bombs at emperors, tsars, passers-by and invalids. They just put you in an electric chair. You die, return to the surface of the Earth, drop an atomic bomb on Europe, and Donald Trump congratulates you instead of making you inhale poisons and an impressive number of hells. Some Jewish theologians said that any idea espousing Judaism's traditional providential God was intellectually untenable. After Auschwitz there can be no poems, no providence – with the exception of Alain Resnais' film *Providence*. (No lives.) Humans should think in terms of human life, of its values, goals and happiness. If any, if any, if any – how could you be happy without God and His providence? No film will ever replace it, no book, no statue, no prayer. We should look for the Joycean 'yes' in this world of ours, not in a mystical eschatological future. And what about the mystical eschatological present? (Our scatological present.) Are we finite beings with finite selves, finite egos, finite minds? All right, our body is finite; even Mussolini's body was finite and mortal. In a way, his head had been created for the sake of the Football Championship I touched upon earlier. Self-discovery should be our aim, but I wonder if it is worth my while to discover my finite self – any finite self, for that matter. And what about prayer? This question always crops up, when we are inclined to devote our leisure hours to cards or secular love which may lead us to God, as we say to ourselves. We always say something to ourselves, and this time we speak of love, which is one of our favourite topics, even when this variety of love is related to God, not to the human body, and eyes, and nose, and hair. Well, prayer should no longer be understood as an attempt to come to terms with God or this supernatural idea: it is just an expression of our aspirations. So we pray, 'My dear self, I hope you'll offer me an opportunity to become famous, legendary. Artist, husband and spiritual being. And also a Being of Light, while the going is good. And of course I'd like to become a multi-millionaire, which would enable me to help the poor and invalids of all kinds. And if I become as wealthy as Bill Gates, I swear I'll raise the dead from their tombs. And I'll also raise myself from my own tomb, while the going is good.' In other words and thoughts, we ought to remain alive and resistant. Instead of looking up in our incessant search for God, we should search for good and look around us at identifiable people.

I have no wish to identify with any humans, even if they introduce themselves, saying, 'I'm John, I'm Solomon, I'm Igor, I'm Sarah.' In Russia they often say today, 'I'm adequate, he's inadequate.' Adequate, inadequate, all or nothing. They are two sides of the same coin and so we can ensure their communication through our dialectical method, through their Marxist doctrine. In this way both Lenin and Stalin succeeded in reconciling bereavement with radiant smiles and lives and overall happiness. I recall the conversation I had with my Moscow friend. When? I no longer remember days. Just some words, some sleepless nights. Anyway, I can always check my memory's account by looking at my computer screen.

HE: I'm dreaming about the state where there are no figures, no mirrors, no differences – nothing at all.

I: What about 'at all'?

HE: Suppose 'at all' is 'all' and nothing just 'nothing'. We could unite them dialectically by saying, 'Nothing all.'

I: I don't want to unite anything. Whatever I belong in is already inside me and also outside. I am enclosed in it, embedded in it. It is my bed, my house, my ceiling, my heaven.

HE: Is that what you call unity, unanimity, harmony, accord, chord, one chord?

I: I am the chord and the one who strikes the chord. No others, just the Other or the Same. We are the Siamese twins, you know.

HE: I don't know anything. Nothing. Are you the Absolute?

I: I am Ab and lute, the lute they speak of in one of Plato's dialogues. And sol, *la clé de sol*. G clef.

HE: Not the *sole mio*?

I: The *sole* and *mio*. And Dover sole. And Moscow sole. And Petersburg sole. And Paris sole.

HE: You're neither everything nor everybody. Your vision of the world is partial, truncated. Your mirror of the universe cracked from side to side. You see only one side of it.

I: There's only one side.

HE: Is God on your side?

I: On the dark side of the moon.

HE: Is that what you call the unknowable?

I: I don't know.

HE: Is your 'don't' knowable or not?

I: I hope the G clef will open parts of the closed books.

HE: Nothing at all is behind closed doors. I see only behind.

I: What about the great Beyond?

HE: What about the doors?

I: All these doors. Don't they mean God lost faith in humanity? What about our reciprocity?

HE: Does He need us? In your opinion?

I: He may side with Spinoza now.

HE: Does Spinoza side with Him?

Forsook, forsake, forsaken, forsook. The keyword of the New Testament; and of the Old Testament. Why do they fall asleep in my garden? It is my garden, isn't it? Three disciples, apostles – call them what you wish; if you wish to call anything, anywhere. I hope you do; or do not; it is up to you, really, as they say. Why did God forsake *Him*, as Dostoevsky often puts it? He, Him, He; but not Her. You are forsaken; so am I, although you do not think in these terms, being infatuated with globalisation, with globality and mobility that transfers you from one continent to another, from one email to another; to others, others, others. I do not know if the Crucifixion is crucial in the light of what happens before and after; and also during this ritual. Forsook, forsaken. Not by thieves, bandits and hooligans who invade the pitch and beat everybody to a pulp. Actually this pulp should be exhibited in Christian churches worldwide; even in deserts where there are no Christian churches, no churches, no temples whatsoever. You create your personal harmony based on His teaching or on no teaching at all, contrary to what Dostoevsky might have said under the circumstances. You have no teaching either on your writing desk or on your wall: you are not St Augustine who read and recited out loud the psalms engraved on all the walls of his room, on all his monuments. No texts, no summons, no prayers you could recite on the rainy days stored for you in the

bowels of history, in your personal history; or universal something, God knows what. Does God know anything related to humans? The question you often ask without seeking an answer because you know *something* about life. And He also knew something, as Dostoevsky puts it. He also knew something about life, otherwise he would not have repeated round the clock, 'Forsook, forsaken, forsook, forsaken.' Nor would He have repeated round the same clock (there is only one clock, contrary to what Einstein maintained), 'Betrayal, betrayal, betrayal, betrayal.' What could one do with a life like that? Creating a harmony, in spite of everything, anything, betrayals and whatsoever, and whats, and nots, and yeses that do not mean anything, whatever they say. What *do* they say? No idea. No need to erect a cross somewhere: forsook and forsaken are enough. You may count on others, on their personal harmonies; if you wish. You create your harmony, your twelve-tone system, your nine-tone system. Your system, your personal C Major. And then you air your grievances and joys, your C Majors and C Minors in front of everybody, and the world begins from scratch. Not history. There is no history. And the Resurrection is everywhere because there is nothing else, even in the tombs from which no one will ever rise. Why should you rise? You are there and everywhere. If you are in your tomb, you are in front of your writing desk and of your wife, your psalms, poems and Ancient Mariners. And Newborn Mariners as well.

A writer is supposed to be virtuous – almost as virtuous as Plato and his teaching; or rather that of Socrates. At least your works must radiate a huge quantity of humane light in which anyone could bathe to become more virtuous, more attuned to the harmony one can hear when listening to the goodness of the world. I, for one, do not hear this goodness; Gogol did not hear it either so I am not alone after all. And he complained about his solitude in the world where only virtue is supposed to survive and illuminate the darkness of the ways. Supposed, must, virtue, beyond light and darkness. Perhaps I live in the world where animals are as light and bright as the sun, where humans are dark – much darker than the dark side of the moon. Be that as it may or may not, I look on the bright side, whenever my cat is by my side; and he is always by my side, even when I happen to be in Japan, on the other side of the globe. Thanks to him I always leap out of bed bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Thanks to him and the horses (and dogs) I encounter during my wanderings around our block I think that life is worth living.

I cannot say I do not like the word 'light' because its manifold character allows us to select a suitable aspect of this phenomenon without gazing blissfully at heaven in the hope of seeing God or the Golden Cross (yet another symbol we are fond of). I can rise very early when the dark pervades almost everything, with the exception of my brain and soul that should work, write and come up with new worlds every day, at least till doomsday when I intend to finish this book. I have written abundantly about the light they stubbornly see at the end of such and such tunnel – after their deaths, in the course of numerous comas. They are so nostalgic in the domain which features tunnels, ends and light that they take an overdose of sleeping pills and go into a deep coma – for the sake of the light they hope to see at the end of their experience or test. Another version of tunnels and doors suits me far better, for it concerns a huge number of energetic particles aimed at the Earth and chiefly at its inhabitants. My wife thinks that it is this energy I suffer from because you are supposed to get used to it first instead of smiling and saying to yourself, 'This is a positive energy. The door is open and the Holy Trinity stands behind this door. And the Holy Trinity, its deeds, actions and particles, are bound to work wonders for my health.' And then we collapse under the weight of this energy and we are tempted to speak once again of putrefaction, of death in life, of dying before rising from the dead with a new soul, with a light-permeated body, with a silver spoon in our mouth. This silver sounds beautiful as it knocks against our brand-new teeth and presently we drink our first cup of tea, either with milk or without. And then, according to mystics and their assistants, we are questioned by a Being of Light

whose garish fluorescence leaves no doubt as to his origins and main (divine) purpose. So he bombards us with questions such as, ‘When were you born? What did you do with your toys and your mother’s breasts? How did you suck her breasts? Did you give thought to the pain she might experience when feeding your fragile body? When did you realise your birth was guided and executed by God? How many sins did you commit in your cradle? Did you listen attentively to your mother’s lullabies? How many sleepless nights did you spend in your youth? What were you thinking about during those sleepless nights? Did you ever touch your penis during those nights? What *did* you touch during those nights? Why didn’t you read the Bible during those nights? Did you have the Bible in your bedside cabinet?’

I do not like beaches and the intensity of light enjoyed by so many beach-rooted bodies, and if I feel like discussing my relationship with light and its inborn bounty, I enlarge upon its capacity to enlighten me (literally speaking) on the matters dealt with in the books I propose to read. In Rembrandt’s picture we also come across the light I have nothing against, for it often looks like a toy mystery, not like the one they often speak about in their books where they study their stigmata in detail and the way they got them. And the light I have always enjoyed in Vermeer’s pictures that I discovered well before opening and relishing Proust’s delightful novel may be added to Rembrandt’s soft mysteries; they have no intention of knocking you down with their revelations, dooms and tombs. I cherish the light which enables me to write what I wish to keep outside my memory, considering that I can no longer count on its unconditional support. I also accept the light I need whenever, in the course of a sleepless night, I look for an innocent *divertissement* about which I could talk to a Being of Light without going bright red. As to Beings of Light, I think my wife fulfils her luminous duty through her gestures, trying not to blind me with rays, whenever she appears in my presence. So I do not always get the feeling she has just left the celestial heights (preoccupied with my health and the viruses I light-heartedly harbour) after removing from the sun what they call a ‘panacea particle’. And I do not always ask her if she carries this particle in one of her pockets. I think she has this light (or this particle) inside her body and so every gesture of hers radiates this light, without getting under my skin: I cannot bear the saints who exhibit their lights and smiles everywhere, not only in the museums designed for this purpose. (They are called ‘Museums of Light’.) You often hear in the streets, ‘Here goes a Being of Light.’ Sure enough, as you turn your head in the direction indicated by the voice, you see a sort of walking candle. It presumably heads for the nearest museum of Light from which it must have escaped some time ago to save a few passers-by, barring their Hell-dedicated paths. So I think it is not any visual affinity with candles or suns that may denote a real Being of Light: a man who immolates himself may be a hero, but he is not a Being of Light, until further notice. In my youth I went to the Bolshoi Theatre very often, attracted by ballets, not by operas wretchedly performed and staged by Soviet citizens. But their ballets reminded me of the light I must have seen in one of my former lives – in Paradise or elsewhere. I am not sure the Paradise they always talk and write about is the only place or space where you can fully enjoy light and its companions (in fortune) to the utmost. In the streets too I am focused on gestures; at least I used to scrutinise the people walking in the immediate vicinity of the Bolshoi, hoping to recognise a ballerina, a source of my ‘cultural’ delights. I might say I even expected to see a pirouette at the very centre of Moscow, not far from Red Square; or in the centre of Red Square, which would have proved convincingly that Giselle had been buried by the Kremlin Wall. And every night she would leave her tomb and dance for the sake of insomniacs – preferably with Marius Liepa whom I admired to the point of attending all his performances.

I do not know if Giselle is in any way responsible for the love I have always diffused in the presence of the dead. It goes without saying I prefer them to the quick – to the point of obliterating the latter altogether, with very few exceptions that I can count on the fingers of one hand; sometimes on the fingers of two hands, when I am in good mood. My preference for the dead is justified by *Giselle*'s Act Two where the heroine is far more gracious and luminous (in my sense of the word) than in Act One. In the first act she tries to eclipse a countess or a princess whose presence reveals to her not only the prince's identity, but also his inclinations and duty: he cannot marry a peasant girl without losing his status, his position at the royal court, his money and glory. And also the princess's money and beauty which must have excited him at some point of his earthly existence. In the second act he switches to the afterlife where he meets a lot of sleeping or rather dead beauties to whom he wishes to offer the flowers he brought for Giselle's tomb. Upon seeing so many beauties, however, he begins to deconstruct his bouquet so as not to offend Giselle's friends and colleagues. And he distributes his flowers all the more obsessively since it is upon them and his generosity that his very life depends and hangs. Depends, hangs, depends, hangs, his dread repeats and murmurs and shouts. At the critical moment, Giselle enters the stage and puts her dead body in front of the prince, thereby protecting him from the Willis' wrath. (Yet another manifestation of Schopenhauer's *Wille* – will to kill, in this case.) If I were in the prince's shoes – I wonder what kind of shoes all these dancers wear – I would ask Giselle not to protect my body from the Willis and their commander-in-chief. 'I wish I were dead. I wish to stay with you in the Hereafter forever. Why are you so cruel? Why do you do your utmost to make me go back to *them*, to the wife I've married only for the sake of her money and her father whose status might allow me to become a king, as Shakespeare put it in *Macbeth*?' Incidentally, I remember a discussion I had one day, in the late Eighties. I talked to an American dancer who said, 'Béjart and other European choreographers don't know the first thing about contemporary ballets. They wear shoes. In the States we take off our shoes and socks and walk barefoot around the stage. And we jump barefoot, our heads brushing against the ceiling.' 'What about your hair?' I asked. 'Do you have your heads shaved?' 'Yes. After all, we are high priestesses and priests of contemporary dance.'

The word 'ceiling' reminds me once again of heaven, although it is enough to raise one's head in order to embark upon a homily featuring God, all sorts of stars, angels, death and Paradise. So you embark upon this homily in the best traditions known to humanity from time immemorial. Perhaps they even talked about the door that someone (not always God Himself) opens and shuts. We know that the alternate opening and closing of the door expresses the rhythm of the universe which is open, whenever our astronomers use their instruments and scrutinise every molecule of the stars, even if they have no intention of falling and thus getting closer to our telescopes. But often a few clouds intervene between the objects of our curiosity and the instruments we use for the purpose of discovering what goes on in that starry sky up there. Under such circumstances, we say the universe is closed like a shop on which we imprudently relied for our dinner and also for the desert and a glass of cognac. But now and then this shop's opening hours slip our minds, and when such ill luck *befalls* us – in such moments we think solemnly about human life and its mishaps – we remember the universe and the door in the sky. A poet says, 'I'm not inspired today. Usually I write three poems every morning. This morning I wrote nothing at all. The door must be closed.' 'Why don't you ask your guardian angel to open it?' you ask. 'His rheumatism is back,' he answers as he transfers his pains and worries to his personal angel who, frankly speaking, never lets him down. But he cannot write poems for his adopted son, and if he does it occasionally, when overeager to get his son off the hook, the latter looks at his computer screen and says, 'What is this? What kind of nonsense did you write this afternoon?'

Do you think this poem is a masterpiece? Do you think they'll applaud your efforts and give you a Nobel Prize?' So last year the angel withdrew into his fantasy world or rather into the world where he lived before taking an ill-starred decision to spend a few years on Earth. (A homage to Wim Wenders.) But let us go back to the open door, and if it is really open, we can even get inside to see the guardian face-to-face or body-to-body, as the experts on martial arts are in the habit of pointing out.

As I said earlier, when they open the door too magnanimously, I suffer from rheumatism and therefore cannot finish my customary walk with the required dignity. I stagger along, alone, on the brink of some catastrophe or other – many catastrophes lie in wait for unreliable knees – and wait for the sight of the front door of my house. And sometimes I pray as follows, 'My Lord, please open this door as soon as I reach it. I have no strength left to look for my key and turn this key in the keyhole or any other hole.' Alas, more often than not, I do not forget to double-lock the front door of my house so I spend around a minute searching for my key in my numerous pockets. And once it is inside my clenched fist, I begin to turn it or rather the fist as if the fist could open the door. Then I clench my teeth – my body thinks that some of its members or parts should be clenched – and let my key appear in the palm of my right or left hand. Then I begin to turn it slowly but surely – in the air, as if to open an airy-fairy door in my garden. Then I spend five minutes trying to insert the key into the keyhole; and so on and so forth. But if I wish to get back to the celestial door in earnest, I should complain about its openness – its glasnost', as Gorbachev might say. (As everyone knows, 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' were his favourite words. Even my spellchecker learnt them 30 years ago.) The Japanese seem to worship subdued lighting which sets their interiors – all their interiors – off to advantage, if I am not mistaken. One never knows with the Japanese, as a Japanese woman told me once. Recently I sent her an email in the hope that she would give me some advice, but received no answer. I suppose the people I touched upon are her friends, and the Japanese are very touchy, generally speaking. You are not supposed to touch their friends; nor do they themselves touch them so you might say the Japanese are very untouchy; or untouchable, as the Indians say; or untouchy-unfeely.

Apparently the universe is undergoing a metamorphosis, but I have no say in its restructuring, in spite of my superficial knowledge of secret lores and doors. If I could suggest an innovation or a softer approach to the rhythm of the seasons, to the pulse of our planet, I would ask the people in charge not to open the celestial door too wildly, too widely: they could leave it ajar, if they were eager to listen to what ordinary humans think and yearn for. Of course they would manifest their astonishment, 'What are you saying? You don't hanker after truth, after the face-to-face you were promised many centuries ago, at the dawn of human intelligence and spirituality? You have no idea what awaits you behind the door, but you're resolved to remain an ignorant ape. So be it, so be it. You're an ape and you'll have to wait for three billion years to become a representative of the Neanderthals, their envoy or ambassador. And you'll wait for five billion years to become a Martian.' 'Of course I'm curious to see what's hidden beyond this door,' I shall answer. 'I've been thirsting for truth ever since I saw the world as I crawled from my mother's womb along the sheets, along some arms and legs. At that particular moment I said to myself, "Such is life and it is worth living only on condition that one knows the truth, the whole of it, the bulk of the truth, every particle of what they call LAW." The point is I suffer from rheumatism, and if your door remains wide-open for more than five minutes, my pain will grow so unbearable I'll scream, thereby perturbing the Mozartian harmony of the universe. A draught is a current of unpleasantly cold air blowing through a room. I don't think you have any notion of the seriousness of the situation. Do you know what "draught" means?' 'Could you spell it please?' 'Do you want the English spelling or the American spelling?' 'Anyway, you can get out of the

room and the cold air is unlikely to pursue you in your garden. Once in your garden, you should go down on your knees and pray while looking at the door, at its openness. It's an open work of art, you know. Open-ended, open-ended. So its openness and end depend on you, on your prayers, your intelligence, your repentances and hopes.'

LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

What seems strange as I try to piece together my recent impressions and sensations is related to the past, to days of yore, even if I concentrate my thoughts on love – the sentiment we are supposed to update every morning. I open my eyes, see my bed's canopy and declare, tears of happiness sparkling in my eyes, 'How I love this canopy! My God, how I love it, every doodle, every colour, every defect.' Then I cast a glance at my alarm clock and say to it, 'How I love thee, my dearest alarm clock. I'm in love with clocks, time and space. I'm in love with time-space and space-time and with quantum mechanics, quantum leaps. I'm in love with every second I go through on my way to Nirvana. I'm also in love with all the leaps I execute in the course of my wanderings: Kierkegaardian leaps, leaps in the dark, leaps out of my skin and so on. I'm also in love with so-called "so on" which means that life goes on and doesn't stop despite the coronavirus and the sway it holds over our planet. I'm even in love with the coronavirus itself, for I know we should love our enemies, and whenever I recall this golden rule, automatically, mechanically, I turn the other cheek, although I'm pretty sure the coronavirus isn't interested in my cheeks. Cheekily it prefers my lungs, and I oblige it with what it still lacks – my other lung and my only liver. And if my wife says, "Since last night you've been suffering from cirrhosis of liver," I'll answer thus, "I hope you don't think I drank two bottles of Burgundy to accompany my copious meal. No, I just turned the other lung. I also turned my liver and brought it level with my lungs to make things easier for the coronavirus." Equality is a ridiculous concept and I wonder if it is a concept at all, or just "at all". We are all equal and therefore can be depicted thus: someone or someone else means the same. No way, no way, no path, no road. You can vote, if you wish: you have every right to vote either for Trump or Hillary Clinton. You can study at Ivy League universities. All people are equal, but they are not equal in volume to Plato, Dante and Shakespeare. My neighbours are *not* equal in volume to my precious self. I love them to the best of my Christian abilities, but they are *not* equal to any of my volumes. And there are many of them: there are only volumes in my voluminous substance.'

My wife says that light does not need to identify with a being as such: it can be a colour, it can hide itself in a tree or in the air. It is, in other words, in other colours, the air that we do not see as we look at trees, bushes and also at the grass, when we really wish to look at the grass and not at our own feet or our shoes and boots. So I could talk to a tree, not necessarily to the Tree of Life: all trees speak to us about life, according to my wife, and given that she talks to me about all these matters, they (these matters and trees) also talk to me about my wife. What is odd, however (I already began this sentence this morning, two hours ago), concerns the choice of the Being of Light I am talking to. He/she/it (Shiite, in other letters) does not prevent me from meditating upon the times I might have known only in one of my former lives. Indeed I often begin my sentences by admitting that I do not know this or that or it, or I just say I have no idea, which might mean I have no ideas at all, at least at the moment. It might also mean one can live without ideas for a long, long time without dying, without brushing against death's shoulder; and yet you continue to rub shoulders with this unpleasant companion, whatever you do, and both philosophers and mystics remind us of this predicament and lifelong chore. Apparently they did not always care about the meaning of life and I vaguely remember a film devoted to this problem. Frankl lived a long life (I lighted upon his name last night, in my garden). When asked on the threshold of death, 'Could you please

express in one sentence the meaning of your own life?’ he said, ‘The meaning of your life is to help others to find the meaning of theirs.’ It goes without saying that this meaning fits neither my mentality nor the archetype to which I have been clinging for 60 years at least, if I remember rightly. Usually I remember wrongly whatever is related to my childhood: I was an ordinary, run-of-the-mill child deprived of memory, of curiosity and ecstasies associated with myriads of discoveries our children are supposed to stumble upon every day. They trip over a root and discover the proximity and scent of the Earth, whereupon they say to their mothers, ‘Mummy, you’re not my Mummy. The Earth is my Mummy.’ ‘And who’s your Daddy?’ asks the mother. ‘My Daddy is this root over which I tripped. If he were in the neighbourhood, he would spank me for my lack of attention, for my new bruises.’ Every time a child falls and gets a few bruises, his father spansks him, flogs him mercilessly, adding insult to injury. I remember neither insults nor injuries, and even my body, my falls and other discoveries seem to be buried in a series of tombs in my consciousness or unconscious. There are a lot of tombstones and their numbers probably exceeds that of the tombs – I prefer tombstones to tombs – but I cannot read whatever is engraved on them, although I might have carried out this literary ritual myself. Writing a few words on tombstones is a very pleasant, rewarding occupation.

Anna de Noailles reminds me of two women I was in love with, and it is a pity I did not dedicate my literary and ordinary life to their worship. I could have married one of them. I met her in Munich in the early Eighties. She was of Romanian extraction and taught English in a school I never saw either in her presence or in her absence. Her English was not perfect; her beauty was, and that was what counted in those days, although I had already begun writing in English and consequently might have been displeased with her faults. But her inward light dazzled me completely, and I still cannot remember the cause of our parting, of the farewell I said to her in Munich or in Versailles. Perhaps I did not say anything, and my silence is more probable than any adieu or rebuke: I received a letter from her in which she said she was weary and consequently would not write to me again, if I did not answer her letter; as it turned out, it was her farewell letter. And mine? I suppose I did not send her anything, not even a farewell present; a doll or something of the kind.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, the poem where my archetype is reflected. It is a poem about water which, at least in my wife’s visions and attitudes, takes centre stage and incites me to use one of my favourite expressions. And this water reflects all archetypes and gives rise to the sensations I shall never part with, whatever the figures I behold in the carpet of my life. I do not know what to call the force which drives me on and on, towards other figures and carpets, but if asked to describe it, I would quote the same poem, the same poet: ‘Till noon we quietly sailed on, / Yet never a breeze did breathe: / Slowly and smoothly went the ship, / Moved onward from beneath.’ Perhaps I am delighted by the origins of this movement, being rather weary of starry nights, sunny days, signs from on high, celestial doors; and even of the dinner tables profusely laden with God-supplied food. Perhaps I am still in love with our Mother Earth, even if I am not one of those Russians who kiss her when coming back to their native country. Actually I have never experienced an acute feeling of nostalgia: it has always been mute, like the strings of the upright piano we had at home at the hour of my birth. At least you could make them mute, soft and almost inaudible to your neighbours. Moved onward from beneath. I might have been forgotten by heavenly hosts and armies a long time ago, but the Earth does not forget me, judging from this movement, from my ability to leaf through the book of my life which is not very different from the Book of Life; at least it is not as different as might be supposed, after reading my texts, *après une lecture de mes nombreux commentaires sur Dante*, as Liszt might

have put it. I sail on and on in my ship in the midst of corpses and fools. And I am certainly of their number, otherwise I would already have left this world to its own devices, this world, this life.

The only truthful and pragmatic sounds produced by humans are screams dramatically related to pain or angst. But if you dare add a comment to these screams, to this ‘O Zeus! Hear my prayer’, you will fail completely: neither Zeus nor Christ nor our common God will ever understand what you are talking about. It is highly probable that none of these Gods will realise you are actually talking, thereby trying to communicate your ideas, sensations and doctrines to the highest spheres of the universe. They might think you are just clearing your throat in expectation of a few sounds you know nothing about: you are not a prophet either in your own right or in any other rights. In short, you are not a prophet at all and so cannot predict what will issue from your mouth: a scream, a death rattle, a philosophical doctrine, a quotation from Mauthner’s masterpiece such as, ‘The language of an individual is not a false picture of his thinking but a false picture of his environment; he articulates everything he thinks individually, only his thinking about reality is individual and therefore false.’ Individually he thinks that Zeus exists and his ears are cocked. But many centuries ago Zeus and his reign were superseded by our God and His reign, His Empire, His Vatican and other institutions among which we find the Greek Orthodox Church and the Holy Office or Inquisition. But our thinking about this kind of reality (any kind of reality) is equally false if the idea we are trying to convey boils down to cocked ears, to the receptivity of the heavens; or to heads nodding in agreement; or to mouths screaming in unison with ours, which might mean we are understood somewhere, not necessarily in our garden or in the street where we live and die. Luckily for all humans, there are vibrations that encompass the whole universe and never lie either to this universe or its inhabitants who cheer up and begin to nod, jump and dance for no reason at all. And this reason, if any, is not even known to themselves, even if we say and repeat, ‘Best known to themselves, best known to themselves.’ As a matter of fact, nothing is best known to anybody, and we could justly point out that everything is *worst* known to everyone. But we do not point anything out, out of pity, commiseration and solidarity with our brothers and sisters and nephews.

George Sand said something I might say myself, even though I do not have to justify myself and the literary method I adopted at the very outset of my literary (so-called) career: ‘The novel need not necessarily be the representation of reality.’ This novel of mine, assuming it is a novel and not a Schumann *noveletta* (the last one, for instance) is a representation of *my* reality, of the reality of *light*, of any celestial body you choose, of the Philosophers’ Stone, of any stone or bird, of my cat. Be that as it may, if questioned by the Being of Light, my personal Being of Light, I would talk about Anna de Noailles or about my aunt with whom I was in love for more than three years. Whenever I take the trouble to explain why I always opt for mature women, I say invariably, ‘I’m paying homage to my aunt whose beauty can’t be conveniently pigeonholed unless you say she was Anna de Noailles’ twin sister.’ However, if I say that or something along these lines, they will bombard me with questions about Proust and his relationship with Robert de Montesquieu. (The spelling is highly recommended by my spellchecker, not by my remembrance of lost time.) I probably described in detail my waiting for her appearance on the famous Odessa beach, and sometimes I wonder if some time ago I did not write a theatrical play reliably based on this romantic episode, on this showpiece of my libido. *Waiting for a bathing suit*. Of course my dreams and even my libido did not reach the stage habitually associated with Turkish baths or saunas where women of all ages and social statuses enjoy themselves in the nude. And yet I remember an image related to such a bath, featuring two female bodies. Their caresses surpassed whatever I had seen before being blessed with such a vision of love and beauty. What a pity the women we come across almost everywhere do not indulge in this pastime to confirm

W. B. Yeats' poetic analysis: 'Everything we look upon is blessed.' You look at the women in love (minus D. H. Lawrence) and your inward light informs you that this vision is far more nourishing and instructive than the sun and the moon put together.

And the Romanian woman I was almost in love with? I welcomed her in Versailles in the hope of marrying her and begetting a few children. At some point, before becoming my mistress, she met one of my students and he fell in love with her too – rather actively, pragmatically and realistically, I must admit. So they met regularly at his place and even in hotels as if repeating some romantic story they had found in Balzac or another novelist I can no longer read, although in Moscow we had 24 volumes of his *Comédie* or *Tragédie* or *Vaudeville*. 'Voda' means water in Russian and the Russians often use this word outside their bathrooms and kitchen – when defining the quality of a book, for instance. They can say, 'This novel is just *vodichka*,' meaning it is not a wine cellar where you are sure to come across your favourite Burgundy, Claret and Barolo. I secretly envied my student and this uncomfortable episode I had to endure as if punished for my timidity and worship of *anima* which came to an end one morning when, upon awakening, my student drew the following conclusion, after looking for a minute or two at her face, 'She is incurably stupid,' which was not altogether wrong, as I was to discover several months later. But the months that preceded this fatal discovery were filled with hitherto unknown delight for which I am still grateful to my destiny or rather to that open door and the perspective where gorgeous women dance around the proverbial, biblical table. She was beautiful and even the alleged stupidity did not often distort her features which must have been chiselled by a celestial sculptor of genius. I wonder why we never talk about those celestial sculptors whose presence in that temple, beyond that open door, should not be obliterated by angels and other emissaries of God. Anna de Noailles was not created by an archangel, for only a professional sculptor devoting his whole life to his Philosophers' Stone is able to create such a masterpiece. And, contrary to my Romanian mistress, she was far from stupid, and her sense of humour appealed not only to Proust, but also (presumably) to her husband. I am not studious enough to embark upon research related to this husband of hers: it is enough to know she was highly-strung and melancholy – as melancholy as a melancholy piece of music, as Proust might have written, when at a loss to name an appropriate piece: his knowledge of music was rather vague, making him confuse Chopin with Schumann. What rejoiced me during a foray into her biography was her support for Dreyfus and his cause: she literally fainted upon being told about his arrest. Apparently they (Proust and Anna de Noailles) withdrew from what might be called an intimate relationship on account of Maurice Barrès. Of course this intimacy never went too far, but they used to exchange jokes and fleeting impressions. I would eagerly put these pastimes in my cup of tea and it is a pity that only my wife seems to be good at both: at playing with words, images, at offering me a dozen fleeting impressions which she usually turns into a self-sufficient eternity.

It is true that if you plunge headlong into light, you might omit its opposite, the second principle without which no oneness is conceivable, for light represents only half of this oneness, of the universe, of harmony and peace of mind. No mind can be authentically peaceful without darkness. (Chuang Tzu wrote, 'Follow me beyond the two principles of light and darkness into oneness.') Deprived of its presence, it cannot even avail itself of the light it sees in front of it, for the simple reason that it sees it no longer. During an eclipse of the sun, they sell you a sort of mask that ensures the survival of your eyesight in spite of the light's ferocious intensity and murderous instinct. The divine light you come across in their treatises is even more ferocious and implacable – for your own good, as they say, nodding their heads and stroking your cheeks. They must have forgotten the picture displayed at the Pompidou Centre where you see a brain being led by a Labrador. And the caption says, 'Labradors are used

as guide-dogs for blind people.’ Incidentally, to increase the intensity of inward light, Taoists employed such different methods as the absorption of sunlight and ingestion of the light of dawn. I prefer the latter solution – all the more enthusiastically since I wake up very early, around 4 a.m., and consequently can ingest the light of dawn to my heart’s content. Instead of gazing for hours and hours at my bed’s delicious canopy, I shall open two or three windows and expose my body (and my inward light) to the dawn, to its radiant gift. If, on the other hand, I expose my body to the sun unprotected, the sunbeams will burn my skin and through the holes thus created the light will penetrate my entrails and burn them too. ‘Heartburn’ they call it, if I am not mistaken. I wonder if the light we see in Pieter de Hooch’s painting is the light of dawn’s twin sister. A lot can be said about these lights and their relationships that are mutually beneficial and need no paint to get under way, to travel miles and miles in the sky, in expectation of a fruitful encounter with a luminous body. All this is very selfish and Frankl (I think I know his cousin) was not selfish, considering that he thought about other people’s meaningful lives as if he could really put them on the right track, saying, ‘Have a nice trip. On a clear day you can see a temple in the distance. That temple is your destination, the meaning of your life. Let there be no mistake about it – I don’t judge the world in terms of religions and their cults, their cult figures. I wish you to discover your inward light which can be nourished through your relationship with the sun and my instructions, my recommendations. I advocate your reliance upon your own means, nourished daily by the book I gave you yesterday, the last book I wrote on the meaning of life in our society and in this day and age. This meaning encompasses machines and also the individuals who press buttons. It also concerns the plastic organs they inserted into your body, replacing your worn-out lungs, liver, intestines and soul. Your new soul is a sort of plastic bag where you can keep my book, among other books and instructions. Don’t forget that throughout the world the most efficacious revelation of the godhead takes the form of light. If you meditate upon my book and its instructions destined for your spiritual improvement, in the long run you’ll see light and grow blind as a result of its intensity. That’s why this Labrador will keep you company.’ In Peter de Hooch’s painting there is a young girl, a mother and a dog who needs no light from the door that was presumably opened by the daughter. She needs knowledge and Plato; the dog needs himself, and that is quite enough, whatever Rousseau says, writes and dies. (No *Émiles*, no educations.) And we could remove from the picture not only Rousseau and Peter de Hooch, but also the other humans: the mother and her daughter. The dog is the mother; and the world. He is also the light coming from the door. The door, the light, the world – The Mother. To die, to live on The Mother’s breasts.

Anna de Noailles. The godhead takes the form of light and vice versa, I suppose. I see a lot of light inside a picture where a gorgeous woman takes centre stage: it is her portrait and no one flanks her on any side. The point is she would have taken centre stage in *any* picture, even in Rembrandt’s *Night Watch* – not only on account of the light she radiates, her inward light. Of course a woman can strike a match and set fire to her dress in the middle of a thoroughfare: even in daylight she would be seen by passers-by and also by birds, assuming there are some birds left in our industrial cities. But Anna de Noailles would have been seen anywhere, eclipsing Saskia and the officers whose trivial shadows are impressive only in the domain of the arts. Her inward light, whether it had been nourished by the sun or by the moon or by Venus herself, was so dazzling that even Beatrice might have recognised her superiority unless she would have mentioned Dante and his poetic genius, saying, ‘He wasn’t in love with Anna de Noailles, was he?’

Generally speaking, I do not understand how human beings can tolerate their fellow creatures, which is all the more astounding in the light of what happens when we talk to animals and caress them. Upon seeing my body

and outstretched arm, my cat begins a series of movements that culminates in a motionless ecstasy. 'I'm no longer on speaking terms with many humans,' I said to my wife, 'because of our language, whatever language we choose as a means of communication. But I'll always be on stroking and also on speaking terms with my cat. We speak another language, unknown to humans. Mauthner thought that the first stage we traverse in our life – often we get stuck in the mud of this stage – is infused with language, poisoned by words. The second is wholly dedicated to laughter. I'm just in the middle of this stage.' 'Are there only two stages in this exceptional history?' my wife inquired. 'The notion of trinity,' I answered, 'seems to regulate and manipulate our lives. But I'm rather far from the third stage alluded to in Mauthner's masterpiece. I'll talk to you about it in due course.'

In *Hamlet* we hear a speech or rather a hymn in which the representatives of our species have centre stage. (Can't we live without these stages, centres and Hamlets? And hamlets? And helmets?) I was reminded of it by Sarah Bernhardt or rather by one of her innumerable portraits and photographs where she is driven off the centre stage by her wonderful dog lying at her feet. In my opinion, she ought to have performed in *Hamlet* with her dog, making this short monologue logical in the context of the times we are enduring rather stoically. We all remember this monologue; no point in waiting for Sarah Bernhardt's posthumous performance. 'What a piece of work is man!' I think we might stop after this rhetorical beginning and start again, modifying our intonation and emphasis. What kind of nonsense do these humans exhibit in the world where they are supposed to take centre stage and multiply non-stop to the detriment of other species? Well and good. But what about the continuation of this piece of work? How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable. *What* are you talking about? About *whom* are you talking, for God's sake? About Sarah Bernhardt's dog? Her greyhound? (If my wife is not mistaken.) Sure enough, he is lying at her feet on a Parisian stage, and she looks at him while delivering her speech or monologue or poem. Let us forget about human reason rooted in language or in falsehood and a multitude of illusions. Let us forget too about his or her faculties, about their supposed infinity. If you cut men and women down to size – to movements, in other words – you might recall a few dancers from the Bolshoi and from the Mariinsky Theatre. In action how like an angel; like Giselle danced either by Ulanova or Bessmertnova – after her death, in Act Two. No words, I beg of you. No living and kicking humans. Swans or nutcrackers. In apprehension how like a god. *What are* you talking about? In misapprehension how like a human! (*Stroking her greyhound*): In apprehension how like a god! Incidentally, even ballerinas are not up to our mythological standards: only jellyfish dance like naiads.

Usually theatrical monologues – interior monologues are different – go in one direction only, and if they proclaim that 'human', the very word denoting humans, sounds nice and seems to be proud of itself, then we lift our heads and go out to demonstrate the height of our head to the world. But sometimes, in the course of one monologue, the hero decides to share with us the opposite of what he has just said (I am talking about Hamlet). So at the end of the abovementioned monologue Hamlet or Sarah Bernhardt informs us that he or she disagrees with himself or herself. He says that humans are dust, and so the words we hear at our own successive funerals – our former lives are thus taken into consideration – reflect the truth and nothing else. Dust to ashes, ashes to dust. And we realise that death managed to split our body into three groups: dust, ashes and nothingness. So our priests should say (from now on): 'Dust to ashes, ashes to nothing, dust to nothing, nothing to ashes.' Sarah also says that any human, especially beggars, according to our Christian traditions, are paragons, all of them: the paragon of animals, if you please. If you see a herd of goats and one human in the midst of those goats, you immediately smile and say, 'Here goes the paragon of goats.' And the paragon nods and says, 'Yes, you're right. I'm the paragon of

animals – of goats, under the circumstances.’ ‘Would you be the paragon of wolves, if you happened to be in their midst?’ ‘Of course.’ ‘And what about tigers?’ ‘Yes, I’m also the paragon of tigers. And of lions. And of elephants.’ ‘Would you have been the paragon of dinosaurs, in days of yore?’ ‘Yes, I would. Yes, I can.’ And so on. Well, Sarah was right, when asking this rhetorical question: ‘What is this quintessence of dust?’ When uttering this seminal remark, she would look at the members of the audience, although the question was not addressed to them: the quintessence of dust is too obtuse to answer such a question and solve such problems. Sometimes Sarah would deviate from the world-famous monologue and ask an additional question: ‘Surely the answer’s obvious – or are you being deliberately obtuse?’ Now and then some member of the audience would rise from his seat (women are *never* obtuse) and say, ‘I’m not deliberately obtuse. My lack of wit is quite unintentional. But if you really need an answer, Herr Hamlet, I can say to you that you also belong to the dust you’re talking about so eloquently and with gay abandon. Frankly speaking, you’re the quintessence of the quintessence you’re enlarging upon, for you’re just an actor or Hamlet, a figment of Shakespeare’s imagination. By the way, isn’t Hamlet a historical figure? Anyway, you’re dust, ashes and nothing, my dear Sarah, for all your theatrical and patriotic talents.’

If you look at paintings once a week or every day, you are bound to realise the superiority of animals depicted in books, exhibited in picture galleries. I have already analysed this superiority in my essay on Velasquez whose propensity to make us look even more obtuse than whatever Sarah Bernhardt said in her theatrical monologues is terrifying and consequently shocks my proud fellow creatures who are imbued with self-importance. Butterflies too are more intelligent, even if overlooked by Nabokov and those who are prepared to put as many butterflies in his museums as is consistent with his glory and authority. For all the love I felt for Schopenhauer’s masterpiece (as I usually say, when touching his world and his representation), I cannot understand why he rated human beings so highly as if afraid of contradicting The Old Testament, its very beginning. He talks about will to his will’s content and declares that the highest degree of its manifestation is due to the human presence on Earth which would lose her splendour if our species dropped a series of atomic bombs (or coronaviruses) on themselves. Right now my cat is available for my scrutiny, and I must say he contradicts Schopenhauer’s assertion most eloquently.

Of course both Plato and Aristotle were as intelligent as my cat, but whenever demoting humanity to the rank of worms, I think exclusively about my contemporaries who continue to surpass themselves in the domain of obtuseness. I accept Hopkins’ panegyric – the one he delivered in his church, I suppose – on condition that I pay no attention to the words and deeds I have been coming across for many years. I might join the musicologists who always speak about silence in connection with music. What a pity this comparison or definition cannot be applied to humans. What a pity they move around instead of staying in their beds, silent, resigned and feeble. I know a woman whose inborn energy shows no sign of abating despite all the viruses she continues to catch as if they were butterflies; as if she were Nabokov’s assistant. More than 30 years ago, in Poland, of all places, she was exposed to Chernobyl’s legendary cloud, to the radioactive rain that decimated a few populations and an infinite number of individuals. She just went to a chemist’s, bought a sort of aspirin and resumed her activities focused on Schubert and Bach: she is a so-called pianist. Instead of enjoying their eternal peace, a lot of composers turn in their graves so you need not turn tables, if resolved to consult them about misprints and suchlike. After all, something *should* remain motionless on our planet! Hopkins’ panegyric talks about human essence that is ‘highly pitched, selved and distinctive from anything in the world’. It is certainly distinctive compared to the animals I see and admire wherever they have not yet being annihilated by hunters and other humans. I wonder if Hopkins would have spoken

of this pitch, alluding to God's presence and authorship, had he lived for another 60 years, which would have allowed him to witness the Second World War and its aftermath. What would he have written at the beginning of our century? Of course one is tempted to bring up Trump's nonsensical triumphs and proclamations, but there are other pitches, other fevers in the world where we live, where the street along which I walk almost every day can be found. 'For this power (God, if I am not mistaken) had to force forward the starting or stubborn elements to the one pitch required.' What are *you* talking about? I know that this force drove Dante from one canto to another until he reached the top of Paradise, situated much higher than the top of the world. (I am talking about *his Paradiso* which is far more beautiful than any other paradise, if I am not mistaken.) Where can this force be detected in this day and age? By the way, I adore this expression: it seems to hit the nail on the head. If you just say 'today', you do not hit anyone.

So I am not tempted to *enlarge* upon Trump's doings, but I would eagerly enlarge upon his undoing, if destiny were disposed to oblige me in this domain, which does not seem to be the case, in spite of many people's prayers and votes. But I might say a few words about the woman I have dealt with abundantly in my writings – over 40 years: I am very fond of repetitive music. Once – all this has happened many times – I introduced a Russian woman to her who was not in her prime, I must admit. Nor did she look old, far from it, judging from the number of suitors she had and still has, I suppose. 'Old age can be the prime of life if you have the right attitude,' said the woman I have been talking about for over 40 years. 'What are you talking about?' I asked, reluctant to waste my energy on sophisticated repartee. 'She's rather tall and it's a pity her face is so heavily lined. If you wish, I could offer her the anti-wrinkle cream I use from time to time. Not *all* the time, mind you – I don't really need it. But creams are of no use. No point in smearing them all over your body.' 'For this power (Devil's, I suppose) had to force forward the starting or stubborn elements to the one pitch required.'

I saw a documentary on Salvador Dali, and I must say I cannot remember a lot of details of his meeting with the scientists he had invited to his place, to one of his places, workshops and works to create a propitious atmosphere for their discussions. And two of them – Prigogine and a man called Tom, a famous mathematician, a Nobel prize winner – put forward some arguments, suggestions and plans I know nothing about except that one of them said, 'Mathematics has nothing to do with reality,' or something along these lines. You go along these lines and find a lot of conclusions that are tantamount to what you have just heard. For instance, 'Mathematics has nothing to do with the human race, even if this race understands mathematics and claims to have invented it.' The point is there is a harmony in the universe and probably there is a point too, the point. The point, the harmony; and everything else revolves around it or sings in unison with it and us and my spouse, and my house, and that is how melodies are born – through singing with harmonies. You become a voice and join the choir, a Mass, a Church; you add a page to a sacred book from the West or the East or the North Pole, the Pole Star, the Star of David. And from polar bears. Does mathematics have anything to do with reality or the human race? In our universe created by universities, common sense and quantum physics, everything depends on our glances and presence. We cast a glance at a thing in itself, and this thing becomes a thing in ourselves; the same goes for human creatures, their wives and husbands and children and offspring and nephews. Whatever we look at or touch becomes a human being – in its own right, or almost. I do not wish them to become human – all these objects, fish, animals, stars, and even alchemical processes. Let them remain Saturnine or gold-imbued or mind-imputed (the Almighty's mind.) Let them grow independent, maturing far away from humans and their ways, their wires, their barbed wires. (Not their wives, not always.) Take no notice of our glances, of our obstreperous, obtrusive presence. Mathematics

has nothing to do with reality and humanity which is far more akin to automatics; not even to the Protestant work ethic they came up with at some point in our history, not mystery. (There is nothing mysterious about our silliness, inanity.) Mathematics is far away from humans and their reality, for the world is harmonious, and it is likely to remain Mozartian, Schubertian, Schoenbergian as long as humans leave it in peace. There is no other peace like that – the non-human peace, I call it. Keep away, my fellow creatures. How could you keep away from world harmony? By tearing yourselves apart. Cre, atu, es, r, r, r. (A homage to the ecology movement.) What could you create with these elements, aspects, atoms, dust and cobwebs? Humans stay within their $\$10000+10000000$ differential calculus.

David Hockney's contribution to the ecological tendency can be admired during a representation of Puccini's *Turandot* for which our painter designed a lot of costumes, props – colours and lines, generally speaking. The singers, actors and props move inside a design and there is nothing else on stage or in the air. You hear the design as well, David Hockney's design, the destiny he imposed on humanity; not only on the Chinese, whatever Trump might say and think. Of course humanity is just Malevich's *Black Square* (not the white one, not the white one) but there are other lines and figures, and we are not entitled to deprive humanity of those additional elements, ingredients: let them think they are rich and prosperous. (We are humane, magnanimous and empathy-ridden, like cats.) Let them die in peace – in *their* peace that has nothing in common with my Beings of Light, with the rest of the cosmos. Or with the Philosophers' Stone. (With me, with me, with me, except my life, except my life, except my wife.) There are three actors or singers whose names are Po, Pu, Pa – not Petipa, mind you. They sing, mock Calaf (not la Callas) and dance from time to time as if the whole thing were staged by Petipa, of all choreographers. As if the whole thing were *Swan Lake* – without swans. Humans dance and sing differently because they are humans and nothing, nobody else. (Not the Martians, not the Martians.) They just move and move, putting their feet forward, backward, sideways, putting them on the shoulders of their partners or lovers, husbands or tutors or sponsors. Anna Pavlova, Ulanova, Plisetskaya were swans, not humans.

I know a Chinese specialist who demonstrates his abilities in the domain where electricity reigns and conquers the world as if in homage to Tesla and his motorcar. He also keeps my computers in good repair, but his father is getting worse and worse (in health), and neither my wife nor her Chinese pupil can do anything for him; and consequently the word 'repair' is no longer used under the circumstances. Using their hearts and spirits, they (my wife and our Chinese friend) send him colours to facilitate the so-called 'transfer'. It would be simpler to walk towards your cemetery, your grave, and lie down in it, after asking a few people to prepare this new place of residence for your body. But our rituals are centred upon these transfers and some of the dying require three Tibetan wrathful deities – no less, no less. And so their relatives put on masks and dance around their deathbeds to prepare them for what moves or dances are in store for them. A lot of the dying do not wish to be confronted with wrathful deities beyond the grave – for the first time. They are longing to rehearse this experience on the Earth, in the presence of their relatives who, in case of emergency, can remove the masks, saying, 'Don't you worry, I'm your brother, your sister, your nephew. Don't you recognise me, us, him, her?' 'Why are you so angry with me?' ask the dying. 'What have I done to you? I've left you my villas and yachts. What more can you ask for?' 'We ask for your life,' all of them answer in unison. 'You're not a bunch of wrathful deities,' say a lot of dying people, uttering their last words, their last wishes. 'Go to Hell.' And their relatives are convinced that no wrathful deities will ever bother the deceased in the Hereafter: God's will was done on the surface of the Earth. Be that as it may, both my wife and her Chinese disciple limit their participation in the funereal transfer to the colours they emit through their

hearts' agency. ('The Colour Agency', as they call it.) 'I like rich jewel colours, such as purple, blue and green,' says the dying. 'Yes,' says my wife. 'I'm sending you peace, confidence – you'll need it, as they say – and convalescence. But the convalescence I'm sending you concerns exclusively your karma, the yellow sphere you might have noticed several minutes ago. You won't need your karma any more. It is your final departure. You've got a one-way ticket in your mind, body and soul. Your convalescence is the definitive removal of your karma.'

Only a few decades ago did we begin to question the mover who presides over our history, destinies and the movement carrying us along our sweet or rather bitter ways. We question the mover as such, i.e. his or her existence in whatever we see and feel around us, above us and even under our feet; in our tombs, for instance. But we also wonder – and that is what I call 'my free will' – in what direction we are driven or pushed by this mover whose hands have been covered with our blood even since we were permitted to catch sight of this vehicle of our survival. Indeed one might rightfully ask oneself: Where to? Or *Quo vadis?* in other words, in another language. When this question is partially answered, which might happen now and then, for all our undying ignorance, we shout, 'No, no, no. Don't move!' as if someone, some elderly person suffering from rheumatism, were trying to rise from his chair. (Women are not supposed to leave either chairs or sofas when someone enters the room where this slice of life is set.) If I was in charge of myself, I would not go on, whatever they say in books and churches; or during their meals on the grass. I cannot say I am lazy and consequently the prime or primeval mover itches to put His foot down or rather up, saying to Himself, 'He needs a good boot up the backside, this old fogey.' 'Where to?' is an important question. Suppose we step into a taxi and the driver puts this question to our intentions, to our mental make-up, to our future, and we are at sea with the road we spot out of the window, with the car itself, let alone with the driver who speaks our language incorrectly as if he had never learnt it either at school or at university. So you speak to yourself for a while, after asking the driver to wait for a moment, 'I'll give you the address in a few moments,' you says, hoping these moments will never fly away and consequently are bound to stay within your reach as long as you reflect upon the situation. Then you realise that he if drives you left, this driver of yours or of someone else's, you will find yourself face to face with the terrifying aspect of your fate, with the wrathful deities and gods they describe in their books of death, of no resurrection. If you go right, however, you are sure to find a few flowers you will offer to the woman you have been in love with for more than a month. You begin to count the days and hours and come to reach the conclusion that the month you have in mind is no longer there, having elapsed or exploded a long time ago. And the woman you are thinking about must have exploded too, so you can see her among the stars and constellations. You catch sight of a constellation and say to yourself, 'I'll give you her name, my constellation. From now on you'll be my only consolation.'

As usual we are torn between fear and ambition, and a lot depends on the result of this tug of war: the identity of the driver, among other identities, names and calls. Your senses inform you that the vehicle you are sitting in has just set off down the road, and you conclude your destination is to be found down there, although you have no idea where these downs and theres are situated on your personal map and also on the map of the universe about which my wife talks every morning and every night. Only in the afternoon is she able to concentrate on something else – on a cup of tea, for instance; unless this cup of tea is also linked to the universe 'by chains of gold', as alchemists say. Then she focuses her attention alternately upon these chains and the gold she sees in the sky and also on the table where her cup of tea awaits her lips and taste buds. Yesterday I drank the tea I had bought last month, before the outset of our confinement, and this tea is aptly and correctly called 'Afternoon Tea'. While sipping her tea, my wife switched her computer on and showed me Laura Eisenhower who had just embarked upon

her speech profusely centred on the coronavirus and the manipulators, ‘this gigantic, wrathful leech we can’t see because of our naïveté and stupid belief in the virtue of the future. This leech fastened itself onto our bodies and also on those of our animals, of our cats and dogs, to take their and our blood.’ I asked my wife what the leech was doing, for I was convinced that Laura Eisenhower was using the term ‘massacre’ (I am almost sure she said ‘this bloody massacre’) in the figurative sense. ‘For the life of me, I can’t see any blood either on my shirt or on my shoes,’ I said. ‘She’s talking about Bill Gates,’ my wife answered. ‘I haven’t heard his name yet,’ I pointed out. ‘You’ll hear it in ten minutes’ time.’ ‘But tell me what went wrong with Bill Gates? I think he said at some point we should no longer fear the atomic bomb because we have another bomb in our midst, in the figurative sense. This bomb was identified as the coronavirus, at the end of the programme.’ ‘That’s right,’ said my wife. ‘Rats and flies spread germs. Humans spread panic.’ ‘You mean they push the panic button?’ ‘No, they don’t act spontaneously, on the spur of the moment. The scheme was well thought out.’ ‘What kind of scheme is it? Do you mean to say they want us to panic because our brains’ inexorable turbulence is sure to make things easier for them? We fasten our seatbelts and they run about with their Kalashnikovs. Is that what you think?’

Let us go once into the territory where Kalashnikovs have no sway and cannot even be detected by our video cameras, for all their sophistication and angst-goaded attention. If the Being of Light I talked about at the end of last week is in the immediate vicinity of my narration and of the conclusions I draw all the time, notwithstanding the shortness of this time, my own shortness, I must recall my past, my childhood and the years I spent at the Moscow Conservatoire; otherwise I am unlikely to be admitted either to Purgatory or to Paradise. At some point I spoke at length about Anna de Noailles, but I cannot say she took part in my adolescent activities, which is all the more problematic since I was not very active in my youth unless we take into consideration the hours I devoted to my piano and Bach’s preludes and figures; and also to Chopin’s etudes, strange as it may appear. In those days I wasted a lot of time on my fingers’ velocity, and what I really needed, considering my present repertoire was rather related to polyphony, to my fingers’ independence, not to their quickness. My professor at the Conservatoire told me at the very outset of our collaboration: ‘Your own independence or your personal freedom depends on your fingers, on *their* freedom and independence. Their freedom will permeate your whole being, if it grows reliable and strong.’ If you attempt to put a Buddhist meditation and the fingers of a budding pianist side by side, you will understand what I am talking about. In the course of his meditation, a Buddhist gets rid of this and that and also of that’s that, determined to empty his brain, body and nerves of whatever stands between him and nirvana. So, at the end of a month or a year, you will see a multitude of empty nerves, vessels and organs – on his X-ray photograph. What would you see on our pianist’s X-ray photograph? A number of cancelled strolls, football games, and games, games, scales, arpeggios. Is that what my personal Light Being is looking for in his endeavour to prepare me for a short stay in Purgatory? Speaking about Light Beings and their descendants, their ascendants – no other topics are as exciting as this one, two or three, ascendants, descendants, ET, our cup of tea – I recall a few television programmes about which I already wrote in my novels, essays, poems and other texts destined for my drawers and rubbish bins. I wonder why the Americans do not buy the Russian films where extra-terrestrial visitors appear to us and appease our overwrought conditions, states and nerves. ‘Let’s stay calm and try to behave like responsible adults,’ they say to us as we painstakingly take to our heels. ‘We are not the Martians you read about in H. G. Wells’ untruthful account of their visit to the Earth. This English writer didn’t see a number of Soviet and Russian documentaries where we assure television viewers of our goodwill and eternal help. We reassure you all the time, even when you see no flying saucers amidst the clouds or inside a

moonbeam, a starry twinkle. As a Soviet song has it, “We’re peaceful creatures, but our armoured train is always on the siding.” If you misbehave, our train will set off and destroy your villages and their tractors, their inhabitants and their haystacks. But we’ll spare your cows, sheep and dogs. They’re as innocent as the inhabitants of *our* planet.’ Of course I remember their visit to Chernobyl about which H. G. Wells said nothing: he was no longer in the grave where he had stopped turning long before the catastrophe that would not have soiled Gorbachev’s hands, had he shaken off the Soviet heritage at the very beginning of his rather productive reign. Apparently these extra-terrestrials, though ignorant of Spielberg’s complimentary film, reduced the destructive consequences of the power failure (let us call it thus to avoid tautologies) almost to zero. Sure enough, what did happen in that town was not far from zero in comparison with what *might* have happened, had our guests limited their activities to playing with kids and occasionally with their mummies. All hell might have broken loose; all the Kremlin’s bells would have tolled for a few months, if not for years and years. (Sometimes those bells toll on their own, appalled by what is going on in Russia.) I think we should leave H. G. Wells out in the cold, as they say in Russian, even when they wish to imply that the person in question is not in any way involved in the failures and disasters they continue to dwell upon. But I still hold a grudge against Laura Eisenhower who just touched upon our extra-terrestrial friends instead of giving them a big bear hug. Of course the Americans (and Westerners, generally speaking) are not used to bear hugs, and even when making a film inspired by a Russian novel, they do not ask their actors to respect the bear-hug ritual so as not to lay themselves open to ridicule, should their film eventually reach Russian or Russia-born projectionists. By the way, when leafing through a book on Bushido, I chanced upon the following piece of information: ‘If asked, “What’s the difference between American couples and Japanese couples?” I first inquire into the identities of the people who constitute the couples in question, for I’m quite aware of the fact that homosexual men and lesbians behave differently from whatever we might witness in the presence of heterosexual couples. After making sure we’re dealing exclusively with heterosexual couples, I say, “American husbands kiss their wives only when there are many people around – in a ballroom, for instance, in the course of a charity ball. They could also do it intimately, when only three or four persons are permitted to admire their mutual tenderness. As for beating their wives with sticks or bare hands, they do it at home, in spite or because of the total lack of witnesses. Japanese husbands kiss and cuddle their wives at home, using all sorts of manuals including the Kama Sutra, Tantric Sex, Yokohama Postures and so on. Whenever they and their wives find themselves surrounded by friends and foes alike – in cinemas as well as in ballrooms, their husbands beat their wives senseless, not contenting themselves with the sixth sense only. It is true that some of them admit, “I’m fed up with my wife’s incessant boasting. Not only does she declare she has the sixth sense, but she says she knows how to use it properly and infallibly. And then I say to her, ‘Did you feel I was about to beat you to death?’ and then I beat her to half-life, anxious to preserve her body for future tortures.”’ What may appear strange to foreigners, with the notable exception of the Russians, is the joy our wives experience when beaten by their husbands, lovers or perfect strangers. In Russia this blood-and-guts ritual is regarded as the best proof of love.’ ‘And what about Japan?’ someone may inquire out of sheer curiosity. ‘In Japan we’ve always admired the Beat Generation and its heroes.’

What is more important – extra-terrestrials or Bushido? Let us discuss them in turn, alternately: never mind the order and the importance we might attach to them as we go on or by. When we see a flying saucer, we usually exclaim, ‘My goodness! I thought I would never see a Martian, however long I might live on this planet that we call the Earth.’ But if you happen to live in the United States of America, you had better keep silent or talk about other matters, cautiously avoiding the word ‘saucer’; unless you wish to spend a few days in prison, for the sake

of your yogic meditation. In everyday, ordinary life you are always perturbed by others who run around and talk non-stop, determined to drive the point home. I am not sure this piece of information is not as fake as the fake news about which the American President talks in front of television crews, but it is a good starting point for any discussion centred upon the visitors from other planets and nebulae. It is true that the Americans do not like to reveal the secrets hidden in the Pentagon's drawers. Even the Russians are far more talkative today as if to compensate for their secretive stance imposed and encouraged by the Soviet regime. Anyway, whenever I am in the United States – I have not travelled to that country for almost 20 years – I often see flying saucers, and I cannot help shouting, whenever this phenomenon does take place, 'Oh, saucer, oh, another one!' And if a policeman asks me, 'What are you talking about?' I answer (to be on the safe side), 'I just thought your astronauts were carrying out a tea ceremony in the sky. And I was wondering where they had hidden their cups – only the saucers could be seen.' So the Americans do not want to admit that someone, either a Martian or a Venusian (or a Venetian, for that matter) helps them in the domain of technology where they have already reached many heights. They do it themselves, unaided and even unsupported either morally or financially, for they can do it, full stop. That is why they say, from time to time, 'Do it yourself,' if you happen to come from Europe or Asia or Russia.

What about painters and sculptors? Of course the Americans seem to eschew the problem I am about to analyse or rather dissect, being social realists to their fingertips. They just paint a few tins of beans – not a dozen tins of caviar, mind you (that would not be democratic) – and show you the result, saying, 'Don't look beyond these tins. They have no meaning other than beans.' 'What a pity,' you answer, 'they don't mean "caviar galore".'

Well, when I look at Proust's mother – among other mothers, not among other Prousts – I say to myself, 'Now I understand why Proust wished to be kissed by his mother at all costs – to the detriment of his sleep, for instance. And also to the detriment of his vocal cords. He kept crying, "Mummy, mummy, mummy, you haven't kissed me good night! So my night is unlikely to be good, you know. Mummy, mummy, mummy, mummy!'" According to this portrait, but not to nature and its reality, his mother was very beautiful, and her beauty could have accounted for his reluctance to look at other women, had she been *really* beautiful. She was not, as a matter of fact because the matter stood differently, whenever you look at photographs of her. I did: I looked at her photographs in the course of one afternoon, and I said to myself, 'I wouldn't have waited for this mother in my bed. I would have fallen asleep, considering the problem I face nowadays, when trying to join Morpheus on my own. So I have to swallow a sleeping pill and lull myself to sleep by singing a few lullabies. If I had to call any mother to my rescue, I would have to swallow at least two sleeping pills. Or four sleeping pills.' One may justly wonder why Proust's mother looks far more beautiful in the portrait painted by an unknown artist – I do not know him, full stop – than in the photographs taken by her relatives who greatly admired her beauty and intellectual capacity. I mean they did not turn her into an undesirable woman on purpose, which any painter could have done, had her portrait been commissioned by her foes. After a while, I came up with the following idea: a magnanimous extra-terrestrial put a number of finishing touches to her portrait. We all know or surmise that extra-terrestrials are much closer to God and His ideals – to His image, to put it bluntly. And their sense of beauty or their aesthetics do not allow them to overlook our blunders and the ugliness we tolerate in our works of art, especially in the pictures we paint. When we fall asleep – and we do that now and then, even if we have to swallow handfuls of sleeping pills to carry this ritual out – an extra-terrestrial comes to our room, examines our paintings and puts a lot of finishing touches to them: one finishing touch would not be enough. I think that is what happened to Lucien Freud or rather to the portrait he painted as he looked at the Queen Elisabeth either in his study or at the

Buckingham Palace or at Windsor Castle. He painted Queen Elizabeth and was rather satisfied with what he had done, every artist being God in his own right. Then he went to bed; so did the Queen. I know nothing about their respective nights, but when Lucien Freud awoke and looked at his picture, he said to himself (at least I suppose he did say *something* to himself and to this effect): ‘Well, I like it even better this morning. I must have slept on it.’ I have never met the Queen and so cannot say whether she is well-read or not, whether you can talk to her for hours without ever searching for a way to kill your boredom, at least until the end of the conversation. But when I look at her portrait, I realise she knows everything, like Erda whom I admire so much, whenever I listen to Wagner’s *Ring*, even if the singers and the conductor do not fulfil my hopes, to put it mildly. I would not be surprised, if told that the artistic fairies or dwarves make a supplementary effort, when dealing with royalty; and this effort is not as extreme as might be assumed: celestial creatures are situated closer to God than their terrestrial counterparts. After all, the Almighty lives in heaven, not underground, as some of His pagan colleagues do ever since they were created by a bunch of ignoramuses. So our fairies and dwarves look alternately at God and at Freud’s picture to make sure they are on the right track; anyway, an additional examination of the original would never go amiss.

We are used to fairies and to the tales which lavish praise upon them, saying they are always in the wings while we are toiling on the stage, sweating our guts out. Then we go to bed and the fairies finish our jobs and set about constructing yet another paradise on Earth. They did it for Cinderella and we are as modest and charming as the heroine of this fairy tale, even if our mothers love us to distraction, and no stepmothers are likely to spoil the fun we are entitled to. I do not mind spending my days and nights in what they call an ‘utter mess’: for some obscure reason, I cannot rely upon fairies or guardian angels who seem to prefer pitiful nonentities and their so-called virtues. Of course I can say to all these fairies, whoever they are, ‘I’m sure I’ll serve a 1001-year jail term in Purgatory. Purgatory is a jail and I’m told you can’t escape from it on your own. Once your term is over, an emissary comes and says, “Well, just another sojourn in fire and you’ll be free.”’ Joyfully you step into the fire and begin to burn, slowly but surely. At the end of the new term of trial you look like a black distorted match that a smoker is about to throw away, out of the window. And another nightmare comes your way, salutes you and you realise that the smoker in whose hand you are lying is the Almighty Himself. You have just lit His pipe and you say to yourself, ‘On Earth they think that God neither drinks alcohol nor smokes – not even a Cuban cigar after dinner.’ Under the circumstances I might say to myself, ‘My wife will be happy. She’ll no longer torture herself with the thought that she’s doomed to die from lung cancer.’ When someone quoted Nietzsche in my father’s presence, he gave a chuckle and said, ‘God, dead? He doesn’t drink or smoke and I’m sure He’ll outlive us all.’ Every creative artist believes he or she is a god or goddess, but I propose to labour the point, for I am not sure all my readers will understand the importance of being a match in God’s hands, if only in the course of a nightmare. Even if, as a result of God’s touch, you are burnt to a cinder like a piece of cake you forgot in the oven, you are blessed much, much more intensely than nature on a beautiful, sunny day. You are even more blessed than the sun (a deity in its own right) on the same magnificent, gift-wrapped day. But you should not overlook a seminal detail; its importance can hardly be overestimated. Not only did God hold you in between His fingers, but you succeeded in putting new life into His pipe. And the smoke His lungs inhaled is your masterpiece, perhaps the only masterpiece you have ever created. Of course you are neither His pipe nor even the smoke He inhales at this very moment, but it is in you, in your essence and substance that this smoke originated a few minutes ago. And you are sure the smoke was born in your head that His fingers rubbed against a box of matches. Moreover, He might even have put you into the box prior to your short journey to His pipe. Of course it is far more prestigious to turn into

this pipe I am talking about, but this honour must be reserved for saints, for the Buddha and Mahomet, let alone for Christ and the Holy Spirit. (Exceptionally it is not reserved for the elderly and women with babies.) No one is likely to ask me spiritual or mystical questions, but I might compare the smoke and the pipe, if only for argument's sake; and from a spiritual or mystical point of view.

Is it better to be the smoke or the pipe? Under the circumstances? Of course the smoke is far more ethereal, more unreal than the pipe. Its fragility and impermanence (and occasional impertinence) have given rise to many idioms such as 'vanish/go up/disappear in a puff of smoke'. I am even prepared to use one of them to outline the fame of my literary legacy: All his hard work seems to be going up in a puff of smoke. (Just one line, as a matter of fact.) For all its fragility and illusory tendencies, the smoke is allowed to penetrate God's body, His very *substance*, as they used to call His body in the Middle Ages, when seeking to define His innermost ego. We might also call it 'self'. No matter how many seconds this smoke of ours spends inside God's substance or self, this experience is truly unforgettable, and the immortality of this experience proves once and for all that not only water has memory in the world of nature, in the world of inanimate creatures. Of course this greatly depends on the identity of the person – no point in bestowing upon them the name of 'substance' – who puffs away at a cigarette or a *papirosa*, as the Russians used to say in the times when they did not know the first thing about cigarettes. One of the most incongruous questions you can put to anyone, including yourself, happens to be the following enigma, 'What kind of *papirosa* did Friedrich Barbarossa smoke?' My father often quoted this joke, when provoked into irony and mockery by meaningless discussions. I am not sure he would have tolerated my thorough investigation of the difference between the smoke and the pipe used by God in my presence. As I pointed out earlier, I attended this chronicle – call it what you wish – in the shape of a black or African match. Be that as it may (may it be, I wonder?), in my sweet dream I saw a quantity of smoke leave God's mouth, after leaving His lungs, after depositing in His lungs a certain quantity of nicotine. On second thoughts, I opt therefore for the pipe, even if I must admit that the smoke knows God better – inside out, so to speak; whereas the pipe remains on the surface. Her knowledge of God and His ways, His substance and ego is rather shallow, if compared with the smoke's penetrability and inquiring mind. We must recognise its capacity to explore all the nooks and crannies of God's lungs – or soul, as some theologians conjecture. According to their theories, God has no body. He is incorporeal and whatever we may come across as we study God's nature is a soul, a huge, incommensurable soul.

Another question may lead us astray, for we have not yet resolved the problem linked to the smoke's penetrability: we do not know yet if this quality avails it nothing or everything. Is it conscious of what it gets in touch with inside God's body? If so, can it memorise the information it gets, the boundless information, to be sure, and transmit us a part of it? Even a microscopic part of such knowledge is in a position to change the world much more than whatever the Russian Revolution achieved in 1917. Some experienced, compulsive smokers indulge in a ludicrous game that might be occasionally admired by their children and even their loving wives: they exhale a number of smoke rings and watch them float in the air, under some ceiling or other. These smoke rings are short-lived; nevertheless you can enjoy the way they float and unfold in the air, growing more and more transparent as if to show us their own dissolution, their Buddhist destiny. Yes, some of those who gather around such a virtuoso performance exclaim as they contemplate the smoke or what remains of it, 'Nirvana, nirvana, nirvana.' 'I wish I could be this smoke,' says one of these observers wistfully, but someone else is sure to spoil the fun (spoilsports can be found almost everywhere) and remind the spectators that smoking destroys nerve cells, nerves and also the lungs and whatever is related to them. 'Does smoking damage God's health?' someone usually asks. 'I'm told that

God has a pair of nicotine-proof lungs,' someone usually points out, and nobody laughs, contrary to what might be expected. 'Suppose God has no body and consequently doesn't need lungs. Can nicotine damage His soul?' 'Even our souls can't be damaged by nicotine.' By the way, my wife has not smoked since Friday, living and having sweet dreams helped by neither nicotine nor smoke. Wreathed in smiles despite their beneficial absence.

Some theologians insist upon the spiritual nature of God Who cannot have anything material in His substance and essence. The word 'substance' sounds too material, in their opinion, and they just say '*niet*' because you cannot define anybody, when speaking about God. Of course you can always define yourself, saying, 'Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense.' You hope one day you will be able to say, when looking at yourself in a mirror, 'Nirvana,' but for the moment you have to content yourself with 'nir' or rather 'Vania' or 'Ivan' or 'Jean' or 'John.' But let us go back to God, which is rather easy: He is always there and so we can stay in our beds and look around and listen to His music. Oddly enough, it is not a Mozart piece we hear; and yet they go on saying, 'Mozart, Mozart, Mozart is divine, Mozart is God, God is Mozart.' Well, the smoke leaves the pipe and enters prudently into God's mouth, fearing its nicotine might destroy the *Ur*-vessel in God's body. According to the same theologians, this *Ur*-vessel gave a signal and the Big Bang assisted by the big boys set the cosmos into motion, into an infinite motion picture. The smoke is now acquainted with God's teeth, palate and even throat. In a way, it is acquainted with whatever God may say on such and such an occasion because the smoke has already glided along God's vocal chords. It is not necessary to travel around God's mind. He does not need this instrument which is condemned by saints and mystics: it often leads us astray. And whenever we *are* astray, we curse the mind and vow to hack it into pieces at the earliest opportunity. So it is enough to know God's vocal cords: this knowledge will help you draw an infinite number of conclusions related to our future and also to our past – for the sake of our history books. They say, 'When the Buddha, the Lord of the world, is to be seen somewhere, all pain will be eradicated; and one will enter into a realm of great wisdom.' We are not dealing with the Buddha; for the moment at least. But Ramakrishna said, 'All the gods look alike, sound alike, taste alike. Just pick up a ladder and climb towards the gods, yours and ours. And you'll find only one God, only one throne, only one flower, the one held by the Buddha.' Master Eckhart said: 'The grain of sand believes in God.' 'Does it know this truth?' asked his disciple. 'Yesterday I talked to it about God and its faith. Now it knows.' Do we really have to talk to the smoke, anxious as we are to tell it the truth and nothing but the truth? But it knows God's inner nature, whereas we know that we know nothing. The smoke is already in God's lungs and I am not sure it has to ask itself the following series of questions, 'What is it? Looks like a lung. Whose lung is it? I must be in heaven, otherwise the smoker would be seated in his armchair, on a sofa. He or she might as well walk on the grass. No, I am in heaven, in a safe haven. And only God lives in heaven – let us leave angels and saints and comets aside, for argument's sake. Judging from the size of this pair of lungs, they must belong to the Almighty, to the Algreaty, as the pipe used to call him. So I am in God's lungs and my wisdom grows as I look around and study His lungs' nooks and crannies. One cranny contains more wisdom than Kant's antinomies and categories. And one nook is worth Plato's *Republic* and *Phaedo* or Prado.'

Let us now turn to the pipe and listen to its interior monologue. The pipe is loyal to God's mouth, although His fingers do remove it from His lips from time to time – so as not to obstruct the flow of prophetic words or curses which would not resound so majestically and fatalistically if the pipe remained in between God's lips, not far from His tongue. The pipe follows the movement of God's tongue: it moves, goes through the motions, even if God neither praises prophesy nor curses his descendants. Some theologians say that every movement of God's

tongue is equivalent to a thousand curses, but others formally disagree with this concept and declare, 'Even His motionless tongue dispatches a thousand benedictions in the direction of the Earth.' That is why one can see a lot of people looking up and catching whatever falls out of the blue or from the nearest cloud. And they put their booty into their pockets and say to curious onlookers, 'I've caught five benedictions this morning.' 'Did they fall from a cloud?' asks an onlooker. 'From the stars,' answers the collector. Sometimes God fiddles with His pipe, even if it is empty and there is no tobacco in sight. One should not say 'within God's field of vision' or 'within His reach', for His field of vision encompasses everything, everybody and every cosmos, (God encosmoses everything), and the same cosmos is within His reach. But if you say 'no tobacco in sight', this means that God does not feel like smoking and there is no tobacco not only within His reach or out of it – tobacco has disappeared from the surface of the Earth. Actually that would give a helping hand to many smokers who cannot fight this pernicious habit on their own, being utterly deprived of Schopenhauerian Will. That does not prevent them from having an impressive amount of Nietzschean Will to Power. They become presidents, kings; and photographers, television crews and reporters ask them sometimes to remove their pipes or cigars from their lips. 'Our readers and viewers would like to see the virginal purity of your faces,' they say to their models. 'I cannot comply with your wishes,' answers the king or the president. 'If I lose touch with my pipe or cigar, if only for a moment, I'll lose touch with my people.' Of course the Almighty does remove the pipe from his face – not for the sake of photographic purity, though – but what staunch believers in His existence look for has already been engraved on the pipe and on a few cigar butts: His precious teeth, their priceless indentations.

God had seen Freud's portrait of the Queen Elizabeth even before it was finished or conceived and well before Freud said to himself, 'This morning I felt an idea germinating in my head/mind.' It would be worth our while to find out if God had known about this portrait before the Big Bang, before the birth of the capital letter B. Never mind, never mind: He has seen it many times, perhaps eternally, and that is what counts in the final analysis. He has also seen other portraits painted by this artist, and they do not seem to have inspired God. He might have appreciated the artist's strokes (of genius) on many occasions but it is upon seeing the Queen's masterly portrait that He hit on the idea which would have resulted in the birth of a universal, unsurpassable masterpiece, had the Almighty valued Freud's life far less than the life of Moses. Even Wotan – a mere sergeant in the army of the gods – allegedly managed to kill a human by appearing in front of him and saying, 'Go to Hell' (in German). Of course Freud might have acquired the sunglasses obediently used by the curious during the eclipses of the sun. But God's light is far more intense than that of the sun, of millions of suns. Even if you put together all our (human-made) searchlights, spotlights, floodlights and headlights and add them to the millions of suns, you will fail to stage the show entitled *His Majesty*. And once again the fun is spoiled by a voice which is eager to inform us that God is everywhere and consequently you could paint a tree stump and say, 'Here's God for you. The Almighty in person, you know.' But someone is likely to object to this whimsical title on the grounds that a tree deserves this title much more. After all, every tree is the Tree of Life, and every stump is just a stump. It would be pointless, ridiculous and illogical to speak about the Stump of Life, for anyone might say, upon seeing such a work of art, 'For nothing in the world would I lead such an existence. I don't like human buttocks.' I think Jung insisted on our maturing incessantly, laboriously and patiently, resolved to let a universal creature grow inside our body, a sort of self or ego or whatever, whatever, whoever. I must become everybody and everything, as so many Emersons, Borgeses and Bramans have already pointed out, pointing at heaven or at their own bodies. Yes, you do not mind being compared to a tree, on condition that it is a full-grown tree you are looking at. What is more, this tree should be

overburdened with fruit, birds, squirrels and nuts. When admiring such a tree in a picture gallery or elsewhere, everyone is likely to emphasise this life-affirming feature, saying how true-to-life the characters in the painting are: the tree of life and all its inhabitants. To round off the analysis of the pipe and the smoke issuing from it, we should not forget the conclusion drawn by Zen Buddhists: ‘Even when one particle of dust gets settled in your eye, all kinds of visions are sure to upset you.’ And if a heap of particles is deposited in your lungs, you may not have any visions whatsoever. You hope an X-ray will allow you to see eternity or at least another hundred years, but your doctors show you a huge tumour, saying, ‘Farewell, see you in the Hereafter.’ Of course you could answer them thus, ‘Well, this vision upset me, but I won’t see you in the Hereafter because you’ll go to Hell, not to Purgatory.’ Anyway, silence is better than tumours and humours. Anyway, sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.

I leaf through books and light on a photograph that seem to come up to my expectations in the domain of love, family life and Beatrice-inspired journeys. The book I am holding in my hands (my feet would not be able to hold it in view of its size) exhibits the splendour I might have dreamt about all my life, if I had not been forced to play the piano and type my books. Anna de Noailles was acquainted with Proust and her portrait surpasses both the Mona Lisa and Botticelli’s Venus: even after restoration, the latter cannot hold a candle to the Princess de Noailles. (What about the woman holding a candle in Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant donnés*?) She was born in Romania and the day before yesterday my wife and I drank a bottle of Romanian sparkling wine – champagne, champagne, I am tempted to shout. Unconsciously I drank this local champagne in honour of the Romanian princess who, vaguely yet definitely, reminded me of a woman I had been in love with many years ago, probably in days of yore. Anyway, it must have happened before the advent and triumph of the coronavirus. But soon I grew disappointed with Anna’s clone: I am not sure any extra-terrestrial had taken care of *her* beauty and also of her intellect, her manners and her glittering eye. (The glitter was not on a par with what we come across in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; or in Anna’s portrait.) That is what happens when you carelessly leave earthly creatures to their own devices: we should not forget that the fates of humanity and its members are somehow entwined. You read in newspapers and chronicles: ‘Our world view has become debased. We no longer have a sense of the sacred.’ The same goes for our bodies, minds, manners and attitudes towards the world. We accept, receive and end up in a clone’s sacrilegious company.

Whenever I chance upon samurais and their swords – or anybody’s sword or fist, for that matter – I realise how helpless I am, if confronted by a hooligan or just an ordinary drunkard who feels like knocking someone’s block off. Of course I am reluctant to acknowledge my lack of training and lack of guts, and I say nonchalantly, ‘You know, I must protect my hands from traumas and also from innocent-looking bruises.’ But if I brace myself for an explanation of this kind at the risk of being the laughing-stock of my fellow creatures (they are just creatures, not my fellows) I often hear something along the lines of, ‘I know a boxer who happens to be a world-renowned pianist,’ or ‘I know a pianist whose knockout punches are feared by sumo wrestlers.’ Luckily, there are very few people around me, either walking in my garden – as they used to do only two years ago – or even sitting in my armchairs. And I can say to them, if they ask me how I defend myself against yobs, ‘You know, I’m an old man and I could remind them of my age, of the futility of their undertaking. Beating an old man isn’t an exploit worthy of the history books or of a hymn. It’s worthy of Buñuel’s *Tristana*, though. Besides, I am almost invisible – not as a Taoist sage, mind you, although I respect *their* way of vanishing into nothingness. All right, I am a Taoist sage so I can vanish into nothingness at the push of a button. I just touch my belly and you no longer see me either in your gardens or in your armchairs; or in your dining rooms which I do not really need. My piece of bread can

provide enough food for my stomach till doomsday. By the way, I believe neither in doomsdays nor in Big Bangs. And a Christian might say to a ruffian who bars his way (they do not beat women, do they?), “You menace my body, but you can’t harm my soul, and you ought to have learnt this truth at school, when learning Epictetus’ maxims. As far as I can see, you haven’t learnt anything anywhere – the fights you indulge in along the highways and byways of Europe do not instruct you in the least. I was created in days of yore and you can’t see my creator. Nor can *I* catch a fleeting glimpse of Him. And yet He must be constantly fleeting, flying, flickering around me, for I am His creation and His loving care surrounds my body and soul on every side. There are so many sides to his creations I’m weary of counting them, you know. As for you, you aren’t aware of any side, any mind that hovers over you day and night, because I’m not sure that anything (let alone anybody) hovers above you. I’m not sure you deserve such a ritual – I’m not as democratic as your pals who think they can beat to death any man and rape any woman, however old or young. They think they live in a free country, and democracy, its unsavoury rules, permit them to mishandle and ill-treat whatever they see and find under their feet. But I’m invisible, my dear friend, as invisible as my creator Who always stands by my side. Incidentally, he isn’t alone – my guardian angel is also by my side, inside my mind and bones. You and your fists are powerless against them. What on Earth can you oppose to God’s fist? Do you think your belts or whatever you call them will enable you to beat God senseless? Do you know how many senses the Almighty has and uses every minute? You’ll need a dozen multiplication tables, I’m afraid, to count only an infinitesimal part of His potentiality, vitality and virtuality, or whatever you call it. Anyway, God is invisible and so all your blows would be wide of the mark. And you must know that I’m created in His image, even if you’re neither Christian nor Muslim. So I’m invisible too.’

Nevertheless, I think I ought to have devoted a year or even two years to the arts they call martial. These arts have something in common with alchemy, for it is not your fist you should educate and instruct in the sacred martial lore. You are supposed to elevate your spirits and your very being, training them day and night, putting them inside the Philosophers’ Stone, according to the alchemical formula you often come across in their books. Mahomet said or rather proclaimed, ‘The sword is the key of Heaven and of Hell,’ and I have no sword either in my garden or in my room where I could keep it, while waiting for death or visible foes. I wish I were a samurai boy; not a samurai girl, whatever the rules we have to obey, when writing in this day and age, when communicating our thoughts to so-called others. This boy of ours or rather of mine must learn how to wield the sword his father put in his cradle either yesterday or the day before. The boy finds this sword, asks his father what this is all about, and his father answers him frankly and confidently, ‘This is your sword and only by wielding it will you be in a position to evade fatal blows, death.’ ‘What are you talking about, Daddy? What’s death? Please tell me what this word means and how I should deal with it.’ ‘You should pick up your sword and kill your own demise,’ says the father. ‘What’s demise, Daddy? Please tell me what this word means and whether it does mean something or not.’ ‘Every word means something,’ answers the father, ‘otherwise our speech and interior monologues would be useless. And also our species – it wouldn’t exist, in other words.’ ‘Does the word “demise” have anything to do with “mice”? You know the mice you talked to me about the other day. “Three blind mice, four blind mice.”’ ‘This sword will endow you with supernatural power so you’ll be able to scratch your foes, alias the mice you’ll meet on your way, like a cat, a leopard, a lion, a tiger. By the way, how old are you, my boy?’ ‘I’m three or four years of age.’ ‘All right. So in this day and age you’re four years old. When you’re five years of age, I’ll show you the clothes you’ll wear all your life – till doomsday, you know.’ ‘What’s doomsday, Daddy?’

These conversations are neither infinite nor eternal, contrary to what might be assumed upon reading the above excerpt from this work. Incidentally, every work, however insignificant, fleeting and flickering and evasive, should be analysed in its entirety, otherwise you may lose the context into which this work has been inserted. So now it is embedded in this context, and if you extract it from this context, depriving it of its natural habitat, you are likely to deliver a fatal blow to its overall meaning. So the conversation they (my heroes) indulged in for the sake of the sword lying in a cradle or in bed or just on a carpet – the boy in question no longer needs a cradle, not at the age of four – was over at some point and now the boy is coming to terms with the aforementioned sword. As the Scriptures say, ‘It was a momentous occasion for him when at the age of five he was apparelled in the paraphernalia of a samurai costume, placed upon a *go*-board –’ No matter how patiently and studiously we dissect the text we are engrossed in, we are bound to stop upon coming across the term a ‘*go*-board’: we might have heard about this game they often call ‘Japanese checkers’, but why should a five-year-old boy be placed upon a *go*-board? To intimate that he is just a pawn in the hands of God or in those of the Devil? It is as if his father wished to convey a great sense of religious devotion. Yes, by putting his son on the *go*-board, the father makes him understand he is just a bolt, a screw, a wheel, and the machine to which he belongs is handled first by his father and then by God. Of course the Almighty has always been there, even before the child’s elaborate birth, and the father goes to great pains to explain how the creation was set in motion and why the universe is a gigantic machine. ‘And we’re just ghosts in this machine,’ the father rounds off. As a matter of fact, he never rounds off and so goes on and on – for the simple reason that the universe is infinite and intricate, and you cannot explain it in a few words. You need a pile of books either on your writing desk or elsewhere, otherwise you will never be able to explain to your children how all this machinery works and why it works instead of coming to a standstill once and for all.

So you continue to read the Japanese Scriptures and say to yourself, ‘If I focus my attention exclusively on the *go*-board, I’ll never reach the core of the enigma I’m confronted with. So let us go, let us go, let us get a move on – that’s what the *go*-board means in the context. It is not for nothing that the verb “*go*” is italicised. Go, go, go, go, go. And forget about the board.’ In the meantime the boy we are describing in minute detail has been initiated into the rights of the military profession. From now on he will play with a real sword that can be seen *on his body*: two days ago he thrust it into his girdle, after enjoying its sparkles for 40 minutes at least. And the boy begins to wonder how he must use this sword of his and who is to become his first victim. The Oedipus complex tells him he should kill his father, after reading Freud’s books and treatises which are based on a thorough examination of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ conclusion: Oedipus has always reigned in our history, and it would be pointless to try and eliminate him from it. The boy’s father is aware of the danger lurking inside the books his son is about to read, and he talks to him about alchemy from which our King Oedipus seems to have been excluded for some obscure reason. (Such reasons are always obscure.) So the father talks to the boy about women, about their dual nature, essence and substance. ‘The female principle,’ he says, ‘has in mythology a destructive as well as creative aspect. Your mother is creative so you shouldn’t attack her either with your sword or otherwise. Your mother is as creative as the Muses about whom I’ll talk to you tomorrow. But other women, most of them, are sirens and they destroy whatever they chance upon and whoever they meet on their multiple paths. Sirens or mermaids lure sailors to a watery grave, as the mercury of the wise drowns its solid counterpart.’ ‘Are sirens wise?’ asks the boy. ‘I don’t understand your words, Daddy. What solid counterpart are you talking about? And who’s Mercury? You, Daddy? Are you Mercury? Should I call you Mercury?’ ‘You can call me Mercury, if you wish,’ concedes the father. And

suddenly – so many things happen suddenly, when you deal with boys and girls – the boy asks the following question, ‘How do humans make love to each other? Do men use their swords? What do women use on those occasions?’

Instead of talking about vaginas and sperm, a true alchemist or a Bushido master shows his son a castle, an image that represents the philosopher’s furnace: it is anyway much more beautiful than whatever can be shown in relation to sexual intercourse. It is all the more impressive since the young apprentice can make the acquaintance of Lady Alchimia who dwells in state with her consort the Athanor King. (Or with Yama Zuki, as the Japanese version has it.) This Lady observes the rules dictated by her vocation and job and consequently carries a shield with an image of the head of Medusa. This shield and especially the head it exhibits symbolise the maxim ‘no generation without corruption’ or something along these lines, as the saying goes. No life without death, no love without bruises, and so on. ‘That’s where the conflict comes to a head,’ says the father touching the son’s sword. ‘You should engage in a combat with Medusa’s head. But don’t cut the Lady’s head off, otherwise you won’t finish your Great Work as brilliantly as you’re supposed to, considering the efforts I’ve made to teach you this art and Arcanum.’ The boy is perplexed, to say the least, and he voices his grievances in his father’s presence. ‘A few days ago I memorised a few excerpts from the book you’d offered me for my birthday.’ ‘Yes, I remember saying to myself, “His birthday is getting nearer and I still haven’t bought him a present,”’ says the father. ‘I remember,’ says the boy, ‘one of the excerpts I learnt that day, just a few minutes before dinner. “Off with her head, off with her head.” I think the queen said it.’ ‘Well, the queen meant you should cut Medusa’s head off,’ says the father. ‘If you touch Lady Alchemia’s head, she won’t appear in the guise of Iris, you know.’ A series of questions ensues, and the father answers all of them, patiently and conscientiously. And then he shows his son a goddess called Venus standing on her scallop shell, her body all roses: the red flowering out of the white. ‘The process I’m speaking of is full of colours, like a Mahler symphony. And you should remember that when the *Materia Prima* turns beetroot, as we say, your triumph is near at hand, for the crown you must put on the Philosophers’ Stone is this redness disporting itself in your retort.’ At this point the father’s teaching may bifurcate, considering that redness is also associated with communism and the tortures endured in the gulag as well as in ordinary prisons. And an experienced father should say to his son, ‘You always have to be on your guard against pickpockets and communists. The latter are even more dangerous because they’re sure to go after your brains. We’ll call this tendency or negative ritual “brain washing”.’ My father told me that before and after the October Revolution one could see many people shouting in the streets of Petrograd, alias Leningrad and St Petersburg. And often these demonstrators marched past holding placards that said, ‘And then in a moment comes the Tyrian colour, the sparkling Red, the fiery Vermilion, and Red Poppy of the Rock.’ And they waved red flags as if prepared to fight an army of bulls. But there were also a lot of anarchists in the streets of Petrograd and Moscow. These were holding placards that said, ‘From henceforth Natures are united, and boil and bubble together like melted Pitch, and change their forms one into another. Take heed therefore lest instead of Powder black of the Blackest, which is the Crows Bill, you have an unprofitable dry half red Precipitate, Orange-coloured, which is a certain sign of the Combustion of Flowers, or Vertue of the Vegetative Seed.’ It is noteworthy that, after the Civil War, after the final defeat of the White Army, they brandished (on Red Square in Moscow) placards that said:

*And white appear’d when all the sundry hews were past;
Which after being tinted Ruddy, for evermore did last.*

But there are other ways of teaching the younger generation how to behave in modern life where we are faced with many insoluble problems, lots of deaths and ‘*kein Verklärung*’, as the German musicologists say, echoing Richard Strauss’ renowned tone poem. No resurrection, no enlightenment, no light – nothing except death, darkness and infinite putrefaction. (The left-wing faction of the Life Party, as I call it.) In the Japanese film I saw a month ago, a samurai indulges in the ritual called *seppuku* which also seems endless, as endless as William Blake’s (and Agatha Christie’s) night, as we all know. But first of all we should decide which path to take – before setting our feet on any path leading into the unknown or a well-known disaster; the disaster we cannot avoid, escape from or delude into thinking we are following a different path and therefore not likely to be there at the appointed hour. There is what may be called an intellectual approach to life and the afterlife which leads us to the truth; and sometimes we get nothing else and one wonders what could be done with a piece of naked truth. Of course you can proclaim it from the rooftops or keep it to yourself, hoping this treasure will bring you heaps of dollars and gold or precious stones; and the Philosophers’ Stone into the bargain. But a few old academics might interfere with your bliss-providing plan and point out that truth as such is unattainable and only the gods live in the area where truth goes about naked: even neophytes can see it. The point is no one, not even philosophers and academicians are allowed to reach this sphere, even if they are called Plato, Aristotle and Kant. There are myriads of trees around the meadow where the truth I am talking about walks and takes a nap after every lunch. And, as the saying goes (or walks), they cannot see the wood for the trees. Of course they do not care for the wood I have just touched upon, but the truth in question (unwillingly) adopts the veil, so to speak. According to some Muslims, only they, namely the followers of the Prophet, have the exclusive right to the truth where all enigmas of the universe and the keys to them are enclosed. You need not announce, ‘I am a sceptic because I worship the Academy founded by Plato, and the academics were convinced that truth was as elusive as a butterfly you can hardly see on the lawn.’ You can believe – no one forbids you to hold such beliefs – that truth, whatever they say and whatever they speak of, is beyond their ken, reach or whatever. Truth is not even a butterfly sitting on the lawn or flying above it because it cannot be found at all either on lawns or in the air. Contrary to all the expressions we are allowed to use in this connection, it has not even vanished into thin air. There is nothing to vanish – nothing to varnish, as someone put it. But the problem lies elsewhere: you can pursue the unvarnished truth, even if it does not so much as exist. Actually you can pursue anything, everything. It is enough to say to your will, ‘I will pursue the truth which you allude to when saying, “Nothing but the truth.” I will pursue it at all costs. It is my will, you know.’ It does not really matter what awaits you at the end of your journey into the truth you are talking about. As usual, what counts is the way, the path, the hours you spend on the road to which you can dedicate a poem, a novel, a *tractatus*.

So we are on the road, but before going any further, we had better decide what we are looking for, assuming we are resolved to look for something or for anyone, anything. Perhaps we left our house for the sake of the proverbial fresh air about which they speak whenever ecology is on the agenda and the agenda is lying on several tables, in the room where the action (the discussion) is set. Well, there is a Russian story to this effect, and in this story you come across a number of spermatozoa running along their channel – the one leading to a uterus, as far as I can remember. It is an obstacle race and every race of this kind presupposes that there are winners among the runners; and there are also two or three losers. One of these losers is running slower than the winners – it goes without saying; if it ran faster than the future winners, it would win the race. Unfortunately reality does not seem

to corroborate this hypothesis: it is not up with the leaders. In other words, it is down with the outsiders. And then it says to itself (everything seems to talk in this universe of ours): ‘What a pity I’m not up with the leaders who are about to establish the union with the uterus I’ve been dreaming about for a long, long time; perhaps ever since I was born. Sure enough, I was also born, once upon a time, although I’m neither a man, nor a woman, nor an animal, nor even a leaf of grass. But I belong to the species called “spermatozoa” and I’m proud of my identity and essence. After all, I am called upon to give birth to another human being, to yet another summit of Creation. So, contrary to what you might think and believe, I’m not the lowest substance you can stumble upon in the course of your worldwide excursion, in the course of your daily exertions. *Hélas, cela n’en prend pas le chemin*. Sometimes I talk to myself in French because the child I’m about to give birth to should be well-read and knowledgeable. He or she should speak several languages. He or she. Frankly speaking, I prefer girls, and I do hope it is a girl we shall see in our garden. As a result of my labours and achievements. I like children, and I don’t understand the pessimists who say we shouldn’t add another element to the global misery at the core of which we continue to suffer. I believe in the radiant, brilliant future of the human race. And I wish to contribute to this future – not only spiritually, theosophically, philosophically and semiologically, mind you. *Hélas, cela n’en prend pas le chemin*. Calm yourself, calm yourself – all is not lost. What do they call it? Subterfuge, subterfuge.’ And our representative of the sperm, of our will-to-power liquid, opens its mouth and shouts (and yet it is not on the rooftops, not yet): ‘Come on, lads! Don’t you see where we are? We’ve been betrayed. Look around you. We’re in the arse. But we’re not arseholes, are we?’ The lads stop in their tracks, look around and retrace their steps, being as naive as Little Red Riding Hood. And our representative continues to run or rather hobble in the same direction. After a while it spots the uterus in the distance and bursts into a song universally known as *The Song of Coitus*.

It is difficult to judge whether the tour de force performed by the spermoid (let us call it this way) really is an improvement. During the race it was irremediably on the slow and weak side, which speaks volumes about its constitution. This what-d’ye-call-it is unquestionably a weakling and so one cannot expect to see a healthy boy or girl in the garden where these children are supposed to run when they are young. Actually the girl it talked about is not likely to run around the garden which is obviously destined for healthy and wealthy children. Most probably this girl will just hobble around the garden, shedding tears, calling her mother, nurse and father over to where she continues to hobble, saying to herself, ‘*Clopin-clopant, clopin-clopant*.’ She will never take part in the Olympic Games and the nearest hospital is sure to become her dwelling place – for years and years. She will speak several languages and know Kant’s *Critiques* by heart, but her health will always let her down almost every day. And she is not Marie Curie or Skłodowska: I think her Polish, original name sounded like that. The creature born as a result of the above subterfuge is very intelligent and she is a smart alec – not a smart arse, contrary to what her fellow students say. But she is not brilliant enough to justify the spermoid’s obnoxious ruse. Of course many of us believe that the obstacle race I described this morning is of no importance. And anyway it is fake news or a race, and this definition is true for the simple reason that the sperm talks neither to itself nor to anyone else. But spermatozoa can move and even run, otherwise none of us would ever have seen the light of day and the dark of night, as I pointed out earlier. Alfred North Whitehead said the universe was and is a huge field of energy which takes different forms in a series of events; consequently the episode I described two hours ago is worthy of our attention. No one can deny that every sexual act creates a field of energy, and at the outset of this event there are two forms we have to take into consideration: a man and a woman. Of course they do not float in space and that leads us to

the following conclusion: a third form must be involved in the process. And this form is the bed on which they are lying, wriggling, groaning and screaming. And nine months later another form enters the stage as depicted in one of Shakespeare's monologues. And we have no right to overlook this event, for a human being cannot and should not be overlooked, whatever happens elsewhere, outside the maternity hospital where the human comes into being. And the obstacle race I alluded to helps us understand how this being came into being. The whole episode or chapter is an event in its own right and therefore we might include it into the 'process philosophy', to use the felicitous term coined by Alfred North Whitehead. According to him, the world is to be understood as a series of manifestations, nodes of energy taking different forms; and different contents, I might add. One set of contents is designed for healthy men and women; another suits intellectuals of both sexes and various gifts. And all these actions can produce events, and that seems to explain why Whitehead called the world we are living in 'eventful'.

Suppose, however, that a man and a woman have a sort of 'disinterested sex', and in this case one might say, 'The extramarital sex turned out to be a bit of a non-event – hardly any spermoids turned up.' Naturally enough we are puzzled by the term 'extramarital' or rather by its application: we automatically assume that any extramarital sex is turbulent and leads to the birth of an out-of-wedlock child. But we might get weary even in the course of an extramarital affair; it depends on how long it lasts and how quickly our partner grows old. Anyway, in this case we cannot really talk about a 'process' – not in the domain where children are born in or out of wedlock; and consequently one can on no account speak of a case *history*, in this case. After all, history is made up of a series of births: the birth of a girl, the birth of Marie Curie (who was much more than a mere ordinary girl), the birth of a blue-eyed boy, and so on; the birth of my cat. A non-history is made up of a series of non-events. A non-eventful world, as Alfred North Whitehead might have put it. But the crucial question remains and should be answered: What kind of spermatozoa do we prefer? Lenin hated intellectuals and logically enough (Lenin was very logical and anti-philosophical) he set up an organisation that was to detect smart alecs in spermatozoa populations; in their midst, in other words. A multitude of tubes were inserted into male organs and also their mouths (the mouths of the males under scrutiny) and the spermatozoa would appear on screens and in notebooks. Whenever a spermoid exhibited an intellectual capacity in one of the fields recorded and listed in the KGB's or rather GPU's books, it was mercilessly destroyed through a poisonous injection. And Dzerzhinsky himself participated in the executions, aiming his revolver at the culprits – at the penises whose contents did not meet with Lenin's approval. We all must have heard about the Philosophers' Ship – not to be confused with the Philosophers' Stone – which carried a number of outstanding philosophers, scientists, writers and painters away from Lenin, Stalin and other members of the Politburo. No one has ever heard about the Spermatozoa's Ship which deposited myriads of potential geniuses all over Europe and the United States of America. Lenin did not think in terms of atoms and their bombs; and yet he received a few English physicists in his Kremlin residence. Hitler, on the other hand, must have welcomed many Russian spermatozoa, otherwise one could hardly explain the technological progress which allowed the German Leader to promise his subordinates 'the final victory over the decadents', as he expressed himself in one of his speeches. One wonders if Heisenberg and Wernher von Braun were not born from those mythical spermatozoa nonchalantly strewn all over their fatherland. If this piece of information is true – no fake news, this time? – there must have been at least four spermatozoa airplanes dropping new lives and superhuman beings on German-speaking towns and garden sheds.

Hitler did not like intellectuals and whenever his doctors detected their presence in the sperm of his male subjects, he would say, 'They're all Jews. And even if they're not, they'll become Jews and decadent with the

passing of the years. And the years pass, as we all know. Let us put a stop to them.’ And one could hear a multitude of shots as if God had said, when dictating the Bible, ‘Listen to me, shots. You should multiply and replenish the Earth.’ Hitler often asked his physicians to show him the life of his subjects’ penises and he applauded the strongest and fastest spermoids, saying, ‘They already belong to the Hitler Youth Movement.’ Lenin used to say, when signing a death warrant, ‘It’s the woolly thinking behind his books that I find so infuriating.’ He was also fond of what he called ‘The Spermatozoa Games.’ From time to time, one could hear his comments, ‘It’s the woolly thinking behind this runner that I find so infuriating.’ And Dzerzhinsky would cock his pistol and shoot the runner dead. Sometimes Lenin said, ‘It’s the woolly thinking behind this corpse that I find so infuriating,’ whereupon they burnt a thousand books. But whenever Lenin was in one of his moods, he always said, ‘It’s the woolly thinking behind these ashes that I find so galling,’ and Stalin would bury the ashes. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, books to books.

There are no Lenins, no Hitlers, no Stalins in the world where we continue to live as if you could call all these performances we are so proud of ‘Life’ or ‘Human Existence’ or even ‘the human condition’. Pavlov conditioned dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell, and humans salivate as they mull over the beauty of their so-called achievements and the efficiency of their gadgets. Anyway, my spermoid – the one I have to thank for my life and its music – was not up with the leaders, being handicapped by the slowness and unreliability of its legs that I seem to have inherited from it. Together with most weak hams, as Hamlet put it. Even my wife, for all her magnetic power, cannot cure me of my rheumatism, arthritis or whatever it is and forever will be unless I depart from the seamy side of life and settle on the bright side of the moon. The seamy side of life is situated in the space where spermatozoa are dragging their feet over the well-known issue: to be or not to be. Those who are ready to earn money, to bathe in reflected glory or just in glory, pure et simple, as they say almost everywhere, they (those spermatozoa) do not drag their feet; over this issue at least. As they say, ‘The herd of rhinos charged towards us.’ So do the spermatozoa who are resolved to live this life of ours, on this Earth of ours, even if they are shown the coronavirus and told they can die in a dirty, overcrowded hospital; as a result of this contamination. ‘I don’t mind,’ they say, almost in unison. ‘Life is so beautiful it’s worth living through and through, even if this through lasts only a few seconds.’ All right, all right. So you run and do not even look at whatever happens around you, and so you run towards the unknown – towards the life which is known to you only in dribs and drabs. One drib shows you a painting by Caspar David Friedrich and you say to yourself, ‘Well, I know everything about the coronavirus and the dangers related to it on every side, at every moment, but this painting is so beautiful – and I suppose this painting reflects reality in all its splendour – that I’m prepared to undergo all sorts of bad and vicious treatments for the sake of one landscape only.’ All right. So you go on running or rather run on running and finally you see a door over which there is a sign, a bad omen that says, ‘This is life. If you enter it, you will be able to get out only if you catch the coronavirus.’ You enter it, you enter everything and everybody, and at some point you feel so saturated with all these everys that you say to them and God, ‘I’m fed up with you, them and everywhere – with your space, if you wish and prefer.’ I have no idea what the Almighty prefers under the circumstances (space-time, in my opinion) but you catch the coronavirus and that is the end of it. Of what? you may ask. Of it, end of story and book.

Not quite, not quite. From where I am sitting and writing I can see a spermoid running along the Channel; or swimming along it, across it. Actually it does not run, this spermoid of ours; it is on all fours and these fours of his are crawling slowly and not very surely along this Channel leading to the Vagina in question or rather in

affirmation. You say 'Yes' to life in Nietzsche's footsteps; in his runlegs rather. Your spermoid says, 'Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,' and it finds its life, its much-vaunted life at the end of its run: in the long run or in the short one: all this depends on the size of the penis along which it runs either on all twos or fours. So I can see my spermoid run or crawl or fall (those toilets smell foul!) along those toilets or other toilets; and I must say I am not very proud of my spermoid, of his or her performance. As far as I can see she has not read Shakespeare – not at this stage of her development and maturity, I am sorry to say. So she does not know that Hamlet hesitated (a bare bodkin in his hand) before saying 'yes' or 'no' or 'be' or 'not yet' or 'yet' or 'yest' or 'jest' or whatever, whatever, whatever. (Joyce and Rabelais would have gone on. So would Beckett.) But I do not admire my spermatoid's legs; or my spermoid's legs, if you prefer, if Hamlet prefers. I am sure it is on its last legs, but unfortunately even these legs of its – its last legs, so to speak and see and do – enable it to reach the life that looks and sounds so horrible I cannot bear it any longer, whatever the length of its legs and thighs. Whatever its size, in short and in long. But I must decide whether I wish to be born at all, and my monologue sounds thus, 'To be born or at all.' Suppose I opt for at all, and in this case – there are so many cases around us, as Wittgenstein put it – I have to choose between 'at' and 'all'. 'All' sounds so awful I have to stop my ears and everything else so as not to experience this 'all' at all. Fortunately I stopped my spermatozoa a long time ago – and this time is as long as all the penises put together – so that I have no children whatsoever. When I utter this sentence, I am often asked, 'Are you sure? You've had so many mistresses on your path of life and even amidst the trees one can see around this path, this way which has nothing to do with Buddhism.' And I answer all these talkers and mockers, 'No, I have no children whatsoever. Ever and what. Do you hear?' 'Didn't you have any amorous scrimmage on your path bordered and edged with flowers?' 'No.' 'Didn't you ever deposit your baby on a flower to compare her with the colours you like so much, your alchemical colours?' 'Did you never say to yourself upon seeing a running child, not a running speramof?' 'What was I supposed to say?' 'You should have taken this child into your arms and said to him the following sentence, "You're my baby, my daughter, my son, my heir-at-law, my legatee, my monument, my immortality, my eternity, my Spinoza."' 'I've never said anything of the kind. But you make me think about a spermoid I heard at the Moscow Conservatoire. Yes, they talked about a spermoid who wasn't good at running. And they said, "You've certainly been born of this spermoid because you can run neither fast nor slowly. You can't run at all. You know French, don't you? You speak it fluently, apparently. *Et bien, les Français dissent il a pris ses jambes à son cou.* Can you take your legs to your neck?' Whenever they talk to me like that, I touch my legs, but I cannot touch all the components of my legs. Actually I think I have forgotten their names, with the exception of the calves. But what does it matter? I am supposed to touch them. What for? I am supposed to take my legs, all of them, if you please, and convey them to my neck or nape or both. All right, I lie down on my bed and touch my legs, my most weak hams, as Shakespeare put it. He is absolutely right, as absolutely as Absolute Vodka. My hams are weak and the ham I ate yesterday was also weak as if contaminated by the utter weakness of my hams; as if I had transmitted my coronavirus to it. If you have this virus (and they often add, 'of yours, of yours,') whatever you eat tastes like this virus, although you have no idea what this virus tastes like: you have not really tasted it. You have not seen it on your plate, and you have not drunk a bottle of wine after tasting it, after swallowing it, after enjoying its taste to the utmost. I suppose this coronavirus enjoyed the taste of its corpses to the utmost, otherwise I could not account for his relentlessness, his unremitting effort. Why doesn't it remit its effort? Why remit? How remit? What do you mean? 'It might remit the case to a new tribunal for reconsideration.' 'What case? What are

you talking about?’ ‘The virus under scrutiny is charged with many murders. So I think it’s high time to remit the case called “the crime against humanity” to a new tribunal specialised in such cases.’

Is life so awful? You cut your belly, look at your entrails, intestines and whatever can be found in them and say, ‘I was right. I had to commit suicide following the example of so many Japanese people because, when committing it, you can see your excrement. And you realise that your life is nothing but your excrement. You see the Mona Lisa, go to a lavatory, as they say sometimes, and your Joconda comes out of your arsehole. Every human, whatever his or her or its status, is an arsehole and so whatever comes into his substance either through his nose or eyes or ears goes out through his/her/its arsehole which is both feminine and masculine and also itine. In the film I saw (perhaps it was entitled *Hara-kiri*) this ritual was carried out by a 25-year-old (young) man – with a wooden sword, mind you. He screamed, pleaded with his torturers as he reminded them he was not longer a child and so could have an ordinary, steel sword to put an end to his miserable life in the twinkling of a belly, as the Japanese put it. ‘You might be in your second childhood,’ said a torturer, ignoring his protestations. ‘No, no, no, I’m not!’

The Japanese have swords in their cradles, and I think I had better point out – at this particular point – that there are no fathers in this world of ours, assuming it is ours and it deserves the name of the world. There are only mothers around us, above us, underneath – our Mother Earth for instance; and her presence does not last a mere instant: she is there forever. There are only mothers, their breasts, their liquids, their fluids, their vibrations and incantations. You emerge from your mother as Venus did, when Botticelli decided to paint her portrait, although he had neither an irresistible urge to paint anything of the kind nor did he say to himself, ‘I should paint a pagan masterpiece before Savonarola comes and destroys everything.’ What next? So many things and events (Whitehead) happen next to this and that that you do not really know what you are talking about. And if you are not talking, you just say, ‘I don’t know what I’m not talking about.’ And everybody says, ‘Please tell us what you’re not talking about.’ And that is how we talk and mock each other, and mop, mop, mop. Suppose you are bent on committing suicide, but some of your cells and nerves – the nerves that have the nerve to say ‘no’ – resist your inclination and will to power. So, before committing suicide, you write in your notebook, ‘Troops combed the area to mop up any remaining resistance’ and you fling your body and all your nerves out of the window.

There are mothers, only mothers, and I shall die on their breasts as if prepared to become what I already became many centuries ago. Or ever, ever, ever becoming, every dying. Fruits of the Earth, *nourriture*, my wife is the Earth and I will die on her body which is my body, astral, physical, alchemical. Love is a nonsensical world: if you say, ‘I love you,’ and no one eats your breasts (even men have breasts) you have not given anything to anybody, not even five kopecks. Beatrice was not in love with Dante: she was his nourishment, his Petrossian salmon and caviar. *Samovar*. Spiritual, *natürlich*. *Pas si natürlich que cela*. Beatrice, her taste, her *robe*, her *nez*. Her blood. I wish I’d passed away on my mother’s breasts that already welcome me with open breasts. I must have died on them so many times. Could I say, ‘I love my cat?’ I fed him not only with whatever I buy in shops, but also with my bodies. And what about the tree I am looking at? Let us forget about trees of life, of fruit, of vegetables. This tree is mine and I will repay, I will pay, I will sacrifice myself for this tree. And I shall put my cat on my chest and a multitude of cats and dogs will withdraw my milk from my body – as much as necessary to keep *them* alive.

Yesterday I spent two hours in the kitchen where I was sitting with my glass of wine, with my mother and with a landscape I know by heart: it is my garden that I can see from the kitchen and also from other the rooms,

places, spaces, bathrooms of my house. And I said to myself and to my mother, ‘This is the eternity I hanker after. Actually I don’t hanker after anything, but eternity doesn’t need any hankering, any desire whatsoever. It is there, and for once I feel and welcome it. It is there, it is there. What else could you ask for? Eternity descends upon you. Or, better still, it waits for you. The problem with all these out-of-the-blue events is you have to take this blue into consideration and consequently it interferes with your life and time and mind and all other what nots. Why should you say or feel this comes out of the blue? *This does not come* – that is what you have to realise in the first place, in the second place and in the zero place. I mean, and I really mean it – this is the only reality I know – that this state of affairs, this state, this image, my mother, my glass of wine, the view I am allowed to contemplate to my heart’s content, assuming I have a heart and it is content – they are my eternity. It is odd I have lived so long to experience the sense and the nonsense of eternity for the first time. You can sit down wherever you wish, and you look around, asking yourself, “Is this the eternity I’ve been dreaming about?” And you answer your question thus, “No. That’s not what my dreams have always been stuffed with. I used to see beautiful women and lakes. What do I see now? A kitchen?”’ Mandelstam wrote a beautiful poem – his ritual and habit – where you sit (as he did himself) in a kitchen, and his wife took part in this ritual, his wife or his mistress or just anybody. And then both of them smelt and enjoyed the sweet odour of kerosene that I cannot bear. Actually I might confuse kerosene with benzene or petrol or all those whatsoevers we are always speaking about. Probably it is better to speak about whatsoevers than about, about, about, the kitchen where I enjoyed eternity with my mother or wife; last night. Of course I could have said, when looking at the patch of my garden or at my wife’s face or at both: ‘I saw eternity, I see eternity, I’ll ever see eternity, I am eternity.’ I am eternity anyway, whether my eyes are closed or not. I wake up and say to myself (and my eyes say to me), ‘I am eternity, I am eternity, you know.’ They do not know anything; I am speaking about my legs. They know they are not eternal; I know that too. So, before trying to leave my bed (there are two actions: trying and leaving) I say to my legs – just in case, just in two cases, three cases: one case is not enough – ‘You’re not reliable, my dears. You’re not reliable at all. What did you do to me yesterday? Do you remember what you did or rather did not? You did not wish to march, I mean, to walk. I have no idea what you wished to do at that hour of the day or night. Perhaps nothing. But I wished to go to the kitchen and have something to eat in that kitchen of mine. By the way I forgot to speak to my wife about Mauthner’s third stage: joyful resignation. Language, laughter, joyful resignation.

Does this have anything to do with my eternity, with the one, with the two, with the three eternities I encountered in that kitchen of mine? The point is one eternity is not enough to allow you to experience ETERNITY because one is not enough; two is or are not enough either. Nothing is enough either or neither or otherwisier. What *is* enough, you may ask? Of course you are bound (bound, bound, like Prometheus) to say to yourself, ‘Eternity is enough, end of story.’ But someone is likely to say to you, ‘End of eternity, you know.’ ‘I know what?’ you ask. ‘End of eternity. You know the end of it and you’re about to leave it forever.’ ‘What? What? What am I going to leave forever?’ ‘Eternity, my dear,’ they answer. And yet I remember the kitchen, Mandelstam’s kitchen where I was sitting when my mother joined me; and we both looked at the patch of reality or unreality exhibited by a patch, by a match – by anything or anywhere. And what do I do now? I cannot see this patch, this match – not the same patches, not the same matches, not the same fire, not the same flames, not the same names. I do. *Je fais*. Continuous shifting of ingredients. As if cooking a dainty dish for God. Or for myself.

No more shifting, no more ingredients.

If there is something, there is nothing; and vice versa.

Eternity has a window.

HE: Do you still judge? Do you still hate us?

I: We *are* superior beings. But our superiority isn't on the same wavelength as the Earth and her real creatures, Beings of the Earth.

HE: A divorce between Heaven and Earth? Why do you think that animals and plants are her *real* creatures? Real things?

I: Because they do not think. They live. Contrary to what the Gnostics say, the material world wasn't created by the Demiurge, a bad boy. Plants and animals are *not* bad. They live, die and rise from the dead, and fly through the clouds, through the Ether. Our so-called superiority or intelligence destroys life in every shape or form. In the long run. Even in the short run.

HE: What about God? Does *He* think?

I: He *is*.

HE: So *Be* is enough. What about the rest of Hamlet's monologues?

I: The quintessence of dust.

HE: What about Sophia? Beatrice?

I: They're spiritual lifts. Elevators. Without their élan, the world would make no sense. My pilgrim's progress.

HE: Do animals take their lifts?

I: They don't have to. They're already there. Their *there* is everywhere.

HE: Don't you think that both night and light should be transfigured? *Die Verklärte Nacht. Und Tag. Und Mann. Und gnädige Frau.*

I: If it weren't for humans, light and day would be eternal.

HE: God created day *and* night. Night. For Novalis, Schoenberg. For sleep, sweet dreams and colourful nightmares. Or for nightmares in black and white.

I: For movies in white.

HE: Boring, isn't it? Malevich.

I: *Das Verklärte Licht*. Nothing but light.

HE: And the human race, our history?

I: Black light. Grey light. Pissarro.

SHE: I slept so wonderfully last night.