LYRICAL AND CRITICAL

By the same Author

THE OUTSIDER
THE PLAGUE
CALIGULA *and* CROSS PURPOSE
(Two Plays)
THE REBEL
THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS
THE FALL
EXILE AND THE KINGDOM
THE POSSESSED
(A dramatization of Dostoevsky's novel)
RESISTANCE, REBELLION AND DEATH
CARNETS 1935–1942
THE JUST
CARNETS, 1942–1951

ALBERT CAMUS

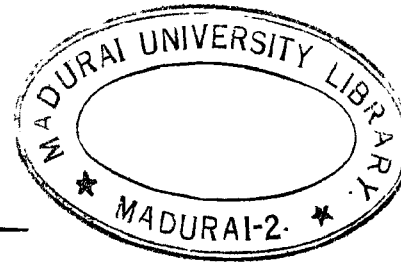
Lyrical and Critical

SELECTED AND
TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
PHILIP THODY

HAMISH HAMILTON
LONDON

First published in Great Britain, 1967
by Hamish Hamilton Ltd
90 *Great Russell Street London WC*1

Printed in Great Britain by
Western Printing Services Ltd, Bristol



Contents

PART THREE

CAMUS ON HIMSELF

PART ONE

LYRICAL ESSAYS

(i)

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

1937

TO

JEAN GRENIER

PREFACE
(1958)

THE essays collected in this volume were written in 1935 and 1936 (I was twenty-two at the time) and published a year later, in Algiers, in a very limited edition. For a long time now, this edition has been unobtainable and I have always refused to allow *Betwixt and Between* to be reprinted.

There are no mysterious reasons for my obstinacy. I reject nothing of what these essays express, but their form has always seemed clumsy to me. The prejudices which I cannot help myself maintaining on the subject of art (I shall explain what I mean later on) have for a long time prevented me from considering their republication. This hesitation, it would appear, reveals great vanity, and implies that I find my other works uniformly perfect. Need I say that this is in no way the case? I am simply more aware of the clumsiness in *Betwixt and Between* than in my other works, where I know it can be found. I can explain this awareness only by confessing that the clumsiness of these essays is linked to the subject closest to my heart, which to some extent it reveals. Since, therefore, I claim no literary value for this little book, I can indeed confess that it has, for me, considerable value as testimony. I say for me, since it is in my presence that it bears witness, and from me that it demands a fidelity whose depth and difficulties I alone can see. I should like to try to explain why.

Brice Parain often maintains that this little book contains my best work. Parain is wrong. I am not saying this, knowing how honest he is, because of that impatience which every artist feels when people are impertinent enough to prefer what he has been to what he is. No, he is wrong because, at twenty-two, unless one is a genius, one scarcely knows how to write. But I can understand what Parain, a learned enemy of art and a philosopher versed in compassion, is trying to say. He means, and he is right, that there is more genuine love in these clumsy pages than in all the others which have followed them.

Each artist thus keeps in his heart of hearts a single stream which, so long as he is alive, feeds what he is and what he says. When that stream runs dry, you see his work gradually shrivel up and start to crack. These are the wastelands of art which the invisible current has ceased to feed. The artist, his hair thin and dry, covered over with thatch, is ripe for silence or for salons, which amount to the same thing. I myself know that my stream is in *Betwixt and Between*, in this world of poverty and sunlight in which I lived for so long, and whose memory still saves me from the two opposite dangers which threaten every artist, resentment and self-satisfaction.

Poverty, first of all, was never a misfortune for me: it was radiant with sunlight. Even my revolts were lit up by the sun. These revolts were almost always, I think I can say this in all honesty, revolts on everyone's behalf, aimed at lifting up everybody's life into the light. Quite possibly my heart was not naturally disposed to this kind of love. But circumstances helped me. To correct my natural indifference, I was placed half-way between poverty and the sun. Poverty prevented me from thinking that all is well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history is not everything. Change life, yes, but not the world which I worshipped as a God. It is thus, no doubt, that I embarked upon my present difficult career, stepping innocently on to a tightrope along which I now move painfully forward, unsure of ever reaching the end. In other words, I became an artist, if it is true to say that there is no art without refusal or consent.

In any case, the radiance which shone over my childhood freed me from all resentment. I lived with very little money, but also in a kind of rapture. I felt infinite strength within me: all I had to do was find a use for it. It was not poverty that stood in the way of that strength: in Africa, the sun and the sea cost nothing. The obstacle lay rather in prejudices or stupidity. These gave me every opportunity to develop a 'Castilian pride' which has done me much harm, which my friend and teacher Jean Grenier is right to make fun of, and which I tried in vain to correct, until I realized that our natures must follow their destiny as well. It then became better to accept my own pride and try to make use of it, rather than give myself, as Chamfort would say, principles stronger than my character. But, after some self-questioning, I can state that, among my many weaknesses, I have never found

the most widespread of our faults—envy, that veritable cancer in societies and doctrines.

I take no credit for this fortunate immunity. I owe it to my family, first of all, who lacked almost everything and who envied practically nothing. Merely by its silence, its reserve, its natural and sober pride, this family, which did not even know how to read, taught me my most valuable lessons, which I still remember. And then I myself was too much taken up with my feelings to think about anything else. Even nowadays when I see the life of a very rich person in Paris, I often feel sorry for him, as well as quite uninterested in being like him. There are many injustices in the world, but there is one that is never mentioned, that of climate. For a long time, without realizing it, I profited from that particular injustice. I can already hear our fierce philanthropists, if they are reading me, levelling their accusations: I want to pass off the workers as rich and the bourgeoisie as poor, so as to prolong the happy serfdom of the former and the power of the latter. No, that is not true. On the contrary, when poverty accompanies a life where men can neither hope nor see the sky—the kind of life which, on reaching manhood, I found in the ghastly suburbs of our towns—then this is the final and most revolting injustice of all. Everything in fact must be done so that these men may escape the double damnation of poverty and ugliness. Though I was born poor, in a working-class area, I did not know what real misery was like until I saw our cold suburbs. Even extreme Arab poverty cannot be compared to it, since the weather is so different. But I believe that anyone who has seen the industrial areas of our towns feels for ever tainted and responsible for their existence.

What I have said nevertheless remains true. I sometimes meet people who live in the midst of fortunes that I cannot even imagine. I still have to make an effort to realize that others can feel envious of these fortunes. For a week, a long time ago, I did live abundantly off the goods of this world: we slept without a roof, on a beach, I lived off fruit and spent half my day alone in the water. It was then that I learned a truth that has always led me to greet the signs of comfort, or of a well-appointed house, with irony, impatience or sometimes with fury. Although I now live without thought for the morrow, and thus as one of the privileged, I do not know how to own things. I never feel that what I have, and which is always given to me without my asking,

is mine to keep. Less through generosity, I feel, than by a kind of parsimony: I cling like a miser to that liberty which immediately disappears with the arrival of excessive wealth. For me, the highest luxury has always coincided with a certain bareness. I love the bare interior of houses in Spain or North Africa. The place where I prefer to live and work (and, something more rare, where I would not mind dying) is a hotel bedroom. I have never felt capable of indulging in what they call home life (which is so often the opposite of the inner life); 'bourgeois' happiness bores and terrifies me. There is in any case nothing glorious about this inability; it has made no small contribution to my worse qualities. I envy nothing, as is my right, but I do not always consider other people's desires; this makes me unimaginative, that is to say unkind. It is true that I have invented a maxim for my own personal usage: 'We must put our principles into great things, mercy is enough for small ones.' Alas! We invent maxims for ourselves in order to plug the gaps in our natures. In my case, a better name for the mercy I speak of is indifference. Its effects, as one can imagine, are less miraculous.

But all I want to underline is that poverty does not necessarily involve envy. Even later on, when a serious illness temporarily deprived me of that natural vigour which, for me, transfigured everything, in spite of the invisible infirmities and new weaknesses which this illness brought me, I knew fear and discouragement but never bitterness. This illness did certainly add new fetters, and these were the hardest to bear, to those which were already mine. In the last resort it encouraged that freedom of the heart, that slight detachment from human concerns, which has always saved me from resentment. And, since I have been living in Paris, I have learnt that this privilege is a royal one. But I have enjoyed it without restrictions or remorse, and up to the present at any rate it has illuminated the whole of my life. As an artist, for example, I began by admiring other writers, which in a sense is heaven on earth. (As we know, the custom in France nowadays, on the contrary, is to begin and even to conclude one's literary career by choosing an artist to make fun of.) Similarly, my human passions have never been directed against other people. The people whom I have loved have always been better and greater than I. Poverty, as I knew it, thus taught me not resentment but, on the contrary, a certain fidelity and a silent obstinacy. If I have

ever forgotten this, it is my own fault, or that of my own failings, not that of the world in which I was born.

It is also the memory of these years which has prevented me from ever being satisfied in the exercise of my calling. Here, I would like to discuss, as simply as possible, what writers normally never mention. I shall not even speak of the satisfaction which is apparently to be found before a perfectly written book or page. I do not know whether many artists experience this. As far as I am concerned, I do not think that I have ever found delight in re-reading a finished page. I will even admit, and am prepared to be believed, that I have always been surprised by the success of some of my books. Of course, one gets used to it, and rather despicably. Nevertheless, even today, I feel myself an apprentice by the side of living writers whom I value at their real merit, and of whom one of the greatest is the man to whom these essays were dedicated as long as twenty years ago.[1] The writer does of course have satisfactions for which he lives and which can fill him with delight. But I personally experience these at the moment of conception, the instant when the subject reveals itself, when the form of the work stands out before our suddenly heightened sensitivity, those delicious moments when imagination and intelligence are as one. These moments go as they are born. What remains is the actual composition—that is to say a long period of suffering.

On another plane, an artist also has the delights of vanity. The writer's profession, especially in French society, is largely one of vanity. I say this moreover without scorn, and scarcely with regret. I am like the others in this respect; who can claim that he is free from this ridiculous infirmity? After all, in a society devoted to envy and derision, a day always comes when, covered with scorn, our writers pay a high price for these petty joys. But the fact is that, in twenty years of literary life, my profession has brought me very few such joys, fewer and fewer with the passage of time.

It is surely the memory of the truths glimpsed in *Betwixt and Between* which has always prevented me from feeling at ease in the public exercise of my calling, and led me to so many refusals which have not always brought me friends. It is indeed true that when we pass over compliments and homages we make the person

[1] Jean Grenier.

paying us the compliment feel that we look down on him, when we are only doubting ourselves. By the same token, if I had shown this mixture of harshness and indulgence that is sometimes found in the literary world, if I had exaggerated my haughty bearing, like so many others, I should have received more sympathy. I should, in fact, have been playing the game. But what is the point, the game does not amuse me! The ambition of Lucien de Rubempré or of Julien Sorel often disconcerts me by its naïvety and by its modesty. That of Nietzsche, Tolstoy or Melville overwhelms me, precisely because of their failure. In my heart of hearts, I feel humble only in the presence of the poorest lives or of the greatest adventures of the mind. What lies between the two is a society which I find laughable.

Often, on those theatrical 'First Nights', which is the only time when I ever meet what is insolently termed 'le Tout Paris', I have the impression that the audience is going to vanish, that this world, as it stands before me, does not exist. It is the others who seem real to me, the great figures shouting on the stage. If I am to stay, I need to remember that each of these spectators also has a rendezvous with himself; that he knows this, and doubtless will be keeping it a few moments from now. Immediately, I see him again as one of my brothers: loneliness joins together those whom society separates. How, knowing this, can we flatter this society, beg for these paltry privileges, agree to congratulate every author of every book, ostentatiously thank the favourable critic, why should we try to seduce our opponents, and, above all, how ought we to greet all those admiring compliments which French society (in the author's presence, at any rate, for once he has left . . .) uses as extensively as Pernod or the sentimental magazines? All this is beyond me, it is true. Perhaps the fault lies mainly with this churlish pride whose powers and range I know so well. But if this were all, if my vanity were the only factor involved, it seems to me that I would enjoy compliments, superficially at least, instead of always being embarrassed by them. No, I am most conscious of the vanity which I share with many members of my profession when I hear certain rather justified criticisms. When I am being complimented, it is not pride which gives me that stupid and clumsy air which I know I have, but (at the same time as that deep indifference which dwells in me like a natural infirmity) a strange feeling which comes over me:

'You're missing the point. . . .' Yes, they are missing the point, and that is why a reputation, which is what people call it, is sometimes so hard to bear that we find a malicious pleasure in doing everything necessary to lose it. When, on the contrary, I re-read *Betwixt and Between* for this edition, so many years after writing it, I knew instinctively with certain pages, in spite of their clumsiness, that this is true, that this is what really matters: that old woman, a silent mother, poverty, the light on the olive trees of Italy, the populated loneliness of love, everything that in my own eyes bears witness to the truth.

Since the time when these pages were written, I have grown older and lived through many things. I have learned about myself, knowing my limits and almost all my weaknesses. I have learnt less about people, since I am interested more in their destiny than in their reactions, and destinies barely differ one from another. I have at least learnt that other people do exist and that selfishness, if it cannot disappear, must try to be clear-sighted. Enjoying oneself alone is impossible. I know this, in spite of the great gifts which I possess in this direction. If solitude exists, and I don't know if it does, we would certainly have the right, on occasions, to dream of it as of a paradise. Sometimes, like everybody else, I have such dreams. But two tranquil angels have always kept me from this paradise: one shows the friend's, the other the enemy's face. Yes, I know all this, and I have also or almost learnt the price of love. But I know no more about life itself than what is awkwardly said in *Betwixt and Between.*

'There is no love of life without despair of life,' I wrote, rather pompously, in these pages. I did not know at the time how right I was; I had not yet known the years of real despair. These years have come, and have managed to destroy everything in me, except, in fact, this uncontrolled appetite for life. I still suffer from this simultaneously fruitful and destructive passion which bursts through even in the darkest pages of *Betwixt and Between.* People say that we really live for only a few hours of our life. This is true in one sense, false in another. For the famished ardour that can be felt in these essays has never left me, and it is, in the last analysis, life at its best and at its worst. I have doubtless tried to correct the worst effects to which this ardour has given rise. Like everyone, I have tried, as best I could, to improve my nature by morality. This, alas, is what has cost me most dear.

With energy, which is something I possess, we sometimes manage to act morally, but never to be moral. The man of passion who longs for goodness yields to injustice at the very moment when he speaks of justice. Man sometimes seems to me to be a walking injustice: I am thinking of myself. If I now have the impression that I was wrong, or that I lied in what I sometimes wrote, it is because I do not know how to make my injustice honestly known. I have doubtless never said that I was a just man. I have merely happened to say that we should try to be just, and also that such an ambition involved suffering and unhappiness. But is this distinction so important? And can the man who does not even manage to make justice prevail in his own life preach its virtues to other people? If only we could live according to honour, that virtue of the unjust! But our society finds this word obscene; 'aristocrat' is a literary and philosophical insult. I am not an aristocrat, my reply is contained in this book: here are my people, my masters, my race; here is what, through them, links me with everyone. And yet I do need honour, because I am not big enough to be able to do without it!

What does it matter? I merely wanted to show that, if I have travelled a long way since this book, I have not made much progress. Often, when I thought I was moving forward, I was losing ground. But, in the end, my mistakes, together with the gaps in my knowledge and my fidelities, have always brought me back to this ancient path that I began to open with *Betwixt and Between*, whose traces are visible in everything that I have achieved since then, and along which, on certain mornings in Algiers, for example, I still walk with the same slight intoxication.

Why then, if this is the case, should I have so long refused to produce this feeble testimony? First of all because, I must repeat, I have artistic scruples as other men have moral and religious ones. Prohibitions, the idea that 'such things are not done', which is something fairly foreign to me in so far as I am a child of free nature, are present in me in so far as I am a slave, and an admiring one, to a severe artistic tradition. This mistrust may also be aimed at my profound anarchy, and thus remain useful. I know my disorder, the violence of certain instincts, the graceless abandon into which I can cast myself. To be constructed, the work of art must first of all use these dark forces of the soul. But not without canalizing them, surrounding them with dikes, so

that their tide also rises. Perhaps my dikes are still too high today. Hence, sometimes, this stiffness. . . . It is simply that on the day when a balance is established between what I am and what I say, perhaps on that day, and I scarcely dare write it, I shall be able to compose the work of which I dream. What I have tried to say here is that in one way or another it will be like *Betwixt and Between*, and that it will speak of a certain form of love. The second reason why I have kept these youthful essays for myself will now be clear: clumsiness and disorder reveal too much of the secrets closest to our hearts; we also betray them through too careful a disguise. It is better to wait until we are skilful enough to give them a form that does not stifle their voice, until we know how to mingle nature and art together in fairly equal doses; in short, to be. For being is the ability to do everything at the same time. In art, everything comes at once or not at all. One day Stendhal cried out: 'But my soul is a fire which suffers if it does not blaze.' Those who are like him in this respect should create only in this blazing fire. At the height of the flame, the cry leaps straight upwards and creates the words which re-echo it in their turn. I am talking here about what all of us, artists unsure of being artists, but certain that we are nothing else, wait for day after day, so that in the end we may agree to live.

Why then, since I am concerned with what is probably a vain expectation, should I now agree to republishing these essays? First of all because a number of readers have been able to find a convincing argument.[1] And then a time always comes in an artist's life when he must take his bearings, draw closer to his own centre, and then try to stay there. Such is the case today, and I need say no more about it. If, in spite of so many efforts to build up a language and bring myths to life, I never manage to rewrite *Betwixt and Between*, I shall have never achieved anything. I feel it in my bones. But there is nothing to prevent me from dreaming that I shall succeed, from imagining that I shall still place in the centre of this work the admirable silence of a mother and the effort of a man to rediscover a justice or a love which matches this silence. Behold, in life's dream, the man who finds his truths and loses them, in the land of death, in order to return through wars, cries,

[1] A simple one. 'This book already exists, but in a small number of copies sold by booksellers at a very high price. Why should wealthy readers be the only ones with the right to read it?' Why indeed?

the madness of justice and love, in short through pain, to that quiet country where death itself is a happy silence. Here still.... Yes, nothing prevents me from dreaming of this, in the very hour of exile, since at least I know with sure and certain knowledge that a man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover through the detours of art those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened. This is why, perhaps, after working and producing for twenty years, I still live with the idea that my work has not even begun. From the very moment that the republication of these essays made me go back to the first pages that I wrote, it is principally this that I have wanted to say.

IRONY

Two years ago, I knew an old woman. She was suffering from an illness that had almost killed her. The whole of her right side had been paralysed. She only had half of herself in this world while the other half was already foreign to her. This bustling, chattering old lady had been made to sit still and keep quiet. She had never learned to read, and now that she sat alone day after day, hardly aware of what was happening, her whole life was reduced to God. She believed in him. The proof is that she had a rosary, a lead statue of Christ, and a stucco statue of Saint Joseph carrying the infant Jesus. She herself doubted whether her illness was incurable, but she said it was to make other people pay attention to her. For everything else, she relied on the God she loved so poorly.

On that particular day, someone did pay attention to her. A young man. (He thought that there was a truth and also knew that this woman was going to die, but did not worry about solving this contradiction.) He had become genuinely interested in this old woman's boredom. This was something she had really noticed. And this interest was an unexpected boon for the invalid. She was eager to talk about her troubles: she was at the end of her tether, and you have to make way for the rising generation. Did she get bored? Of course she did. She had been put in her corner, like a dog. It would be better to have done with it once and for all. Since she would much sooner die than be a burden to anyone.

Her voice had taken on a quarrelsome note, like someone haggling over a bargain. Still, the young man understood her. Nevertheless, he was of the opinion that being a burden on other people was better than dying. But that proved only one thing: that he had doubtless never been a burden on anybody. And of course he told the old lady—since he had seen the rosary: 'You still have God.' It was true. But even here she had her troubles. If she happened to spend rather a long time in prayer, if her eyes

strayed and followed a pattern in the wallpaper, her daughter would say: 'There she is, praying again!' 'What business is that of yours?' the invalid would say. 'It's none of my business, but it ends up by getting on my nerves.' And the old woman would fall silent, casting a long, reproachful look at her daughter.

The young man listened to all this with an immense and unfamiliar pain that hurt his chest. And the old woman went on: 'She'll see when she's old. She'll need it as well.'

You felt that this old woman had been freed of everything except God, wholly abandoned to this final evil, virtuous through necessity, too easily convinced that what still remained for her was the only thing worth loving, finally and irrevocably plunged into the wretchedness of man in God. But if hope in life is once reborn, then God is powerless against human interests.

They had sat down at table. The young man had been invited to dinner. The old lady wasn't eating, because food is difficult to digest in the evenings. She had stayed in her corner, just behind the young man who had been listening to her. And because he felt that he was being watched he couldn't eat very much. Nevertheless, the dinner proceeded. They decided to extend the party by going to the cinema. As it happened, there was a funny film on that week. The young man had blithely accepted, without thinking about the person who continued to exist behind him.

The guests had risen from table to go and wash their hands before leaving. There was obviously no question of the old lady coming as well. Even if she hadn't been half-paralysed, she was too ignorant to be able to understand the film. She said she didn't like the cinema. The truth was that she couldn't understand it. In any case, she was in her corner, vacantly absorbed in the beads of her rosary. That was where she put all her confidence. The three objects that she still kept by her represented the material point where God began. Beyond and behind the rosary, the statue of Christ or of Saint Joseph, there opened up a vast, empty blackness in which she placed all her hope.

Everyone was ready. They went up to the old lady to kiss her and wish her a good night. She had already realized what was happening and was clutching her rosary tightly in her hand. But it was quite apparent that this showed as much despair as it did zeal. Everyone else had kissed her. Only the young man was

left. He had given her an affectionate handshake and was already turning away. But she saw that the one person who had taken an interest in her was leaving. She didn't want to be alone. She could already feel the horror of loneliness, the long, sleepless hours, the frustrating intimacy with God. She was afraid, could now rely only on man, and, clinging to the one person who had shown any interest in her, held on to his hand, squeezing it, clumsily thanking him in order to justify this insistence. The young man felt embarrassed. The others were already turning round to tell him to hurry up. The film began at nine and it was better to arrive early so as not to have to queue up.

He felt confronted by the most atrocious suffering he had ever known: that of a sick old woman left at home by people going to a cinema. He wanted to leave and escape, felt a moment of intense hatred for the old woman, and almost slapped her hard across the face.

Finally he did manage to get away, while the invalid, half rising from her arm-chair, watched with horror as the last certainty in which she could have found rest faded away. There was now nothing to protect her. And, defenceless before the idea of death, she did not know exactly what terrified her, but felt that she did not want to be alone. God was of no use to her. All he did was cut her off from people and make her lonely. She did not want to be without people. So she began to cry.

The others were already outside in the street. The young man could not get rid of his feelings of remorse. He looked up at the lighted window, a great dead eye in the silent house. The eye closed. The old woman's daughter told the young man: 'She always turns the light off when she's by herself. She likes to sit in the dark.'

*

The old man brought his eyebrows triumphantly together, waggling a sententious forefinger. 'When I was a young man,' he said, 'my father used to give me five francs a week out of my wages as pocket money to last me till the following Saturday. Well, I still managed to save. First of all, when I went to see my fiancée, I walked four miles through the open country to get there and four miles to get back. Just you listen to me now, young men just don't know how to amuse themselves nowadays.' There were

three young men sitting at a round table with this one old man. He was describing his petty little adventures: valued acts of crass stupidity, onsets of fatigue that he celebrated as victories. He never paused in his story, and, in a hurry to tell everything before his audience left him, retained only those aspects of his past that he thought likely to impress them. Making people listen to him was his only vice: he refused to notice the irony of the glances and the sudden mockery that greeted him. The young men saw him as the usual old man for whom everything was marvellous in his day, while he saw himself as the respected elder whose experience carries weight. Young men don't know that experience is a defeat and that we must lose everything to win a little knowledge. He had suffered. He never mentioned it. It's better to seem happy. And if he was wrong in this pretence he would have been even more mistaken to try to make people sympathize with him. What do the sufferings of an old man matter when life absorbs you completely? He talked on and on, wandering blissfully through the grey monotony of his own mutterings. But it couldn't last. He needed to be listened to, and the young men had stopped paying attention. He wasn't even funny any longer; he was old. And young men are fond of billiards and cards, which don't resemble the idiocy of everyday work.

Soon he was alone, in spite of his efforts and the lies he told to enliven his story. With no attempt to spare his feelings, the young men had left. Once again he was alone. To be no longer listened to: that's the terrible thing about being old. He was condemned to silence and loneliness. He was being told that he would soon be dead. And an old man who is going to die is useless, he is even an insidious embarrassment. Let him go. He ought to go. Or, if he doesn't, to shut up: it's the least he can do. And he suffers because as soon as he stops talking he realizes that he is old. Yet he did get up and go, smiling to everyone around him. But the faces he saw were either indifferent, or convulsed by a gaiety that he had no right to share. A man was laughing: 'She's old, I don't deny it, but you sometimes make the best stews in old pots.' Another, already more seriously: 'Well, we're not rich but we eat well. Look at my grandson now, he eats more than his father. His father needs a pound of bread, he needs two! And you can pile on the sausage and camembert. And sometimes when he's finished he says: "*Han, Han!*" and keeps on eating.' The old

man moved away. And with his slow step, the short step of the ass turning the wheel, he walked through the crowds of men on the long pavements. He felt ill and did not want to go home. Normally, he was quite happy to go back to the table and the oil lamp, the plates where his fingers moved quite mechanically to their place. He still liked to eat his supper without talking, the old woman on the other side of the table, chewing over each mouthful, gazing into vacancy with an empty mind. This evening, he would arrive home later. His supper would have been served and gone cold, his wife would be in bed, not worrying about him since she knew that he often came home unexpectedly late. She would say 'He's in the moon again', and that said everything.

Now he was walking along with his gently insistent step. He was old and alone. When life is reaching its end, old age wells up in bouts of nausea. Everything comes down to not being listened to. He walks along, turns at the corner of the street, stumbles, and almost falls. I have seen him. It's ridiculous, but what can you do about it? After all, he prefers being in the street, being there rather than at home where for hours on end fever hides the old woman from him and shuts him alone in his room. Then, sometimes, the door slowly opens and gapes ajar for a moment. A man comes in. He is wearing a light-coloured suit. He sits down facing the old man and the minutes pass while he says nothing. He doesn't move, just like the door which stood ajar a moment ago. From time to time he strokes his hair and sighs gently. When he has watched the old man for a long time with the same heavy sadness in his eyes, he leaves, silently. The latch clicks to behind him and the old man stays there, horrified, with an acid and painful fear in his stomach. In the street, on the other hand, however few people he may meet, he is never alone. His fever sings. He walks a little faster: tomorrow everything will be different, tomorrow. Suddenly he realizes that tomorrow will be the same, and, after tomorrow, all the other days. And he is crushed down by this irreparable discovery. It's ideas like this that kill you. Men kill themselves because they cannot stand them—or, if they are young, they turn them into epigrams.

Old, mad, drunk, nobody knows. His will be a worthy end, tear-stained and admirable. He will make a good end, that is to say he will suffer. That will be a consolation for him. And besides,

where can he go? He will always be old now. Men build on their future old age. They try to give this old age, besieged by hopelessness, an idleness which leaves them with no defence. They want to become foremen so as to be able to retire to a small house in the country. But once they are deep in years, they realize perfectly well that this is a mistake. They need other men for protection. And as far as he was concerned, he needed to be listened to if he was to believe in his life. Now, the streets were darker and emptier. There were still voices going by. In the strange calm of the evening they were becoming more solemn. Behind the hills encircling the town there were still glimmers of daylight. From somewhere out of sight, smoke rose, imposingly, behind the wooded hilltops. It rose slowly in the sky, in tiers, like the branches of a pine-tree. The old man closed his eyes. As life carried away the rumblings of the town, and the heavens smiled their foolish, indifferent smile, he was alone, forsaken, naked, already dead.

Need I describe the other side of this fine coin? Doubtless, in a dark and dirty room, the old woman was laying the table. When dinner was ready she sat down, looked at the clock, waited a little longer, and then began to eat a hearty meal. She thought to herself: 'He is in the moon.' That said everything.

*

There were five of them living in the same apartment: the grandmother, her younger son, her elder daughter and the daughter's two children. The son was almost dumb; the daughter, an invalid, thought with difficulty, and, of the two children, one was already working for an insurance company while the other was continuing his studies. At seventy, the grandmother still ruled over all these people. Above her bed you could still see a portrait taken of her five years previously, sitting bolt upright in a black dress that was held together at the neck by a medallion, not a wrinkle on her face. With enormous clear, cold eyes, she had that regal posture which she gave up only with increasing age and still sometimes tried to recover when she went out.

It was these clear eyes that held a memory for her grandson which still made him blush. The old woman would wait until there were visitors and would then ask, looking at him severely, 'Whom do you like best? Your mother or your grandmother?' She en-

joyed it more when her daughter herself was there. For in every case the child would always reply 'My grandmother', with, in his heart, a great upsurge of love for his ever silent mother. Then, when the visitors were surprised at this preference, the mother would say: 'It's because she was the one who brought him up.'

It was also because the old woman thought that love is something you can demand. The knowledge that she herself had been a good mother gave her a kind of rigidity and intolerance. She had never deceived her husband and had borne him nine children. After his death, she had energetically brought up her young family herself. After leaving their little farm on the outskirts, they had ended up in an old and poor part of the town that they had now been living in for a long time.

And this woman was certainly not lacking in qualities. But for her grandsons, who were at the age of absolute judgments, she was nothing but a fraud. Thus one of their uncles had told them a significant story: he had gone to pay a visit to his mother-in-law, and had seen her sitting idly at the window. But she had come to the door with a duster in her hand and had apologized for carrying on working by saying that she had so little free time left after doing her housework. And it must be confessed that this was typical. She had the greatest ease in fainting after a family discussion. She also suffered from painful vomiting caused by a liver complaint. But she never showed the slightest modesty when she was ill. Far from shutting herself away, she would vomit noisily into the kitchen garbage can. And when she came back into the room, her eyes running with tears from the efforts she had been making, she would tell anyone who begged her to go to bed that she had to get the next meal ready and play her part in running the house: 'I do everything here.' Or again: 'I don't know what you'd do without me.'

The children grew used to ignoring her vomitings, her 'attacks' as she called them, as well as her complaints. One day she went to bed and demanded the doctor. They sent for him to humour her. On the first day he diagnosed a slight stomach upset, on the second a cancer of the liver, on the third a serious attack of jaundice. But the younger of the two children insisted on seeing all this as yet another performance, a more sophisticated act, and felt no concern. This woman had bullied him too much for

his initial reaction to be pessimistic. And there is a kind of desperate courage in being lucid and refusing to love. But people who play at being ill can succeed: the grandmother carried simulation to the point of death. On her last day, her children around her, she began freeing herself of the fermentations in her intestines. She turned and spoke with simplicity to her grandson: 'You see,' she said, 'I'm farting like a little pig.' She died an hour later.

As for her grandson, he now realized that he had not understood a thing that was happening. He could not free himself of the idea that he had just witnessed the last and most monstrous of this woman's performances. And if he asked himself whether he felt any sorrow, he could find none at all. Only on the day of the funeral, because of the general outburst of tears, did he weep, but was afraid of being insincere and telling lies in the presence of death. It was on a fine winter's day, shot through with sunlight. In the pale blue sky, you could sense the cold all spangled with yellow. The cemetery overlooked the town, and you could see the fine transparent sun setting in the bay quivering with light, like a moist lip.

None of this fits together? How very true! A woman you abandon to go to the cinema, an old man to whom you have stopped listening, a death which redeems nothing, and then, on the other hand, the whole radiance of the world. What difference does it make if you accept everything? What you have here are three destinies which are different and yet alike. Death for us all, but his own death to each. After all, the sun still warms our bones for us.

BETWEEN YES AND NO

IF it is true that the only paradises are those that we have lost, I can find a name for this tender and inhuman feeling which inhabits me today. An emigrant is returning to his country. And I am remembering. The irony and tension fade away and I am back at home. I don't want to chew over my happiness. It is much simpler and much easier than that. For what has remained untouched in those hours which I am bringing back from the depths of forgetfulness is the memory of a pure emotion, a moment suspended in eternity. Only this memory is true in me and I always discover it too late. We love the gentleness of certain gestures, the way a tree fits into a landscape. And we have only one detail to recreate all this love, but this is enough: the smell of a room that has been shut up for too long, the particular sound of a footstep on the road. This is also true for me. And if I then loved while giving myself, I finally became myself since only love can restore us to ourselves.

Slow, peaceful and grave, these hours return, just as strong, just as moving—because it is evening, because it is a sad hour, and because the dull sky holds a kind of vague desire. Each rediscovered gesture reveals me to myself. Someone once said to me: 'It's so difficult to live.' And I remember the tone of voice. On another occasion, someone murmured: 'The worst mistake still lies in making people suffer.' When everything is over, we are no longer thirsty for life. Is that what they call happiness? As we walk alongside these memories, we clothe everything in the same quiet garb, and death looks like a backcloth whose colours have lost their glow. We turn back upon ourselves. We feel our distress and love ourselves better for it. Yes, that is perhaps what happiness is, the self-pitying awareness of our misery.

That is certainly true of this evening. In this Moorish café, at the far end of the Arab town, I recall not a moment of past happiness but a feeling of strangeness. It is already night. On the

walls, canary yellow lions pursue green-clad sheikhs among five-branched palm trees. In a corner of the café, an acetylene lamp gives a flickering light. The real light comes from the fire, at the bottom of a small oven adorned with yellow and green enamel. The flames light up the middle of the room, and I can feel them reflected on my face. I am facing the doorway and the bay. Crouching in one corner, the café owner seems to be looking at my glass, which stands there empty with a mint leaf at the bottom. There is no one in the main room, noises rise from the town below, while farther off in the bay lights shine. I hear the Arab breathe heavily, and his eyes glow in the dusk. Is what I can hear far off the sound of the sea? The world sighs towards me in a long rhythm, and brings me the peace and indifference of immortal things. Tall red shadows make the lions on the walls sway with a wave-like motion. The air grows cool. The light-houses begin to turn: green, red, white. And still the world sighs its long sigh. A kind of secret song is born from this indifference. And I am home again. I think of a child living in a poor district. That district, that house! There were only two floors, and the staircases were unlit. Even now, long years later, he could go back there on the darkest night. He knows that he would climb the staircase without stumbling once. He bears this house in his very body. His legs retain the exact height of the steps; his hand, the instinctive, never-conquered horror of the banister. Because of the cockroaches.

On summer evenings, the working men go out on to the balcony. In his flat, there was only one tiny window. So they brought down the chairs and put them in front of the house, and enjoyed the evening air. There was the street, the ice-vendor next door, the cafés opposite, and the noise of children running from door to door. But above all, through the wide fig-trees, there was the sky. There is a solitude in poverty, but a solitude which gives everything back its value. At a certain level of wealth, the heavens themselves and the star-filled night seem natural goods. But at the bottom of the ladder, the sky recovers its full meaning: a priceless grace. Summer evenings, mysteries with crackling stars! Behind the child lay a stinking corridor and his little chair, splitting across the bottom, sank slightly beneath his weight. But he had only to raise his eyes to drink straight from the pure sky. Sometimes a large tram would rattle swiftly past. And a drunk

would stand singing at a street corner, though without troubling the silence.

The child's mother never spoke either. Sometimes, people would ask her: 'What are you thinking about?' And she would reply: 'Nothing.' And that was the truth. Everything was already there, so she thought about nothing. Her life, her interests, her children were simply there, with a presence too natural to be felt. She was an invalid, had difficulty in thinking. She had a harsh and domineering mother who sacrificed everything to a touchy animal pride and who had long ruled over her daughter's feeble mind. Emancipated by her marriage, the daughter came obediently home when her husband died. He died a soldier's death, as they say. In a place of honour, you can see in a golden frame his military medal and *croix de guerre*. The hospital also sent the widow the small shell splinter found in his body. The widow has kept it. Her grief has long since disappeared. She has forgotten her husband, but still speaks of her children's father. To bring up these children, she goes out to work and gives her wages to her mother, who brings up the children with a whip. When she hits them too hard, her daughter tells her: 'Don't hit them on the head.' Because they are her children, she is very fond of them. She loves them with a hidden and impartial love. Sometimes, as on those evenings which he now remembers, she would come back from her exhausting work (as a charwoman) and find the house empty. The old woman out shopping, the children still at school. Then she huddles in a chair, gazing in front of her, wanders off in the dizzy pursuit of a crack along the floor. Around her, night thickens and then her silence is a grief without repair. If the child comes in at this moment, he sees the thin shape with its bony shoulders and stops: he is afraid. He is beginning to feel a lot of things. He is scarcely aware of his own existence, but this animal silence makes him cry with pain. He feels sorry for his mother, but is this loving her? She has never hugged or kissed him for she wouldn't know how. Then he will stand a long time watching her. Because he feels that he is separate from her, he becomes conscious of her suffering. She can't hear him, for she is deaf. In a few moments, the old woman will come back, life will start up again: the round light cast by the paraffin lamp, the oilcloth on the table, the shouts, the swear-words. But in the meantime this silence marks a pause, an immensely long moment.

Because he is vaguely aware of this, the child thinks that the upsurge of feeling in him is love for his mother. And this must be so, because after all she is his mother.

She is thinking of nothing. Outside, the light, the noises; here, silence in the night. The child will grow, will learn. They are bringing him up and will ask him to be grateful, as if they were sparing him pain. His mother will always have these silences. He will grow in pain. Being a man is what counts. His grandmother will die, then his mother, then himself.

His mother has given a sudden start. Something has frightened her. He looks stupid standing there gazing at her. He ought to go and do his homework. The child has done his homework. Today he is in a sordid café. He is now a man. Isn't this what counts? That can't be so, since doing homework and accepting to be a man only leads to being old.

Still crouching in his corner, the Arab is clasping his hands round his feet. From the terraces there rises the scent of roasting coffee mingled with the excited chatter of young voices. A tug adds its grave and tender note. The world is ending here as it does each day, and all its measureless torments give rise to nothing but this promise of peace. The indifference of this strange mother! The only thing which can serve as a measure for it is the immense solitude of the world. One evening, they had called her son—he was already quite old—to his mother's side. A fright had brought on a serious mental shock. She was in the habit of going on to the balcony at the end of the day. She would take a chair and lean her mouth against the cold and salty iron of the balcony rail. Then she would watch the people going past. Behind her, the night gradually thickened. In front of her, the shops were suddenly lighting up. The street was filling up with people and lights. She would gaze emptily at it until she forgot where she was. On this particular evening, a man had loomed up behind her, dragged her backwards, knocked her about, and run away on hearing a noise. She had seen nothing, and had fainted. She was in bed when her son arrived. He decided, on the doctor's advice, to spend the night with her. He stretched out on the bed, by her side, lying on the top of the blankets. It was summer. The fear left by the recent drama hung in the air of the overheated room. Footsteps were rustling and doors creaking. In the heavy air, there floated the smell of the vinegar used to cool the invalid's

brow. She, in the meantime, moved restlessly about, whimpering, sometimes giving a sudden start. She then pulled him out of brief snatches of sleep from which he emerged drenched in sweat, prepared to act—and into which he fell back, heavily, after glancing at his watch on which the night-light threw three dancing shadows. It was only later that he realized how much they had been alone that night. Alone against everybody. The 'others' were asleep, while they both breathed the same fever. In this old house, everything then seemed hollow. The midnight trams drained away with them all the hope which comes to us from men, all the certainties given to us by town noises. The house was still humming with their passage, and little by little everything died away. All that remained was a great garden of silence peopled from time to time with the terrified groans of the sick woman. He had never felt so cut off from everything. The world had melted away, taking with it the illusion that life begins again each morning. Nothing was left, neither studies, ambitions, preferences in a restaurant or favourite colours. Nothing but the sickness and death in which he felt himself plunged. . . . And yet, at the very moment when the world was crumbling, he was alive. And he had finally even gone to sleep. Yet not without taking with him the tender and despairing image of a solitude for two. Later, much later, he was to remember this mingled scent of sweat and vinegar, this moment when he had felt the ties which attached him to his mother. As if she were the immense pity of his heart, spread out around him, made flesh, and diligently playing, with neither posture nor pretence, the part of a poor old woman whose fate moves men to tears.

Now the ashes in the grate are beginning to choke the fire. And still the same sigh from the earth. The pearled song of an Arab drum can be heard in the air, overladen with a woman's laughter. Lights come closer in the bay—fishing vessels, no doubt, returning to harbour. The triangle of sky that I can see from where I am sitting has been stripped of its daylight clouds. Overflowing with stars, it quivers in a pure breeze and the padded wings of night beat slowly around me. How far will this night in which I cease to belong to myself go? There is a dangerous virtue in the word simplicity. And on this night I can understand a man wanting to die because things cease to matter when he sees through life completely. A man suffers and endures misfortune after

misfortune. He bears them, settles down to his fate. People think well of him. And then, one evening, that's it: he meets a friend of whom he has been very fond. The latter speaks to him absent-mindedly. On returning home, the man kills himself. People then talk about private sorrows and secret dramas. No. And if a reason really must be found, he killed himself because a friend spoke to him absent-mindedly. Thus, every time that it seemed to me as if I had grasped the deep meaning of the world, it is its simplicity that has always overwhelmed me. My mother, that evening, and her strange indifference. On another occasion, I was living in a villa in the suburbs, alone with a dog, a pair of cats and their kittens, all black. The mother cat could not feed them. One by one, all the kittens died. They filled their room with filth. And every evening, when I arrived home, I would find one stiff on the floor, its gums laid bare. One evening, I found the last one, half eaten by the mother. It already stank. The smell of death mingled with the stench of urine. Then, with my hands in the filth, and the stench of rotting flesh reeking in my nostrils, I sat down in the midst of all this misery and gazed for hour after hour at the demented flame shining in the cat's green eyes as she crouched motionless in the corner! Yes. And it is just like that this evening. When we are stripped down to a certain point, nothing leads anywhere any more, hope and despair are equally groundless, and the whole of life can be summed up in an image. But why stop there? Simple, everything is simple, from the lights alternating in the lighthouses, one green, one red, one white, to the cool of the night and the smell of the town and poverty which reaches me from below. If, this evening, it is the image of a certain childhood which comes back to me, how can I refrain from welcoming the lesson of love and poverty which it offers? Since this hour is like a pause between yes and no, I leave hope or disgust with life for another time. Yes, catch only the transparency and simplicity of paradises lost: in an image. And thus it was that not long ago, in a house in an old part of the town, a son went to see his mother. They sat down facing each other, in silence. But their eyes met:

'Well then, mother.'

'Well then, here we are.'

'Are you bored? Don't I talk much?'

'Oh, you've never talked much.'

And, though her lips do not move, her face lights up in a beautiful smile. It's true, he has never talked very much to her. But did he ever really need to? When you keep quiet, the situation becomes clear. He is her son, she is his mother. She can say to him: 'You know.'

She is sitting at the foot of the divan, her feet together, her hands together in her lap. He, on his chair, scarcely looks at her and smokes ceaselessly. A silence.

'You ought not to smoke so much.'

'It's true.'

The whole smell of the district rises in through the window. The accordion from the neighbouring café, the traffic hurrying in the evening, the smell of the skewers of grilled meat that are eaten between small, springy rolls of bread, a child crying in the road. The mother rises and picks up her knitting. Her fingers are clumsy, twisted with arthritis. She works only slowly, taking up the same stitch three or four times or undoing a whole row with a dull ripping sound.

'It's a little cardigan. I shall wear it with a white collar. With that and my black coat, I shall be dressed for the season.'

She has risen to switch on the light.

'It gets dark early nowadays.'

It was true. Summer was over and autumn had not yet begun. Swifts were still calling in the gentle sky.

'You'll come back soon?'

'But I've not left yet. Why do you talk about that?'

'No, it was just to say something.'

A tram passes. A car.

'Is it true that I look like my father?'

'His spitting image. Of course, you didn't know him. You were six months old when he died. But if you had a little moustache!'

It was without conviction that he mentioned his father. No memory, no emotion. Doubtless someone quite ordinary. Besides, he had been very keen to go. At the battle of the Marne, his head split open. Blind and dying for a week: his name on his village war memorial.

'Basically,' she says, 'it's better that way. He would have come back blind or mad. So, poor chap . . .'

'It's true.'

And what then is it that keeps him in this room, except the

certainty that it's always the best thing to do, the feeling that the whole absurd simplicity of the world has come to seek refuge here?

'You'll come back?' she says. 'I know that you have work to do. Just from time to time. . . . '

But where am I now? And how can I separate this empty café from that room in my past? I can no longer tell whether I am living or remembering. The lighthouse beams are there. And the Arab standing in front of me is telling me that he is going to close. I have to leave. I no longer wish to go down so dangerous a slope. It is true that, as I take a last look at the bay and its lights, what rises towards me is not the hope of better days but a serene and primitive indifference to everything and to myself. But I must break this curve which is too easy and too soft. And I need my lucidity. Yes, everything is simple. It is men who complicate things. Don't let them tell us any stories. Don't let them say of the man sentenced to death: 'He is going to pay his debt to society,' but: 'They're going to cut his head off.' It looks like nothing at all. But it does make a little difference. And then, there are people who prefer to look their fate in the eye.

IRON IN THE SOUL

I ARRIVED in Prague at six in the evening. I immediately took my suitcases to the left luggage office. I still had two hours in which to look for a hotel. And I was full of a strange feeling of liberty because I no longer had my two suitcases hanging on my arms. I came out of the station, walked by some gardens, and found myself suddenly thrown into the middle of the Avenue Wenceslas, swarming with people at that time in the evening. Around me were a million people who had lived until today and whose existence had never impinged upon mine. They were alive. I was thousands of kilometres away from a familiar country. I could not understand their language. They all walked quickly. And as they overtook me, they all cut themselves off from me. I felt lost.

I had little money. Enough to live for six days. But after then, friends were coming to meet me. Nevertheless, I also began to feel anxious about that. So I set out to look for a cheap hotel. I was in the new part of the town, and all those that I could see were bursting with lights, laughter and women. I walked faster. Something in my rapid pace already seemed like flight. However, towards eight in the evening, exhausted, I reached the old town. There I was attracted by a modest-looking hotel with a small doorway. I go in. I fill in the form, take my key. I have room number 34, on the third floor. I open the door and find myself in a most luxurious room. I look to see how much it costs: twice as expensive as I thought. The problem of money becomes really acute. I can now live only poorly in this great city. My anxiety, still rather vague a few moments ago, fixes itself on this one point. I feel uneasy. I feel hungry and empty. Nevertheless, a moment of lucidity: I have always been credited, rightly or wrongly, with the greatest indifference concerning money. Why then should I be worried about the expense? But already my mind is working. I must have something to eat, start walking again and look for a

cheap restaurant. I must not spend more than ten crowns on each of my meals. Of all the restaurants that I can see, the least expensive is also the least attractive. I walk up and down in front of it. The people inside begin to notice my antics: I have to go in. It is a rather murky cellar, painted with pretentious frescoes. A fairly mixed clientele. A few prostitutes, in one corner, are smoking and talking seriously to one another. A number of men, for the most part colourless and of intermediate age, sit eating at the tables. The waiter, a colossus in a greasy dinner jacket, leans his enormous, expressionless head in my direction. I quickly make a random choice of a dish from what, for me, is the incomprehensible menu. But it would appear that this needs to be explained. And the waiter asks me a question in Czech. I reply with the small amount of German that I know. He does not know German. He summons one of the prostitutes who comes forward in the classic pose, left hand on hip, cigarette in the right hand, simpering smile. She sits down at my table and asks me questions in a German which I judge as bad as my own. Everything becomes clear. The waiter wanted to sing me the praises of the *plat du jour*. Game for anything, I take the *plat du jour*. The prostitute talks to me but I can't understand her now. Naturally, I say yes in my most sincere tone of voice. But I am not here. Everything annoys me, I waver, I don't feel hungry. And still this twinge of pain in me and the tightness in my stomach. I buy the girl a glass of beer because I know how to behave. The *plat du jour* having arrived, I start to eat: a mixture of porridge and meat, made disgusting by an unbelievable quantity of cummin. But I think about something else, of nothing at all rather, staring at the fat, laughing mouth of the woman in front of me. Does she think I am inviting her favours? She is already close to me, starts to make advances. An automatic gesture from me holds her back. (She was ugly. I have often thought that if she had been pretty I would have avoided everything that happened later.) I was afraid of being sick, there and then, in the middle of all these people ready to laugh, but still more afraid of being alone in my hotel room, without money or enthusiasm, reduced to myself and to my poverty-stricken thoughts. Even today, I still wonder with embarrassment, at the weary and cowardly creature that then emerged from me. I left. I walked in the old town, but could not stand my own presence any longer and ran all the way

to my hotel, went to bed, and waited for sleep, which came almost at once.

Every country where I am not bored is a country that teaches me nothing. That was the kind of remark which I used to try to cheer myself up. But need I describe the days that followed? I went back to my restaurant. Morning and evening, I endured the atrocious cummin-flavoured food which made me feel sick. I consequently walked around all day with a constant desire to vomit. But I resisted, knowing that one must take in nourishment. Besides, what did this matter compared with what I should have to endure if I tried out a new restaurant? There, at least, I was 'recognized'. People gave me a smile even if they didn't speak to me. On the other hand, anguish was gaining ground. I paid too much attention to that sharp twinge of pain in my head. I decided to organize my days, to cover them with points of reference. I stayed in bed as late as possible and my days were consequently shortened. I washed, shaved and methodically explored the town. I lost myself in the sumptuous baroque churches, trying to rediscover a homeland in them, but emerging emptier and more deeply in despair after this disappointing encounter with myself. I wandered along the Vltava and saw the water swirling and foaming at its dams. I spent endless hours in the immense silent and empty district of the Hradchin. At sunset, in the shadow of its cathedral and palaces, my lonely step echoed along the streets. As I noticed this, panic seized hold of me again. I dined early and went to bed at half-past eight. The sun tore me from myself. I visited churches, palaces and museums, I tried to calm my anguish in every kind of work of art. A classic dodge: I sought to melt down my rebellion into melancholy. But in vain. As soon as I came out, I was a foreigner again. Once, however, in a baroque cloister, at the far end of the town, the gentleness of the hour, the softly tinkling bells, the clusters of pigeons flying from the old tower, together with something like a scent of herbs and nothingness, gave birth in me to a silence full of tears that almost delivered me. And, back in my hotel room that evening, I wrote out the following passage at one sitting, and now reproduce it unchanged, since its very pomposity reminds me of how complex my feelings were: 'And what other profit can we seek to draw from travel? Here I am stripped bare, in a town where the notices are written in strange, incomprehensible hieroglyphics,

where I have no friends to talk to, in short where I have no distractions. I am fully aware that nothing can rescue me from this room filled with the noises of a foreign town, and carry me away to the more delicate light of a fireside or a beloved place. Shall I call, cry out? All I shall see will be unknown faces. Everything, churches, gold and incense, casts me back into a daily life where my anguish gives everything its value. And now the curtain of habits, the comfortable loom of words and gestures in which the heart sinks down to slumber, slowly opens and lays bare the ashen visage of anxiety. Man is face to face with himself: I defy him to be happy. . . . And yet this is how travel enlightens him. A great gulf widens between him and things. The world's music finds its way more easily into this less solid heart. As he is finally stripped bare, the slightest solitary tree becomes the most tender and fragile of images. What travel gives us is a landscape which we can feel and love, composed of works of art and women's smiles, of races of men at home in their land, and of monuments that tell the story of the centuries. And then, at close of day, I find this hotel room where once again I have this deep hollow feeling, as if my soul were hungry.' But need I confess that all this was just a means of getting to sleep? And I can now say that what I retain of Prague is the smell of cucumbers soaked in vinegar, which are sold at every street corner to eat between your fingers, and whose bitter, piquant flavour would awake and feed my anguish as soon as I had crossed the threshold of my hotel. That, and also perhaps a certain tune played on an accordion. Beneath my windows, a blind, one-armed man, sitting on his instrument, kept it in place with one buttock while opening and shutting it with his one good hand. It was always the same childish and tender tune which woke me every morning and set me down brusquely in the unadorned reality where I was floundering.

I can also remember that on the banks of the Vltava I would suddenly stop, and seized by this smell or that melody, carried almost beyond myself, would murmur: 'What does it mean? What does it mean?' But I had doubtless not yet gone over the edge. On the fourth day, in the morning, I was getting ready to go out. I wanted to find a particular Jewish cemetery that I had not been able to find the previous day. Someone knocked at the door of the next room. After a moment's silence, they knocked again. A long knock this time, but apparently in vain. A heavy

step went down the stairs. Without paying attention to what I was doing, my mind empty, I wasted a few moments reading the instructions for a shaving cream that I had in any case been using for a month. The day was heavy. From the sunless sky, a coppery light fell on the spires and domes of old Prague. The newsboys were shouting as they did every morning when selling the *Narodni Politika.* I tore myself with difficulty from the torpor that was overcoming me. But just as I was going out, I passed the waiter who looked after my particular floor, armed with a bunch of keys. I stopped. He knocked again, for a long time. He tried to open the door. No success. It must have been bolted on the inside. More knocks. The room sounded hollow, with so lugubrious a note that, depressed as I was, I left without asking any questions. But in the streets of Prague, I was pursued by a painful foreboding. How shall I ever forget the waiter's stupid face, the funny way his polished shoes curled upwards, and the button that was missing from his jacket? I did finally have lunch, but with a growing feeling of disgust. Towards two in the afternoon, I went back to my hotel.

In the hall, the servants were whispering. I rapidly climbed the stairs in order to come face to face more quickly with what I was expecting. It was what I thought. The door of the room was half open, so that all that could be seen was a high, blue-painted wall. But the dull light that I mentioned above threw two shadows on this screen: the dead man lying on the bed and a policeman guarding the body. These two shadows were at right-angles to each other. This light overwhelmed me. It was authentic, a real living light, of an afternoon of life, a light which makes you notice that you are alive. He was dead. Alone in his room. I knew that this was not suicide. I dashed back into my room and threw myself on to the bed. A man no different from many others, short and fat, if I was to believe the shadow. He had doubtless been dead for some time. And life had gone on in the hotel, until the waiter had had the idea of calling him. He had arrived in this hotel without suspecting anything and he had died alone. And I, during that time, had been reading the advertisement for my shaving cream. I spent the whole afternoon in a state that I should not like to describe. I lay stretched out on my bed, thinking of nothing, with a strange heaviness in my heart. I cut my finger nails. I counted the cracks in the floorboards. 'If I can count up

to a thousand. . . .' At fifty or sixty, I collapsed. I couldn't go on. I could understand nothing of the noises outside. Once however, in the corridor, a stifled voice, a woman's voice, said in German: 'He was so good.' Then I thought desperately of my own town, on the shores of the Mediterranean, of the summer evenings that I love so much, so gentle in the green light and full of young and beautiful women. For days now I had not uttered a single word and my heart was bursting with the cries and protests I had held back. I should have wept like a child if anyone had opened his arms to me. Towards the end of the afternoon, broken with weariness, I was staring madly at my door handle, a popular accordion tune endlessly running through my empty head. At that moment, I had gone as far as I could. I was without a country, a town, a room or a name, and on the verge either of a victory and an inspiration in which I would finally know, or of a madness and humiliation in which I would disappear. There was a knock at my door and my friends came in. I was saved even if I was cheated of the outcome. I even think that I said: 'I'm happy to see you again.' But I am sure that I confessed nothing further and that in their eyes I was still the man they knew when they left.

*

I left Prague a short time later. And, certainly, I did take an interest in what I saw there later, I could note down such and such an hour in the little Gothic cemetery of Bautzen, with the brilliant red of its geraniums and the blue morning sky. I could speak of the long, pitiless and graceless plains of Silesia. I went through them at daybreak. A heavy flight of birds was passing in the thick, misty morning, above the sticky earth. I also like tender and grave Moravia, with its distant, pure horizons, its roads bordered with sour plum trees. But I still felt dizzy, like a man who has spent too long gazing into a bottomless pit. I arrived in Vienna, left it after a week, and was still held captive within myself.

Nevertheless, in the train taking me from Vienna to Venice, I was waiting for something. I was like a convalescent who has been fed on soups and who is thinking about what it will be like to eat his first crust of bread. A light was coming to birth. I now know what it was: I was ready for happiness. I shall speak only of the six days that I lived on a hill near Vicenza. I am still there,

or, rather, I still find myself there again, as the scent of rosemary brings everything flooding back to me.

I enter Italy. A land that fits my soul, whose features I recognize one by one as I draw near. The first houses with scaly tiles, the first vines flat against a wall made blue by sulphur dressings, the first clothes hung out in the courtyards, the disorder, the men's untidy, casual dress. And the first cypress (so slight and yet so straight), the first olive-tree, the dusty fig-tree. Shadow-filled squares of small Italian towns, midday hours when pigeons seek rest, slowness and sloth, in these the soul exhausts its rebellions. Passion travels gradually into tears. And then, here is Vicenza. Here the days revolve upon themselves, from the daybreak stuffed with cockcrows to this unequalled evening, sweetish and tender, silky behind the cypress-trees, its hours punctuated by the long measure of the crickets' cry. This inner silence which accompanies me is born of the slow stride which leads from one day to another. What more can I long for than this room opening out on to the plain, with its antique furniture and its crocheted lace? I have the whole sky on my face, and feel that I could follow these slow, turning days for ever, spinning motionlessly with them. I breathe in the only happiness I can attain—an attentive and friendly awareness. I spend the whole day walking about: from the hill, I go down to Vicenza or else farther into the country. Every person I meet, every scent on this street, is a pretext for my measureless love. Young women looking after a children's holiday camp, the trumpet of the ice-cream sellers (their cart is a gondola on wheels, pushed by two handles), the displays of fruit, red melons with black pips, translucid and sticky grapes—all are props for the person who can no longer be alone.[1] But the tender and bitter piping of the grasshoppers, the perfume of water and stars that you meet in the September nights, the scented paths among the lentisks and rose-bushes, all are signs of love for the person forced to be alone.[2] Thus the days pass. After the dazzling glare of the sun-filled days, evening comes, in the splendid décor offered by the gold of the setting sun and the black of the cypress-trees. I then walk along the road, towards the crickets that can be heard far away. As I advance, they begin one by one to sing more softly, and then fall silent. I walk slowly forward, weighed down by so much ardent

[1] That is to say everybody.

[2] That is to say everybody.

beauty. Behind me, one by one, the crickets swell their voices and sing: a mystery in this sky from which indifference and beauty now descend. And, in a last gleam of light, I can read on the fronting of a villa: 'In magnificentia naturae, resurgit spiritus.' This is where I must stop. Already the first star shines, then three lights gleam on the hill opposite, unharbingered the sudden night has fallen, a breeze murmurs in the bushes behind me, the day has fled, leaving me its gentleness.

I of course had not changed. It was simply that I was no longer alone. In Prague, I could not breathe between the walls. Here, I was face to face with the world, and, freed from myself, peopled the universe with forms in my own likeness. For I have not yet spoken of the sun. In the same way that I took a long time to realize my attachment and love for the world of poverty in which I spent my childhood, it is only now that I can see the lesson of the sun and of the countries which witnessed my birth. Shortly before midday, I went out and walked towards a spot that I knew and which looked out over the immense plain of Vicenza. The sun had almost reached its zenith, the sky was of an intense and airy blue. All the light descending from it poured down the slope of the hills, clothing the cypresses and olive-trees, the white houses and the red roofs, in the warmest of robes, before vanishing in the plain which lay steaming in the sun. And each time I had the same feeling of being laid bare. In me, there was the horizontal shadow of the little fat man. And what I could touch with my finger in these plains whirling with sunlight and dust, in these close-cropped hills all crusty with burnt grass, was a form, bared down from attractions to essentials, of that taste for nothingness which I carried within me. This country restored me to my heart of hearts and placed me face to face with my secret anguish. But it was and yet was not the anguish of Prague. How can I explain this? Certainly, looking at this Italian plain, peopled with trees, sun and smiles, I seized more firmly than elsewhere this odour of death and inhumanity which had been pursuing me for a month. Yes, this fullness without tears, this joyless peace which dwelt in me, consisted solely of a very clear awareness of what I did not like, of renunciation and lack of interest. In the same way as the man who is about to die, and knows it, takes no interest in what will happen to his wife, except in novels. He fulfils man's destiny, which is to be an egotist,

that is to say someone who despairs. For me, this country held no promise of immortality. What was the point in being alive again in my soul, without eyes to see Vicenza, without hands to touch the grapes of Vicenza, without flesh to feel the night's caress on the road between Monte Berico and the villa Valmarana?

Yes, all this was true. But, at the same time, the sun filled me with something that I cannot really express. At this extreme point of extreme awareness everything came together, and my life stood before me like a solid block to be accepted or rejected. I needed a greatness. I found it in the confrontation between my deep despair and the secret indifference of one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. I drew from it the strength to be at one and the same time both courageous and aware. So difficult and paradoxical a thing was enough for me. But I may perhaps have exaggerated something of what I then felt so sincerely. Besides, I often think about Prague and about the mortal days that I lived there. I have found my town again. Sometimes, however, the sour smell of cucumbers and vinegar returns to awake my anxiety. I then have to think of Vicenza. Both are dear to me, and I cannot separate my love for light and life from the secret attachment I bear for the experience of despair that I have tried to describe. It will be clear that I myself do not want to choose between them. In the suburbs of Algiers, there is a little cemetery with black iron gates. If you go to the far end, you look out over the valley with the bay in the distance. You can spend a long time dreaming as you gaze at this offering which sighs with the sea. But when you retrace your steps, you find a flagstone that bears the words 'Eternal regrets', above an abandoned grave. Fortunately, there are idealists to set things right.

LOVE OF LIFE

AT night in Palma, life ebbs slowly back towards the district where cafés provide music, behind the market. The streets are dark and silent until you reach the latticed doors and find light and music filtering through. I spent almost a whole night in one of these cafés. It was a small, very low room, rectangular, painted green and hung with pink garlands. The wooden ceiling was covered with tiny red light bulbs. Miraculously fitted into this minute space were an orchestra, a bar with multi-coloured bottles, and the customers, squashed so tight that they could hardly breathe. Only men. In the middle, two square yards of free space. Glasses and bottles streamed from it as the waiter carried them to all four corners of the room. Not a single person here was conscious. They were all bellowing. A kind of naval officer was belching alcohol-laden compliments into my face. At my table, an ageless dwarf was telling me his life-story. But I was too tense to listen to him. The orchestra kept on playing, but all you could gather of the tunes was the rhythm, beaten out by every foot in the place. Sometimes the door would open. In the midst of shouts, a new arrival would be fitted in between two chairs.[1]

Suddenly, the cymbals clashed, and a woman leaped swiftly into the minute circle, in the middle of the cabaret. 'Twenty-one,' the officer told me. I was stupefied. The face of a young girl, but carved out of a mountain of flesh. She was perhaps six feet tall. With all her fat, she must have weighed three hundred pounds. Hands on hips, wearing a sweater of yellow net through whose meshes swelled a chessboard of white flesh, she was smiling; and each corner of her mouth sent a series of small waves of flesh right to her ear. The excitement in the room knew no bounds. You felt that this girl was known, loved, expected. She was still smiling. She looked round at the customers and, still

[1] There is a certain ease of enjoyment that defines true civilization. And the Spanish people is one of the few in Europe that is civilized.

silent and smiling, wriggled her belly forward. The customers screamed, then demanded a song that everyone seemed to know. It was an Andalusian song, nasalized, and accompanied by a strong three-beat rhythm on the muffled drums. She sang, and at each drum beat mimed the act of love with her whole body. In this monotonous and passionate movement, real waves of flesh stemmed from her hips and moved upwards until they died away on her shoulders. The room seemed to be crushed. But, with the refrain, the girl, pivoting round, seizing her breasts with both hands, opening her red, moist mouth, took up the tune, in chorus with the room, until everyone stood upright in the tumult.

As she stood in the centre, feet apart, sticky with sweat, hair hanging loose, she lifted up her immense torso, which burst out of its yellow sweater. Like an unclean goddess rising from the waves, forehead villainous low, hollow-eyed, she lived only by a slight quiver at the knee, like that of a horse after the race. In the midst of the foot-stamping joy around her, she was like an ignoble and exalting image of life, with despair in her empty eyes and thick sweat on her belly. . . .

Without cafés and newspapers, it would be difficult to travel. A paper printed in our language, a place where, in the evenings, we try to rub shoulders with other men, enable us to mime in familiar gestures the man we were at home, and who, seen from a distance, is so like a stranger. For what gives value to travel is fear. It breaks down a kind of inner décor in us. We can't cheat any more—hide ourselves away behind the hours in the office or at the plant (these hours against which we protest so strongly and which protect us so surely against the suffering of being alone). Thus I have always wanted to write novels in which my heroes would say: 'What would I do without my office hours?', or again: 'My wife has died, but fortunately I have all these parcels to get ready for tomorrow.' Travel takes this refuge from us. Far from our own people, our own language, wrenched away from all support, deprived of our masks (we don't know the fare on the tram and everything is like that), we are completely on the surface of ourselves. But also, because we feel our soul is sick, we restore its miraculous value to every being and every object. A woman who dances without a thought in her head, a bottle on a table, glimpsed behind a curtain, each image becomes a symbol.

The whole of life seems to be reflected in it, in so far as it sums up our own life at the time. When we are aware of every gift, the contradictory intoxications we can enjoy (including that of lucidity) are indescribable. And never perhaps has any country, except the Mediterranean, taken me so far from myself and yet so near.

This is doubtless the source of what I felt in this café at Palma. But at midday, on the other hand, what struck me in the empty district round the cathedral, among the old palaces with their cool courtyards, in the streets with their scented shadows, was the idea of a certain 'slowness'. No one in the streets. In the miradors, motionless old women. And, walking along by the side of the houses, stopping in courtyards full of green plants and round, grey pillars, I melted into this smell of silence, I slipped my chains, became nothing more than the sound of my footsteps or this flight of birds whose shadow I could see on the still sunlit part of the walls. I would also spend long hours in the little Gothic cloister of San Francisco. Its delicate and precious colonnade was shining with this fine, golden yellow colour found on old Spanish monuments. In the courtyard were laurel roses, false pepper-plants, a wrought-iron well from which hung a long spoon of rusted metal. Passers-by drank from it. I still sometimes remember the clear sound it made as it dropped back on the stone of the well. Yet it was not the sweetness of life that this cloister taught me. In the sharp sound of their wingbeats as the pigeons flew away, the silence that suddenly came and crouched in the middle of the garden, in the lonely squeaking of the chain on its well, I rediscovered a new and yet familiar savour. I was lucid and smiling as I watched this unique play of appearances. And I felt that a single gesture was enough to splinter this crystal in which the world's face was smiling. Something would slacken, the flight of pigeons would die and each of them slowly fall, on its outstretched wings. Only my motionless silence lent plausibility to what looked so like an illusion. I joined in the game. I accepted appearances without being taken in by them. A fine, golden sun was gently warming the yellow stones of the cloister. A woman was drawing water from the well. In an hour, a minute, a second, now perhaps, everything could collapse. And yet this miracle continued. The world lived on, modest, ironic and discreet (like certain gentle and reserved forms taken by women's

friendship). A balance continued, coloured however by all the apprehension of its own end.

There lay all my love of life: a silent passion for what would perhaps escape me, a bitterness beneath a flame. Each day, I would leave this cloister like a man who has been lifted from himself, inscribed for a brief moment in the continuance of the world. And I know why I then thought of the expressionless eyes of the Doric Apollos or of the stiff and motionless characters in Giotto's painting.[1] For it was then that I really understood what countries like this could offer me. I am surprised that men can find certainties and rules for life on the shores of the Mediterranean, that they can satisfy their reason there and justify optimism and social responsibility. For what in fact struck me was not a world made to the measure of man, but one that closed in upon him. No, if the language of these countries harmonized with what sounded deeply within me, it was not because it answered my questions but because it made them superfluous. It was not prayers of thanksgiving that rose to my lips, but this *Nada* whose birth is possible only at the sight of landscapes crushed by the sun. There is no love of life without despair of life.

At Ibiza, I went every day to sit in the cafés that are dotted around the port. Towards five in the evening, the local youths walk side by side up and down the length of the jetty. That is where marriages and the whole of life are arranged. One cannot help thinking that there is a certain greatness in thus beginning one's life with the world as witness. I would sit down, still dizzy from that day's sun, my head full of white churches and crumbling walls, of dry fields and hairy olive-trees. I would drink a sweetish syrup. I looked at the curve of the hills in front of me. They sloped gently down to the sea. The evening was turning green. On the largest of the hills, the last breeze was turning the sails of a windmill. And, by a natural miracle, everyone lowered his voice. So there was nothing but the sky and the singing words rising towards it, as if heard from a great distance. In the brief moment of dusk there reigned something fleeting and melancholy which could be felt not only by one man but also by a whole people. As for me, I longed to love as people long to cry. I felt

[1] It is with the appearance of smiles, and expression in the eyes, that the decadence of Greek sculpture and the dispersion of Italian art begin. As if beauty ended where the mind begins.

that every hour I slept would henceforth be an hour stolen from life . . . that is to say, from the hours of undefined desire. I was tense and motionless, as I had been in those vibrant hours in the cabaret at Palma and the cloister at San Francisco, powerless against this great upsurge that sought to put the world between my hands.

I know that I am wrong, that we cannot give ourselves completely. Otherwise, we could not create. But there are no limits to loving, and what does it matter to me if I clasp things badly if I can embrace everything? There are women at Genoa whose smile I loved for a whole morning. I shall never see them again and, doubtless, nothing is simpler. But words will never quench the flame of my regret. By the little well in the cloister of San Francisco, I watched the pigeons flying past and forgot my thirst. But a moment always came when my thirst was reborn.

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

SHE was a lonely and peculiar woman. She maintained a close relationship with the Spirits, identified herself with their quarrels, and refused to see certain members of her family who had a bad reputation in the world where she sought refuge.

One day, she received a small legacy from her sister. These five thousand francs, coming at the end of her life, turned out to be something of an encumbrance. They had to be invested. If almost everyone is capable of using a large fortune, the difficulty begins when the sum is a small one. This woman remained faithful to herself. Close to death, she sought a shelter for her old bones. A real bargain came up. A lot had just fallen vacant in her town cemetery, and on this piece of land the owners had erected a magnificent, soberly designed, black-marble tomb, a genuine treasure in fact, which they were prepared to let her have for four thousand francs. She purchased this tomb. It was a safe investment, immune to fluctuations on the stock exchange and to political events. She had the inner grave prepared, and kept it in readiness to receive her own body. And, when everything was completed, she had her name carved on it in golden capitals.

This bargain satisfied her so completely that she was seized with a veritable love for her tomb. Initially, she went to see how the work was progressing. She ended up by paying herself a visit every Sunday afternoon. It was the only time she went out, and her only amusement. Towards two in the afternoon, she made the long trip that brought her to the city gates where the cemetery was situated. She would go into the little tomb, carefully close the door behind her, and kneel down on the *Prie-Dieu.* It was thus, set in her own presence, confronting what she was and what she would become, rediscovering the link of a constantly broken chain, that she effortlessly pierced the secret designs of Providence. A strange symbol even made her realize one day

that she was dead in the eyes of the world. On All Saints' Day, arriving later than usual, she found the doorstep of her tomb piously strewn with violets. Some unknown and tender-hearted passers-by, seeing this tomb devoid of flowers, had had the kind thought of sharing their own, and had honoured the memory of this neglected corpse.

And now I think about these things again. I can see only the walls of the garden which lies on the other side of my window. And these few branches flowing with light. Higher still, the foliage and, higher still, the sun. But all that I can perceive of the rejoicing air which is felt outside, of all this joy spread out over the world, are the shadows of branches playing on my white curtains. Also five rays of sunlight patiently pouring into the room the scent of dried grass. A breeze, and the shadows on the curtains come to life. If a cloud passes over the sun, the bright yellow of this vase of mimosas leaps from the shadow. It is enough: one light coming to birth, and I am filled with a confused and whirling joy. It is a January afternoon which thus places me in presence of the wrong side of the world. But the cold stays in the depths of the air. Everywhere a film of sunlight that would crack beneath your finger, but which clothes everything in an eternal smile. Who am I and what can I do but enter into the play of foliage and of light? Be this ray of sunlight in which my cigarette burns away, this softness and discreet passion breathing in the air. If I try to reach myself, it is in the very depths of this light. And if I try to understand and savour this delicate taste which reveals the secret of the world, it is myself that I find at the depth of the universe. Myself, that is to say this extreme emotion which frees me from my surroundings.

In a moment, other things, other men and the graves they purchase. But let me cut out this minute from the cloth of time. Others leave a flower between pages, and enclose in them a walk where love has touched them with its wing. I also walk but am caressed by a god. Life is short, and it is a sin to waste one's time. They say that I am active. But being active is still wasting one's time, if in doing so one loses oneself. Today is a resting place, and my heart goes off in search of itself. If an anguish still clutches me, it is when I feel this impalpable moment slipping through my fingers like quicksilver. Let then those who wish turn their backs upon the world. I do not feel sorry for myself

since I can see myself coming to birth. At this moment, my whole kingdom is of this world. This sun and these shadows, this warmth and this cold rising from the depths of the air: what cause is there for wonder at death and human suffering since everything is written on this window where the sun pours down its fullness as a greeting to my pity? I can say and in a moment I shall say that what counts is to be human and simple. No, what counts is to be true, and then everything fits in, humanity and simplicity. And when then am I truer than when I am the world? My cup brims over before I desire. Eternity is there and I was hoping for it. What I now wish for is no longer happiness but simply awareness.

One man contemplates and another digs his grave: how can we separate them? Men and their absurdity? But here is the smile of the heavens. The light swells and soon summer will be here. But here are the eyes and the voice of those whom I must love. I hold to the world through all my gestures, to men through all my gratitude and pity. I do not want to choose between these two sides of the world, and I do not like a choice to be made. People don't like you to be lucid and ironic. They say: 'That shows that you are not good.' I can't see that this follows. Certainly, if I hear a man saying that he is an immoralist, I translate this by saying that he needs to give himself an ethic; if I hear another saying that he despises intelligence, I realize that he cannot bear his doubts. But because I don't like people to cheat. Great courage still consists of gazing steadfastly at the light as on death. Besides, how can I define the thread which leads from this all-consuming love of life to this secret despair? If I listen to the voice of irony,[1] crouching underneath things, it slowly shows itself. Winking its small, clear eye: 'Live as if . . .' In spite of much searching, that is all I know.

After all, I am not sure that I am right. But that is not what is important if I think of that woman whose story I heard. She was going to die, and her daughter dressed her for her tomb while she was alive. It would in fact appear that it is easier to do this when the limbs are not stiff. But it's odd, all the same, how everyone around us is in a hurry.

[1] That *guarantee of freedom* spoken of by Barrès.

(ii)

NUPTIALS

1938

Note to the 1950 edition

These essays were originally written in 1936 and 1937, and a small number of copies of them published in Algiers in 1938. This new edition reproduces them without any changes, in spite of the fact that their author has not ceased to consider them as essays, in the precise and limited meaning of the term.

'The hangman strangled Cardinal Carrafa with a silken rope which broke: two further attempts were necessary. The Cardinal looked at the hangman without deigning to utter a word.'

Stendhal, *La Duchesse de Palliano*

NUPTIALS AT TIPASA

In spring, Tipasa is inhabited by gods and the gods speak in the sun and the scent of absinthe leaves, the silver-armoured sea, the blue glare of the sky, the flower-covered ruins and the light in great bubbles among the heaps of stone. At certain hours of the day, the countryside is black with sunlight. The eyes try in vain to glimpse anything but drops of light and colours trembling on the lashes. The voluminous scent of aromatic plants tears at your throat and suffocates you in the vast heat. Far off, I can just make out the black bulk of the Chenoua, rooted in the hills around the village, and moving with a slow and heavy rhythm until it finally squats down in the sea.

The village that we pass through on our way there already opens out on to the sea. We enter a blue and yellow world where we are greeted by the harsh and odorous sigh of the Algerian summer earth. Everywhere, pinkish bougainvillaeas hang over the villa walls; in the garden, the hibiscus plants are still pale red, the tea-coloured roses foam as thick as cream, and long, blue irises stand in delicate flower-beds. All the stones are warm. As we step off the buttercup-yellow bus, the butchers in their little red vans are making their morning rounds and calling to the villagers with their trumpets.

To the left of the port, a stairway of dry stones leads to the ruins, through the mastic-trees and broom. The path goes in front of the small lighthouse before plunging into the open country. Already, at the foot of this lighthouse, large red and yellow cactus plants go down towards the first rocks sucked at by the kissing sound of the sea. As we stand in the slight breeze, with the sun warming one side of our faces, we watch the light coming down from the sky, the smooth sea smiling with its glittering teeth. Before entering the ruins' kingdom, we stand for the last time as mere spectators.

After a few steps, the smell of absinthe seizes you by the throat.

Their grey wool covers the ruins as far as the eye can see. Their oil ferments in the heat, and the whole earth gives off a heady alcohol which makes the sky quiver. We stride to the meeting-place of love and desire. We are not seeking lessons or the bitter philosophy required from greatness. Nothing matters here but the sun, kisses and the wild scents of the earth. I myself do not seek to be alone there. I have often been there with those I loved and read on their features the clear smile taken by the face of love. Here, I leave others to concern themselves with order and with moderation. The great free love of nature and the sea absorbs me completely. In this marriage between ruins and springtime, the ruins have become stones again, and, losing the polish imposed on them by men, have gone back to nature. Nature has celebrated the return of these prodigal daughters by laying out a profusion of flowers. The heliotrope pushes its red and white head between the flagstones of the forum, and red geraniums spill their blood over what were houses, temples and public squares. Like those men whom much knowledge brings back to God, many years have brought these ruins back to their mother's house. Today, their past has finally left them, and nothing distracts them from that deep force which draws them back to the centre of the things which fall.

How many hours spent crushing absinthe leaves, caressing ruins, trying to match my breathing to the tumultuous sighs of the world! Deep among wild scents and concerts of somnolent insects, I open my eyes and heart to the unbearable grandeur of this heat-soaked sky. It is not so easy to become what we are, to rediscover our deepest measure. But as I watched the solid backbone of the Chenoua, my heart grew calm with a strange certainty. I was learning to breathe, I was fitting into the mould and fulfilling myself. Each of the hills, as I climbed them one by one, kept me a reward, like that temple whose columns measure the course of the sun and which has a view over the whole village, with its white and pink walls and green verandas. As also had this basilisk on the East hill, which has kept its walls and is surrounded by a great circle of uncovered ornamented coffins, most of them scarcely emerging from the earth whose nature they still share. They used to contain corpses; now, sage and wallflowers grow in them. The Sainte-Salsa basilica is Christian, but each time we look out through a gap in the walls we are greeted by the song of

the world: hillsides planted with pine and cypress-trees, or the sea rolling its white horses twenty yards away. The hill on which Sainte-Salsa is built has a flat top and the wind blows more strongly through the portals. Under the morning sun, a great happiness hovers in space.

Those who need myths here are indeed poor. Here the gods serve as beds or resting places as the day races across the sky. I describe and say: 'This is red, this blue, this green. This is the sea, the mountain, the flowers.' And what need have I to speak of Dionysus to say that I love to crush mastic bowls under my nose? Is the old hymn, which will later come to me quite spontaneously, even addressed to Demeter: 'Happy is he alive who has seen these things on earth'? How can we forget the lesson of seeing, and of seeing on this earth? All one had to do at the mysteries of Eleusis was watch. Yet even here, I know that I shall never come close enough to the world. I must be naked and dive into the sea, still scented with the perfumes of the earth, wash these off in the sea, and consummate on my flesh the embrace for which sun and sea, lips to lips, have so long been sighing. I feel the shock of the water, rise up through a thick, cold glue, then dive back with my ears ringing, my nose streaming and the taste of salt in my mouth. As I swim, my water-varnished arms flash out to turn gold in the sunlight, and then plunge back with a twist of all my muscles; the water streams along my whole body as my legs take tumultuous possession of the waves—and the horizon disappears. On the beach, I flop down on the sand, yield to the world, feel my flesh and bones heavy again, besotted with sunlight, occasionally glancing at my arms where the water slides off and patches of salt and soft blond hair appear on my skin.

Here I understand what is called glory: the right to love without restraint. There is only one love in this world. Embracing a woman's body also means holding in your arms this strange joy which descends from sky to sea. In a moment, when I throw myself down among the absinthe plants to bring their scent into my body, I shall know, whatever prejudices may say, that I am fulfilling a truth which is that of the sun and which will also be that of my death. In a sense, it is indeed my life that I am playing out here, a life which tastes of warm stone, is full of the sighs of the sea and the rising song of the crickets. The breeze is cool and

the sky blue. I love life with abandon and wish to speak of it with freedom: it makes me proud of my human condition. Yet people have often told me: there's nothing to be proud of. Yes, there is: this sun, this sea, my heart leaping with youth, the salt taste of my body, and the vast landscape where tenderness and glory merge in blue and yellow. It is this conquest that requires my strength and my resources. Everything here leaves me intact, I give up nothing of myself, I put on no mask: it is enough for me patiently to acquire the difficult knowledge of how to live which is worth all their arts of living.

Shortly before midday, we would come back through the ruins towards a little café by the side of the port. How cool was the welcome of the tall glass of iced green mint as I entered the well-shadowed room, my head ringing with colours and with the cymbals of the sun! Outside, lie the sea and the road burning with dust. Sitting at the table, I try to blink my eyelids so as to catch the multi-coloured dazzle of the white-hot sky. Our faces damp with sweat, but our bodies cool in our light garments, we all stretch out the happy weariness of a day of nuptials with the world.

The food is poor in this café, but there is plenty of fruit—peaches especially, whose juice drips down your chin as you bite into them. With my teeth closing inside the peach I gaze avidly before me as I listen to the blood pounding in my ears. Over the sea hangs the vast silence of noon. Every beautiful thing has a natural pride in its own beauty, and today the world allows its pride to ooze out from every pore. Why, in its presence, should I deny the joy of living, if I can avoid enclosing everything in this joy? There is no shame in being happy. But today the fool is king, and I call fools those who fear pleasure. We have heard so much about pride: you know, it's the sin of Lucifer. Beware, they cried, you will lose your soul, and your vital force. I have in fact learnt since then that a certain pride. . . . But at other times I cannot prevent myself from claiming the pride of life which the whole world conspires to give me. At Tipasa, 'I see' equals 'I believe', and I am not stubborn enough to deny what my hands can touch and my lips caress. What I feel is not the need to make it into a work of art, but to describe, which is different. Tipasa appears to me like one of those characters whom one describes in order to give indirect expression to a general attitude. Like

them, it bears witness, and in a virile fashion. It is the character I am describing today, and it seems to me that by dint of caressing and describing it my delight will have no end. There is a time for living and a time for bearing witness to life. There is also a time for creating, which is less natural. It is enough for me to live with my whole body and bear witness with my whole heart. Live Tipasa, bear witness, and the work of art will come later. There lies a freedom.

*

I would never stay more than one day at Tipasa. A moment always comes when we have looked too long at a landscape, in the same way as it is a long time before we have looked at it enough. Mountains, the sky, the sea, are like faces whose barrenness or splendour we discover by looking rather than seeing. But if it is to speak to us, every face should come to be seen afresh. And, when we complain of growing tired too quickly, we should rather be filled with admiration that the world should appear new simply because we have forgotten it.

Towards evening, I would go to a more formal section of the park, set out as a garden, just off the main road. As I left the tumult of scents and sunlight, in the now cool evening air, my mind grew calm and my relaxed body enjoyed the inner silence stemming from love satisfied. I sat on a bench, watching the countryside fill out with light. I was replete. Above me, a pomegranate tree drooped down its flower buds, closed and ribbed like tight fists containing every hope of spring. Rosemary was growing behind me, and all I could smell was the scent of alcohol. The hills were framed about with trees, and beyond them stretched a band of sea on which the sky, like a sail becalmed, lay resting with all its tenderness. In my heart was a strange joy, the very joy which stems from a clear conscience. There is a feeling familiar to actors when they know that they have played their part well, that is to say when they have, literally, made their gestures coincide with those of the ideal character they embody, entering a ready-made pattern and bringing it to life with their own heartbeats. That was exactly what I felt: I had played my part well. I had performed my task as a man, and the fact that I had known joy all one livelong day seemed to me not an exceptional success but the intense fulfilment of a condition which, in certain

circumstances, makes it our duty to be happy. We are then alone again, but this time in satisfaction.

*

The trees had now become peopled with birds. The earth gave a long sigh before sliding into darkness. In a moment, with the first star, night will fall on the theatre of the world. The dazzling gods of day will return to their daily death. But other gods will come. And, although they will be darker, their ravaged faces will still have been born deep in the earth.

But, for the moment, the unending bursting of the waves on the shore was reaching me across a whole space dancing with golden pollen. Sea, landscape, silence, scents of this earth, I drank my fill of a scent-laden life and bit into the already golden fruit of the world, overwhelmed by the feeling of its strong sweet juice flowing along my lips. No, it was neither I nor the world that counted, but solely the harmony and silence that gave birth to the love between us. A love that I was not weak enough to claim for myself alone, proudly aware that I shared it with a whole race born of the sun and sea, alive and full of character, which draws its greatness from its simplicity, and standing on the beaches smiles in complicity to the glittering smile of its heavens.

THE WIND AT DJEMILA

THERE are places where the mind dies so that a truth which is its very denial may be born. When I went to Djemila, there was wind and sun, but that is another story. What must be said first of all is that there reigned a heavy, unbroken silence—something like a perfectly balanced pair of scales. The cry of birds, the soft sound of a three-hole flute, goats trampling, murmurs from the sky, all sounds which added to the silence and desolation of these places. Now and then a sharp clap, a piercing cry, marked the upward flight of a bird huddled among the rocks. Wherever you walk, along the paths through the ruined houses, along wide, paved roads under shining colonnades, along the vast forum between the triumphal arch and the temple set upon a hill, you always end up at the ravines which surround Djemila on every side, like a pack of cards opened out under a limitless sky. And you stand there, absorbed, face to face with stones and silence, as the day moves on and the mountains grow purple and surge upwards. But the wind blows across the plateau of Djemila. This great confusion of wind and sunlight, that mixes light with the ruins, forges something which gives man the measure of his identity with the solitude and silence of this dead city.

It takes a long time to go to Djemila. It is not a town where you stop and then move farther on. It leads nowhere and is a gateway to no other country. It is a place from which the traveller returns. The dead city lies at the end of a long, winding road where every turning seems the last and thus appears all that much longer. When, yellowish as a forest of bones, its skeleton at last looms up against the faded colours of the plateau, Djemila then symbolizes that lesson of love and patience which alone can lead us to the beating heart of the world. There, among a few trees and some dried grass, it uses all its mountains and all its stones to protect itself against vulgar admiration, quaintness or the delusions of hope.

We had wandered the whole day among this arid splendour.

Then the wind, which we had scarcely felt at the beginning of the afternoon, seemed to grow little by little as the hours went by and fill the whole countryside. It blew from a gap in the mountains, far away towards the East, rushing from beyond the horizon, leaping and cascading among the stones and sunlight. It whistled with endless power among the ruins, whirled round inside an amphitheatre of stones and earth, bathed the heaps of pock-marked blocks of stones, clasped each column with its breath and shed itself in endless cries on the forum which lay open to the heavens. I felt myself whipping in the wind like a mast. Hollowed out at the waist, with burning eyes and cracking lips, my flesh dried out until it no longer belonged to me. Beforehand, it had been by my flesh that I deciphered the handwriting of the world. On it, the world had inscribed the signs of its tenderness or anger, warming it with its summer breath or biting it with its frosty teeth. But the wind had rubbed against me for so long, shaking me for more than an hour, stunning me with its resistance, that I lost consciousness of the pattern traced by my body. Like the pebble polished by the tides, I was polished by the wind, worn through to my very soul. I grew from being a little of that great force on which I drifted, until I gradually became the force itself, mingling the throbbing of my own heart with the great sonorous heartbeats of this omnipresent heart of nature. The wind was fashioning me in the likeness of the burning nakedness around me. And its fleeting embrace gave me, stone among stones, the solitude of a column or an olive-tree in the summer sky.

This violent bath of sun and wind drained me of all my vital force. I scarcely felt that quiver of wings inside me, the complaint of life, the weak rebellion of the mind. Soon, scattered to the four corners of the earth, self-forgetful and self-forgotten, I am one with this wind and live within it, am one with these columns and that archway, one with these flagstones warm to the touch, one with these pale mountains around the deserted city. And never have I been at one and the same time so detached from myself and so present in the world.

Yes, I am present. And what strikes me at this moment is that I can go no farther. Like a man sentenced to life imprisonment, to whom everything is present. But also like a man who knows that tomorrow will be the same, and every other day. For when a man becomes conscious of what he is now, it means that

he expects nothing further. If there are landscapes which are like moods, they are the most vulgar. For I was following through this country something that belonged not to me but to it, like a taste for death common to us both. Between the columns with their now lengthening shadows, anxieties melted into the air like wounded birds. And, in their place, came an arid lucidity. Anxiety is born from the heart of the living. But calm will cover over this living heart: that is all I can see clearly. As the day moved forward, as the noises and lights were muffled by the ashes falling from the sky, deserted by myself, I felt defenceless against the slow forces in my own being that were saying no.

Few people realize that there is a refusal which has nothing to do with renunciation. What meaning do words like future, improvement, good job, mean here? What is meant by the heart's progress? If I obstinately refuse all the 'later on's' of this world, it is because I have no desire to give up my present wealth. I do not want to believe that death is a gateway to another life. For me, it is a closed door. I do not say that it is a step that we must all take: but that it is a horrible and dirty adventure. Everything people suggest seeks to deliver man from the weight of his own life. But as I watch the great birds flying heavily through the sky at Djemila, it is precisely a certain weight of life that I ask for and obtain. When I coincide completely with this passive passion the rest ceases to concern me. I have too much youth in me to be able to speak of death. But it seems to me that, if I were to speak of it, it is here that I should find the precise word that would express, between horror and silence, the conscious certainty of a death without hope.

We live with a few familiar ideas. Two or three. With the worlds and the men we happen to meet, we polish and transform them. We need ten years to have an idea that really belongs to us—that we can talk about. Naturally, it is a little discouraging. But through it man gains a certain familiarity with the beautiful visage of the world. Until then, he has seen it face to face. Now he needs to step to one side to see its profile. A young man looks at the world face to face. He has not had time to polish the idea of death or of nothingness, though he has chewed over their full horror. That is what youth must be like, this harsh confrontation with death, this physical terror of the animal that loves the sun. Whatever people may say, youth has no illusions on this score,

at any rate. It has had neither the time nor the piety to build itself any. And, I don't know why, but faced by this ravined landscape, by this solemn and lugubrious cry of stone, by Djemila inhuman at nightfall, by this death of colours and of hope, I was certain that when they reach the end of their lives, men worthy of the name must rediscover this confrontation, deny the few ideas which they had, and recover the innocence and truth which shine in the eyes of Greeks and Romans in face of their destiny. They regain their youth, but by embracing death. There is nothing more despicable in this respect than illness. It is a remedy against death. It prepares us for it. It creates an apprenticeship whose first stage is self-pity. It supports man in his great effort to avoid the certainty that he will die completely. But Djemila . . . and I then feel certain that the true, the only progress of civilization, the one to which a man devotes himself from time to time, lies in creating conscious deaths.

What always amazes me, when we are so swift to elaborate on other subjects, is the poverty of our ideas on death. It is a good thing or a bad thing, I fear it or I summon it (they say). But also this proves that everything that is simple goes beyond us. What is blue, and how can we think 'blue'? The same difficulty arises for death. Death and colours are things that we cannot discuss. And, nevertheless, the important thing is this man before me, heavy as earth, who prefigures my future. But can I really think about it? I say to myself: I am going to die, but this means nothing since I cannot manage to believe it and can experience only other people's death. I have seen people die. Above all, I have seen dogs die. It was touching them that overwhelmed me. I then think of flowers, smiles, desire for women, and realize that my whole horror of death lies in my jealousy of life. I am jealous of those who will live and for whom flowers and the desire for women will have their full flesh-and-blood meaning. I am envious because I love life too much not to be selfish. What does eternity matter to me? You can lie in bed one day and hear someone tell you: 'You are strong and I owe it to you to be sincere: I can tell you that you are going to die;' lie there, with the whole of your life clasped in your hands, all your fear in your bowels and a look of stupidity in your eyes. What does the rest matter? Waves of blood come throbbing to my temples and I feel I could crush everything around me.

But men die in spite of themselves, in spite of their surroundings. They are told: 'When you are cured . . .', and they die. I want none of that. For if there are days when nature lies, there are others when she tells the truth. Djemila is telling the truth this evening, and with what sad and insistent beauty! In the presence of this world, I have no desire to lie or for other people to lie to me. I want to keep my lucidity to the last, and gaze upon my death with all the fullness of my jealousy and horror. It is when I cut myself off from the world that I fear death most, attaching myself to the fate of living men instead of contemplating the unchanging sky. Creating conscious deaths means lessening the distance which separates us from the world, and entering joylessly into fulfilment, conscious of the exalting images which belong to a world for ever lost. And the sad song of the Djemila hills plunges the bitterness of this lesson deeper into my soul.

*

Towards evening, we were climbing the slopes leading to the village and, retracing our steps, listening to our guide: 'Here is the pagan town; this area outside the field is where the Christians lived. Later on . . .' Yes, it is true. Men and societies have succeeded one another in this place; conquerors have marked this country with their non-commissioned officer's civilization. They entertained a vulgar and ridiculous idea of greatness, and measured that of their empire by the surface which it covered. The miracle is that the ruins of their civilization should constitute the very negation of their ideal. For it was not the signs of conquest or ambition that this skeleton town, seen from such a height as evening fell and white pigeons flew around the triumphal arch, was inscribing on the sky. In the end, the world always conquers history. I well know the poetry of the great cry of stone which Djemila utters among the mountains, the heavens and the silence: lucidity, indifference, the true signs of beauty or despair. Our heart tightens as we behold this greatness which we must already leave. Djemila stays behind us with the sad water of its sky, the song of a bird coming from the other side of the plateau, a few goats running quietly down the mountainside, and, in the calmed and sonorous dusk, the living face of a horned god on the frontal of an altar.

SUMMER IN ALGIERS

to Jacques Heurgon

THE loves we share with towns are often secret ones. Cities like Paris, Prague and even Florence are closed in upon themselves and thus restrict the world peculiar to them. But Algiers, like other privileged places such as coastal towns, lies open to the sky like a mouth or like a wound. What you can love in Algiers is what everybody lives off: the sea visible at every corner, a certain weight of sunlight, the beauty of the race. And, as always, this generosity and lack of modesty also hold a more secret flavour. In Paris, you can feel nostalgic for space and for the beating of wings. Here, at least, man has everything he needs, and, thus assured of his desires, can measure up his wealth.

You doubtless need to spend a long time in Algiers to understand how desiccating an excess of nature's blessings can be. There is nothing here for people seeking knowledge, education or self-improvement. This land contains no lessons. It neither promises nor reveals. It is content to give, but does so profusely. Everything here is revealed to the naked eye, and is known the very moment it is enjoyed. Its pleasures have no remedies and its joys remain without hope. What it demands are clear-sighted souls, that is to say those without consolation. It asks us to make an act of lucidity as we make an act of faith. Strange country, which gives the men it nourishes both their wretchedness and their greatness! It is not surprising that the sensual wealth heaped on the man of feeling in this country should coincide with the most extreme deprivation. There is no truth that does not carry its bitterness within itself. Why then should it be surprising if I never love the face of this country more than in the midst of its poorest inhabitants?

Throughout their youth, men find here a life which matches their beauty. Then, afterwards, come decline and forgetfulness. They have wagered on the flesh, but they knew that they would lose. In Algiers, everything is a refuge and an occasion for

triumphs for those who are young and alive: the bay, the sun, the games marked out in red and white on the terraces over towards the sea, the flowers and stadia, the cool-legged girls. But for the man who has lost his youth there is nothing to hang on to, and no place where melancholy can escape from itself. Elsewhere, the terraces in Italy, the cloisters of Europe or the shape of the hills in Provence, are all places where man can flee from his humanity and be gently saved from himself. But everything here demands solitude and young men's blood. Goethe on his deathbed called for light and this is a historic remark. In Belcourt and Bab-el-Oued, the old men sitting at the back of cafés listen to young men with brilliantined hair boasting of their exploits.

It is the summer which grants us these beginnings and ends in Algiers. During these months, the town is deserted. But the poor and the sky are always with us. With the first, we go down together towards the port and its human treasures: the gentle warmth of the water and the brown bodies of the women. In the evening, crammed with these riches, they go back to the oilskin cloth and oil-lamp that are the only background that they know.

*

In Algiers, you don't say 'to go swimming' but 'to dive in for a swim'. I won't insist. People bathe in the port and rest on the buoys. When you go close to a buoy on which a pretty girl is already sitting, you shout to your friends: 'I tell you it's a sea-gull.' These are healthy pleasures. They obviously constitute the ideal for these young men, since most of them continue to live like this during the winter, and each day at noon strip themselves bare in the sun for a frugal lunch. Not that they have read the boring sermons of our nudists, those protestants of the body (there is a way of systematizing the body which is as infuriating as systems for the soul). But they 'like being in the sun'. We shall never give enough importance to what this custom represents for our time. For the first time in two thousand years, the body has been shown naked on the beaches. For twenty centuries, men have tried to impose decency on the insolence and simplicity of the Greeks, to play down the flesh and complicate our clothes. Today, reaching back over this history, the young men sprinting on the Mediterranean beaches rediscover the magnificent gestures of the athletes of Delos. And by thus living close to the

body, and living by the body, we learn that it has its own nuances, its life, and, to venture an absurdity, its own psychology.[1] The evolution of the body, like that of the mind, has its history, its reversals, its gains and its losses. With only this nuance: colour. When you go to swim in the port during summer, you notice that everybody's skin is changing at the same time from white to gold, then to brown, and, finally, to a tobacco colour which represents the final stage which the body can manage in this quest for transformation. The Kasbah's pattern of white cubes dominates the whole port. When you are at water level, people's bodies form a bronzed frieze against the glaring white background of the Arab town. And, as you move into the month of August and the sun grows stronger, the white of the houses becomes more blinding and skins take on a darker glow. How then can you fail to identify yourself with this dialogue between stone and flesh which matches the seasons and the sun? You spend the whole morning diving in the sea, with garlands of laughter among spouts of water, in long paddling trips around red and black cargo vessels (the ones from Norway smell of all kinds of wood, the ones from Germany reek of oil, the ones going from port to port along the coast smell of wine and old casks). When the sun is brimming over from every corner of the sky, the orange-coloured canoe laden with sunburnt bodies brings us back in a mad race. And when, in a sudden pause in the rhythmic stroke of the fruit-coloured blades of the double paddle, we glide smoothly into the harbour, how can I help but know that I am carrying across the smooth waters a bronzed cargo of gods in whom I recognize my brothers?

But, at the other end of the town, the summer already offers us the contrast of its other wealth: I mean its silences and boredom. These silences do not always have the same quality, according

[1] May I be so foolish as to say that I do not like the way Gide exalts the body? He asks it to hold back his desire in order to make it more intense. He thus brings himself close to those who, in the slang of brothels, are termed weirdies or kinkies. Christianity also seeks to suspend desire. But, more naturally, sees this a mortification. My friend Vincent, who is a cooper and junior breast-stroke champion, has an even clearer view of things. He drinks when he is thirsty, if he wants a woman tries to sleep with her, and would marry her if he loved her (this hasn't happened yet). Then he always says: 'That's better'—an energetic summary of the apology one could write for satiety.

to whether they are born of shadow or of sun. There is the silence of noon on Government Square. In the shade of the trees that grow each side, Arabs sell penny glasses of iced lemonade, perfumed with orange blossom. Their cry of 'cool, cool' echoes across the empty square. When it fades away, silence falls again under the sun: in the merchant's pitcher, the ice moves and I can hear it tinkling. There reigns the silence of the siesta. In the streets round the docks, in front of the squalid barbers' shops, you can measure the silence by the melodious buzzing of the flies behind the hollow reed curtains. Elsewhere, in the Moorish cafés in the Kasbah, it is men's bodies which are silent, which cannot drag themselves away, leave the glass of tea, and rediscover time through the pounding of their own pulse. But there is, above all, the silence of the summer evenings.

Is it because these brief moments when day swings over into night are peopled with signs and secret calls that Algiers is linked so closely to them in my heart? When I have been away from this country for some time, I imagine its dusks as promises of happiness. On the hills looking down over the town, there are paths among the mastic-trees and olive-trees. And it is towards them that my heart then turns. I can see sheaves of blackbirds rising up against the green horizon. In the sky, suddenly emptied of its sun, something releases its hold. A whole small people of red clouds stretches up until it melts into the air. Almost immediately afterwards, there appears the first star that had been forming and growing harder in the thickness of the heavens. And then, sudden and all-consuming, night. What is so unique in these fleeting evenings of Algiers that it releases so many things in me? They leave a sweetness on my lips, but before I have time to weary of it, it has already vanished into darkness. Is this the secret of its persistence? The tenderness of this country is furtive and overwhelming. But once we feel it, then our heart at least surrenders. On the Padovani beach, the dance-hall is open every day. And, in this immense rectangular box which stands open to the sea all along one side, the penniless youth of the district come to dance until evening. Often, I would wait there for one particular moment. In the daytime, the dance-hall is protected by a sloping wooden roof. When the sun has gone in, this is removed. The hall is then filled with a strange green light, born of the double shell of the sky and sea. When you sit a long way from the

windows, you can see only the sky, and, like puppets in a shadow-theatre, the faces of the dancers floating past one after another. Sometimes the musicians play a waltz and the dark profiles then revolve like cut-out figures placed on a record player. Night comes quickly then, and, with it, the lights. But I shall never be able to describe the secret enchantment of this subtle moment. What I do remember is a magnificent, tall girl who had danced all one afternoon. She was wearing a necklace of jasmine on her close-fitting blue dress, which was damp with sweat right down the back. She was laughing and throwing back her head as she danced. When she passed in front of the tables, she left behind her a mingled scent of flowers and flesh. When evening came, I could no longer see her body pressed against her partner, but the white of her jasmine and the black of her hair were revolving one after the other against the sky, and when she threw back her full throat I could hear her laugh and see her partner's silhouette lean suddenly forward. It is to evenings such as these that I owe my idea of innocence. And I am learning that these beings charged with violence cannot be separated from the sky in which their desires revolve.

*

In the local cinemas in Algiers, there are often mint pastilles on sale with red letters engraved upon them expressing everything needed for the birth of love: (1) questions: 'When will you marry me?'; 'Do you love me?'; (2) replies: 'Madly'; 'Next spring'. After having prepared the ground, you pass them to your neighbour who replies in the same vein or simply plays the fool. In Belcourt, there have been marriages arranged like this and whole lives decided by an exchange of mint-flavoured sweets. And this gives a good picture of the childlike people of this country.

The sign of youth is perhaps a magnificent vocation for easy pleasures. But, above all, it lies in a haste to live that borders on extravagance. In Belcourt, as in Bab-el-Oeud, people marry young. They start work very early, and exhaust the range of human experience in ten years. A workman of thirty has already played all his cards. He waits for the end with his wife and children around him. His delights have been swift and merciless. So has his life. And you then understand why he should have been born of this country where everything is given to be taken

away. In this abundance and profusion, life follows the curve of the great passions, sudden, demanding, generous. It is not to be built up but to be burned away. Reflection or self-improvement are quite irrelevant. The notion of hell, for example, is here nothing more than an amusing joke. Only the very virtuous are allowed such fancies. And I believe that virtue is a meaningless word throughout the whole of Algeria. Not that these men lack principles. They have their code of morality, which is very well defined. You 'don't let your mother down'. You see to it that your wife is respected in the street. You show consideration to pregnant women. You don't attack an enemy two to one, because 'that's dirty'. If anyone fails to observe these elementary rules, 'He's not a man' and that's all there is to it. This seems to me just and strong. There are still many of us who observe the highway code, the only disinterested one I know. But at the same time the shopkeepers' ethic is unknown. I have always seen the faces around me take on an expression of pity when a man goes by between two policemen. And, before finding out whether the man was a thief, a patricide, or simply an eccentric, people said: 'Poor fellow', or again, with a touch of admiration: 'He's a pirate.'

There are peoples born for pride and for life. It is they who nourish the most singular vocation for boredom. It is also they who look upon death with most repulsion. Apart from sensual delights, the Algerians' amusements are idiotic. For years now the entertainment of the over-thirty age group has been fully catered for by a bowling club, by friendly society dinners, cheap cinemas and communal celebrations. Sundays in Algiers are of the gloomiest. How could this mindless people disguise the deep horror of its life with myths? In Algiers, everything associated with death is either ridiculous or detestable. These people have neither religion nor idols and die alone after having lived in a crowd. I know nowhere more hideous than the cemetery of the Boulevard Bru, which stands facing one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. A fearful sadness rises from the black setting where, in aesthetic horror piled on aesthetic horror, death reveals its true face. 'Everything fades away,' say the heart-shaped ex-votos, 'except memory.' And they all insist upon that ridiculous eternity which the heart of those who loved us provides at so low a cost. The same phrases serve all forms of despair. They address the corpse and call it 'thou': 'Our memory will

never abandon thee,'—a gloomy pretence by means of which one lends a body and desires to what is at best a black liquid. Elsewhere, in the midst of a stupefying display of flowers and marble birds, you find this reckless vow: 'Never shall thy grave lack flowers.' But you are quickly reassured: the words are carved around a gilded stucco bouquet, a great time-saver for the living (like those flowers termed everlasting which owe their pompous name to the gratitude of those who still jump on moving buses). Since one must move with the times, the classical warbler is sometimes replaced by a breath-taking pearl aeroplane, piloted by a simpering angel who, in defiance of all logic, has been provided with a magnificent pair of wings.

How can one nevertheless explain that these images of death never cut themselves off from life? Here, values are closely linked together. The favourite joke of the Algerian undertakers, when they have no one in the hearse, is to shout: 'Like a ride, honey?' to the pretty girls they meet on the way. This may well have symbolic, if somewhat tasteless, implications. It can also seem blasphemous to acknowledge the news of someone's death by winking your left eye and saying: 'Poor chap, he won't sing any more.' Or, like that woman from Oran who had never loved her husband: 'God gave him to me, God has taken him away.' But when all is said and done, I don't see what is sacred about death, and I am, on the contrary, very aware of the difference between fear and respect. Everything here breathes the horror of dying in a country which is an invitation to life. And yet it is under the very walls of this cemetery that the young men of Belcourt arrange their meetings, and the girls let themselves be kissed and fondled.

I fully realize that such a people cannot be accepted by everyone. Here, intelligence occupies nothing like the place it does in Italy. This race is uninterested in the mind. It worships and admires the body. From this it derives its strength, its naïve cynicism,[1] and a puerile vanity that leads it to be severely criticized. People frequently criticize it for its 'mentality', that is to say for a particular mode of life and set of values. And it is true that a certain intensity of life involves some injustice. Here, nevertheless, is a people with no past, no tradition, and yet which is not lacking in poetry. But it is a poetry whose hard and sensual

[1] See note on page 71.

quality I know very well, a poetry that is far from tenderness, even from the tenderness of the Algerian sky, the only poetry which in fact moves me and makes me one with myself. The opposite of a civilized people is a creative one. These barbarians lounging on the beaches give me the unreasoned hope that, perhaps without knowing it, they are modelling the face of a culture where man's greatness will finally discover its true visage. This people, plunged wholly in the present, lives with neither myths nor consolation. It has placed all its goods on this earth and hence remains defenceless against death. The gifts of physical beauty have been heaped upon it. And, with them, that strange greed which always accompanies this futureless wealth. Everything that people do in Algiers indicates a disgust for stability and a lack of regard for the future. People hasten to live, and if an art were to be born here it would conform to that hatred of permanence which led the Dorians to carve their first column out of wood. And yet it is true that one can find a certain moderation as well as a constant excess in the strained and violent face of this people, in this summer sky emptied of tenderness, beneath which all truths can be told and on which no deceitful divinity has traced the signs of hope or of redemption. Between this sky and the faces looking up to it there is nothing on which to hang a mythology, a literature, an ethic or a religion; only stones, flesh, stars and those truths which the hand can touch.

*

A man who can feel his links with one land, his love for a few men, who knows that there is always a place where his heart will find its resting place, already owns many certainties in his life. And yet, certainly, this can be insufficient. But everything, at certain moments, yearns for that land of the soul. 'Yes, it is there that we must return.' What is strange in finding here on earth the union for which Plotinus yearned? Unity expresses itself here in terms of sun and sea. The heart feels it through a certain taste of flesh which constitutes its bitterness and greatness. I learn that there is no superhuman happiness, no eternity outside the curve of the days. These paltry and essential goods, these relative truths, are the only ones that can move me. I have not enough soul to understand the other, 'ideal' ones. Not that we should behave as beasts, but I can see no point in the happiness

of angels. All I know is that this sky will last longer than I shall. And what can I call eternity except what will continue after my death? What I am expressing here is not the creature's self-satisfaction with its own condition. It is something quite different. It is not always easy to be a man, even less to be a man who is pure. But to be pure means rediscovering that country of the soul where the throbbing of our blood mingles with the violent pulsations of the afternoon sun. It is a well-known fact that we always recognize our homeland when we are about to lose it. Those whose self-torments are too great are those whom their homeland rejects. I have no desire here to be brutal or to appear exaggerated. But what in fact denies me in this life is first of all what kills me. Everything that exalts life at the same time increases its absurdity. In the summer of Algiers, I learn that only one thing is more tragic than suffering, and that is the life of a happy man. But this can also be the path to a greater life, since it can teach us not to cheat.

Many people, in fact, affect a love of life in order to avoid love itself. They try to enjoy themselves and 'make experiments'. But this is an intellectual attitude. You need a rare vocation to become a sensualist. A man lives out his life without the help of his mind, with its triumphs and defeats, its simultaneous loneliness and companionship. I think that we can often feel a secret shame at the sight of these men from Belcourt who work, defend their wives and children, often without a word of reproach. I certainly have no illusions. There is not much love in the lives that I am describing. I should rather say that there is no longer very much. But at least they have eluded nothing. There are words which I have never really understood, like that of sin. I nevertheless believe that these men never sinned against life. For if there is a sin against life, it lies perhaps less in despairing of it than in hoping for another life and evading the implacable grandeur of the one we have. These men have not cheated. They were gods of the summer at twenty in their thirst for life, and they are still gods today, stripped of all hope. I have seen two of them die. They were full of horror, but silent. It is better like that. From the mass of evils swarming in Pandora's box, the Greeks brought out hope as the very last, as the most terrible of all. I know of no more moving symbol. But hope, contrary to popular belief, is tantamount to resignation. And living means not being resigned.

This at least is the bitter lesson of summers in Algiers. But already the season is trembling and summer dips away. The first September rains, after so much violence and tension, come like the first tears shed by a liberated land, as if for a few days this country were bathed in tenderness. Yet at the same time the carob trees are casting the scent of love over the whole of Algeria. In the evening, after the rain, the whole earth lies with its belly moistened by an almond-flavoured seed, and after yielding to the sun throughout the summer lies at rest. And once again this scent lays its blessing upon the nuptials between man and the earth, and raises in us the only truly virile love that this world holds: one which is generous and will die.

Note: Here, as an illustration, is the account of a fight overheard in Bab-el-Oued and reproduced word for word. (The narrator does not always speak the language of Musette's Cagayous. This is not surprising. The Cagayous' language is often a literary one, that is to say a reconstruction. Members of the 'underworld' do not always use slang. They use slang expressions, which is different. The Algerian uses a typical vocabulary and a special syntax. But it is by their introduction into French that these creations find their flavour.)

So then Coco comes on forward and tells him: 'Just hold it a minute now, hold it.' Up comes the other fellow and says: 'Now what?' Then Coco says to him: 'I'll be letting you have it.' '*You'll* be letting *me* have it?' Then he puts his hand behind his back, but that was it. So then Coco says to him: 'Now keep your hands in front, because I'll be having your 45 and you'll be biting the dust all the same.'

So the other one kept his hand in front. And Coco gave him one, just one, not two, just one. The other man was on the deck, going 'Ow, Ow'. Then everybody came. And the bundle was on. One of them went up to Coco, then two then three. But I said to him: 'Here, you're going to hit my brother, are you?' 'What do you mean, he's your brother?' 'If it's not my brother then he's as good as.' Then I thumped him. Coco was thumping, I was thumping, Lucien was thumping. I'd got one of them in the corner and was giving him the head. Then the law arrived. They put the chains on us, you know. Red with shame, I was, going all the way through Bab-el-Oued. In front of the *Gentlemen's Bar* there were some of my pals and some little girls as well. Red with shame, I was. But afterwards, Lucien's father told us: 'You were right to do it.'

THE DESERT

to Jean Grenier

LIVING, of course, is slightly the opposite of expressing. If I am to believe the great Tuscan masters, it means bearing triple witness, in silence, flames and immobility.

It is a long time before we realize that the people in their paintings can be encountered every day of the week in the streets of Florence or of Pisa. But it is equally true that we no longer know how to look at the real faces of those around us today. We no longer look at our contemporaries, and are eager only for what serves our aims and determines our behaviour. We prefer its most vulgar poetry to the face itself. But Giotto and Piero della Francesca are perfectly aware that a man's feelings are nothing. And, indeed, everyone has a heart. But the simple and eternal emotions round which revolves the love of living—hatred, love, tears and joys—grow deep inside a man and model the face of his destiny—like the grief which makes Mary clench her teeth in Giottino's *Entombment*. In the immense friezes of the Tuscan churches I see a crowd of angels whose faces are but lightly traced, and yet whose silent passion still reveals a loneliness all of its own.

What matters are not picturesque qualities, episodes, shades of colour or emotional effects. What counts is not poetry. What counts is truth. And I call truth anything that continues. There is a subtle lesson in thinking that, in this respect, only painters can satisfy our hunger. This is because they have the privilege of making themselves novelists of the body. Because they work in that magnificent and trivial matter that is called the present. And the present always shows itself in a gesture. They do not paint a smile, a fleeting moment of modesty, of regret or expectation, but a face with the shape of its bones and the colour of its blood. What they have expelled from these faces moulded for eternity is the curse of the mind: at the price of hope. For the body knows nothing of hope. All it knows is the beating of its own heart.

Its eternity consists of indifference. As in the *Scourging of Christ* by Piero della Francesca, where, in a freshly washed courtyard, both the tortured Christ and the thickset executioner reveal the same detachment in their attitudes. This is because the torment has no sequel. Its lesson ends at the frame around its canvas. Why should a man who expects nothing of the morrow feel emotion? This impassibility and this greatness, which man shows when he has no hope, this eternal present, is precisely what perceptive theologians have called hell. And hell, as everyone knows, also consists of bodily suffering. The Tuscan painters stop at the body and not at its destiny. There are no prophetic paintings. And it is not in the museum that we must seek reasons to hope.

The immortality of the soul, it is true, preoccupies many intelligent people. But this is because they reject the only truth given to them, the body, before they have exhausted all its strength. For the body sets them no problems or, at least, they know the only solution it proposes: it is a truth which must perish and which, because of that, acquires a bitterness and nobility which they dare not contemplate directly. Intelligent people would sooner have poetry, for poetry is the soul's concern. Clearly I am playing on words. But it is also clear that all I wish to do by calling it truth is consecrate a higher poetry: that dark flame which Italian painters from Cimabue to Francesca have raised up amid the Tuscan scenery as the lucid protestation of men cast into a land whose splendour and light speak ceaselessly to them of a non-existent God.

It can happen that indifference and sensitivity may lead a face to merge with the mineral grandeur of a landscape. Just as certain Spanish peasants come to resemble their own olive-trees, so the faces in Giotto's pictures, shorn of the insignificant shadows which reveal the soul, finally merge with Tuscany itself in the only lesson which it freely offers: the exercise of passion at the expense of feeling, a mixture of asceticism and pleasure, a resonance common to both man and the earth and by which man, like the earth, defines himself as halfway between wretchedness and love. There are not so many truths of which the heart can be assured. And I recognized how obvious a truth this was on an evening when the shadows were beginning to drown the vines and olive-trees of the Florentine countryside in a vast and

silent sadness. But sadness in this country is never anything but a commentary on beauty. And as the train travelled on through the evening I felt a tension in me slowly giving way. And today, can I doubt that with the face of sadness this also bore the name of happiness?

Yes, Italy also lavishes in every landscape the lesson illustrated by its men. But it is easy to miss our chance of happiness, for it is always undeserved. The same is true of Italy. And if its grace is sudden, it is not always immediate. More than any other country, it invites us to deepen an experience which nevertheless seems to be complete on first acquaintance. This is because it begins by lavishing its poetry in order better to disguise its truth. Its first spells are rites of forgetfulness: the rose-laurels of Monaco, Genoa full of flowers and the smell of fish, and blue evenings on the Ligurian coast. Then finally Pisa, and with it an Italy which has lost the rather tatty charm of the Riviera. But it is still a country of easy virtue, and why should we not lend ourselves for a time to its sensual grace? There is nothing urging me on while I am here (I am deprived of the joys of the 'hunted traveller' since a cheap ticket compels me to spend a certain time in the town 'of my choice'), and my patience for love and understanding seems endless on this first evening when, tired out and starving, I enter Pisa, and am greeted in Station Avenue by ten bellowing loudspeakers pouring out a flood of sentimental songs over a crowd in which almost everyone is young. I already know what I expect. After this life has surged around me, the strange moment will come when, with the cafés closed and the silence suddenly restored, I shall walk through the short, dark streets towards the centre of the town. How can I describe the trick whereby the empty town of Pisa, with its green and yellow monuments, the black and gold of the Arno, changes so swiftly and so skilfully into a strange setting of silence, water and stones. 'In such a night as this, Jessica!' Here, on this singular stage, gods appear with the voices of Shakespeare's lovers. . . . We must learn how to lend ourselves to dreams when dreams lend themselves to us. In the depths of this Italian night, I can already hear the strains of this more private song which people come to look for here. Tomorrow, and only tomorrow, will the countryside fill out in the morning light. But this evening I am a god among gods, and as Jessica flies off 'on the swift steps of love', I

mingle my voice with that of Lorenzo. But Jessica is only a pretext, and this upsurge of love goes beyond her. Yes, I believe that Lorenzo is less in love with her than grateful to her for allowing him to love. But why should I dream this evening of the Lovers of Venice and forget Verona? Because there is nothing here that invites us to cherish unhappy lovers. Nothing is vainer than to die for a love. What we ought to do is live. And a living Lorenzo is better than a Romeo in his grave, and this despite his rose-bush. How then can we refrain from dancing in these feasts of living love—and from sleeping in the afternoon on the short grass of the Piazza del Duomo, surrounded by monuments that there will always be time enough to visit, from drinking at the town fountains where the water was slightly lukewarm but so fluid, from seeing again the face of the woman who was laughing, with her long nose and proud mouth? All we must realize is that this initiation prepares us for higher illuminations. These are the dazzling processions leading to the Dionysian mysteries at Eleusis. It is in joy that man prepares his lessons and, when its ecstasy is at its highest pitch, the flesh becomes conscious and consecrates its communion with a sacred mystery whose symbol is black blood. It is here that the self-forgetfulness drawn from the ardour of that first Italy prepares us for the lesson which frees us from hope and takes us from our history. These twin truths of the body and of the moment in time, this spectacle of beauty, are things we should cling to as we cling to the only happiness we can expect, one that will enchant us but perish in the act.

*

The most repulsive materialism lies not where people think, but in the effort to pass off as living truths ideas which are dead, diverting on to sterile myths the stubborn and clear-sighted gaze which we should cast on what in us must die for ever. I remember that in Florence, in the cloister of the dead, at the Santissima Annunziata, I was carried away by something which I mistook for distress and which was only anger. It was raining. I was reading inscriptions on the tombstones and the ex-votos. This man had been a tender father and a faithful husband; another, at the same time as the best of husbands, a skilful merchant. A young woman, a model of all the virtues, had spoken French '*si*

come il nativo'. There a young girl was the hope of her whole family, '*ma la gioia è pellegrina sulla terra*'. But nothing of all that affected me. Almost all of them, according to the inscriptions, had resigned themselves to dying, doubtless because they accepted their other duties. On that day, children had invaded the cloister and were playing leap-frog over the tombstones which strove to perpetuate their virtues. Night was then falling, and I had sat down on the ground, my back against a column. A priest smiled at me as he went by. In the church, an organ was playing softly, and the warm colour of its pattern sometimes reappeared behind the children's shouts. Alone against the column, I was like someone seized by the throat and who shouts out his faith as if it were his last word. Everything in me protested against such a resignation. 'You must,' said the inscriptions. But no, and my revolt was right. This joy that travelled indifferent and absorbed like a pilgrim on the earth was something that I had to follow step by step. And, as far as the rest was concerned, I said no. I said no with all my strength. The tombstones taught me that it was pointless, that life is '*col sol levante, col sol cadente*'. But today I cannot see what my revolt loses by being pointless, and I am well aware of what it gains.

Besides, that is not what I set out to say. I should like to define a little more clearly a truth which I then felt at the very heart of my revolt and of which this revolt was only an extension, a truth which stretched from the small late roses in the cloister of Santa Maria Novella to the women on that Sunday morning in Florence, their breasts free beneath their light dresses, and their moist lips. At every church corner, that Sunday morning, stood displays of flowers, their petals thick and shining, bejewelled with spots of water. What they then offered me was a kind of 'naïvety' as well as a reward. There was a generous opulence in these flowers as there was in these women, and I could not see that desiring the latter was very different from longing for the former. The same pure heart sufficed for both. It is not often that a man feels his heart is pure. But when he does, his duty is to give the name of truth to what has so singularly purified him, even if this truth may seem a blasphemy to others. This is what I thought on that particular day. I had spent my morning in a Franciscan convent, at Fiesole, full of the scent of laurel. I had stood for a long time in the little courtyard overflowing with red flowers, sunlight and

black and yellow bees. In a corner stood a green watering can. Before going there, I had visited the monks' cells, and seen their little tables each adorned with a skull. Now, this garden bore witness to the sources of their inspiration. I had turned back towards Florence, down the hill which led towards the town lying open with all its cypress trees. I felt that this splendour of the world, these women and these flowers, offered a kind of justification for these men. I was not sure that they were not also the justification for all those men who know that an extreme level of poverty always rejoins the wealth and luxury of the world. Between the life of these Franciscans, enclosed among columns and flowers, and the life of the young men of the Padovani beach in Algiers, who spend the whole year in the sun, I felt that there was a common resonance. If they strip themselves bare, it is for a greater life (and not for another one). This is at least the only valid meaning of expressions such as 'deprivation' and 'stripping oneself bare'. Being naked always has a sense of physical liberty and of that harmony between hand and flowers—this loving understanding between the earth and a man delivered from humanity—ah! I would be a convert to this if it were not already my religion. No, what I have just said cannot be a blasphemy—any more than if I say that the inner smile of Giotto's portraits of Saint Francis justifies those who have a taste for happiness. For myths are to religion what poetry is to truth, ridiculous masks laid on the passion to live.

Shall I go further? The same men who, at Fiesole, live among red flowers, also keep in their cell the skull that nourishes their meditations. Florence at their window and death on their table. A certain continuity in despair can give birth to joy. And when life reaches a certain temperature, our soul and our blood mingle together and live at ease in contradiction, as indifferent to duty as to faith. I am no longer surprised that a cheerful hand should have thus resumed its strange notion of honour on a wall in Pisa: '*Alberto fa l'amore con la mia sorella.*' I am no longer surprised that Italy should be the land of incests, or at least, which is more significant, of admitted incests. For the path which leads from beauty to immorality is tortuous but certain. Plunged deep in beauty, the mind feeds off nothingness. When he faces landscapes whose grandeur clutches him by the throat, each of his thoughts is a scratch on man's perfection. And soon, crossed out,

scarred and rescarred by so many overwhelming certainties, he ceases to be anything at all in face of the world except a formless stain knowing only passive truths, the world's colour or its sun. Landscapes as pure as this dry up the soul and their beauty is unbearable. The message of these gospels of stone, sky and water is that there are no resurrections. Henceforth, from the depths of these deserts which the heart sees as magnificent, the men of these countries begin to feel temptation. Why is it surprising if minds brought up before the spectacle of nobility, in the rarefied air of beauty, remain unconvinced that greatness and goodness can live together? An intelligence with no god to carry it to completion seeks for a god in what denies it. Borgia, on his arrival in the Vatican, exclaims: 'Now that God has given us the papacy, let us hasten to enjoy it.' And he behaves accordingly. Hasten is indeed the word. There is already a hint of the despair so characteristic of those filled with all good things.

Perhaps I am mistaken. For I was in fact happy in Florence like many others before me. But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads? And what more legitimate harmony can link a man to life than the twin awareness of his longing to endure and the death which awaits him? At least he learns to count on nothing and to see the present as the only truth given to us 'as a bonus'. I realize that people talk about Italy, the Mediterranean, as classical countries where everything is on a human scale. But where is this, and where is the road leading to it? Let me open my eyes to seek my measure and my satisfaction! What I do see is Fiesole, Djemila and ports in the sunlight. The human scale? Silence and dead stones. All the rest belongs to history.

And yet this is not the end. For it has not been laid down that happiness should be for ever inseparable from optimism. It is linked with love—which is not the same thing. And I know of times and places where happiness can seem so bitter that we prefer its promise. But this is because in these times or places I lacked the heart to love, that is to persevere. What we must talk of here is man's entry into the feasts of earth and beauty. For now, like the neophyte shedding his last veils, he lays down before his god the small change of his personality. Yes, there is a higher happiness where happiness seems trivial. At Florence, I went up to the top of the Boboli gardens, to a terrace from which

my gaze could travel right across Mount Oliveto and the upper part of the town over to the horizon. On each of these hills, the olive-trees were pale as little wisps of smoke, while the cypress trees were like darker shoots against their slight mist, the nearer ones green, the more distant ones black. Heavy clouds cast stains on the deep blue of the sky. As the afternoon drew to its close, there came a silver light in which everything fell silent. The top of the hills had first of all been shrouded in clouds. But a breeze had risen whose breath I could feel on my cheek. As it blew, the clouds behind the mountains drew apart like the two sides of a curtain. At the same time, the cypress trees on the summit seemed to shoot up in a single jet against the sudden blue of the sky. With them, the whole hillside and landscape of stones and olive-trees rose slowly back into sight. Other clouds came. The curtain closed. And the hill with its cypress trees and houses vanished anew. Then the same breeze, which was closing the thick folds of the curtain over other hills, scarcely visible in the distance, came and drew them apart again here. As the world thus filled and emptied its lungs, the same breath ceased a few seconds away and then, far off, resumed the theme of a fugue which stone and air composed on the world's scale. Each time, the theme was repeated in a slightly lower key. As I followed it into the distance, I became a little calmer. And as I reached the end of this perspective which the heart could feel, I saw in one glance the whole range of hills moving with the same breath, and with them the song of the whole earth.

Millions of eyes, I know, have gazed at this landscape, and for me it was like the first smile of the sky. It took me out of myself in the deepest sense of the word. It assured me that, except for my love and the wondrous cry of these stones, there is no meaning in anything. The world is beautiful, and outside it there is no salvation. The great truth that it patiently taught me is that the mind is nothing, nor even the heart. And that the stone warmed by the sun, or the cypress tree shooting up against the suddenly clear sky, mark the boundary of the only universe in which 'being right' is meaningful: nature without men. And this world annihilates me. It carries me through to the end. It denies me without anger. As this evening fell over the Italian countryside, I was on my way to a wisdom where everything had already been overcome, had not tears come into my eyes and had not the

great sob of poetry welling up within me made me forget the truth of the world.

*

It is on this moment of balance that I must end: the strange moment when spirituality rejects ethics, where happiness is born of the absence of hope, where the mind finds its justification in the body. If it is true that every truth bears its bitterness within it, it is also true that every denial contains a flourish of affirmations. And this song of hopeless love which is born of contemplation can also form the most effective guide for action. As he emerges from the tomb, the risen Christ of Piero de la Francesca has no human expression on his face—only a fierce and soulless grandeur that I cannot help taking for a resolve to live. For the wise man, like the idiot, expresses little. This return delights me.

But do I owe this lesson to Italy, or have I drawn it from my own heart? It was doubtless in Italy that I became aware of it. But this is because Italy, like other privileged places, offers me the spectacle of a beauty in which men nevertheless die. Here again truth must decay and what is more exalting? Even if I long for it, what have I in common with a truth that is not destined to decay? It is not on my scale. And to love it would be pretence. People rarely understand that it is never through despair that a man gives up what constituted his life. Impulses and moments of despair lead towards other lives, and merely indicate a quivering attachment to the lessons of the earth. But it can happen that when he reaches a certain degree of lucidity a man feels his heart is closed, and without protest or rebellion turns his back on what up to then he had taken for his life, that is to say his restlessness. If Rimbaud dies in Abyssinia without having written a single line, this is not because he prefers adventure or has renounced literature. It is because 'that's how things are', and because when we reach a certain stage of awareness we finally acknowledge something which each of us, according to our particular vocation, seeks not to understand. This clearly involves undertaking the survey of a certain desert. But this strange desert is accessible only to those who can live there without ever slaking their thirst. Then, and only then, is it peopled with the living waters of happiness.

Within reach of my hand, in the Boboli gardens, hung enormous

golden Chinese persimmons whose skin had burst and which were oozing with thick syrup. Between this light hill and these juicy fruits, between the secret brotherhood which linked me to the world and the hunger which urged me to seize the orange-coloured flesh above my hand, I could feel the movement which leads certain men from spiritual purity to sensual delights and from self-denial to the fullness of desire. Both then and now I admired the link which rivets man to the world, this double image in which my heart can intervene and dictate its happiness to the exact point where the world can either carry it to fruition or destroy it. Florence! One of the few places in Europe where I realized that a consent lay sleeping at the heart of my revolt. In its sky mingled with tears and sunlight, I learned to say yes to the earth and to burn in the dark flame of its feast days. I felt . . . but what word can I use? what excess? How can I consecrate the harmony between love and revolt! The earth! In this great temple deserted by the gods, all my idols have feet of clay.

(iii)

SUMMER

1954

'But you are born
For a limpid day.'

Hölderlin

THE MINOTAUR OR THE HALT AT ORAN

to Pierre Galindo

This essay dates from 1939, something which should be borne in mind if the reader is to judge what Oran could be like today. Violent protests emanating from this beautiful town have in fact assured me that all these imperfections have been (or will be) remedied. The beauties celebrated in this essay have, on the other hand, been jealously protected. Oran, a happy and realistic city, no longer needs writers. It is waiting for tourists.

(1953)

THERE are no more deserts, there are no more islands. The need for them nevertheless makes itself felt. If we are to understand the world, we must turn aside from it; if we are to serve men better, we must briefly hold them at a distance. But where can we find the solitude necessary to strength, the long breathing-space in which the mind can gather itself together and courage take stock of itself? We still have large towns. But these must fulfil certain conditions.

The cities that Europe can offer are still too full of rumours from the past. A practised ear can still detect the rustling of wings, the quivering of souls. We feel the dizziness of centuries, of glory and of revolutions. There, we remember the clamour in which Europe was forged. There is not enough silence.

Paris is often a desert for the heart, but sometimes, as we stand looking over it from the Père-Lachaise, a wind of revolution suddenly fills this desert with flags and vanquished grandeurs. This same is true of certain Spanish towns, of Florence or of Prague. Salzburg would be peaceful without Mozart. But, from time to time, there runs across the Salzach the great cry of Don Juan plunging into hell. Vienna seems more silent, a maiden among cities. The stones there are no more than three centuries old, and their youth has known no sadness. But Vienna stands at a crossroads of history. The clash of empires rings round about her. On certain evenings, when the sky veils itself in blood, the

stone horses on the monuments of the Ring seem about to take flight. In this fleeting moment, when everything tells of power and history, you can distinctly hear the Ottoman empire crashing under the charge of the Polish cavalry squadrons. Here, likewise, there is not enough silence.

It is, without doubt, this well-peopled solitude which men come to seek in the towns of Europe. Men who know the task awaiting them, that is. Here, they can choose their company, take it and leave it. How many minds have been tempered by that walk between their hotel room and the old stones of the Ile Saint-Louis! It is true that others have died there of loneliness. But it was there, in any case, that those who survived learned why they should grow and assert themselves. They were alone and yet not alone. Centuries of history and beauty, the burning evidence of a thousand past lives, walked with them along the Seine, and spoke to them both of traditions and of conquests. But their youth urged them to summon up this company. There comes a time, there come times in history, when such company is a crowd. 'It's between us two now,' exclaims Rastignac as he confronts the vast mouldering heap of the town of Paris. Yes, but two can be a crowd as well!

Deserts themselves have taken on meaning, have been overladen with poetry. They have become sacred places for all the sufferings of this world. But what the heart requires at certain moments is, on the contrary, a place without poetry. Descartes, for his meditations, chooses his desert: the busiest commercial city of his time. There he finds his loneliness, and the chance to write what is perhaps the greatest of our virile poems: 'The first [precept] was never to accept anything as true unless I knew without the slightest doubt that it was so.' One can have less ambition and yet the same nostalgia. But in the last three centuries, Amsterdam has been covered with museums. To escape from poetry and rediscover the peacefulness of stones, we need other deserts, and other places with neither souls nor resting places. Oran is one of these.

The Street

I have often heard people from Oran complaining about their town: 'There is no interesting society here.' But you wouldn't

want one if there were! A number of high-minded people have tried to acclimatize the customs of another world into this desert, faithful to the principle that no one can be of genuine service to art or to ideas without co-operation from others.[1] The result has been that the only instructive society is that of poker-players, boxing enthusiasts, bowling fanatics and regional societies. There, at least, the atmosphere is natural. After all, there is a certain kind of greatness which does not lend itself to elevation. It is infertile by nature. And anyone who wants to find it leaves interesting society behind him and goes down into the street.

The streets of Oran are abandoned to dust, pebbles and heat. If it rains, there is a flood and a sea of mud. But rain or shine, the shops have the same absurd and extravagant air. All the bad taste of Europe and the East has chosen Oran as its meeting place. There, piled on top of one another, you find marble greyhounds, swan-lake ballet dancers, Diana the Huntress in green galalith, discus-throwers and harvesters, everything that serves for wedding or birthday presents, the whole depressing population which a commercial and joking genie ceaselessly summons to our chimney-pieces. But this perseverance in bad taste here assumes a baroque extravagance where all can be forgiven. Behold, in a jewel-case of dust, the contents of one shop-window: ghastly plaster-cast models of tortured feet, a batch of Rembrandt sketches 'given away at 150 francs each', a quantity of 'practical jokes and tricks', tricolour wallets, an eighteenth-century pastel drawing, a mechanical plush donkey, bottles of *eau de Provence* for preserving green olives, and an ignoble-looking wooden virgin with an indecent smile. (So that no one shall remain ignorant, the 'management' has placed a label at its feet: 'Wooden virgin'.)

*

You can find in Oran:

1. Cafés whose grease-covered counters are strewn with the feet and wings of flies, where the proprietor never stops smiling although the place is always empty. A 'small black' used to cost twelve sous and a 'large one' eighteen;

2. Photographers' shops where the technique has not progressed since the invention of sensitized paper. They display a

[1] In Oran, you meet Gogol's Klestakoff. He yawns and then: 'I feel that we shall have to concern ourselves with higher things.'

singular fauna, never encountered in the street, which ranges from the pseudo-sailor leaning with one elbow on a console-table, to the marriageable maiden, dress belted at the waist, standing with dangling arms against a sylvan scene. It can be assumed that these are not copies from nature but original creations;

3. An edifying plethora of undertakers. This is not because people die more frequently in Oran, but simply because, I suppose, they make more fuss about it.

The endearing simplicity of this nation of shop-keepers extends even to their advertisements. The future programme of a cinema in Oran gives details of a third-class film. I note the adjectives 'magnificent', 'splendid', 'extraordinary', 'marvellous', 'overwhelming' and 'stupendous'. To conclude, the management informs the public of the considerable sacrifices it has had to make in order to be able to present this astonishing 'production'. However, the price of the seats will remain the same.

It would be wrong to think that this merely shows the taste for exaggeration peculiar to Mediterranean countries. What the authors of this miraculous prospectus are really doing is giving proof of their psychological perspicacity. They need to overcome the indifference and deep apathy which men feel in this country as soon as they have to choose between two entertainments, two jobs, and even, quite frequently, between two women. You decide only when compelled to do so. And the advertisers are perfectly aware of this. They will go to the same extremes as in America, having the same reasons for desperation in both places.

Finally, the streets of Oran tell us about the two essential pleasures of the local youth: having its shoes shone, and parading these same shoes along the boulevard. To gain a correct idea of the first of these two delights, you must entrust your shoes at ten o'clock on a Sunday morning to the shoe-shiners of the Boulevard Galliéni. There, perched on a high stool, you can enjoy that peculiar satisfaction which even the profane can receive from the spectacle of men as deeply and visibly in love with their work as are the shoe-cleaners of Oran. Everything is worked out to the last detail. Several brushes, three kinds of polishing rag, shoe-polish mixed with petrol: one might believe that the operation has been concluded when a perfect shine comes to birth beneath the application of the soft brush. But the same eager hand puts a second coat of polish on the gleaming surface, rubs it,

dulls it, drives the cream into the very heart of the leather and then brings out, with the same brush, a double and truly definitive shine which emerges from the innermost depths.

The marvels thus obtained are then exhibited to the connoisseurs. Really to appreciate the pleasures offered by the boulevard, you must attend the fancy-dress dances organized by the youth of Oran every evening in the town's main thoroughfates. Between the ages of sixteen and twenty, in fact, the 'fashionable' young Oranais choose to model their elegance on the American cinema and disguise themselves before going to dine. With curly, brilliantined hair flowing from under a felt hat which is cocked over the left ear while its brim obliterates the right eye, neck encircled in a collar generous enough to receive the continuation of the hair, the microscopic knot of the tie held in place by the strictest of pins, jacket hanging half-way down the thighs and nipped in at the hips, light-coloured trousers hanging short, shoes gleaming above triple soles, these youths parade along the pavement their unshakeable self-confidence and the steel tips of their shoes. They attempt to imitate, in all matters, the gait, the self-confidence and superiority of Mr. Clark Gable. Consequently, the more critically-minded members of the town normally baptize these young men, by the grace of unaffected pronunciation, 'Clarques'.

However that may be, the main boulevards of Oran are invaded late every afternoon by an army of agreeable adolescents who take the greatest pains to look like gangsters. Since the young girls of Oran know that they have been destined since birth to marry these tender-hearted rogues, they also flaunt the make-up and elegance of the great American actresses. The same cynics consequently christen them 'Marlenes'. Thus when on the evening boulevards the chirping of birds rises from the palm-trees to the sky, scores of Clarques and Marlenes meet, casting appreciative and evaluating glances, happy to live and to appear, absorbed for an hour in the bliss of perfect existences. What we then behold, in the words of the jealous, are the meetings of the American commission. But these words reveal the bitterness of the over-thirties who have no part in such games. They fail to recognize these daily congresses of youth and romantic love for what they are—the parliaments of birds found in Hindu literature. But no one, on the boulevards of Oran, discusses the

Problem of Being, or is concerned with the way to perfection. All that remains is the fluttering of wings, the flaunting of outspread tails, flirtations between victorious graces, all the rapture of a careless song that fades with the coming of night.

I can already hear Klestakoff saying: 'We must concern ourselves with higher things.' Alas, he is quite capable of doing so. A little encouragement, and in a few years' time he will people this desert. But, for the time being, a gently secretive soul can find rest in this facile town, with its parade of made-up maidens who have no disguise for feelings, who make so poor a pretence at coquetry that we immediately see through their wiles. Concern ourselves with the higher life! We should do better to use our eyes: Santa Cruz carved out of the rock, the mountains, the flat sea, the violent wind and the sun, the tall cranes in the docks, the sheds, the quays and the gigantic flights of stairs which scale the rock on which the town is set, and in the town itself these games and this boredom, this tumult and this solitude. Perhaps none of this is high enough. But the great value of these overpopulated islands is that in them the heart can strip itself bare. Silence is now possible only in noisy towns. From Amsterdam, Descartes wrote to Balzac, now old, 'Each day I stroll through the confusion of a great people, with as much freedom and quiet as you find in your lanes.'

The Desert in Oran

Compelled to live in the presence of an admirable landscape, the Oranais have overcome this formidable trial by screening themselves behind extremely ugly buildings. You expect a town opening out on to the sea, washed and refreshed by the evening breeze. And, except for the Spanish district, you find a city which has its back to the sea, which has been built turning in upon itself, like a snail. Oran is a long, circular, yellow wall, topped with a hard sky. At first, men wander round the labyrinth, looking for the sea as for Ariadne's thread. But they turn round and round in the yellow, stifling streets until, in the end, the Oranais are devoured by the Minotaur of boredom. The Oranais have long since ceased wandering. They let the monster eat them.

No one can know what stone really is until he has been to Oran. In this dustiest of cities, the pebble is king. It is so well loved that

merchants display it in their windows, either as a paperweight or simply for its appearance. People pile them up along the streets, doubtless for pure visual pleasure, since a year later the pile is still there. Things which elsewhere derive their poetry from being green here take on a face of stone. The hundred or so trees which can be found in the business quarter of the town have been carefully covered over with dust. They have become trees from a petrified forest, their branches exuding an acrid, dusty smell. In Algiers, the Arab cemeteries have their well-known gentleness. In Oran, above the Ras-el-Aïn ravine, facing the sea for once, what you see laid out against the blue sky are fields of chalky, crumbly pebbles set blindingly on fire by the sun. In the midst of these dead bones of the earth, scattered patches of crimson geraniums give the landscape its life and fresh blood. The whole town is held fast in a clamp of stone. Seen from the Planters, the cliffs which hold it in their grip are so thick that the landscape loses its reality between the stone. Man is an outlaw. So heavy a weight of beauty seems to come from another world.

If what we call a desert is a place without a soul in which the sky alone is king, then Oran awaits its prophets. All around and above the town the brutal nature of Africa is, in fact, adorned in its most burning glory. It splits open the ill-chosen décor which men have laid upon it, utters its violent cries between each house and over all the housetops. If you go up on to one of the roads running along the side of the Santa Cruz mountain, what you see first of all are the scattered and brightly coloured blocks of Oran. But, as soon as you go a little higher, the jagged cliffs surrounding the plateau seem to be crouching in the sea like red beasts. From higher still, great whirlpools of sun and wind swirl over the untidy town, blowing and battering through it as it lies scattered in confusion over all four corners of the rocky landscape. You see the clash between the magnificent anarchy of men and the permanence of an unchanging sea. This gives the road along the mountain-side an overwhelming scent of life.

Deserts have something implacable about them. The mineral sky of Oran, its trees and streets in their layer of dust, all join forces to create this thick and impassive world in which the mind and heart cannot be turned from themselves, nor from their one subject, which is man. Here, I am speaking of harsh refuges. People write books about Florence and Athens. These towns have

formed so many European minds that they must have a meaning. They keep the power to sadden or excite. They calm a certain hunger of the soul whose proper food is memory. But how can one feel tender in a town where nothing appeals to the mind, where ugliness itself is anonymous, where the past is reduced to nothingness? What can be the attraction of emptiness, of boredom, of an indifferent sky? Solitude, without a doubt, and perhaps human beings as well. There is a certain race of men for whom human beings, wherever they are beautiful, make up a bitter homeland. Oran is one of the thousand capitals such men possess.

Sport

The Central Sporting Club, in the Rue du Fondouk, in Oran, is presenting an evening of boxing which it proclaims will be appreciated by those who really love the sport. What this actually means is that the boxers whose names are on the posters are far from being champions, that some of them will be stepping into the ring for the first time, and that you can therefore count on the courage if not on the skill of the contestants. An Oranais having electrified me by the formal undertaking that 'blood will flow', I find myself this evening among the real lovers of the sport.

It would appear that the latter never demand comfort. A ring has in fact been erected at the far end of a kind of whitewashed, garishly lit garage, with a corrugated iron roof. Folding chairs have been set up on all four sides of the ropes. These are the 'ring-side seats'. Other seats have been set up in the body of the hall, and at the far end there is a wide-open space known as the 'free area', so named because not one of the five hundred people standing there can take out his pocket handkerchief without causing a serious accident. This rectangular box contains a thousand men and two or three women—of the type who, according to my neighbour, 'always want to show off'. Everyone is sweating ferociously. While we wait for the 'white hopes' to step into the ring, an immense loudspeaker grinds out Tino Rossi. Ballads before butchery.

The true lovers of the sport possess limitless patience. The fights promised for nine o'clock have not yet started at half-past, and yet no one complains. It is a warm spring evening, and the

smell of humanity in its shirt-sleeves is intoxicating. Violent discussions are accompanied by the periodic popping of lemonade bottle corks and the tireless lamentations of the Corsican singer. A few new arrivals are fitted in, when a projector casts a blinding light on to the ring. The white hopes step into the ring.

These white hopes, or beginners, who fight for pleasure, are always anxious to prove it by massacring each other at the first opportunity, with a fine disregard for technique. None of them has ever lasted more than three rounds. The hero of the evening in this respect is a certain 'Aero the Kid' who normally sells lottery tickets on café terraces. His opponent, in fact, has taken an unlucky dive out of the ring at the beginning of the second round, under the impact of a fist that whirled like a propeller.

The crowd has grown a little more excited, but still out of politeness. It takes deep, grave breaths of the sacred odour of embrocation. It contemplates this series of slow rites and confused sacrifices which are made even more authentic by the propitiatory patterns cast by the struggling shadows on the whiteness of the wall. These are the formal prologue of a savage and calculated religion. The trance will come only later.

And, at this very moment, the loudspeaker introduces Amar, 'the tough Oranais who never gives up', against Pérez, 'the Algerian puncher'. The profane might well misinterpret the howls which greet the presentation of the boxers in the ring. They might think that this was some sensational fight in which the two rivals were going to settle a personal quarrel known to the public. It is, indeed, a quarrel that they are going to settle, but one that, for the last hundred years, has cast a mortal division between Algiers and Oran. A few hundred years ago, these two North African towns would have already bled each other white, as Florence and Pisa did in happier times. Their rivalry is all the stronger from being based on absolutely nothing. Having every reason to love each other, their hatred is all the fiercer. The Oranais accuse the Algerians of being 'stuck-up'. The Algerians insinuate that the Oranais are ill-bred. These are bloodier insults than one might think, since they are metaphysical. And because they cannot besiege each other, Oran and Algiers meet, struggle and exchange insults in the field of sport, statistics and public works.

It is consequently a page of history that is unfolding itself in the ring. And the tough Oranais, supported by a thousand

howling voices, is defending against Pérez a way of life and the pride of a province. Truth compels me to say that Amar is putting his points badly. His arguments are out of order: he lacks reach. The Algerian puncher, on the other hand, is long enough in the arm and makes his points persuasively on his opponent's eyebrow. The Oranais bears his colours triumphantly, amidst the howls of the frenzied spectators. In spite of repeated encouragement from the gallery and from my neighbour, in spite of the fearless 'Bash him', 'Give him what for', the insidious cries of 'foul', 'Oh, the ref. never saw him', the optimistic 'He's shagged', 'He's had it', the Algerian is declared winner on points to the accompaniment of interminable booing. My neighbour, who likes to talk about the sporting spirit, applauds ostentatiously, whispering to me meanwhile, in a voice made hoarse by so much shouting: 'Like this, they won't be able to say *down there* that the Oranais are savages.'

But, in the body of the hall, a number of fights that were unlisted on the programme have already broken out. Chairs are waved in the air, the police force their way through, the excitement is at its height. To calm these good people and contribute to the restoration of silence, the 'management' instantly entrusts the loudspeaker with the thunderous march of *Sambre-et-Meuse*. For a few moments, the hall takes on a wondrous aspect. Confused bunches of fighters and indulgent referees wave to and fro beneath the policemen's grasp, the gallery is delighted and urges them to further efforts with wild cries, cock-a-doodle-doos or ironic mewing, soon submerged in the irresistible flood of military music.

But the announcement that the main fight is about to start is sufficient to restore calm. This happens quickly, with no flourishes, as when actors leave the stage as soon as the play is over. In the most natural way in the world, hats are dusted, chairs put back in their place, and every face immediately assumes the benign expression of the respectable spectator who has paid for his seat at a family concert.

The last fight of the evening confronts a French naval champion with an Oranais boxer. This time, it is the latter who has the advantage of reach. But during the initial rounds his advantage makes little appeal to the crowd. It is digesting its excitement, convalescing. It is still short of breath. Its catcalls lack animosity. If it applauds, it is with no vigour. The spectators split into two

camps, as they must do if order is to prevail. But each man's choice is guided by that indifference which succeeds great weariness. If the Frenchman holds on in the clinches, if the Oranais forgets that one does not attack with the head, the boxer is bowled over by a broadside of hisses but immediately put back on his feet by a salvo of applause. It is not until the seventh round that sport comes back to the surface, accompanied by the emergence from their fatigue of its true lovers. The Frenchman, in fact, has been put down on the canvas, and, anxious to win back points, has charged at his opponent. 'Here we go,' says my neighbour. 'This will be murder.' And, in fact, that is what it is. Covered in sweat beneath the implacable lights, the two boxers open their guard, close their eyes and swing. They push with their knees and shoulders, exchange their blood and snort with fury. Instantaneously, the spectators stand erect and punctuate each hero's effort with their cries. They receive the blows, return them, swell them by a thousand harsh and panting voices. The same men who had chosen their favourite in indifference stick to their choice through obstinacy, and endow it with passion. Every ten seconds, my right ear is pierced by a shout from my neighbour 'Go on, bluejacket! Bash him, matelot', while a spectator in front of us shouts 'Anda, Hombre!' to the Oranais. The hombre and the bluejacket comply, escorted, in this white-washed temple of cement and corrugated iron, by a crowd in frenzied worship of these low-browed gods. The dull thud of every blow echoes in enormous vibrations through the very body of the crowd, which gasps its last breath with the boxers themselves.

In this atmosphere, the announcement of a draw is badly received. It runs contrary to what, in the crowd, is an utterly Manichaean vision: there is good and evil, the victor and the vanquished. One is either right or wrong. The conclusion of this impeccable logic is immediately provided by two thousand energetic lungs which accuse the judges of being either bought or sold. But the bluejacket has gone to embrace his opponent in the ring and drinks his fraternal sweat. This is enough to make the crowd effect an immediate *volte-face* and explode in applause. My neighbour is right: they are not savages.

The crowd which now flows out, beneath a sky filled with silence and with stars, has just fought the most exhausting of

battles. It says nothing, fades furtively away, too exhausted for exegesis. There is good and evil, this religion is merciless. The cohort of the faithful is now nothing more than a gathering of black and white shadows disappearing into the night. The reason is that strength and violence are lonely gods. They give nothing to the memory. On the contrary, they scatter miracles by handfuls in the present. They are on the same scale as this people which lacks a past and celebrates its communions round boxing rings. They are slightly difficult rites, but which simplify everything. Good and evil, the victor and the vanquished: at Corinth, two temples stood side by side, the one of Violence, the other of Necessity.

Monuments

For many reasons connected as much with economy as with metaphysics, one can say that Oranais style, if such a thing exists, finds clear and powerful expression in that singular edifice known as the *Maison du Colon.* Oran has, indeed, no lack of monuments. The town has its quota of Imperial Marshals, and of local ministers and benefactors. You come across them in little, dusty squares, resigned to rain as to sun, converted like everything else to stone and boredom. But they nevertheless represent something imported. In this happy barbarity, they stand as regrettable traces of civilization.

Oran, on the contrary, has erected altars and rostrums to itself. When the Oranais had to construct a building to be shared by the innumerable agricultural organizations which provide the country with its livelihood, they decided to erect, using the most solid materials, and placing it at the centre of their business city, a convincing representation of their virtues: *La Maison du Colon.* To judge by this building, these virtues are three in number: boldness of taste, love of violence, and a sense of historical synthesis. Egypt, Babylon and Munich have collaborated in the delicate construction of a pastry-cake representing an immense inverted cup. Multicoloured stones, of the most startling effect, have been set along each side of the roof. The brightness of these mosaics is so persuasive that all one can discern at first is a shapeless dazzle. But, on closer inspection, they do reveal their meaning to the fully awakened attention: a gracious

settler, wearing a bow tie and a solar topee, is receiving the homage of a procession of slaves clad as nature intended.[1] Finally, the edifice has been erected, with all its illuminations, at the centre of a crossroads, amid the bustle of the tiny gondola-shaped tramways whose squalor is one of the charms of the town.

Oran is, moreover, very attached to the two lions which stand on its main square. Since 1888, they have sat majestically on either side of the staircase leading up to the town hall. Their creator was called Cain. They look majestic and are short in the body. It is said that, at night, they descend one after the other from their pedestal and pad silently round the darkened square, stopping on occasion to urinate at length between the tall dusty fig-trees. These are, naturally, rumours to which the Oranais lend an indulgent ear. But it is unlikely.

In spite of some researches, I have not been able to develop any great enthusiasm for Cain. All I have discovered is that he enjoyed the reputation of a skilful depicter of animals. Nevertheless, I often think about him. This is a tendency which the mind acquires in Oran. Here is a sonorously named artist who gave this town a work of no importance. Several hundred thousand men have grown familiar with the jovial lords of the jungle that he placed in front of a pretentious town hall. It is one kind of artistic success. These lions doubtless bear witness, as do thousands of other works of the same kind, to something very different from talent. Men have painted 'The Night Watch', 'Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata', 'The Exaltation of the Flower', or carved the statue of David. What Cain did was erect two grinning felines in the town square of a trading province overseas. But one day the statue of David will crumble into ruin with the town of Florence, and these lions will perhaps be saved from the disaster. Once again, they bear witness to something else.

Can I clarify this idea? These statues contain both indifference and solidity. The mind has made no contribution, and matter an enormously large one. Mediocrity seeks to endure by every means, including bronze. We refuse it the right to eternity, but it takes it every day. Is it not itself eternity? In any case, there is something moving in this perseverance, and it bears its lesson, which is the one offered by all the monuments of Oran and by

[1] Another of the qualities of the Algerian race is, as can be seen, frankness.

Oran itself. For an hour a day, for once in a while, it compels you to take an interest in something which is not important. The mind can profit from such moments of calm. This is how it takes the cure and, since it must pass through these moments of humility, I feel that this opportunity to stultify itself is better than others. Everything perishable seeks to endure. Let us then admit that everything wishes to endure. The works of man have no other meaning, and in this respect Cain's lions have the same chance of succeeding as the ruins at Angkor. This encourages modesty.

There are other monuments in Oran. This, at least, is what we must call them, since they too bear witness for their town, in perhaps a more significant way. They are the excavations which, at the moment, cover the coastline over a distance of ten kilometres. The apparent aim is to transform the brightest of bays into an enormous port. In fact, it is yet another opportunity for man to pit himself against stone.

In the canvases of certain Flemish masters, you see the insistent recurrence of an admirably spacious theme: the construction of the Tower of Babel. You see immense landscapes, rocks reaching up into the sky, escarpments teeming with workmen, animals, ladders, strange machines, ropes and beams. Men, in fact, are in the picture only to bring out the inhuman vastness of the buildings. It is this that comes to your mind on the coast road running to the west of Oran.

There, clinging to immense slopes, are rails, tip-trucks, cranes, and miniature railways. . . . Under a devouring sun, toy-like locomotives circumnavigate vast blocks of stone, to the accompaniment of whistles, dust and smoke. Night and day, a nation of ants swarms over the smoking carcass of the mountain. Scores of men, hanging from the same rope against the cliff face, their bellies pressed to the handles of pneumatic drills, quiver day after day in mid-air, unloosing whole sections of stone that crash down in a roar of dust. Farther along, the trucks tip their load from the top of the slopes, and the rocks, suddenly launched towards the sea, roll and dive into the water, each heavy block followed by a shower of lighter stones. At regular intervals, at dead of night or in the middle of the day, explosions shake the whole mountain and lift up the sea itself.

What man is doing, in these excavations, is making a head-on

attack against stone. And if we could for a moment forget the harsh slavery which makes this work possible, we should be filled with admiration. These stones, wrenched from the mountain, help man in his projects. They pile up beneath the first waves, gradually emerge, and finally take shape as a jetty that will soon be covered with men and machines moving daily farther out to sea. Vast steel jaws gnaw unceasingly at the cliff's belly, swivel round and disgorge their excess rubble into the sea. As the cliff face sinks lower, the whole coast pushes the sea relentlessly backwards.

Stone, of course, cannot be destroyed. All that can be done is move it around. Whatever happens, it will always outlast the men who use it. For the moment, it lends itself to their determination to act. Even that determination is doubtless quite gratuitous. But it is man's task to move things around: he must choose between doing that or doing nothing at all. Clearly, the Oranais have chosen. Before that indifferent bay, they will still go on for years piling up heaps of pebbles along the coast. In a hundred years, that is to say tomorrow, they will have to start again. But today these piles of rock bear witness for the men who wend their way among them, their faces set in a mask of dust and sweat. The true monuments of Oran remain its stones.

Ariadne's Stone

It seems that the Oranais are like that friend of Flaubert who, on his deathbed, cast a last look at this irreplaceable earth and cried out: 'Close the window, it's too beautiful.' They have closed the window, they have walled themselves in, they have exorcised the landscape. But Le Poittevin is dead, and, now that he is gone, tomorrow has followed tomorrow. Similarly, beyond the yellow walls of Oran, the earth and sea pursue their indifferent dialogue. This permanence which the world possesses has always held a contradictory charm for man. It inspires him and casts him into despair. The world never has more than one thing to say, it is interesting, then boring. But, in the long run, it conquers through obstinacy. It is always right.

As soon as you leave the gates of Oran, nature raises its tone. Towards Canastel lie immense stretches of waste land, covered with scented bushwood. There, the wind and sun speak only of

solitude. Above Oran stands the Santa Cruz mountain, with its plateau and the thousand ravines leading to it. Roads, along which one could in former times travel in a coach, cling to the hillsides overlooking the sea. In January, some are covered in flowers. Buttercups and daisies turn them into sumptuous paths, woven with white and yellow. On Santa Cruz, there is no more to be said. But if I had to speak of this mountain, I should forget the sacred processions which climb its harsh slopes on the great feast days and evoke other pilgrimages. They travel in solitude through the red stone, rise above the motionless bay, before descending to consecrate a perfect and shining hour to frugality.

Oran also has its deserts of sand: its beaches. The ones near the city gates are empty only in winter and in spring. Then, they are plateaux covered with asphodels, and peopled with small, bare villas among the flowers. The sea growls a little, lower down. But the sun, the slight wind, the whiteness of the asphodels, the harsh blue of the sky, already foreshadow the summer and the golden youth which then covers the beach, long hours on the sand and the sudden gentleness of evening. Each year sees a new harvest of flower-maidens on these shores. Apparently, they last only for one season, since the following year other warm corollas take their place, who the previous summer were still little girls with bodies hard as buds. Coming down from the plateau at eleven in the morning, all this young flesh, scarcely covered by its motley garments, flows over the sand like a multicoloured wave.

One must go farther off (and strangely near, in fact, to that place where two hundred thousand men walk round in their own tracks) to find a landscape that is still untouched: long, empty dunes on which the passage of men has left no trace but a worm-eaten hut. From time to time, an Arab shepherd leads across the top of the dunes the black and beige stains made by his herd of goats. On these beaches in the province of Oran, each summer morning feels like the first morning of the world. Each dusk feels like the last, a solemn death proclaimed at sunset by a final light which darkens every shade. The sea is ultramarine, the road the colour of dried blood, the beach yellow. Everything vanishes with the green sun; an hour later, the dunes are flowing with moonlight. Then comes night, boundless beneath a shower of stars. Storms drift occasionally across the night, and flashes of lightning

flow along the dunes, turn the sky pale, and cast an orange-coloured glow upon the sand or on our eyes.

But this cannot be shared through speech. It must be lived. So much solitude and grandeur give these places an unforgettable appearance. In the mild early dawn, beyond the small, still black and bitter waves, a new being cleaves the waters of night that are so heavy to bear. The memory of these joys gives me no regret, and this is how I know that they were good. After so many years, they are still there, somewhere in this heart which finds fidelity so hard. And I know that today, if I want to visit them, the same sky will still pour down its cargo of stars and breezes upon the deserted dune. These are the lands of innocence.

But innocence needs sand and stones. And man has forgotten how to live with them. This, at least, appears to be the case, since he has shut himself up in this strange town of slumbering boredom. It is nevertheless this confrontation which gives Oran its value. The capital of boredom, besieged by innocence and beauty, is hemmed in by an army as rich in soldiers as in stones. Yet, at certain times, how tempted one feels in this town to pass over to the enemy! How tempted to merge oneself with these stones, to become indistinguishable from this burning and impassive universe which stands as a challenge to history and its agitations! A vain temptation, no doubt. But there is in every man a deep instinct which is neither that of destruction nor that of creation. It is simply the longing to resemble nothing. In the shade of the warm buildings of Oran, on its dusty asphalt, one sometimes hears this invitation. It seems that, for a time, the minds which yield to it are never disappointed. They find the shades of Eurydice and the sleep of Isis. These are the deserts where thought refills its lungs, the cool hand of evening on a troubled heart. No vigil can be kept upon this Mount of Olives; the mind joins and approves the sleeping Apostles. Were they really wrong? They did have their revelation after all.

Let us think of Sakia-Mouni in the desert. He spent long years there, crouching motionless and looking up to heaven. The gods themselves envied him this wisdom and this fate of stone. In his stiff and outstretched hands, the swallows had made their nest. But, one day, they flew away to follow the call of distant lands. And the man who had killed in himself desire and will, glory and sadness, began to weep. Thus it happens that flowers grow from

the rock. Yes, let us consent to stone when we must. It too can give us the secret and the rapture that we seek in faces. Of course, this cannot last. But what is there that can? The face's secret fades, and we must tread once more the closed paths of desire. And if stone can do no more for us than can the human heart, it can at least do just as much.

'To be nothing!' For thousands of years this cry has inspired millions of men in revolt against desire and suffering. Its echoes have travelled all the way across centuries and oceans, before coming to rest upon the oldest sea in the world. They still echo softly against the solid cliffs of Oran. Everyone, in this country, follows this advice without knowing it. Naturally, it is practically in vain. Nothingness is no more in our grasp than is the absolute. But since we welcome as evidence of grace the eternal signs which roses or the sufferings of men can bring us, let us also not reject the rare invitations to sleep which are granted to us by the earth. The second have as much truth as the first.

This, perhaps, is the Ariadne's thread of this frenzied and sleep-walking town. We acquire the virtues, the wholly provisional virtues, of a certain boredom. To be spared, we must say 'yes' to the Minotaur. It is an old and fecund wisdom. Above the sea, lying silent at the foot of the red cliffs, we need only to hold ourselves exactly balanced between the two massive headlands which, to right and left, stand bathed in the clear water. In the chugging of a coastguard vessel crawling out to sea, you can distinctly hear the stifled call of glittering and inhuman forces: it is the Minotaur's farewell.

It is midday, the day itself stands at a point of balance. His rite accomplished, the traveller receives the price of his deliverance: the little stone, dry and soft as an asphodel, that he picks up on the cliff. For the initiate, the world is no heavier to carry than that stone. The burden of Atlas is easy; all you need do is choose your time. You then understand that for an hour, a month, a year, these shores can lend themselves to freedom. They offer the same uncritical welcome to the monk, the civil servant and the conqueror. There were days when I used to expect, in the streets of Oran, to meet Descartes or Cesare Borgia. This did not happen. But perhaps another will be more fortunate than I. A great action, a great undertaking, virile meditation, required in days gone by the solitude of a desert or a convent. There,

men kept vigil over the weapons of their mind. Where better could we keep this vigil now than in the emptiness of a large town built to last in the midst of mindless beauty?

Here is the small stone, soft as an asphodel. It lies at the beginning of everything. Flowers, tears (if you insist), departures and struggles are for tomorrow. In the middle of the journey, when the heavens open their fountains of light in vast, resounding space, the headlands all along the coast look like a fleet of ships impatient to weigh anchor. These heavy galleons of rock and light lie trembling on their keels as if in preparation for a voyage to the islands of the sun. Oh, mornings in Oran! From high on the plateaux, the swallows swoop down into the immense cauldrons of simmering air. The whole coast is ready for departure, a thrill of adventure runs along it. Tomorrow, perhaps, we shall set sail together.

1939

THE ALMOND-TREES

'DO YOU KNOW,' Napoleon once said to Fontanes, 'what fills me most with wonder? The powerlessness of force to establish anything. There are only two powers in the world: the sword and the mind. In the end, the sword is always conquered by the mind.'

Conquerors, we see, are sometimes melancholy. They must pay something for so much vainglory. But what, a hundred years ago, was true of the sword, is no longer true today for the tank. The conquerors have made progress, and the dismal silence of mindless places has established its long reign over a lacerated Europe. At the time of the hideous wars of Flanders, Dutch painters could perhaps still paint the cockerels in their farmyards. The Hundred Years War has likewise been forgotten, and yet the prayers of the Silesian mystics still inhabit some men's hearts. But today, things have changed, the painter and the monk are mobilized: we are one with this world. The mind has lost that regal certainty which a conqueror could acknowledge; it now exhausts itself in cursing force, for want of knowing how to master it.

There are noble souls who keep deploring this, and saying it is evil. We do not know if it is evil, but we know it is a fact. The conclusion is that we must come to terms with it. All we then need to know is what we want. And what indeed we want is never again to bow down before the sword, never more to declare force to be in the right when it is not serving the mind.

This, it is true, is an endless task. But we are here to pursue it. I do not have enough faith in reason to subscribe to a belief in progress, or to any philosophy of History. But I do at least believe that men have never ceased to grow in the knowledge of their destiny. We have not overcome our condition, and yet we know it better. We know that we live in contradiction, but that we must refuse this contradiction and do what is needed to

reduce it. Our task as men is to find those few first principles that will calm the infinite anguish of free souls. We must stitch up what has been torn apart, render justice imaginable in a world which is so obviously unjust, make happiness meaningful for nations poisoned by the misery of this century. Naturally, it is a superhuman task. But tasks are called superhuman when men take a long time to complete them, that is all.

Let us then know our aims, standing steadfast on the mind, even if force dons the mask of ideas or of comfort to lure us from our task. The first thing is not to despair. Let us not listen too much to those who proclaim that the world is ending. Civilizations do not die so easily, and even if this world were to collapse, it will not have been the first. It is indeed true that we live in tragic times. But too many people confuse tragedy with despair. 'Tragedy,' Lawrence said, 'ought to be a great kick at misery.' This is a healthy and immediately applicable idea. There are many things today deserving of that kick.

When I lived in Algiers, I would wait patiently all winter because I knew that in the course of one night, one cold, pure February night, the almond trees of the Vallée des Consuls would be covered with white flowers. I was then filled with delight as I saw this fragile snow stand up to all the rain and resist the wind from the sea. Yet every year it lasted, just long enough to prepare the fruit.

This is not a symbol. We shall not win our happiness with symbols. We shall need something more weighty. All I mean is that sometimes, when life weighs too heavily in this Europe still overflowing with its misery, I turn towards those shining lands where so much strength is still untouched. I know them too well not to realize that they are the chosen lands where courage and contemplation can live in harmony. The contemplation of their example then teaches me that if we would save the mind we must pass over its power to groan and exalt its strength and wonder. This world is poisoned by its misery, and seems to wallow in it. It has utterly surrendered to that evil which Nietzsche called the spirit of heaviness. Let us not contribute to it. It is vain to weep over the mind, it is enough to labour for it.

But where are the conquering virtues of the mind? This same Nietzsche listed them as the mortal enemies of the spirit of heaviness. For him, they are strength of character, taste, the

'world', classical happiness, severe pride, the cold frugality of the wise. These virtues, more than ever, are necessary today, and each can choose the one that suits him best. Before the vastness of the undertaking, let no one in any case forget strength of character. I do not mean the one accompanied on electoral platforms by frowns and threats. But the one that, through the virtue of its whiteness and its sap, stands up to all the winds from the sea. It is that which, in the winter of the world, will prepare the fruit.

1940

PROMETHEUS IN THE UNDERWORLD

'I felt that the Gods lacked something so long as there was nothing to set against them.'

Prometheus in the Caucasus. Lucian

WHAT is the meaning of Prometheus for the man of today? It would doubtless be said that this God-defying rebel is the model for contemporary man, and that his protest, raised thousands of years ago in the deserts of Scythia, is culminating today in an unparalleled historical convulsion. But, at the same time, something tells us that this victim of persecution is still among us, and that we are still deaf to the great cry of human rebellion of which he gives the solitary signal.

Modern man indeed endures a multitude of suffering over the narrow surface of the earth, lacks food and warmth, and sees liberty as merely a luxury that can wait; and all that he can do is suffer a little more, even as all that liberty and its last witnesses can do is vanish a little more. Prometheus was the hero who loved men enough to give them fire and liberty, technology and art. Today, mankind needs and cares only for technology. It rebels through its machines, holding art and what art implies as an obstacle and symbol of slavery. What, on the contrary, characterizes Prometheus is that he cannot separate machines from art. He believes that both souls and bodies can be freed at the same time. The man of today believes that we must first of all free the body, even if the mind must suffer a provisional decease. But can the mind die provisionally? Indeed, if Prometheus were to come back to earth, the men of today would behave as the gods did long ago: they would nail him to the rock, in the name of that very humanism which he was the first to symbolize. The hostile voices that would then insult the defeated victim would be the very ones which echo on the threshold of Aeschylean tragedy: those of Force and Violence.

Am I yielding to the meanness of the times, to naked trees and the winter of the world? But this very nostalgia for light is my

justification: it speaks to me of another world, of my true country. Does this nostalgia still mean something for some men? In the year the war began, I was to take ship and follow the voyage of Ulysses. At that time, even a penniless young man could form the sumptuous project of crossing the sea in quest of sunlight. But I then did as everyone else. I did not take ship. I took my place in the queue shuffling towards the open mouth of hell. Little by little, we entered. At the first cry of murdered innocence, the door slammed shut behind us. We were in hell, and we have not left it since. For six long years, we have been trying to come to terms with it. We now catch glimpses of the warm ghosts from the islands of the blessed only across the long, cold, sunless years which are still to come.

How then, in this damp, dark Europe, can we avoid trembling with regret and sharing this cry which, in his old age, Chateaubriand uttered to Ampère departing for Greece: 'You will rediscover neither a leaf of the olive-trees nor a pip of the grapes which I saw in Attica. I regret even the grass that grew there in my day. I have not had the strength to make a patch of heather grow.' And we too, sunk in spite of our youthful blood in the terrible old age of this last century, sometimes regret the grass which always grew, the olive leaf we shall no longer gaze on for itself, and the grapes of liberty. Man is everywhere, and everywhere we find his cries, his suffering and his threats. When so many men are gathered together, the grasshopper can find no space. History is a sterile earth where the heather will not grow. Yet the men of today have chosen history, and they neither could nor should have turned their faces from it. But instead of mastering it, they agree a little more each day to be its slave. It is here that they betray Prometheus, this son 'both bold in thought and light of heart'. It is here that they go back to the wretchedness of the men whom Prometheus tried to save. 'They saw without seeing, heard without listening, like forms from dreams.'

Yes, one evening in Provence, one whiff of salt are enough to show us that everything still lies before us. We need to reinvent fire, to reinstall those crafts which calm the body's hunger. Attica, the vine-harvest of liberty, the bread of the soul, must come later. What can we do but cry to ourselves: 'They will never more return, or they will return for others', and do what we must to see that others at least do not lack them? And what

of us, who feel this painfully, and who yet try to accept it without bitterness? Are we lagging behind, or are we forging ahead? Shall we have the strength to make the heather grow again?

We can imagine how Prometheus would have replied to this question which arises in our century. Indeed, he has already given his answer: 'I promise you, O mortals, both improvement and repair, if you are skilful, virtuous and strong enough to achieve them with your own hands.' If, then, it is true that salvation lies in our own hands, I shall say Yes to the questions of this century, because of the wise strength and informed courage that I still feel in some of those I know. 'O Justice, O my mother,' cries Prometheus, 'you see what I am made to suffer.' And Hermes mocks the hero: 'I am amazed that, being a God, you did not foresee the torment you now undergo.' 'I foresaw it,' replies the rebel. Those I have mentioned are, like him, the sons of justice. They too suffer from the misery of all men, knowing what they do. They indeed know that blind justice does not exist, that history has no eyes, and that we must therefore reject its justice in order to put in its place, in so far as this can be done, the justice invented by the mind. It is here that Prometheus comes once more back into our century.

Myths have no life of their own. They wait for us to clothe them in flesh. If one man in the world answers their call, they give us their strength in all its fullness. We must preserve this myth, and ensure that its sleep is not mortal so that resurrection may become possible. I sometimes doubt whether the men of today can be saved. But it is still possible to save their children, in both their body and their mind. It is possible to offer them at one and the same time the chances of happiness and those of beauty. If we must resign ourselves to living without beauty, and the liberty which it implies, the myth of Prometheus is one of those which remind us that any mutilation of man can only be temporary, and that we serve nothing in man if we do not serve the whole of man. If he is hungry for bread and for heather, and if it is true that bread is the more necessary, let us learn how to keep the memory of heather alive. At the darkest heart of history, the men of Prometheus, without ceasing from their harsh calling, will keep watch over the earth and over the unwearying grass. The enchained hero maintains, amid the thunder and lightning of the Gods, his quiet faith in man. This is how he is harder than his rock and

more patient than his vulture. More than his rebellion against the gods, it is this long stubbornness which is meaningful for us. It accompanies this admirable determination to separate and exclude nothing, and which always has and always will unite the suffering heart of men and the springtimes of the world.

1946

SHORT GUIDE TO TOWNS WITHOUT A PAST

THE gentleness of Algiers is rather Italian. The cruel glare of Oran is more like Spain. Perched high on a rock above the Rummel gorges, Constantine is reminiscent of Toledo. But Spain and Italy are overflowing with memories, with works of art and educative ruins. And Toledo has had its Greco and its Barrès. The cities I am discussing are, on the contrary, towns without a past. They are towns which offer neither relaxation nor tenderness. When the siesta hours bring their boredom, there is neither compassion nor melancholy in their sadness. In the morning light, or in the natural luxury of the evenings, their delights are, on the contrary, without gentleness. These towns give nothing to the mind and everything to the passions. They are suited neither to wisdom nor to the delicacies of taste. A Barrès and those like him would be crushed to pieces.

Passionate travellers (of other people's passions), over-sensitive minds, aesthetes and newly-weds have nothing to gain from going to Algiers. And, unless he has an absolute vocation, no one could be recommended to retire and live there for ever. Sometimes, in Paris, when people I esteem ask me about Algiers, I feel like crying out: 'Don't go there.' Such a joke would have some truth in it. For I can see what they are expecting and know they will not obtain it. And, at the same time, I know the charms and the subtle power of this country, its insinuating hold on those who linger there, how it immobilizes them, first of all by ridding them of questions, and finally by rocking them to sleep in everyday life. When the light hits you, so glaring that it turns black and white, it almost stops you breathing. You give way to it, settle down in it, and then realize that this too long splendour holds nothing for the soul and is merely an excessive delight. You would then like to turn back to the mind. But the men of this country, and that is their strength, seem stronger in heart than mind. They can be your friends (and what friends!), but you

can never tell them your secrets. Such a thing might be considered rather fearsome here in Paris, where souls are poured out so lavishly and where the water of secrets flows softly and endlessly along among the fountains, statues and the gardens.

What this land most resembles is Spain. But with no traditions, Spain would be merely a beautiful desert. And unless they happen to have been born there, there is only one race of men who can think of withdrawing for ever to the desert. Since I was born in this desert, I cannot in any case consider discussing it as a visitor. Can one number the charms of a dearly loved woman? No, you love her all of a piece, if I may use the expression, with one or two precise reasons for tenderness such as a favourite pout or a particular way of shaking the head. I thus have a long-standing liaison with Algeria, one that will doubtless never end, and which prevents me from being completely lucid. All you can do in such a case is, by perseverance, to make a kind of abstract list of what you love in the thing you love. It is this academic exercise that I can undertake here in respect of Algeria.

First of all comes the beauty of its young people. The Arabs, of course, and then the others. The French of Algeria are a bastard race, made up of unforeseen mixtures. Spaniards and Alsatians, Italians, Maltese, Jews and Greeks have come together there. As in America, this brutal interbreeding has had happy results. As you walk through Algiers, look at the wrists of the women and the young men, and then think of the ones you see in the Paris *métro*.

The traveller who is still young will also notice that the women there are beautiful. The best place to take full note of this is the terrace of the Café des Facultés, in the Rue Michelet, in Algiers, on a Sunday morning in April. Cohorts of young women, sandals on their feet, wearing light, brightly coloured dresses, walk up and down the street. You can admire them without inhibitions: that is why they are there. At Oran, the Cintra bar, on the Boulevard Galliéni, is also a good observatory. At Constantine, you can always walk round the bandstand. But since the sea is several hundred kilometres away, there is something lacking in the people you meet there. In general, and because of this geographical location, Constantine offers fewer attractions, though its boredom has a rather more delicate quality.

If the traveller arrives in summer, the first thing he must do is

obviously go down on to the beaches which surround the towns. He will see the same young people, more dazzling because less clothed. The sun then gives them the somnolent eyes of great beasts. In this respect, the beaches of Oran are the finest, for nature and women are both wilder there.

As far as picturesqueness is concerned, Algiers offers an Arab town, Oran a Negro village and a Spanish district, and Constantine a Jewish quarter. Algiers has a long necklace of boulevards along the sea; you must walk there at night. Oran has few trees, but the finest stones in the world. Constantine has a suspension bridge where the thing to do is have your photograph taken. On very windy days, the bridge sways to and fro above the deep gorges of the Rummel, and you have the feeling of danger.

I recommend the sensitive traveller, if he goes to Algiers, to go and drink *anisette* under the archways around the port, to go in the morning to La Pêcherie and eat freshly caught fish grilled on charcoal stoves; to go and listen to Arab music in a little café in the Rue de la Lyre whose name I have forgotten; to sit on the ground, at six in the evening, at the foot of the statue of the Duc d'Orléans, in Government Square (not for the sake of the duke, but because there are people walking by, and it is pleasant there); to go and lunch at the Padovani restaurant, which is a kind of dance-hall on stilts, on the sea shore, where life is always easy; to visit the Arab cemeteries, first of all to find calm and beauty there, and then to appreciate at their true value the ignoble cities where we stack our dead; to go and smoke a cigarette in the Rue des Bouchers, in the Kasbah, in the midst of the spleens, livers, mesenteries and bleeding lungs that are dripping everywhere (the cigarette is necessary, since these middle ages have a strong smell).

For the rest, you must be able to speak ill of Algiers when in Oran (insisting on the commercial superiority of the port of Oran), make fun of Oran when in Algiers (have no hesitation in accepting the idea that the Oranais 'do not know how to live'), and, at every opportunity, humbly acknowledge the superiority of Algiers over metropolitan France. Once these concessions have been made, you will be able to appreciate the real superiority of the Algerian over the Frenchman, that is to say his limitless generosity and his natural hospitality.

It is perhaps here that I could stop all irony. After all, the best

way of talking about what you love is to speak of it lightly. As far as Algeria is concerned, I am always afraid to lean on this matching inner chord, whose blind and serious song I know so well. But I can, at least, say that it is my true country, and that anywhere in the world I recognize its sons and my brothers by the friendly laughter that seizes me when I meet them. Yes, what I love about the towns of Algiers does not cut me off from the men who live in them. That is why I prefer to be there at that evening hour when the shops and offices pour out into the streets, still dark from the sun, a chattering crowd which flows right along to the boulevards facing the sea, and begins to grow silent as night falls and the lights from the sky, from the lighthouses in the bay and from the streetlamps, merge gradually into the same quivering glow. A whole people then stands meditating on the sea shore, and the crowd splits up into a thousand solitudes. Then begin the great African nights, royal exile, and the exaltation of despair which awaits the solitary traveller.

No, you must certainly not go there if you feel a lukewarm heart and if your soul is weak and weary! But for those who know what it is like to be torn between yes and no, between noon and midnight, between revolt and love, and finally for those who love funeral-pyres along the shore, there is a flame awaiting them in Algiers.

1947

HELEN'S EXILE

THE Mediterranean has its sunlit tragedy which is not that of the mists. On certain evenings, on the sea, at the foot of the mountains, night falls on the perfect curve of a little bay, and an anguished fullness rises from the silent waters. We realize in such places that, if the Greeks experienced despair, it was always through beauty and its oppressive quality. Tragedy, in this golden sadness, reaches its highest point. Our own time, on the contrary, has nourished its despair in ugliness and in convulsions. That is why Europe would be ignoble if grief could ever have this quality.

We have exiled beauty, the Greeks took up arms on its behalf. A first but a long-standing difference. Greek thought always took its stand upon that idea of limit. It carried nothing to extremes, neither religion nor reason, because it denied nothing, neither reason nor religion. It gave everything its share, balancing light with shade. Our Europe, on the contrary, eager for the conquest of totality, is the daughter of excess. It denies beauty, as it denies everything which it does not extol. And, although in diverse ways, it extols only one thing: the future empire of reason. In its madness, it pushes back the eternal limits, and at once dark Furies swoop down upon it to destroy. Nemesis is watching, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance. All those who go beyond the limit are, by her, pitilessly chastised.

The Greeks, who spent centuries asking themselves what was just, would understand nothing of our idea of justice. Equity, for them, supposed a limit, while our whole continent is convulsed by the quest for a justice which it sees as absolute. At the dawn of Greek thought, Heraclitus already conceived justice as setting its bounds to the physical universe itself. 'The sun will not go beyond its bounds, for otherwise the Furies which watch over justice will find it out.' We, who have cast both the universe and the mind from their proper orbit, laugh at such threats. We light

up in a drunken sky what suns we please. But these bounds nevertheless exist and we know it. In our wildest madness we dream of a balance that we have lost, and which in our simplicity we think we shall rediscover when our errors cease. An infantile presumption, and one which justifies the fact that childish peoples, inheriting our madness, should guide our history today.

A fragment attributed to this same Heraclitus states simply: 'Presumption, regression of progress.' And, many centuries after the Ephesian, Socrates, threatened by the death penalty, granted himself no other superiority than this: that he did not presume to know what he did not. The most exemplary life and ideas which these centuries can offer end on a proud acknowledgement of ignorance. And, in forgetting this, we have forgotten our virility. We have preferred the power which apes greatness, Alexander first of all, and then the Roman conquerors, which our school history books, by an incomparable vulgarity of soul, teach us to admire. We have conquered in our turn, have set aside the bounds, mastered heaven and earth. Our reason has swept everything away. Alone at last, we finally hold empire over a desert. How could we conceive this higher balance in which nature balanced history, beauty and goodness, and which carried the music of poetry even into the tragedy of blood? We turn our back upon nature, we are ashamed of beauty. Our miserable tragedies stink of offices, and the blood they run with has the colour of dirty ink.

That is why it is indecent to proclaim today that we are the sons of Greece. Or, if we are, we are sons turned renegade. Putting history on the throne of God, we are marching towards theocracy, like those whom the Greeks called barbarians and whom they fought to the last in the waters of Salamis. If we really want to grasp our difference, we must address ourselves to the man who, among our philosophers, is the true rival of Plato. 'Only the modern town,' Hegel dares write, 'can offer the mind the ground where it can achieve awareness of itself.' Thus we live in the time of great cities. The world has been deliberately cut off from what gave it permanence: nature, the sea, hills, evening meditations. Awareness can now be found only in the streets, because there is history only in the streets, so runs the decree. And, consequently, our most significant works bear witness to the same prejudice. One seeks in vain for landscapes in major

European writers since Dostoievski. History explains neither the natural universe which came before it, nor beauty, which stands above it. It has consequently chosen to know nothing of them. Whereas Plato contained everything, nonsense, reason and myths, our philosophers contain nothing except either nonsense or reason, because they have closed their eyes to the rest. The mole is meditating.

It was Christianity that began to replace the contemplation of the world by the tragedy of the soul. But Christianity at least referred to a spiritual nature, and consequently maintained a certain fixity. Now that God is dead, all that remains is history and power. For a long time now, the whole effort of our philosophers has been aimed solely at replacing the idea of human nature by the idea of situation, and ancient harmony by the confused upsurge of chance, or by the pitiless movement of reason. While the Greeks used reason to restrain the will, we have ended by placing the upsurge of the will at the heart of reason, and reason has therefore become murderous. For the Greeks, values were pre-existent to every action, and marked out its exact limits. Modern philosophy places its values at the end of action. They are not, but they become, and we shall know them completely only at the end of history. When they disappear, limits do as well, and since ideas differ on what these will be, since there is no struggle which, unhindered by these same values, does not extend indefinitely, we are now witnessing the conflict of Messianisms whose clamours merge in the shock of empires. Excess is a fire, according to Heraclitus. The fire is gaining ground; Nietzsche has been overtaken. It is no longer with hammer blows but with cannon shots that Europe philosophizes.

Nature is still there, nevertheless. It sets up its calm skies and its reasons against the folly of men. Until the atom too bursts into flame, and history ends in the triumph of reason and the death agony of the species. But the Greeks never said that the limit could not be crossed. They said that it existed and that the man who dared ignore it was mercilessly struck down. There is nothing in the history of today that can contradict them.

Both the historical spirit and the artist seek to remake the world. But the artist, through an obligation of his very nature, recognizes the limits which the historical mind ignores. This is why the latter aims at tyranny while the passion of the first is

liberty. All those who are fighting today for liberty are in the final analysis fighting for beauty. Of course, no one thinks of defending beauty solely for its own sake. Beauty cannot do without man, and we shall give our time its greatness and serenity only by accompanying it into its misery. We shall never again stand alone. But it is equally true that man cannot do without beauty, and this is what our time pretends to forget. It tenses itself to achieve empires and the absolute, it seeks to transfigure the world before having exhausted it, to set it to rights before having understood it. Whatever it may say, it is turning its back on this world. Ulysses, on Calypso's island, is given the choice between immortality and the land of his fathers. He chooses this earth, and death with it. Such a simple greatness is today foreign to our minds. Others will say that we lack humility. But this word, all things considered, is ambiguous. Like those buffoons in Dostoievski who boast of everything, rise up to the stars and end by flaunting their shame in the first public place, we lack simply the pride of the man who is faithful to his limitations and perceptively in love with his condition.

'I hate my time,' said Saint-Exupéry before his death, for reasons that are not far removed from those which I have mentioned. But, however overwhelming this cry may be, coming from him who loved men for their admirable qualities, we shall not take it as our own. Yet what a temptation, at certain times, to turn our back upon this gaunt and gloomy world. But this is our time and we cannot live hating ourselves. It has fallen so low as much by the excess of its virtues as by the greatness of its faults. We shall fight for the one amongst its virtues that comes from far off. Which virtue? Patroclus's horses weep for their master, dead in battle. All is lost. But Achilles returns to the fray and victory lies at the end because friendship has been murdered: friendship is a virtue.

It is through the acknowledgement of our ignorance, the refusal of fanaticism, the recognition of the boundaries of man and the world, through the faces we love, in short, through beauty, that we shall rejoin the Greeks. In a way, the meaning of tomorrow's history will not be where men think it is. It lies in the struggle between creation and the inquisition. Whatever the price that artists will have to pay for their empty hands, we can hope for their victory. Once again, the philosophy of darkness will melt

away above the dazzling sea. Oh, noonday thought, the Trojan war is fought far from the battle ground! Once again, the terrible walls of the modern city will fall to deliver, 'its soul serene as the untroubled waves', Helen's beauty.

1948

THE ENIGMA

WAVES of sunlight, pouring from the topmost sky, bounce fiercely on the countryside around us. All falls quiet with this din, and Mount Luberon, over there, is merely a vast block of silence which I listen to unceasingly. I listen carefully, men run to me from far off, invisible friends call to me, my joy grows, the same joy as years ago. Once again, a happy enigma helps me to understand everything.

Where is the absurdity of the world? In this shining glory, or in the memory of its absence? How, with so much sun in my memory, could I have wagered on nonsense? People around me are amazed; so, at times, am I. I could tell them, as I tell myself, that it was in fact the sun which helped me, and that the very thickness of its light coagulates the universe and its forms into a dazzling blackness. But there are other ways of saying this, and I should like, faced by this white and black clarity which, for me, has always been that of truth, to explain in simple terms what I feel about this absurdity which I know too well to allow anyone to speak about it in an oversimplified way. Moreover, the very fact of talking about it will lead us back to the sun.

No man can say what he is. But he can sometimes say what he is not. People want the man who is still seeking to have already reached his conclusions. A thousand voices are already telling him what he has found, and yet he knows that this is not the case. Should he carry on seeking and let them talk? Of course. But, from time to time, we must defend ourselves. I do not know what I am looking for, I name it prudently, I withdraw what I said, I repeat myself, I go backwards and forwards. People nevertheless call upon me to deliver the name, or names, once and for all. Then I object; are not things lost when they receive a name? Here, at least, is what I can try to say.

*

If I am to believe one of my friends, a man always has two characters: his own, and the one his wife thinks he has. If we replace his wife by society, we shall understand how a particular expression, used by a writer to describe a whole context of emotions, can be isolated by the way people comment on it and presented to its author every time he tries to talk about something else. Words are like actions: 'Are you the father of this child?' 'Yes.' 'Then he is your son.' 'It is not as simple as that, not at all!' Thus Gérard de Nerval, one filthy night, hanged himself twice, once for himself because he was unhappy, and a second time for his legend, which now helps some people to live. No one can write about real unhappiness, or about certain moments of happiness, and I shall not try to do so here. But, as far as legends are concerned, we can describe them, and, for a moment at least, believe that we have dispelled them.

A writer writes to a great extent to be read (as for those who say they don't, let us admire them but not believe them). Yet more and more, in France, he writes in order to obtain that final consecration which lies in not being read. From the moment, in fact, that he can provide the material for a picturesque article in one of our mass-circulation newspapers, there is every possibility that he will be known to a fairly large number of people who will never read his works because they will be content to know his name and to read what other people write about him. From then onwards, he will be known (and forgotten) not for what he is, but according to the image which a hurried journalist has given of him. To make a name in literature, it is consequently no longer indispensable to write books. It is enough to be thought to have written one book, mentioned in the evening papers, and on which one can repose for the rest of one's life.

There is no doubt that this reputation, great or small, will be undeserved. But what can be done about it? Let us rather admit that this inconvenience can be beneficial. Doctors know that certain illnesses are desirable: they provide, in their own way, a compensation for a functional disorder which, in their absence, would express itself in a more serious disturbance. Thus there are fortunate constipations and providential attacks of arthritis. The flood of words and hasty judgments, which nowadays drowns all public activity in an ocean of frivolity, at least endows the French writer with a modesty that he constantly needs in a

nation which, moreover, gives a disproportionate importance to his calling. To see your name in two or three newspapers I could mention is so harsh a trial that it must inevitably involve some spiritual benefit. Let us then praise society, which can so cheaply teach us every day, by its very homages, that the greatness which it honours is worthless. The louder the sound, the quicker it dies. It evokes that fire of tow which Alexander VI often had burned before him to remind him that all the glory of this world vanishes like smoke.

But that is enough irony. It is enough, in this respect, to say that an artist should cheerfully resign himself to allowing what he knows is an unworthy image of himself to lie about in dentists' and hairdressers' waiting-rooms. It was there that I read about a fashionable author who was considered to spend every night presiding over heady Bacchanalian orgies, where nymphs were clothed in nothing but their hair and fauns had dark and fatal nails. One might doubtless have wondered how he found the time to write a series of books that fil'ed several library shelves. This writer, in fact, like many of his colleagues, sleeps at night in order to spend long hours every day working at his desk, and drinks Vichy water so as not to strain his liver. This does prevent the average Frenchman, whose Saharan sobriety and mania for cleanliness are well known, from being indignant at the idea that our writers should teach men to drink and not to wash. There is no lack of examples. I can myself give an excellent recipe of how to secure a reputation for austerity very cheaply. I do in fact bear the weight of such a reputation, which is a source of great amusement to my friends (as far as I myself am concerned, it is more a source of embarrassment, for I know how little I deserve it). All you need do, for example, is decline the honour of dining with a newspaper editor of whom you do not have a high opinion. Even simple decency cannot be imagined except by reference to some twisted sickness of the soul. In any case, no one will ever imagine that, if you refuse this editor's dinner, this is not only because you do not have a very high opinion of him, but also because your greatest fear in the world is being bored—and what is more boring than a typically Parisian dinner?

We must therefore be resigned. But, from time to time, you can try to readjust the sights, and to repeat that you cannot always be a painter of the absurd and that no one can believe in a

literature of despair. Of course, it is always possible to write, or to have written, an essay on the notion of the absurd. But, after all, you can also write about incest without having necessarily hurled yourself on your unfortunate sister, and I have nowhere read that Sophocles ever thought of killing his father and dishonouring his mother. The idea that every writer necessarily writes about himself and depicts himself in his books is one of the puerile notions that we have inherited from Romanticism. It is by no means impossible, on the contrary, that a writer should be interested first and foremost in other people, or in his time, or in familiar myths. Even if he does happen to put himself in the picture, it is only very exceptionally that he talks about what he is really like. A man's works often retrace the story of his nostalgias or his temptations, practically never his own story, especially when they claim to be autobiographical. No man has ever dared describe himself as he is.

As far as such a thing is possible, I would, on the contrary, have liked to be an objective writer. What I call an objective writer is an author who chooses themes without ever taking himself as the subject. But the modern mania of identifying the author with his subject-matter cannot allow him to enjoy this relative liberty. Thus one becomes a prophet of the absurd. Yet what did I do except reason about an idea which I found in the streets of my time? It goes without saying that both I and my whole generation have nourished this idea (and that a part of myself still does so). What I did, however, was to set it far enough from me to analyse it and decide on its logic. Everything that I have been able to write since then is sufficient proof of this. But it is more convenient to exploit a cliché than a nuance. They choose the cliché: so I am absurd as before.

What is the point of saying yet again that in the experience which interested me, and on which I happened to write, the absurd can be considered only as a point of departure—even though the memory and feeling of it still accompany the later steps in the argument? Similarly, with all due sense of proportion, Cartesian doubt, which is systematic, is not enough to make Descartes into a sceptic. In any case, how could one restrict oneself to saying that everything is meaningless, and that we should plunge into absolute despair? Without going to the root of the matter, one can at least remark that in the same way

as there is no absolute materialism, since simply to form this word there must be something in the world apart from matter, there is likewise no total nihilism. As soon as you say that everything is nonsense, you express something that is meaningful. Refusing to see the world all meaning amounts to abolishing all value judgments. But living and eating, for example, is in itself a value judgment. You choose to stay alive the moment you do not allow yourself to die of hunger, and you consequently recognize that life has at least a relative value. What, in fact, does a literature of despair mean? Despair is silent. Moreover, even silence is meaningful if your eyes speak. True despair is the agony of death, the grave or the abyss. If it speaks, if it reasons, above all if it writes, immediately a brother reaches out his hand, the tree is justified, love is born. A literature of despair is a contradiction in terms.

Of course, a certain optimism is not my speciality. Like all the men of my age, I grew up to the sound of the drums of the First World War, and our history since that time has remained murder, injustice or violence. But real pessimism, which does exist, lies in going one better than all this cruelty and shame. For my part, I have never ceased fighting against this dishonour, and I hate only the cruel. In our darkest nihilism, I have sought only reasons to go beyond it. Not, I would add, through virtue, nor by a rare elevation of the soul, but by an instinctive fidelity to a light in which I was born, and in which for thousands of years men have learned to welcome life even in suffering. Aeschylus is often full of despair; yet he sheds light and warmth. At the centre of his universe, we find not fleshless nonsense but an enigma, that is to say a meaning which is difficult to decipher because it dazzles us. And, likewise, the unworthy but nevertheless stubborn sons of Greece who still survive in this emaciated century may still find this history too scalding hot, and yet they bear the pain because they want to understand it. At the centre of our work, dark though it may be, there shines an inexhaustible sun, the same sun which cries today across the hills and plain.

*

After this, the fire of tow can burn; what do our image and our usurpations matter? What we are, what we have to be, are enough to fill our lives and occupy our strength. Paris is a mar-

vellous cave, and its men, seeing their own shadows reflected on the far wall, take them for the only reality there is. The same is true of the strange and fleeting fame this town awards. But we have learned, far from Paris, that there is a light behind us, and that we must turn round and cast off our chains if we are to look at it directly; that our task is, before we die, to seek for all the words we can to name it. Each artist is undoubtedly pursuing his truth. If he is a great artist, each work brings him nearer to it, or, at least, itself swings closer in towards this centre, this buried sun where everything must one day burn. If he is mediocre, each work takes him farther from it, the centre is then everywhere, the light disintegrates. But the only people who can help the artist in his obstinate quest are those who love him, and those who, themselves lovers or creators, find in their own passion the measure for all passion, and can then judge.

Yes, all this noise . . . when peace would be to love and create in silence! But we must learn to be patient. One moment more, the sun seals our mouths.

1950

RETURN TO TIPASA

'You have sailed with a furious soul far from your father's house, beyond the double rocks of the sea, and you live in a foreign land.'

Medea

FOR five days, the rain had been falling unceasingly on Algiers, and had finally drenched the sea itself. From the heights of an apparently inexhaustible sky, unending sheets of rain, so thick they were viscous, swooped down on the gulf. Soft and grey like a great sponge, the sea heaved in the shapeless bay. But the surface of the water seemed almost motionless beneath the steady rain. At long intervals, however, a broad and imperceptible movement raised a murky cloud of steam from off the sea and brought it into harbour, beneath a circle of soaking boulevards. The town itself, all its white walls running with damp, gave off another cloud of steam which moved out to meet the first. Wherever you turned when this happened, you seemed to be breathing water, and you could drink the very air.

Looking at this drowned sea, I walked about and waited, in this December Algiers which was still for me the town of summers. I had fled from the night of Europe, from a winter of faces. But the town of summers had itself been emptied of its laughter and offered me only hunched and shining backs. In the evening, in the violently lit cafés where I sought refuge, I read my age upon faces that I could recognize without giving them a name. All I knew was that these men had been young when I was, and that now they were young no more.

I stayed on, however, without any clear idea of what I was waiting for, except, perhaps, the moment when I could go back to Tipasa. It is, indeed, a great folly and one that is almost always punished, to go back to the places of your youth, and to seek to relive, at the age of forty, things which you loved or greatly enjoyed at twenty. But I knew about this folly. I had already come

back to Tipasa for a first time, shortly after those wartime years that marked for me the end of my youth. I then hoped, I believe, to rediscover a liberty which I could not forget. Here, indeed, more than twenty years ago, I had spent whole mornings wandering among the ruins, breathing the scent of absinthe, warming myself against the stones, finding the small roses which survive in springtime and swiftly lose their leaves. Only at noon, when the very crickets fell silent in the heat, would I flee before the avid blaze of an all-devouring light. Sometimes, at night, I would sleep open-eyed beneath a sky flowing with stars. Then, I was alive. Fifteen years afterwards, I found my ruins again, a few steps from the first waves. I followed the streets of the forgotten city across the fields covered with bitter trees, and, on the hills overlooking the bay, could still caress the breadcrust-coloured pillars. But now the ruins were surrounded by barbed wire, and could be reached only through official entrances. It was also forbidden, for reasons which apparently enjoyed the blessing of morality, to walk there after dark; by day, you met a sworn guardian.

Bewildered, walking through the lonely and rain-soaked countryside, I at least made an effort to rediscover that strength which has so far never failed me, and which helps me to accept what exists once I have recognized that I cannot change it. And I could not, in fact, travel backwards through time, restore to the world the face that I had loved and which had disappeared in the course of one day, many years ago. On the second of September, in fact, I had not gone to Greece, as I had planned. Instead, war had come to us, then had covered Greece itself. This distance, these years which separated the warm ruins from the barbed wire, were also in myself, as I stood that day before the sarcophagi filled with black water or under the dripping tamarisk trees. Brought up first of all in the spectacle of beauty, which was my only wealth, I had begun with fullness. What had followed was barbed wire: I mean tyrannies, war, police forces, the time of revolt. We had had to come to terms with the night: the beauty of the day was only a memory. And in this muddy Tipasa, the memory itself was growing dim. No talk now of beauty, fullness or youth! In the light cast by the flames, the world had suddenly shown its wrinkles and its wounds, both old and new. It had grown old in an instant, the twinkling of an eye, and we with it. I knew well enough that only men caught

unawares could be inspired by the passion which I sought for here. Love cannot exist without a little innocence. Where was innocence? Empires were crumbling, men and nations tearing at one another's throats; our mouths were sullied. After being innocent in ignorance, we were now unintentionally guilty: the more we knew, the greater grew the mystery. This is why we busied ourselves, O! mockery of mockeries, with morality. Sick in spirit, I dreamed of virtue! In the days of innocence, I did not know that morality existed. I now knew that it did, and could not live up to it. On the promontory that I had loved in former days, between the drenched pillars of the ruined temple, I seemed to be walking behind someone whose footsteps I could still hear on the tombstones and mosaics, but whom I should never catch up with again. I went back to Paris, where I stayed for some years before coming back home.

During all these years, however, I had an obscure feeling that something was missing. When you have once had the chance to love intensely, your life is spent seeking to find this light and ardour once again. To give up beauty and the sensual happiness it brings, and devote myself exclusively to unhappiness, requires a greatness that I do not have. But, after all, nothing is true which compels us to exclude. Isolated beauty ends in grimaces, solitary justice in oppression. Anyone who seeks to serve the one to the exclusion of the other serves nobody, not even himself, and in the end is doubly the servant of injustice. A day comes when, because we have held ourselves so stiff, nothing amazes us any more, and our life goes in new beginnings. These are days of exile, dryness and dead souls. To live again, we need grace, forgetfulness of ourselves, or else a homeland. On some mornings, as we turn a corner, an exquisite dew falls on our heart and then vanishes. But its freshness still remains, and it is always this which the heart demands. I had to leave once more.

And, in Algiers for a second time, still walking under the same downpour which I felt had not stopped since a departure which I had considered final, in the midst of this immense melancholy which smelled of rain and sea, in spite of this misty sky, these backs fleeing beneath the deluge, these cafés whose sulphurous light decomposed people's faces, I still persisted in my hopes. Did I not know, moreover, that rain in Algiers, although looking as if it is going on for ever, nevertheless does stop quite suddenly,

like those rivers in my country which swell to a flood in two hours, devastate acres of land, and dry up again in an instant? One evening, in fact, the rain stopped. I waited for yet another night. A liquid morning rose, dazzling, over the pure sea. From the sky, fresh as a rose, washed and rewashed by the waters, reduced by each successive laundering to its most delicate and clearest texture, there fell a quivering light which gave each house, each tree, a palpable shape and a magic newness. The earth, on the morning the world was born, must have arisen in just such a light. Once again I set out for Tipasa.

There is not a single one of these sixty-nine kilometres that is not filled for me with memories and sensations. A violent childhood, adolescent day-dreams to the hum of the bus's engines, mornings, the freshness of young girls, beaches, young muscles always tensed to their highest effort, that slight anguish which evening brings to a heart of sixteen years, desire for life, glory, and always the same sky as companion to all the years, with its inexhaustible strength and light, a sky insatiable and continually devouring, for months on end, the victims lying crucified upon the beach at the funereal hour of noon. Always the same sea as well, almost impalpable in the morning air, which I glimpsed again on the horizon as soon as the road left the Sahel and the bronze-coloured vineyards on its hills, and plunged down towards the coast. But I did not stop to look at it. I wanted to see the Chenoua again, this heavy, solid mountain, carved in one piece and running along the west side of Tipasa Bay before plunging into the sea. You see it from far off, long before you arrive, as a light blue haze still mingling with the sea. But it gradually condenses as you come nearer, until it takes on the colour of the waters which surround it, like an immense and motionless wave brutally caught in the very act of breaking over a suddenly calm sea. Nearer still, almost at the gates of Tipasa, you see its beetling mass, brown and green, the old, unshakeable, moss-grown god, port and haven for its sons, of whom I am one.

I was gazing at it as I finally crossed the barbed wire and stood among the ruins. And, in the glorious December light, as happens only once or twice in lives that can henceforth see themselves as crowned with every blessing, I found exactly what I had come to seek, and which, in spite of time and in spite of the world, was given truly to myself alone, in this deserted nature. From the

olive-strewn forum, you could see the village opposite. Not a sound came from it: wisps of smoke rose in the limpid air. The sea also lay silent, as if breathless beneath the unending shower of cold and glittering light. From the Chenoua, a distant cock-crow alone extolled the fragile glory of the day. Across the ruins, as far as the eye could see, there lay nothing but pock-marked stones and absinthe plants, trees and perfect columns in the transparence of the crystal air. It was as if the morning stood still, as if the sun had stopped for an immeasurable moment. Amid this light and silence, years of night and fury melted slowly away. I listened to an almost forgotten sound within myself, as if my heart had long been stopped and was now gently beginning to beat again. And, now awake, I recognized one by one the imperceptible sounds that made up the silence: the continuous bass part of the birds, the short, light sighing of the sea at the foot of the rocks, the vibration of the trees, the blind song of the columns, the whispering of the absinthe plants, the furtive lizards. I could hear all that, while also listening to the waves of happiness rising up within me. I felt that I had at last come back to port, for a moment at least, and that from henceforth this moment would never end. But shortly afterwards the sun visibly rose a degree higher in the sky. A blackbird chirped its brief prelude and immediately, from all around, birds' voices exploded with a strength, a jubilation, a joyful discord, an infinite delight. The day moved on. It was to carry me through till evening.

At noon, on the half-sandy slopes, strewn with heliotropes as if by a foam which the furious waves of the last few days had left behind them in their retreat, I gazed at the sea, then gently rising and falling as if exhausted, and quenched the two thirsts that cannot long be neglected if all our being is not to dry up, the thirst to love and the thirst to admire. For there is only misfortune in not being loved; there is misery in not loving. We all, today, are dying of this misery. This is because blood and hatred lay bare the heart itself: the long demand for justice exhausts the love which nevertheless gave it birth. In the clamour in which we live, love is impossible and justice not enough. This is why Europe hates the daylight and can do nothing but confront one injustice with another. But I rediscovered at Tipasa that, in order to prevent justice from shrivelling up, from becoming a magnificent orange containing only a dry and bitter pulp, we

had to keep a freshness and a source of joy intact within ourselves, loving the daylight which injustice leaves unscathed, and returning to the fray with this reconquered light. Here, once more, I found ancient beauty, a young sky, and measured my good fortune as I realized at last that in the worst years of our madness the memory of this sky had never left me. It was this which in the end had saved me from despair. I had always known that the ruins of Tipasa were younger than our new buildings or our crumbling towns. There, the world was born again each morning in a light that was always new. O light! This is the cry of all the characters who, in classical tragedy, come face to face with their destiny. Their final refuge was also ours, and I now knew that this was so. In the depths of the winter, I finally learned that there lay in me an unconquerable summer.

*

Once again I left Tipasa, returning to Europe and its struggles. But the memory of this day still bears me up and helps me greet with equanimity both joys and woes. What can I long for, at the difficult moment where now we stand, except the power to exclude nothing and learn to weave one rope, of black and white thread, that is stretched to breaking point? In everything which I have done or said up to now, I seem to recognize these two forces, even when they contradict each other. I have not been able to deny the light where I was born, and I have not wished to reject the servitudes of our time. It would be too easy to place here by the side of Tipasa other names which are more sonorous and more cruel: there is, for the men of today, an inner path which I know well through having travelled both ways upon it, and which leads from the hills of the mind to the capitals of crime. And, doubtless, we can always take rest, sleep on the hillside or settle down in crime. But if we give up a part of what exists, we must ourselves give up being; we must then give up living or loving except by proxy. Thus there is a will to live while refusing nothing of what life offers which is the virtue that I honour most in all this world. From time to time, at least, it is true that I should like to have exercised it. Since few epochs more than our own require us to be equal to the best as to the worst, I should like, in fact, to elude nothing and keep a double

memory alive. Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever difficulties the enterprise may present, I should like never to be unfaithful either to the second or the first.

But this still sounds like ethics, and we live for something that goes beyond them. If we could name it, what silence would ensue! On the hill of Sainte-Salsa, to the east of Tipasa, the evening is inhabited. Darkness, it is true, has not yet come, but an invisible waning of the light foreshadows sunset. A wind rises, gentle as the night, and suddenly the untroubled sea chooses its way and flows like a great barren river across the horizon. The sky grows darker. What follows is mystery, the gods of night, and what lies on the other side of pleasure. But how can this be expressed? The small coin that I take away from here has one clear side, the face of a beautiful woman which constantly repeats all I have learned today, and a side which is eaten away and which I feel under my fingers during my return. What can this lipless mouth do except repeat what another, mysterious voice within me says, a voice which daily teaches me my ignorance and happiness:

'The secret that I am looking for is buried in a valley of olive-trees under the grass and cold violets, around an old house that smells of vines. For more than twenty years I have wandered over this valley, and over others like it, questioning dumb goatherds, knocking at the door of uninhabited ruins. Sometimes, when the first star shines in a still clear sky, beneath a rain of delicate light, I have thought that I knew. I did know, in fact. Perhaps I still know. But no one wants this secret, doubtless I myself do not desire it, and I cannot cut myself off from my own people. I live with my family, which believes that it reigns over rich and hideous towns, built of stones and fogs. Day and night, it raises its voice, and everything yields while it bows down before nothing: it is deaf to all secrets. Its power, which bears me up, nevertheless bores me, and I come to be weary of its cries. But its unhappiness is my own, we are of the same blood. I too am sick, and am I not a noisy accomplice who has cried out among the stones? Thus I try to forget, I march through our towns of iron and fire, I smile bravely at the night, I welcome storms, I shall be faithful. In fact, I have forgotten: henceforth, I shall be deaf and active. But perhaps one day, when we are ready for death, I shall be able to give up our shrieking tombs, go and lie down in the valley, under the unchanging light, and learn for a last time what I know.'

(1953)

THE SEA CLOSE BY

Logbook

I grew up in the sea and poverty was sumptuous, then I lost the sea and found all luxuries grey and poverty unbearable. Since then, I have been waiting. I wait for the homebound ships, the house of the waters, the limpidity of day. I wait patiently, am polite with all my strength. Men see me walk by in fine and learned streets, I admire landscapes, applaud like everyone else, shake hands, but it is not me speaking. Men praise me, I dream a little, they insult me, I scarcely show surprise. Then I forget, and smile at the man who insulted me, or am too courteous in greeting the person I love. What can I do if all I can remember is one image? Finally they call upon me to tell them who I am. 'Nothing yet, nothing yet. . . .'

It is at funerals that I excel myself. I do, indeed. I walk slowly through the iron-strewn paths of suburbs, travelling along wide lanes planted with cement trees and leading to holes in the cold earth. There, beneath the scarcely reddening bandage of the sky, I watch bold workmen inter my friends beneath six feet of earth. If I then cast the flower which a clay-covered hand holds out to me, it never misses the grave. My piety is exact, my feelings as they should be, my head is suitably inclined. I am admired for finding just the right word. But I have no merit in this: I am waiting.

I have been waiting for a long time. Sometimes, I stumble, I lose my touch, success evades me. What does it matter, for I am then alone. It is thus that I wake up at night, and, still half-asleep, think I hear the sound of waves and the breathing of the waters. Fully awake, I recognize the wind in the trees and the sad murmur of the empty town. I then need all my art to hide my distress or clothe it in the prevailing fashion.

At other times, on the contrary, I am helped. On certain days in New York, lost at the bottom of this well of stones and steel where wander millions of men, I would run from one man to another, without seeing where they ended, exhausted, until I was sustained

only by the human mass seeking its way out. But, each time, the distant siren of a tug-boat came to remind me that this town, this empty well, was an island, and at the tip of the Battery the water of my baptism was awaiting me, black and rotting, covered over with hollow corks.

Thus, though I possess nothing, have given away my fortune, camp by the side of all my houses, I can still be blessed with all riches when I choose, set sail at every hour, unknown to despair. There is no country for those who despair, but I know that the sea comes before and after me, and hold my madness ready. Those who love and are separated can live in grief, but this is not despair: they know that love exists. This is why I suffer, dry-eyed, in exile. I am still waiting. A day comes, at last. . . .

*

The bare feet of the sailors beat softly on the deck. It is dawn, and we are setting sail. The moment we leave harbour, a short, gusty wind vigorously brushes the sea which curls backwards in small, foamless waves. A little later, the wind freshens and scatters the sea with swiftly vanished camellias. Thus, throughout the morning, we hear our sails slapping over a cheerful pond. The waters are heavy, scaly, covered with cool foam. From time to time, the waves yap against the bow; a bitter, unctuous foam, the Gods' saliva, flows along the wood and loses itself in the water where it scatters into shapes that die and are reborn, the hide of a white and blue cow, an exhausted beast which drifts a long way behind our wake.

*

Since our departure, the seagulls have been following our ship, apparently without effort, almost without moving their wings. Their fine straight navigation scarcely leans upon the breeze. Suddenly, a loud plop at the level of the kitchens casts a greedy alarm among the birds, throws their fine flight into confusion and sends up a fire of white wings. The seagulls whirl madly in every direction, and then without any loss of speed drop away from the fight one by one and dive down to the sea. A few seconds later, they are together again on the water, a quarrelsome

farmyard that we leave behind us, nestling in the hollow of the wave, and slowly plucking through the manna of scraps.

*

At noon, under a deafening sun, the sea, exhausted, scarcely finds the strength to rise. When it falls back on itself, it makes the silence whistle. It cooks for an hour and the pale water, a vast white-hot iron sheet, sizzles. In a minute, it will turn and offer its damp side, now hidden in waves and darkness, to the sun.

*

We pass by the gates of Hercules, the headland where Antaeus died. Beyond, the Ocean lies everywhere, on one side we pass by the Horn and the Cape of Good Hope, the Meridians wed the Latitudes, the Pacific drinks the Atlantic. At once, setting course for Vancouver, we plunge slowly towards the South Seas. A few cables' lengths away, Easter Island, Desolation and the New Hebrides file past us in convoy. Suddenly, one morning, the sea-gulls disappear. We are far from any land, and alone, with our sails and our engines.

*

Alone also with the horizon. The waves come from the invisible East, patiently, one by one; they reach us, and then, patiently, set off again for the unknown West, one by one. A long voyage, with no beginning and no end. . . . Rivers and streams pass by, the sea passes and remains. This is how we must love it, faithful and fleeting. I wed the sea.

*

The high seas. The sun sinks down, is swallowed by the mists long before it reaches the horizon. For one brief moment, the sea is pink on one side and blue on the other. Then the waters grow darker. The schooner slides, minute, over the surface of a perfect circle whose metal is thick and stained. And, at the most peaceful hour, as evening comes, hundreds of porpoises emerge from the water, play around us for a moment, then flee to the horizon

where there are no men. They leave behind them the silence and anguish of primitive waters.

*

A little later still, we meet an iceberg on the Tropic. Doubtless invisible after its long voyage in these warm waters, but still effective: it passes to starboard, where the rigging is briefly covered with a frosty dew, while to port the day dies without moisture.

*

Night does not fall at sea. Rather, from the depths of the waters, which an already submerged sun gradually darkens with its thick ashes, it rises towards the still pale sky. For a brief moment, Venus shines alone above the black waves. In the twinkling of an eye, stars swarm in the liquid night.

*

The moon has risen. First it gently illuminates the surface of the waters, then mounts higher and writes upon the supple water. At last, at its zenith, it lights up a whole corridor of sea, a rich river of milk which, with the motion of the ship, flows inexhaustibly towards us through the dark ocean. Here is the faithful night, the cool night which I called for amid the noise of lights, drink and the tumult of desire.

*

We sail across spaces so vast they seem unending. Sun and moon rise and fall in turn, on the same thread of light and night. Days at sea, even and indistinguishable as happiness. . . .

*

This life rebellious to forgetfulness, rebellious to memory, of which Stevenson speaks.

*

Dawn. We sail perpendicularly across the Tropic of Cancer, the waters groan and are convulsed. Day breaks over a surging

sea, full of steel spangles. The sky is white with mist and heat, with a dead but unbearable glare, as if the sun had turned liquid in the thickness of the clouds, over the whole stretch of the celestial vault. A sick sky over a decomposing sea. As the day draws on, the heat grows in the white air. All day long, the bow noses out clouds of flying fish, small iron birds, forcing them from their bushes in the waves.

*

In the afternoon, we meet a steamer going back up towards the towns. Our sirens exchange greetings in three great hoots, like prehistoric animals. Passengers lost at sea are warned that other men are present and exchange greetings with them, the two ships draw slowly farther apart; all this fills the heart with sadness. What man who cherishes the sea and loneliness will ever stop himself from loving these obstinate madmen who, clinging to planks and tossed by the mane of immense oceans, chase after islands long adrift?

*

In the very midst of the Atlantic, we bend beneath savage winds blowing endlessly from pole to pole. Each cry we utter is lost, flies off into limitless space. But this cry, carried day after day on the winds, will finally reach land at one of the flattened ends of the earth and echo timelessly against the frozen walls until a man, lost somewhere in his shell of snow, hears it and consents to smile with happiness.

*

I was half asleep in the early afternoon sun when a terrible noise awoke me. I saw the sun in the depths of the sea, the waves reigning in the surging heavens. Suddenly, the sea was alight, the sun flowed in long icy draughts down my throat. Around me, the sailors were laughing and crying. They loved one another, yet with no forgiveness. On that day, I recognized the world for what it was, I consented that its good should also do evil and its drawbacks carry benefits. On that day, I realized that there were two truths, of which one must never be told.

*

The curious Austral moon, slightly gnawed away, accompanies us for several nights and then slides rapidly from the sky down to the sea which swallows it. There remains the Southern Cross, the infrequent stars, the porous air. At the same instant, the wind also ceases completely. The sky rolls and pitches above our immobile masts. Engine dead, sails hove to, we whistle in the warm night while the water beats amicably against our sides. No commands, the machines are silent. Why indeed should we carry on and why should we return? Our cup is running over, and we are rocked to sleep by a silent, unconquerable madness. A day comes like this which draws everything to a close; we must then let ourselves sink, like those who swim until exhausted. What do we accomplish? For ever, I have held it secret from myself. O bitter bed, princely couch, the crown lies at the bottom of the seas.

*

In the morning, the lukewarm water foams gently under our propeller. We put on speed. Towards noon, travelling from distant continents, a herd of sea cows cross our path, overtake us and swim rhythmically northwards, followed by multicoloured birds which, from time to time, rest upon their horns. This rustling forest slowly vanishes on the horizon. A little later, the sea is covered over with strange, yellow flowers. Towards evening, for hour after hour, we are preceded by an invisible song. I go to sleep, at home.

*

All our sails stretched in a keen breeze, we race across a clear and rippling sea. At top speed, our helm goes hard to port. And towards nightfall, correcting our course again, listing so far to starboard that our sails skim the water, we sail rapidly along the side of a southern continent which I recognize for having, in former days, flown blindly across it in the barbarous coffin of an aeroplane. I was an idle king and my chariot dawdled; I waited for the sea but it never came. The monster roared, took off from the guano fields of Peru, hurled itself above the beaches of the Pacific, flew over the fractured white vertebrae of the Andes and then above the herds of flies which cover the immense Argentinian plain, linked with one swoop the milk-flowing Uruguyan

meadows to the black rivers of Venezuela, landed, roared again, quivered with greed at the sight of new empty spaces to devour, and yet never ceased failing to move forward or at least did so only with a convulsed, obstinate slowness, a fixed, weary and intoxicated energy. I felt then that I was dying in my metallic cell and dreamed of bloodshed and of orgies. Without space, there is neither innocence nor liberty! When a man cannot breathe, prison means death or madness; what can he do there but kill and possess? Today, on the contrary, I have all the air I need, all our sails slap in the blue air, I am going to cry out with speed, we throw our sextants and compasses into the sea.

*

Under the imperious wind, our sails are like iron. The coast drifts at full speed before our eyes, forests of royal coconut trees whose feet are bathed by emerald lagoons, a quiet bay, full of red sails, moonlit beaches. Great buildings loom up, already cracking under the pressure of the virgin forest which begins in the servants' courtyard; here and there a yellow ipeca or a tree with violet branches burst through a window, Rio finally crumbles away behind us and the monkeys of Tijuca will laugh and gibber in the vegetation that has overgrown its new ruins. Still faster, along wide beaches where the waves spread out in sheaves of sand, still faster, where the Uruguyan sheep plunge into the sea and at once turn it yellow. Then, on the Argentinian coast, great crude piles of faggots, set up at regular intervals, raise slowly grilling halves of oxen to the sky. At night, the ice from Tierra del Fuego comes and beats for hours against our hull; the ship barely loses speed and tacks about. In the morning, the single wave of the Pacific, whose cold foam boils green and white for thousands of kilometres along the Chilean coast, slowly lifts us up and threatens to wreck us. The helm avoids it, overtakes the Kerguelen Islands. In the sweetish evening, the first Malayan ships come out to meet us.

*

'To sea! To sea!' shouted the magical boys in one of my childhood books. I have forgotten everything of the book except this cry. 'To sea!', and from across the Indian Ocean to the banks of

the Red Sea, where in the silent nights you can hear the stones in the desert, scorched in the daytime, cracking one by one, we come back to the antique sea in which all cries are hushed.

*

Finally, one morning, we drop anchor in a bay filled with a strange silence, beaconed with fixed sails. All we can see are a few sea birds quarrelling in the sky over scraps of reeds. We swim ashore to an empty beach; we spend all day swimming and drying ourselves in the sand. When evening comes, under a sky that turns green and fades into the distance, the sea, so calm already, becomes still more peaceful. Short waves blow a vaporous foam on to the lukewarm shore. The sea birds have disappeared. All that is left is a space, lying open to a motionless voyage.

*

The knowledge that certain nights of prolonged gentleness will return to the earth and sea when we have gone can indeed help us in our death. Vast sea, forever virgin and forever ploughed, my religion with the night! It washes and feeds us in its sterile furrows, frees us and holds us upright. Each wave brings its promise, always the same. What does the wave say? If I were to die, in the midst of cold mountains, unknown to the word, cast off by my own people, my strength at last exhausted, the sea would at the final moment flood into my cell, come to raise me above myself and help me die without hatred.

*

At midnight, alone on the shore. One moment more, and then I shall set sail. The sky itself has weighed anchor, with all its stars, like those ships which at this very hour, throughout the world, gleam with all their lights and illuminate dark harbour waters. Space and silence weigh equally upon the heart. A sudden love, a great work, a decisive act, a thought which transfigures, all these at certain moments bring the same unbearable anxiety, linked with an irresistible charm. Is living like this, in the delicious anguish of being, in exquisite proximity to a danger whose name

we do not know, the same as rushing to our doom? Once again, without respite, let us go.

*

I have always felt that I was living on the high seas, threatened, at the heart of a royal happiness.

1953

PART TWO

CRITICAL ESSAYS

LA NAUSÉE

by Jean-Paul Sartre

A NOVEL is never anything but a philosophy put into images. And, in a good novel, the whole of the philosophy has passed into the images. But if once the philosophy overflows the characters and action, and therefore looks like a label stuck on the work, the plot loses its authenticity and the novel its life.

Nevertheless, a work that is to last cannot dispense with profound ideas. And this secret fusion between experiences and ideas, between life and reflection on the meaning of life, is what makes the great novelist (as we see him in a work such as *La Condition Humaine*, for example).

The work in question today is a novel where this balance has been broken, where theories damage life. For some time now, this has happened quite frequently. But what is striking in *La Nausée* is the fact that the author has remarkable gifts as a novelist as well as the most lucid and ironic of minds, and that these gifts are at one and the same time both generously used and wasted.

Taken individually, in fact, each of the chapters of this extravagant meditation reaches a kind of perfection in bitterness and truth. The novel which is sketched out in it—a small port in the North of France, a middle class composed of ship-owners who combine religious observance with the pleasures of the table, a restaurant where the exercise of eating resumes its repugnant aspect in the narrator's eyes—in short everything that concerns the mechanical side of existence is depicted with a sureness of touch in which lucidity leaves no place for hope.

Similarly, the reflections on time, which is embodied by an old woman trotting aimlessly along a narrow street, are, taken in isolation, one of the most telling illustrations of the philosophy of anguish, as expressed in the thought of Kierkegaard, Chestov, Jaspers or Heidegger. Thus the two sides of the novel are both equally convincing. But they do not, when joined together, make

up a work of art, and the passage from one to the other is too swift, too unmotivated, for the reader to be carried away as he is by a genuine novel.

Indeed, the book itself looks less like a novel than a monologue. A man judges his life, and by so doing judges himself. I mean that he analyses his presence in the world, the fact that he moves his fingers and eats at regular hours—and what he finds at the bottom of the most elementary act is its fundamental absurdity.

In the best ordered of lives, a moment always comes when the background collapses. Why this and that, this woman, this job and this appetite for a future? To put it all in a nutshell, why this fever for life in these legs that are going to rot?

We all have this feeling. And, in any case, for most men, the approach of dinner, the arrival of a letter or a smile from a passing girl, are enough to carry them along. But the man who likes to dig right down into ideas finds that if he looks directly at this idea his life becomes impossible. And to live knowing that life is pointless is what gives rise to anguish. And if you live against the stream, the whole of your being is seized with disgust and revolt, and this revolt of the body is what is called nausea.

A strange subject certainly, and yet the most banal of them all. Sartre carries it to its conclusions with a vigour and certainty that show how ordinary so apparently subtle a form of disgust can be. It is in this effort that the similarity between M. Sartre and another author whom, unless I am mistaken, no one has mentioned in connection with *La Nausée*, is to be found. I mean Franz Kafka.

But the difference is that, in M. Sartre's novel, there is some indefinable obstacle which prevents the reader from participating, and which holds him back when he is at the very threshold of consent. I myself explain this by the very noticeable lack of balance between the ideas that the work contains and the images in which these are expressed. But there is perhaps something further. For the mistake of a certain literature lies in thinking that life is tragic because it is wretched.

It can be magnificent and overwhelming, that is its whole tragedy. Without beauty, love or danger it would be almost easy to live. And M. Sartre's hero does not perhaps give us the real meaning of his anguish when he insists on those aspects of man

which he finds repugnant, instead of basing his reasons for despair on certain of man's signs of greatness.

The realization that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself but only a beginning. It is a truth which nearly all great minds have taken as their starting point. It is not this discovery which is interesting, but the consequences and the rules for actions which can be drawn from it. At the end of this voyage to the frontiers of anxiety, M. Sartre does seem to authorize one hope: that of the creator who achieves deliverance through writing.

There may perhaps emerge from primitive doubt a cry of 'I write, therefore I am.' And there is something rather comic in the lack of proportion between this final hope and the revolt which gave it birth. For, in the last resort, almost all writers know how trivial their work is when compared to certain moments of their life. M. Sartre's object was to describe these moments. Why not go right through to the end?

However that may be, this is the first novel by a writer from whom we can expect everything. So natural a suppleness in staying on the far boundaries of conscious thought, so painful a lucidity, indicate limitless gifts. This is enough for *La Nausée* to be welcomed as the first cry of an original and vigorous mind whose future works and lessons we await with impatience.

Review published in *Alger républicain*
on October 20, 1938

LE MUR

by Jean-Paul Sartre

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, whose *La Nausée* I reviewed in this column, has just published a collection of short stories in which the strange and bitter themes of his first novel recur under a different form. Men sentenced to death, a madman, a sexual pervert, a man suffering from impotence and a pederast make up the characters in these stories. This choice of themes might seem rather peculiar. But already, in *La Nausée*, the aim was to make an exceptional case into an everyday story. It is at the far boundaries of the heart and instincts that M. Sartre finds his inspiration.

But this needs further definition. It can be shown that the most ordinary of people is already a monster of perversity and that, for example, we all more or less wish for the death of those we love. This, at least, is the aim of a certain kind of literature. It does not seem to me that this is M. Sartre's aim. And, at the risk of being perhaps a shade over-subtle, I would say that his aim is to show that the most perverse of creatures acts, reacts and describes himself in exactly the same way as the most ordinary. And if there were a criticism to be made, it would concern only the use which the author makes of obscenity.

Obscenity in literature can attain a certain grandeur. It certainly contains an element of grandeur, as the example of Shakespeare can show. But at least it must be required by the work itself. And while, in *Le Mur*, this may be the case for 'Erostrate', it is not true for 'Intimité', where the sexual descriptions often seem gratuitous.

*

There is in M. Sartre a certain taste for impotence, in the full meaning of the word and in its physiological sense, which leads him to choose characters who have come to the end of their tether, and who stumble over an absurdity which they cannot

overcome. The obstacle they encounter is their own life, and I will go so far as to say that they do so through an excess of liberty.

These people are quite rootless, have no principles, no Ariadne's thread, are so free that they disintegrate, and are deaf to the call of action or creation. One single problem preoccupies them, and they have not defined it. It is this which gives M. Sartre's stories both their immense interest and their absolute mastery.

Whether we look at the young Lucien, who begins by surrealism and ends in the *Action Française*, or at Eve, whose husband is mad, and who wants at all costs to penetrate into this mad domain from which she is excluded, or at the hero of 'Erostrate', everything they do, say or feel is unforeseen. And nothing, at the moment when they are introduced to us, indicates what they will do in a minute's time. M. Sartre's art lies in the details he gives of his ridiculous creatures, and the way he observes their monotonous behaviour. He describes, making few suggestions, but patiently following his characters and attributing importance only to the most pointless of their acts.

It would not be surprising to learn that at the very moment when he begins his story, the author himself is not sure where it will lead him. But the fascination of such story-telling is undeniable. We are seized by the narrative, and the reader also identifies himself with that higher and ridiculous freedom which leads the characters to their own end.

For these characters are, in fact, free. But their liberty is of no use to them. This, at least, is what Sartre demonstrates. It is doubtless this which explains the emotion of these pages, which so often leave us breathless, as well as their cruel pathos. For in this universe man is freed from all the shackles of his prejudices, and sometimes even from his own nature. Then, reduced to self-contemplation, he becomes aware of his profound indifference to everything which is not himself. Man is alone, locked up in this liberty. It is a liberty which exists only in time, for death inflicts on it a swift and breathtaking denial. His condition is absurd. He will go no farther, and the miracles of those mornings where life begins again have lost all meaning for him.

How can one remain lucid when faced with such truths? It is normal that these beings, deprived of human amusements, the cinema, love or the Legion of Honour, should throw themselves

into an inhuman world where they will this time forge their own chains: madness, sexual mania or crime. Eve wants to go mad. The character of 'Erostrate' wants to commit a crime, and Lulu wants to live with her impotent husband.

Those who avoid making this revolution or who do not complete it, still feel nostalgic for the self-annihilation which it offers. And, in the best of these short stories, 'La Chambre', Eve watches her husband's delirium and tortures herself to discover the secret of this universe in which she would like to be absorbed, of this isolated room in which she would like to sleep with the door closed for ever.

This intense and dramatic universe, these garish and yet colourless sketches, are a good definition of M. Sartre's work and his appeal. And it is justifiable to speak of 'the work' of an author who, in two books, has succeeded in going straight to the essential problem and in bringing it to life through characters which haunt us. A great writer always brings with him his world and his message. Sartre's message involves a conversion to nothingness, but also to lucidity. And the image, which he perpetuates through his characters, of a man sitting amid the ruins of his life, is a good illustration of the greatness and truth of this work.

Review published in *Alger républicain*
on March 12, 1939

REVIEW OF *BREAD AND WINE*

by Ignazio Silone

THE publishing house of Grasset has just given us an excellent translation of Ignazio Silone's novel *Bread and Wine*. Once again, we are concerned with a work that deals with the problems of the present day. But the mixture of anguish and detachment with which these problems are treated enables us to greet *Bread and Wine* as a great revolutionary work. And this for several reasons.

First of all, the work is without any doubt that of an anti-fascist. But the message which it contains goes beyond anti-fascism. For this revolutionary, who has spent years in exile after having escaped from a concentration camp, finds on his return to Italy both continuing reasons to hate fascism, and reasons to doubt. Not his revolutionary faith, of course, but the way in which it was expressed. One of the culminating passages of the book is doubtless the moment when Pietro Sacca, the hero, makes contact with the elementary life of the Italian peasants, and wonders whether the theories in which he dressed up the love he bore this people have not taken him away from the people themselves. It is in this respect that the work can be considered revolutionary. For such a work is not one which glorifies victories and conquests, but one which brings to light the most tormenting conflicts of the Revolution. The more painful these conflicts are, the more effect they will have. The militant who is too quickly convinced of the need for revolution stands in the same relationship to the true revolutionary as the bigot does to the mystic. For the greatness of a faith can be measured by the doubts it inspires. And no sincere militant, born among the people and determined to defend its dignity, can fail to recognize the doubt which invades Pietro Sacca. The anguish which seizes the Italian revolutionary is the very quality which gives Silone's book its bitterness and sombre brilliance.

On the other hand, no revolutionary work can exist without artistic qualities. This may seem paradoxical. But I believe that

if our time teaches us anything at all in this respect, it is that revolutionary art, if it is not to lapse into the most humiliated forms of thought, cannot do without artistic greatness. There is no half-way house between vulgar propaganda and creative inspiration, between what Malraux calls 'the will to prove' and a work like *La Condition Humaine.*

Bread and Wine satisfies this requirement. This book, written by a rebel, is cast in the most classical of forms. Short sentences, a world view which is simple and sophisticated at one and the same time, terse and natural dialogues, give Silone's style a secret vibration which comes through even in translation. If the word poetry has a meaning, it is here that it lies, in these tableaux of a rustic and eternal Italy, in these cypress-planted slopes and this unequalled sky, and in the ancient gestures of these Italian peasants.

The voyage of Ignazio Silone and the lesson offered by this novel lie in the rediscovery of the path which leads from these gestures to this truth, in the return from an abstract philosophy to the bread and wine of simplicity. And no small part of its greatness lies in the way it inspires us to rediscover, through the hatreds now besetting us, the face of a proud and human people which still offers us our only hope for peace.

Review published in *Alger républicain*
on May 23, 1939

INTELLIGENCE AND THE SCAFFOLD

It is said that when Louis XVI, on his way to the guillotine, tried to give one of his escorts a message for the queen, he received the following reply: 'I am not here to run messages for you but to take you to the scaffold.' I feel that this excellent example of correct language and obstinate perseverance on the job in hand is perfectly applicable, if not to all the novels in our language, at least to a certain classical tradition of the French novel. Novelists belonging to this family do indeed refuse to carry messages, and their sole concern seems to be to lead their characters imperturbably to the meeting-place that awaits them, whether this be the convent of Madame de Clèves, the triumph of Juliette and the ruin of Justine, the solitude of Adolphe, the deathbed of Madame de Graslin, or that festival of old age which Proust finds in the salon of Madame de Guermantes. What really characterizes these authors is singleness of purpose, and it would be pointless to look in these novels for the equivalent of the interminable adventures of a Wilhelm Meister, for example; it is not that we are strangers to pedantry—but we have our own particular kind, which is not, fortunately, that of Goethe. All we can say is that, in art, an ideal of simplicity always requires fixity of intention. We can therefore place at the centre of the French novel a certain perseverance.

This is why the novel sets us primarily artistic problems. If our novelists have proved anything, it is that the novel, contrary to general belief, cannot easily dispense with perfection. However, it is a strange sort of perfection, which is not always formal. People imagine—wrongly—that novels do not require style. They do, in fact, demand style of the most difficult kind, the one which takes second place. But the problems which our great novelists set themselves did not concern form for form's sake. They dealt solely with the exact link these writers wished to introduce between their tone and their ideas. They had to find, halfway

between monotony and chit-chat, a language to express their perseverance. If this language is often lacking in outward show, this is because it is born of sacrifices. The messages have been omitted: everything is reduced to essentials. This is why minds as different as Stendhal and Madame de Lafayette look as if they belong to the same family: they have both worked hard to use the right language. The first problem which Stendhal sets himself is in fact the one which preoccupied the novelists of the great centuries. What he calls 'absence of style' is a perfect conformity between his art and his passions.[1] For what gives originality to all the novels of this kind, compared to those written in other countries, is that they are not only a school for life but a school for art: the liveliest flame runs through them in accurate language. Our great successes are born of a particular concept of strength, which can be called elegance, but which still has to be defined.

*

You need to be two men in order to write. In French literature, the great problem is thus the translation of what we feel into what we want to make other people feel. What we call a bad writer is one who expresses himself by reference to an inner context that the reader cannot know. This leads the mediocre writer to say everything he pleases. The great rule of the artist, on the contrary, is to forget half of himself in favour of communicable expression. This inevitably involves sacrifies. And this quest for an intelligible language whose function is to mask the immensity of his fate, leads him to say not what he pleases but only what he must. A great part of the genius of the French novel lies in this conscious effort to give the order of a pure language to the cries of passion. In short, what triumphs in the works I am discussing is a certain preconceived idea, by which I mean intelligence.

This, however, needs to be defined. People always tend to think that this intelligence involves outward appearances, composition for example. Now it is curious to note that the composition of the typical novel of the seventeenth century, of *La Princesse de Clèves*, for example, is extremely loose. It launches out into several stories, begins in complexity even though it ends in unity. In fact, we have to wait until the nineteenth century to

[1] 'If I am not clear, all *my world* is destroyed.' (Stendhal.)

find in *Adolphe* the purity of line which we are very ready, in our imagination, to lend *La Princesse de Clèves*. Similarly, the composition of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is purely chronological, with no artistic experiments. The composition of Sade's novels is elementary; philosophical dissertations alternate with erotic descriptions, and do so right to the end. Stendhal's novels offer curious evidence of carelessness, and there will always be constant reasons for surprise in the final chapter of *La Chartreuse de Parme*, in which the author, as if in sight of home, anxious to conclude, bundles in twice as many events as in the rest of the book. It is not, in any case, these examples which justify the claim that French novels possess an Apollonian perfection of form.

The unity, the profound simplicity, the classicism of these novels are thus to be found elsewhere. It is doubtless nearer to the truth to say merely that the great characteristic of these novelists lies in the fact that each one of them, in his own way, always says the same thing and always in the same tone. Being classical means repeating oneself. We thus find, at the heart of our great works of fiction, a certain conception of man which intelligence tries to illustrate by means of a small number of situations, And, of course, this could be said of any good novel, if it is true that the novel uses intelligence to create its universe in the same way that the theatre makes use of action. But what seems peculiar to this French tradition is that the plot and characters should in general be restricted to this idea, and that everything should be arranged to send its vibrations everywhere. Here, intelligence not only contributes the original idea; it is, at the same time, a marvellously economical principle which produces a kind of passionate monotony. It is at one and the same time both creative and mechanical. Being classical means both repeating oneself and knowing how to repeat oneself. And this is the difference which I see between French novels and the fiction of other countries, where intelligence inspires works, but where it also allows itself to be carried away by its own reactions.[1]

*

To take a specific example, it seems to me that Madame de Lafayette's aim, since nothing else in the world concerns her, is

[1] In Russian novels, for example, or in experiments like those of Joyce.

solely to teach us a very particular conception of love. Her strange postulate is that this passion places man in peril. And although this is something which can be said in conversation, no one has ever had the idea of carrying logic quite so far as Madame de Lafayette. What one feels at work in *La Princesse de Clèves*, as in *La Princesse de Montpensier* or *La Contesse de Tende*, is a constant suspicion of love. This is already visible in her language, where it really seems as if certain words burn her mouth: 'What Madame de Clèves had said of his portrait had restored him to life by making him realize that it was he whom she did not hate.' But the characters, in their own way, also convince us that this healthy suspicion is valid. They are strange heroes who all die of emotion, and who seek out mortal illnesses in thwarted passions. Even the minor characters die through impulses of the soul: 'He received his pardon when he was expecting only the death blow, but fear had so seized him that he was out of his mind and died a few days later.' The most audacious of our Romantics never dared attribute so much power to passion. And it is easy to understand that, faced with these ravages of feeling, Madame de Lafayette should take as mainspring of her plot an extraordinary theory of marriage considered as a lesser evil: it is better to be unhappily married than suffer from passion. It is here that we recognize the deep-seated idea whose obstinate repetition gives the work its meaning. It is an idea of order.

Long before Goethe, in fact, Madame de Lafayette balanced the injustice of an unhappy condition against the disorder of the passions; and long before him, by an amazing upsurge of pessimism, she chose injustice, which disturbs nothing. The only difference is that the order with which she is concerned is less that of a society than that of a system of ideas and of a soul. And far from wishing to make the passions of the heart the slave to social prejudices, she uses these prejudices to provide a remedy for the disorderly impulses which terrify her. She is not interested in defending institutions, which do not concern her; but she does wish to protect the core of her being, whose only enemy she knows. Love is nothing but madness and confusion. It is not hard to guess what burning memories surge beneath these disinterested phrases, and it is this, far more than an illusory composition, which offers us a great lesson in art. For there is no

art where there is nothing to be overcome, and we realize that the monotony of this ceremonious harmony is as much the result of a clear-sighted calculation as of an anguished passion. If there is only one feeling present, this is because it has eaten up everything else, and if it always speaks in the same rather formal tone, this is because it is not allowed to shout. This objectivity is a victory. Other writers, who can offer lessons but who achieve no victories, have tried to be objective. But this was because they were capable of nothing else. This is why the novelists who are called naturalists or realists, who have written so many novels and many good ones, have not written a single great one. They could not go beyond description. The greatness of this lofty art lies, on the contrary, in the fact that in Madame de Lafayette we feel that these limits have been put there *on purpose*. They thus immediately disappear, and the whole work echoes far around. This stems from a concerted art which owes everything to intelligence and its concern for discipline. But it is quite obvious that this art is, at the same time, born of an infinite possibility of suffering, and of a firm decision to master this suffering by means of language. Nothing expresses this disciplined distress, this powerful light with which intelligence transfigures pain, better than an admirable sentence from *La Princesse de Clèves*: 'I told him that so long as his suffering had had limits, I had approved of it and shared it; but that I should pity him no longer if he gave way to despair and lost his reason.' This tone is magnificent. It assumes that there is a certain strength of soul which can impose limits on misery by censuring its expression. It brings art into life by giving man, in his struggle against his destiny, the powers of language. And we thus see that if this literature is a school for life, it is *precisely because* it is a school of art. To be more accurate, we should say that the lesson of these lives and these works of art is no longer simply one of art, but one of style. We learn from them to give our behaviour a certain form. And this permanent truth which Madame de Lafayette never stops repeating, which she expresses in this sentence in unforgettable form, takes on its full significance and illuminates what I mean when we see that it is the same man (le Prince de Clèves) who says this and who will nevertheless himself die of despair.

It would be easy to find in Sade, in Stendhal, in Proust and in a few of our contemporaries a similar lesson in style and life, very

different in each case, but always made up of a choice, a calculated independence and a clarity of aim. Perseverance in sin which has become legitimate in Sade,[1] the litanies of energy in Stendhal,[2] the heroic effort of Proust to remould human suffering into a wholly privileged existence, all say one thing and nothing else. Each of them uses a single feeling which has invaded them for ever in order to make a work whose faces are both different and monotonous.

Of course, all I am doing here is giving certain indications. They will perhaps be enough to show that the rigour, the purity and the concentrated force of French classical fiction do not stem from its purely formal qualities (in any case, such a term has no meaning in art). What does matter is the stubborn perseverance in a certain tone, a certain constancy of soul, a human and literary knowledge of sacrifice. Such a classicism stems from deliberate choices[3] (*partis pris*). This cult of effective intelligence creates not only an art but also a civilization and a way of life. It is of course possible that such an attitude is not without certain limitations. But these are perhaps necessary limitations. We tend nowadays to undervalue this lucid effort. And we are very proud of the universality of our taste. But this universality perhaps diminishes our inner strength. If anyone asked him how he had managed to construct his theory, Newton could reply: 'By thinking about it all the time.' There is no greatness without a little obstinacy.

In any case, this is how I explain the very strong feeling which I have when I read our great novels. They bear witness for the efficacity of human creation. They convince you that the work of art is a human thing, never human enough, and that the creator can dispense with dictates from above. They are born not of flashes of inspiration but of a daily fidelity. And one of the

[1] 'He invented cruelties that he never practised himself, and which he would have had no desire to practise, in order to enter into contact with the great problems' (Otto Flake). The great problem of Sade is the irresponsibility of man without God.

[2] The remark by the Prince de Clèves can be placed by the side of this notation in Stendhal's *Journal*: 'As often happens to men who have concentrated their energy on one or two vital points, he looked lazy and untidy.'

[3] This is why *Le parti pris des choses* of Francis Ponge is one of the few contemporary classical works.

secrets of the French novel is its ability to show at one and the same time a harmonious sense of fatality and an art which springs wholly from individual liberty—to present, in short, the perfect domain in which the forces of destiny clash with human decisions. This art is a revenge, a means of overcoming a difficult fate by imposing a form upon it. They teach us the mathematics of destiny, which are a means of freeing ourselves from it. And if le Prince de Clèves shows that he is, in spite of everything, superior to this quivering sensitivity which will cause his death, it is precisely because he is capable of forming that admirable sentence which refuses to depict madness and despair. None of our great novelists has turned his face away from the sufferings of men, but we can also say that none of them has given way to it, and that by an inspiring patience they have all mastered it through artistic rules. The concept of virility offered to the modern Frenchman (and naturally this has nothing to do with beating the big drum) is perhaps something which he owes to this succession of dry and burning works where, to the very foot of the gallows, the mind unfalteringly pursues its highest efforts until it reaches victory.

Article published in a special number of the review *Confluences* entitled 'Problèmes du roman' in July, 1943

ON A PHILOSOPHY OF EXPRESSION

by Brice Parain

IT is not certain that our time has lacked gods. Many have been proposed, and they have most often been stupid or cowardly. It does, on the other hand, seem that it lacks a dictionary. This, at least, is something obvious to those who hope that this world, in which all words have been prostituted, will one day find a clear justice and an unequivocal liberty. But the question that Brice Parain has just raised is whether such a dictionary is possible, and, above all, whether it is conceivable in the absence of a god who will give this dictionary its meanings. The books that Parain has recently published are concerned with language.[1] But it was the uncertainty of language that already constituted the subject-matter of his first essays.[2] This long and scrupulous reflection would be enough to earn him attention and esteem. But for many other reasons, which I shall give in my conclusion, these books matter for our time, and in spite of the apparent speciality of their subject they do not abandon our century for a single moment.

What is Parain's originality? He makes language into a metaphysical question. For professional philosophers, language poses historical and psychological problems. How did it originate, what are its laws, these problems mark the limits of the enquirer's ambitions. But there is a primary question which must bear on the very value of the words that we use. We need to find out whether our language is truth or falsehood: this is the question that Parain chooses to discuss.

Talking, nevertheless, seems the easiest thing in the world. We lie when we want to and tell the truth when we must. But this is not the problem. What, on the contrary, we have to discover is

[1] *Essai sur le logos platonicien* (1941), *Recherches sur la nature et les fonctions du langage* (1943), Gallimard.

[2] *Essai sur la misère humaine* (1934), *Retour à la France* (1936), Grasset.

whether or not our language is false at the very moment when we think we are telling the truth, whether words have flesh or are merely empty shells, if they overlie a deeper truth or are merely a way of chasing after the wind. We already knew, in fact, that words do sometimes let us down, and do so at the very moment when our heart is going to speak; that they betray us even more often in our moments of greatest sincerity; and that on other occasions their role is to trick us by appearing to settle everything. We knew quite well that 'to pay one's debt to society', 'die on the field of battle', 'put an end to one's days', 'make total war', 'to be rather weak-chested', 'a life of toil', were ready-made expressions, aimed at camouflaging terrible experiences. But the questions which Parain asks are even more searching. For, in fact, the problem lies in discovering whether our most accurate expressions, our most successful cries, are not in fact empty of all meaning, whether, in short, language does not express the definitive solitude of man in a silent universe. This amounts, in fact, to seeking for the essence of language, and asking words to give us the same reasons that we require of God. For the basis of Parain's enquiry lies in the idea that if language is meaningless then everything is meaningless, and that the world is consequently absurd. Our knowledge comes to us only through words. Once they are proved useless, then we are finally and definitively blind.

But indulging in metaphysics means accepting paradoxes, and the metaphysics of language do not fail to observe this rule. Either, in fact, our words translate only our impressions, and, partaking of their contingency, are deprived of any precise meaning; or else our words represent some ideal and essential truth, and consequently have no contact with tangible reality, which they can in no way affect. Thus we can name things only in an uncertain manner, and our words become certain only when they cease to refer to actual things.

In neither of these cases can we count on words to tell us how to behave. And tragedy begins with the consequences of this. 'We cannot,' says Parain, 'accuse language of being the instrument of falsehood and of error, without at the same time, and for the same reasons, accusing the world of being bad and God of being wicked'.[1] And, quoting what Socrates says in the

[1] *Recherches*, p. 141.

Phaedo: 'Misuse of language is not only distasteful in itself, but actually harmful to the soul.'[1]

The situation confronting Socrates was not, in fact, without analogy with our own. There was evil in men's souls because there were contradictions in speech, because the most ordinary words had several different meanings, were distorted and diverted from the plain and simple use which people imagined them to have. Such problems cannot leave us indifferent. We also have our sophists and call for a Socrates, since it was Socrates' task to attempt the cure of souls by the search for a dictionary. If the words justice, goodness, beauty, have no meaning, then men can justifiably tear one another to pieces. Socrates' effort, and his failure, lay in seeking this impeccable meaning, for the lack of which he chose to die. Similarly it is in a concern for these urgent consequences that the value of Parain's *Recherches* can be found. His first aim is to be honest. He sets out, with the greatest clarity, the paradox of expression: 'If man chooses the sensualist hypothesis, he will obtain the external world but lose knowledge; if he chooses the idealist hypothesis, he will obtain knowledge, but will not know how to deal with tangible reality and his knowledge will be useless. In the first case, his language will become literature; in the second, the logical system, developed from a few simple propositions, will soon appear as the fruit of a dream, or as the agonizing amusement with which a prisoner occupies his solitude.'[2] We now understand why language should be not only a metaphysical problem for Parain, but indeed lie at the root of all metaphysics. And it is not without good reason that he offers his researches both as an enquiry into our condition and as an introduction to the history of philosophy. Any philosophical system is, in the last analysis, a theory of language. Every enquiry about being calls into question the power of words.

*

The history of philosophy, for Parain, is basically the history of the failures of the mind when confronted with the problem of language. Man has not managed to find his words. And it is perhaps possible to think of the metaphysical adventure as both an obstinate and sterile quest for the master-word that would illuminate everything, for an adequate 'Open Sesame', the

[1] Hackforth's translation.

[2] *Recherches*, p. 56.

equivalent of 'Aum', the sacred syllable of the Hindus. In this respect, Parain's researches show that, between classical Greek philosophy and modern dialectic, considerations on language have moved towards an attitude of acceptance and resignation. Attempts at justification have been replaced by a study of the rules of expression. This evolution lies parallel to the one which, in our century, has replaced metaphysics by the cult of action, the quest for knowledge by the day to day wisdom of pragmatism. 'Knowledge and becoming are mutually exclusive,' wrote Nietzsche. Thus, if we want to live in 'the becoming', we must give up all hope of knowledge.

The Greeks, those great adventurers of the mind, nevertheless tackled the problem head-on. And the pre-Socratics began by defining a motionless and transparent universe, in which every object had its corresponding expression. But neither did they recoil before the consequences of this initial claim. For if each word is guaranteed by an object in this world, nothing can be denied, and Protagoras is right to proclaim that all is true. Knowledge consists of sensation and discussion becomes impossible. This world is without objections, and we only need to speak to tell the truth.[1] But Gorgias can just as well say that all is false, since in fact there are more true objects than words to designate them. No word can give a complete account of what it designates, nothing can be proved since nothing can be exhausted.

Greek thought oscillated for a long time between these extreme conclusions. And it is not without significance that it should have found its purest literary form in the dialogue, as if, throughout the centuries, Protagoras and Gorgias should in all Hellenic thought unwearyingly oppose each other. The effort of Socrates, that of Plato, was to find the law which transcends our acts and our expressions. We are not very certain about Socrates' conclusions. We know that he chose to die, and this is perhaps a proof that he believed more in the virtue of example than in verbal demonstration. But as far as Plato is concerned, Parain correctly remarks that the *Dialogues* are nothing more than long

[1] Similarly, if we conclude that we give a name only to what exists, everything which has a name therefore exists, and there is not one of man's dreams (Jesus or Pan) which does not possess reality. If, on the contrary, we conclude that we can name what does not exist, we are without any rule.

struggles between language and reality, in which, paradoxically, it is reality which is vanquished. For the theory of Ideas marks the victory of words, which are more general than objects and closer to the ideal country of which this world is nothing but a pale copy. For words to have a meaning, this meaning must come from somewhere other than the tangible world, which is so fleeting and so changeable. This 'elsewhere', to which so many Greek minds appealed with all their strength, is Being. Plato's solution is no longer psychological but cosmological.[1] He makes language an intermediary stage in the hierarchy which goes from matter to the One. The *logos* is a species of being, one of the spheres of universal harmony. By its side, the world has no importance.

Thus, from the fifth century B.C., the final problem is set out: the world or language, nonsense or eternal light. It is this sharp choice which Aristotle, anxious to remain within the familiarity of things, chooses to reject. But for some problems, prudence does not pay. The Aristotelian theory of proof, in which words are correct only by convention, but in which this convention rests on an accurate intuition of essences, is an ambiguous compromise. It is this choice, on the contrary, that Pascal restores in all its cruelty. Uncertain of languages, trembling before the enormity of falsehood, incapable of making paradox reasonable, all Pascal does is convince himself that it exists.[2] But he denounces this paradox better than anyone else: 'Two errors,' he writes. '1. Take everything literally, 2. Take everything spiritually.' This is why Pascal suggests not a solution but a submission. Submission to traditional language because it comes to us from God, humility in the face of words in order to find their treu inspiration. We have to choose between miracles and absurdity, there is no middle way. We know the choice that Pascal made.

With a few important nuances, which I shall indicate later, it is obvious that, for Parain as well, this dilemma constitutes the basic problem. But he does nonetheless study the considerable effort that modern philosophers have made to secure a compromise that would be less scandalous for reason. This is a compromise already visible in Descartes and Leibniz, and I should point out that the chapters devoted to them in the *Recherches*

[1] *Essai sur le logos platonicien.*

[2] What do words mean? For us, Pascal is a great philosopher. But in the street where he was born, in Clermont-Ferrand, there exists a *Pascal Bar.*

are absolutely original. This compromise, however, finds its best expression in German philosophy, and especially in Hegel. We know that, in one of its most characteristic aspects, German philosophy has hit upon the idea of deifying history. In fact, this philosophy looks upon history, taken as a whole, as the common expression of unity and of 'becoming'. In fact, it is no longer a question of unity or the absolute, in the classical sense. There are no longer any truly atemporal essences. On the contrary, ideas realize themselves in time. One of Hegel's texts quoted by Parain is a striking illustration of this position: 'We therefore have to say of the Absolute that it is essentially Result and that it is only when it reaches its conclusion that it succeeds in being what it is in truth, its nature consisting precisely in being at one and the same time its own fact, subject or becoming'. Clearly, this is a philosophy of immanence. The absolute no longer stands in opposition to the relative world, but mingles with it. There is no longer any truth, but there is something which is in the process of creating itself, and which will become truth. And, similarly, language is nothing but the totality of our inner life. The truth of a word is not something which it owns, but something which creates itself little by little in sentences, speeches, literature and the history of literatures. The word 'God', for example, is nothing outside its attributes and the phrase which acknowledges Him. Separated from the pile of notions which men's hearts and the history of mankind have accumulated and continue to accumulate around it, the word itself is insignificant. All words thus form part of an unending adventure which moves towards a universal meaning. There also language is being, but this is because being is everything.

I have not enough space to discuss this conception here. Readers will turn with great interest to the discussion of it offered by Parain. What he does, in short, is confront Hegel with the objections inseparable from any philosophy of immanence: we cannot conceive of a truth which has neither beginning nor end, which participates at one and the same time of physical and universal things. Metaphysics is the science of beginnings, and the demand raised by language is more categorical than the reply which such an argument provides. Is language truth or falsehood? To reply that it is truth 'in process of self-creation' (and with the help of falsehood) is possible only if we carry abstraction

into the heart of concrete things. And, in any case, this reply cannot form an adequate response to the trenchant paradox with which the mind is confronted here.

*

The history of philosophy always brings the thinker back to the Pascalian dilemma. And the aim of the *Recherches* is to use new arguments to underline a paradox which is as old and cruel as man himself. It would be a mistake, in fact, to imagine that what we have here is an argument which simply concludes that the world is meaningless. For Parain's originality, for the time being at any rate, is to keep the dilemma in suspense. He does of course say that if language has no meaning then nothing can have any meaning, and that everything is possible. But his books show, *at one and the same time*, that words have just enough meaning to refuse us this final certainty that the ultimate answer is nothingness. Our language is neither true nor false. It is simultaneously useful and dangerous, necessary and pointless. 'My words do perhaps distort my ideas, but if I do not reason then my ideas vanish into thin air.' Neither yes nor no, language is merely a machine for making doubt. And as in every problem which involves being, we find as soon as we advance a little farther, to the point where our condition is called into question, that we are in the midst of darkness. A brutal 'no' would at least be a definite answer. But this is not what we find. Yet, however uncertain language may be, Parain does feel that it yields the elements of a hierarchy. It does not provide us with being, but it allows us to suspect that being exists. Each word goes beyond the object which it claims to designate, and forms part of the species. But if it indicates the species, it is not the species in its entirety. And even if we were to bring together all the words designating all the individuals of this species, we should not make up the species itself. The word contains something further, but this something further is still not enough.

The author refrains from concluding, and, as he says himself, his book begins and ends with the expression of a disquiet. He nevertheless allows us to guess where his feelings and his experience will lead him. His apparent aim is to maintain choice and paradox: 'Any philosophy,' he writes, 'which does not refute Pascal is vain.' This is true, even for minds that nothing predis-

poses towards miracles. Moreover, the apparent objectivity of the writer could give the impression that his admirable books sum up a metaphysics of falsehood which has already had a very great defender. But while Nietzsche accepted the falsehood of existence and saw it as the principle of all life and all progress, Parain rejects it. Or, at least, if he agrees to acknowledge it, he does not give it his approval—preferring, at that precise moment, to resign his judgment into the hands of some higher power. This philosophy of expression culminates in a theory of silence. Parain's basic idea is one of honesty: the critique of language cannot elude the fact that our words commit us and that we should remain faithful to them. Naming an object inaccurately means adding to the unhappiness of this world. And, in fact, the vast wretchedness of man, which has long pursued Parain and which has inspired so many moving accents in his work, is falsehood. Without as yet knowing, or at least saying, how this can be done, he nevertheless does know that the great task of man is not to serve falsehood. When he finishes his analysis, he merely glimpses the fact that language contains a power which goes far beyond ourselves: 'We ask language to express what is most intimately personal to man. It is not fitted to such a task. It was made to formulate what is most strictly impersonal, what, in man, is closest to other people.'[1] It is to this higher banality that we should perhaps restrict ourselves, for it is there that the artist and the peasant, the thinker and the worker, do come together. For language goes beyond individuals, and its terrible inadequacy is the sign of its transcendence. For Parain, this transcendence needs a hypothesis. We are well aware that here, when confronted with the Pascalian choice, Parain tends towards miracles and, through them, to traditional language. He sees the fact that men resemble one another as evidence for a god. Miracles consist of going back to everyday words, while taking with one the honesty needed to lessen the part of falsehood and hatred.[2] This is indeed a path that leads to silence, but towards a silence which is relative, since absolute silence is impossible. Although Parain may tell us that his book stops short, on this side of ontology, his final effort

[1] *Recherches*, p. 173.

[2] 'Not to lie means not only refusing to hide our acts or our intentions, but also saying them and meaning them truthfully. This is not easy, and not something which is painlessly acquired.' *Recherches*, p. 183.

lies in pursuing with the most silent of beings that higher conversation in which words are unnecessary: 'Language is only a means for drawing us to its opposite: silence and God.'[1]

*

This is the point where the critic should call a halt. We have not yet reached the essential point where we should make a choice between miracles and absurdity. What we must do to show that between them they form the only possible choice, and that nothing else matters. But I think I should be justified in pointing out, in my conclusion, that this is where Parain's apparently very highly specialized investigations link up again with our century and its destiny. They have, in fact, never really been separated from them, and it is not irrelevant to learn that Parain's books constitute, in their author's eyes, one single meditation, extending over a number of years, and which is intimately linked to the history of his life and to our own history.

What characterizes our century is perhaps not so much the need to rebuild the word as to rethink it. This amounts, in fact, to giving the world its language. This is why some of the great artistic or political movements of our time have involved a calling into question of language. The example of surrealism is an adequate illustration of how a philosophy of expression can be closely linked with a criticism of society. Today, when the questions which the world puts to us are so much more urgent, we seek our words with even more anguish. The lexicons proposed cannot suit our purpose. And it is natural that the best among us should form a kind of passionate academy in quest of a French dictionary. This is why the most significant works of the nineteen-forties are perhaps not the ones that people imagine, but the ones that call language and expression once more into question. The criticism of Jean Paulhan, the new world created by Francis Ponge, and the historical philosophy of Parain seem to me to be a response to this demand, although on very different planes and with very marked contrasts between them. For these men are not indulging in Byzantine speculations about grammatical motivations, but asking a number of basic questions that are linked to

[1] *Recherches*, p. 179. But from that point onwards, the new problem that arises is how to reconcile the existence of falsehood with the existence of God. This, I assume, will be the problem treated by Parain in his next book.

human suffering. It is in their activity that our sacrifices find their form.

One thing has changed, however, since the surrealists. Instead of using the uncertainty of language and of the world to justify every possible kind of liberty—calculated madness or automatic writing—men are striving after an inner discipline. What they draw from despair is no longer anarchy but self-discipline. The tendency is no longer to deny that language is reasonable or to give free rein to the disorders it contains. It is to recognize that language has the limited powers to return, through miracles or through absurdity, to its tradition. In other words, and this intellectual move is of the highest importance for our time, we no longer use the falsehood and apparent meaninglessness of the world to justify instinctive behaviour, but to defend a prejudice in favour of intelligence. It is a question merely of a reasonable intelligence which has come back to concrete things and has a concern for honesty. It is a new classicism—and one which bears witness for the two values most frequently attacked today, I mean intelligence and France.

For many reasons, the book which Parain promises us on the ontology of language takes on a great importance. But in the meantime, over and above any differences of opinion, let us begin by recognizing how deeply similar we are. What these books teach us is a liking for truth, a lesson in modesty which concludes a scrupulous analysis, itself served by the most extensive documentation. We cannot neglect such works. We still have much to do, and we are still subjected to the most torturing of questions. But it is certain that, whether we turn towards miracles or towards absurdity, we shall do nothing outside those virtues in which human honour lies, and which are honesty and poverty. What we can learn from the experience set forth in these books is to turn our back upon attitudes and speeches in order scrupulously to bear the weight of our own daily life. 'Preserve man in his perseverance,' we read in the *Essai sur la misère humaine*, 'it is through this that he becomes immense, and gains the only immensity that he can transmit.' Yes, we have to rediscover our banality. It is merely a matter of knowing whether we shall have both the genius and simplicity of heart which now are needed.

Article published in *Poésie 44*, 1944

SKETCH OF ONE OF THE ELECT

THE *Portrait de M. Pouget* was published before the war, in instalments, in a review whose influence was relatively limited. It enjoyed, at the time, an undoubted but an unobtrusive success. It has just appeared in book form,[1] and it still seems to have been relatively little discussed in the unoccupied zone. This is because, in spite of appearances, the world has not changed since the war. It is still very noisy. And if a quiet voice takes upon itself to speak to us of an austere and pure example, the probability is that no one will listen. What we mean when we say that a book has 'acquired a public' is that it has gone beyond the large or small circle of readers that it could count upon even before publication. I naturally have no doubts that the *Portrait de M. Pouget* was read enthusiastically in Catholic circles. But it would be a good thing if very different readers had the opportunity to meditate on this fine book, and what I should like to do here is, in fact, to say how it appeals to a mind which is foreign to Catholicism.

It is an extremely difficult enterprise to put on stage intelligence and modesty, or to sketch the portrait and write the novel of a spiritual adventure. The *Portrait de M. Pouget* belongs to a *genre* which is difficult to define and needs still more delicacy of touch to place in the right family. It is inspired not by friendship, as was Montaigne's essay on La Boétie, but rather by veneration, as Alain was when he tried to bring Jules Lagneau back to life. There is always something moving in the homage which one man pays to another. But who can boast that he has defined the enthralling emotion which links certain minds one to another by ties of respect and admiration? These ties are sometimes more solid than those of blood. The man who has not had this experience is indeed poor, while he who, being granted it, has given

[1] Published by Gallimard, 1943.

himself wholly to it, is happy indeed. It is, in any case, an experience of this kind which M. Guitton has described for us.

Who was M. Pouget? An old Lazarist priest, threequarters blind, who meditated on Tradition, and received a few students in the little cell where his life was drawing to its close. This life can be summed up in a few words: peasant, seminarist, teacher, invalid and forty years' studious retreat in the *Maison des lazaristes.* It is thus lacking in those dramatic events which nourish brilliant biographies. The only events of this existence are contained in an endless reflection on Tradition and Biblical texts. Writing the biography of M. Pouget thus involved composing a small manual of exegesis and apologetics, tracing out a spiritual portrait from his works, his method and his ideas.

These ideas were not clear-cut. M. Pouget put them forward with considerable precaution. And M. Guitton has shown all the necessary moderation and respect in describing them. A summary would thus be a distortion. The reader can remedy this drawback by keeping the necessary correction-index constantly in mind. On reading the rest of this article, Pouget would have been, and M. Guitton would now be, justified in exclaiming: 'It's much more complicated than that.'

*

M. Pouget's whole effort seems to have been devoted to finding a middle way between blind and reasoned faith. He did not wish to maintain ideas that are indefensible, to justify ambitions which the Bible never possessed. M. Pouget made concessions. He considered everything in the Bible inspired, but did not see everything as necessarily sacred. A choice had to be made. From the point of view of a rigid orthodoxy, such an attitude was dangerous. This, in fact, proved to be the case, for it would appear that M. Pouget endured official disapproval. He came to terms with this by striving after serenity and putting forward a postulate: 'The Church is not infallible because of the proofs that she advances, but because of the divine authority with which she teaches.' This said, his problem was to cut his losses, to establish an irreproachable minimum in the Biblical texts, and to show that this minimum was enough to prove the truths of faith. M. Pouget pointed out, for example, that we now require the Gospels to possess a degree of historical accuracy which no

one would have thought of requiring from the historians of classical antiquity or of the Middle Ages. Allowance must nevertheless be made for the mentality peculiar to each historical period, for the rapid variations in moral climate from one century to another. And we have to make a clear distinction, in the Bible, between what is attributable to divine inspiration and what results from the mentality peculiar to a historical period. Thus, for a long time, the Bible indiscriminately cast both righteous and sinners into the same hell. *Ecclesiastes*, for example, clearly states that 'the dead know not anything neither have they any more a reward' (IX, 5). This is because the idea of moral rewards was foreign to primitive Jewish society. It is consequently impossible to defend these texts, or torture them by allegory until they bear witness to divine inspiration.

To those who might show surprise at God's carelessness in thus allowing his ideas to be distorted, M. Pouget would have replied that it was more probably a case of a deliberate plan. God has proportioned his revelations to the ability of men to understand them. The light of God is too bright for human eyes, and revelation must be progressive. 'God is a teacher,' M. Pouget would say.

We had to wait until the twentieth century to believe that it was possible to philosophize without knowing how to spell. This idea would have scandalized M. Pouget. Divine pedagogy, like all reasonable pedagogies, proceeds on the contrary by stages. It does not lay down the law, it teaches. It temporises with the human mind and gives it time to breathe. God has thus made himself into a realist and a politician. M. Pouget also liked to talk of another divine attribute, that of condescension (which we must, I suppose, take in its exact meaning of 'coming down to the level of . . .'). God's motto would thus be, according to our author: 'Neither too soon, nor too late, nor too much at a time.' The result is that God has made his teaching coincide with history. History is the series of manoeuvres organized by God to make the light of truth penetrate the blind hearts of men. We must consequently look upon revelation as something that develops, in a stubborn effort to free itself from the successive husks of worldly prejudices. Historical knowledge is sacred. And M. Guitton had considerable justification for replying to critics that: 'What is remarkable is not that Judeo-Christianity should

be clothed in particular mental attitudes, but that it should transcend them.' Let us finally note that the Church supports this effort by its own work of defining the faith, which M. Pouget points out is almost always a negative one. The Church gives every liberty to her theologians. She rejects only the theories which threaten the existence of the faith when they are put forward. Revelation teaches what is, the Church rejects what is not. The task of the Church is thus to watch over the march of truth, preventing men from causing it either to hasten or to stray. Heretics, in short, are men who want to go faster than God. There is no salvation for impatience.

*

These principles of the basic minimum, of the respect for the mentality peculiar to a particular period, and of progressive revelation, form the basis of M. Pouget's method. This method does not, it is true, go to the root of the problem. This is the problem of being, and M. Pouget seems to have mistrusted metaphysics. In any case, the intellectual esteem inspired by his enterprise makes it the commentator's duty not to go beyond the context which the author has chosen. Within this context, however, M. Pouget's method is exposed to one great objection. It runs the risk, in fact, of using 'historical mentality' as a waste-paper basket for problems raised by exegesis. Everything that contradicts faith is attributed to the mentality of the time, and discussion is thus avoided. On this point, M. Guitton offers a reply which is only half satisfying: 'The method is as good as the mind using it.' True. But this involves the risk of abolishing the problem of methodology, for there would no longer be good and bad methods but good and bad minds. With a few nuances, I would not find this a completely impossible standpoint. But for a person who accepts Tradition, it is, on the contrary, rather surprising.

One feels much more comfortable, on the other hand, in pointing out what seems invaluable in M. Pouget's meditations: they leave the problem of faith intact. Let me make myself clear. It is scarcely necessary to say that, for M. Pouget himself, the problem did not arise. But every exegesis assumes its disbelievers. Like Pascal's *Pensées*, M. Pouget's thought has an implicit aim: it is apologetic. But his method does not try to convince people

immediately. That is the task of grace. M. Pouget's critique was negative and preparatory. It aimed at showing that the inspired texts of the Bible contained nothing really offensive to common sense. Divine texts cannot be obstacles on the path to faith. They are, on the contrary, sure and certain guides. 'From all this,' said M. Pouget, 'we draw not faith, *for this is impossible*, but adequate motives for belief.' Thus, from any intellectual standpoint, such a method, with all its modesty and generosity, leaves the problem untouched. Our freedom of choice remains absolute. It is brought back into its true climate.

For a hundred years now, people have confused science and religion far too much.[1] A more supple examination does, in fact, restore complete freedom both to Christians and to unbelievers. The former no longer try to 'prove' revelation, while the latter no longer base their arguments on the incredible genealogies of the Bible. The problem of faith does not lie in quibbles of this kind. It is by common sense that M. Pouget restores its prestige to grace. Here, he puts everything back in its right place, which is the only way to make the mind progress. These are the real merits of such a method. And however discreet they may be, these merits are so invaluable that they make us forget the surprising attitude which kept Copernicus and Galileo on the *Index* for three hundred years, or which accords divine status to the slightest comma in the Bible.

*

Is all of M. Pouget contained in this method? We might perhaps expect to find that there is also, in addition to all this, some whiff of existence, some more human resonance. This method itself should nevertheless place Christians in the secret of a great soul. When M. Guitton writes that the principle which M. Pouget followed in his researches was 'a courageous indifference towards his desires', we seem indeed to stand face to face with the man and, for a second, to possess him completely. Again, we feel completely informed, as far as this human scale is concerned,

[1] In fact, contemporary disbelief is no longer based on science, in the way that it was at the end of the last century. It denies both science and religion. It is no longer the scepticism of reason when confronted with miracles. It is a passionate disbelief.

when M. Pouget himself confides to us that: 'There are moments, now that I am drawing near my end, when I have questions which might tend towards disbelief.' It would be puerile to exaggerate the meaning of these confessions. They are the significant shadows of the portrait, the fold of the lip which Piero della Francesca gave to the Duke d'Urbino. It would be nothing without the rest, the hard eyes, the imperious nose, and even the landscape in the background. But, without it, the face would lose its secret and its humanity.

Here I can, in conclusion, repeat the question I asked at the beginning: 'But who was M. Pouget?' Today, when India is in fashion, one is certain of an audience if one talks about Gurus. It is, indeed, one of these spiritual masters that M. Pouget calls to mind. Yet this cannot be said of his influence. His teaching, in fact, is not aimed at illumination or at the inner god; this strange Guru has transformed higher criticism into an instrument of spiritual purification and training. He appeals to common sense in order to support the revelation of what transcends our senses. I am not competent to judge if he was rewarded in what was dearest to his heart.[1] We can, on the contrary, easily feel that a book like the one which has just been devoted to him is not only a homage but also a proof of the efficacity of such teaching. For I have scarcely discussed the book itself, faithful in this, I suppose, to the intentions of its author. In another book by M. Guitton we read that 'the elect are those who realize their own ideal type'. In this respect, we can see that we have today a 'portrait of one of the Elect' which appears an exceptional triumph in our literature. To be written, it needed not only talent, but the powerful motives of admiration and affection. M. Guitton has dealt clearly with the most difficult ideas, and this characterizes the highest style. But he breathes warmth into abstractions and passion into objectivity. This stems from the soul. A virile piety does the rest and gives the tone of this fine book.

It would be ungracious to insist upon the reservations which the ethical *a priori* detectable in certain pages of the book (page 130 *passim*, 157) can inspire in a non-Catholic thinker. It is enough to note that such reservations exist. The essential thing

[1] It will nevertheless be noted that M. Guitton's fine thesis on Time and Eternity in Plotinus and Saint Augustine begins by a methodological distinction between mind and mentality.

is that this book of good faith should be accorded its rightful place: far above the vain remarks which, today, are heard like the sounding brass and tinkling cymbal mentioned by Saint Paul.[1]

Review published in the *Cahiers du Sud*, April 1943

[1] *Le Portrait de M. Pouget* was written before the war. Since the armistice, M. Guitton has published texts and articles of which I would be less inclined to approve.

LECTURE GIVEN IN ATHENS ON THE FUTURE OF TRAGEDY

AN oriental sage always included in his prayers the request that the divinity would spare him from living in an interesting age. Our age is extremely interesting, that is to say it is tragic. Do we at least have, to purge us of our miseries, the theatre suited to our age or can we hope to have it? In other words, is modern tragedy possible? This is the question I would like to ask myself today. But is it a reasonable question? Is it not of the same type as 'Shall we have a good government?' or 'Will our authors become modest?', or again 'Will the rich soon share their fortunes with the poor?', interesting questions without a doubt, but which make us dream rather than think.

I do not think so. I believe, on the contrary, and this for two reasons, that we can legitimately raise the question of modern tragedy. The first reason is that great periods of tragic art occur, in history, in centuries of crucial change, at moments when the life of peoples is heavy both with glory and with threats, when the future is uncertain and the present dramatic. After all, Aeschylus fought in two wars, and Shakespeare was contemporary to quite a remarkable succession of horrors. Moreover, they both stand at a kind of dangerous turning in the history of their civilization.

It can in fact be noted that in the thirty centuries of Western history, from the Dorians to the atomic bomb, there have been only two periods of tragic art, both of which are narrowly defined in both time and space. The first is Greek. It presents a remarkable unity, and lasts a century, from Aeschylus to Euripides. The second lasts very little longer, and flourishes in the countries bordering on the very edge of Western Europe. It has, in fact, been insufficiently noted that the magnificent explosion of the Elizabethan theatre, the Spanish theatre of the Golden Age, and French seventeenth-century tragedy, are practically contemporary with one another. When Shakespeare dies, Lope de Vega is

54 and has already had a large number of his plays performed; Calderón and Corneille are alive. And, finally, there is no more distance in time between Shakespeare and Racine than between Aeschylus and Euripides. Historically, at least, we can consider ourselves in the presence, although with differing aesthetics, of a single magnificent flowering, that of the Renaissance, born in the inspired disorder of the Elizabethan stage and ending in formal perfection in French tragedy.

Between these two tragic moments lie almost twenty centuries. During these twenty centuries, there was nothing at all, nothing, except Christian mystery plays, which can be dramatic but which, for reasons I shall explain, cannot be tragic. We can therefore say that we are dealing with very exceptional times, which should by their very peculiarity tell us something about the conditions for tragic expression. This is, in my view, a fascinating subject for study, and one that should be pursued with thoroughness and patience by true historians. But I am not competent to deal with it and I should simply like to mention what I think about it as a man of the theatre. If you look at the movement of ideas both in these two periods and in the tragic works that were written in them, you will find one constantly recurring factor. Both periods mark in fact a transition between forms of cosmic thought, each impregnated with the notion of divinity and holiness, and other forms which, on the contrary, are inspired by individualistic and rationalist concepts. The movement from Aeschylus to Euripides is, roughly speaking, the movement which goes from the great pre-Socratic thinkers to Socrates himself (Socrates, who despised tragedy, made an exception for Euripides). Similarly, from Shakespeare to Corneille, we go from the world of dark and mysterious forces, which is still that of the Middle Ages, to the universe of individual values affirmed and maintained by the human will and by reason (almost all the sacrifices in Racine are motivated by reason). It is the same movement, in short, which leads from the passionate theologians of the Middle Ages to Descartes. Although this evolution is more clearly visible in Greece, because it is simpler and limited to one place, it is the same in both cases. Each time, in the history of ideas, the individual frees himself little by little from a corpus of sacred concepts and stands face to face with the ancient world of terror and devotion. Each time, in the works, we move from ritual tragedy

and from almost religious festivals, to psychological tragedy. And each time the final triumph of individual reason, in the fourth century in Greece and in the eighteenth century in Europe, dries up tragic production for centuries.

What, as far as we are concerned, can we draw from these observations? First of all the very general remark that the tragic age always seems to coincide with an evolution in which man, consciously or not, frees himself from an older form of civilization and finds that he has broken away from it without having found a new form which satisfies him. It seems to me that we, in 1955, have reached this stage, and can therefore ask whether this inner anguish will find a tragic expression in our world. However, the twenty centuries separating Euripides from Shakespeare should encourage us to be prudent. After all, tragedy is one of the rarest of flowers, and there is only the slimmest chance that we shall see it bloom in our own day. But there is another reason which encourages us to wonder about this chance. It involves this time a very particular phenomenon that we have been able to observe in France for some thirty years now, and which began with the reform carried out by Jacques Copeau. This phenomenon is the use of the stage by writers, a stage which up to then had been colonized by theatrical traders and manufacturers. This intervention by writers thus leads to the resurrection of tragic forms, which tend to put dramatic art back in its rightful place, at the summit of the literary arts. Before Copeau (except for Claudel, whom nobody performed) the privileged place for theatrical sacrifices was, in France, the double bed. When the play was particularly successful, the sacrifices were multiplied, and the beds as well. In short, a business, like so many others, in which the price of everything was marked—with, if I may say so, the mark of the beast. This, moreover, was what Copeau said about it:

> '. . . If we are asked what feelings inspire us, what passion urges us forward, compels us, forces us, and which finally overwhelms us, it is this: *indignation.*
>
> A frantic industrialization which, more cynically every day, degrades the French stage and makes the educated public turn away from it; the monopolization of most of our theatres by a handful of entertainers hired by shameless merchants; everywhere, and even in places where great traditions ought to preserve some modesty, the

same spirit of ham acting and commercial speculation, the same vulgarity; everywhere, bluff and all conceivable kinds of exaggeration and exhibitionism live like parasites on a dying art, itself now no longer even mentioned; everywhere the same flabbiness, disorder, indiscipline, ignorance and stupidity, the same contempt for the creator, the same hatred for beauty; an ever more vain and stupid output of plays, ever more indulgent critics, and ever more misguided public taste: that is what inspires our indignation and revolt.'

Since this magnificent protest, followed by the creation of the Vieux-Colombier, the theatre in France, and this is our inexhaustible debt to Copeau, has gradually recovered its claim to nobility, that is to say, it has found a style. Gide, Martin du Gard, Giraudoux, Montherlant, Claudel and so many others have restored a glory and ambitions that had disappeared a century ago. At the same time a movement of ideas and reflections on the theatre, whose most significant product is the fine book of Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double*, the influence of foreign theoreticians such as Gordon Craig and Appia, have put tragic themes back at the centre of our preoccupations.

Thus I can, by bringing all these observations together, clearly define the problem which I should like to discuss in your presence. Our time coincides with a drama in civilization which could today, as it did in the past, favour tragic modes of expression. At the same time many writers, in France and elsewhere, are concerned with providing our times with its tragedy. Is this a reasonable dream, is this enterprise possible, and what conditions must be fulfilled? This, for me, is the question which matters today for all those whom the theatre excites as would a second life. Of course, no one today is in a position to give a definite reply to this question and say: 'Favourable conditions. Tragedy following.' I shall thus limit myself to a few suggestions concerning this great hope which inspires men of culture in the West.

*

First of all, what is a tragedy? The problem of defining 'the tragic' has greatly occupied both literary historians and writers themselves, although no formula has ever received universal agreement. Without claiming to solve a problem which makes so many thinkers hesitate, we can nevertheless adopt a comparative method and try to define how, for example, tragedy differs from

drama or melodrama. This is what seems to me to be the difference: the forces confronting each other in tragedy are equally legitimate, equally justified. In melodramas or dramas, on the contrary, only one force is legitimate. In other words, tragedy is ambiguous and drama simple-minded. In the former, each force is at one and the same time both good and bad. In the latter, one is good and the other bad (which is why, in our day and age, propaganda plays are nothing but the resurrection of melodrama). Antigone is right, but Creon is not wrong. Similarly, Prometheus is both just and unjust, and Zeus, who pitilessly oppresses him, also has right on his side. Melodrama could thus be summed up by saying: 'Only one is just and justifiable,' while the perfect tragic formula would be: 'All can be justified, no one is just.' This is why the advice given by the chorus of classical tragedies is mainly one of prudence. For the chorus knows that up to a certain limit everyone is right and that the person who, through blindness or passion, oversteps this limit is heading for catastrophe if he persists in his desire to assert a right which he thinks he alone possesses. The constant theme of classical tragedy is thus that of the limit which must not be transgressed. On either side of this limit stand equally legitimate forces locked in quivering and unending combat. The man who makes a mistake about this limit, who tries to destroy this balance, is heading for the abyss. This idea of the limit which no one should overstep, and beyond which lies death or disaster, also recurs in *Macbeth* and *Phèdre*, though in a less pure form than in Greek tragedy. Finally, this explains why the ideal drama, like the Romantic drama, is first and foremost movement and action, since what it represents is the struggle between good and evil and the different incidents in this struggle. The ideal tragedy, on the other hand, and especially Greek tragedy, is first and foremost tension, since it is the conflict, in a frenzied immobility, between two powers, each of which wears the double mask of good and evil. It is of course true that between these two extreme types of tragedy and melodrama, dramatic literature offers all possible intermediaries.

But if we restrict ourselves to the pure forms, what are the two forces which, in Greek classical tragedy for example, enter into conflict? If we take *Prometheus in chains* as typical of this kind of tragedy, we can say that there is, on the one hand, man and his desire for power, and on the other the divine principle

reflected by the world. Tragedy occurs when man, by pride (or even by stupidity, as in the case of Ajax) enters into conflict with the divine order, personified by a god or incarnated in society. The more justified this revolt, and the more necessary this order, then the greater the tragedy which stems from the conflict.

Consequently everything which, within a tragedy, tries to destroy this balance destroys the tragedy itself. If the divine order cannot be called into question and admits only sin and repentance, there is no tragedy. There can be only mysteries or parables, or again what the Spaniards call acts of faith or sacramental acts, that is to say spectacles in which the one truth that exists is solemnly proclaimed. It is thus possible to have religious drama but not religious tragedy. This explains the silence of tragedy up to the Renaissance. Christianity plunges the whole of the universe, man and the world, into the divine order. There is thus no tension between the world and the religious principle, but, at the most, ignorance, together with the difficulty of freeing man from the flesh, of renouncing our passions in order to embrace spiritual truth. Perhaps there has been only one Christian tragedy in history. It was celebrated on Golgotha during one imperceptible instant, at the moment of the 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' This fleeting doubt, and this doubt alone, made sacred the ambiguity of a tragic situation. Afterwards the divinity of Christ was never again called in doubt. The mass, which gives a daily consecration to this divinity, is the real form which religious theatre takes in the West. It is not invention, but repetition.

On the other hand, everything which frees the individual and makes the universe submit to his wholly human law, especially by the denial of the mystery of existence, once again destroys tragedy. Atheistic or rationalist tragedy is thus equally impossible. If all is mystery, there is no tragedy. If all is reason, the same thing happens. Tragedy is born between light and shade, and from the struggle between them. And this is understandable. In both religious and atheistic drama, the problem has in fact already been solved. In the ideal tragedy, on the contrary, it has not been solved. The hero rebels and rejects the order which oppresses him, while the divine power, by its oppression, affirms itself exactly to the same extent as it is denied. In other words, revolt alone is not enough to make a tragedy. Neither is the affirmation

of the divine order. Both a revolt and an order are necessary, the first propping up the second, and each reinforcing the other with its own strength. No Oedipus without the destiny summed up by the oracle. But the destiny would not have all its fatality if Oedipus did not refuse it.

And if tragedy ends in death or punishment, it is important to note that what is punished is not the crime itself but the blindness of the hero who has denied balance and tension. I am talking, of course, of the ideal tragic situation. Aeschylus, for example, who remains close to the religious and Dionysiac origins of tragedy, granted Prometheus forgiveness in the last section of the trilogy; the Furies are replaced by the Kindly Ones. But in Sophocles the balance is for most of the time scrupulously maintained, and it is in this respect that he is the greatest tragedian of all time. Euripides, on the other hand, will upset the tragic balance by concentrating on the individual and on psychology. He is thus a forerunner of individualistic drama, that is to say of the decadence of tragedy. Similarly, the great Shakespearean tragedies are still rooted in a kind of vast cosmic mystery which puts up an obscure resistance against the undertakings of its passionate individuals, while Corneille ensures the triumph of the individual ethic, and by his very perfection announces the end of the *genre*.

People have thus said that tragedy swings between the two poles of extreme nihilism and unlimited hope. For me, nothing is more true. The hero denies the order which strikes him down, and the divine order strikes because it is denied. Both thus affirm that they exist at the very moment when this existence is called into question. The chorus draws the lesson, which is that there is an order, that this order can be painful, but that it is still worse not to recognize that it exists. The only purification lies in denying and excluding nothing, in thus accepting the mystery of existence, the limitations of man, in short the order where men know without knowing. Oedipus then says 'All is well', when his eyes have been torn out. Henceforth he knows, though he never sees again. His darkness is filled with light, and this face with its dead eyes shines with the highest lesson of the tragic universe.

What can be drawn from these observations? A suggestion and a working hypothesis, nothing more. It seems in fact that tragedy is born in the West each time that the pendulum of civilization is

halfway between a sacred society and a society built around man. On two occasions, twenty centuries apart, we find a struggle between a world that is still interpreted in a sacred context and men who are already committed to their individuality, that is to say, armed with the power to question. In both cases, the individual increasingly asserts himself, the balance is gradually destroyed, and the tragic spirit finally falls silent. When Nietzsche accuses Socrates of having dug the grave of classical Greek tragedy, he is right up to a certain point—exactly to the same extent that it is true to say of Descartes that he marks the end of the tragic movement born of the Renaissance. At the time of the Renaissance, in fact, the traditional Christian universe is called into question by the Reformation, the discovery of the world and the flowering of the scientific spirit. Gradually, the individual stands up against the sacred order of things and against destiny. Shakespeare then throws his passionate creatures against the simultaneously evil and just order of the world. Death and pity invade the stage and once again the final words of tragedy ring out: 'A higher life is born of my despair.' Then the pendulum moves increasingly in the opposite direction. Racine and French tragedy carry the tragic movement to its conclusion in the perfection of chamber music. Armed by Descartes and the scientific spirit, triumphant reason then proclaims the rights of the individual and empties the stage: tragedy will go down into the street on the bloody boards of revolution. Romanticism will thus write no tragedies but simply dramas, and among them only those of Kleist or Schiller reach true greatness. Man is alone, and he is thus confronted with nothing but himself. He is then no longer a tragic character, but an adventurer. Dramas and novels will depict him better than any other art. The spirit of tragedy consequently disappears until our own day, when the most monstrous wars have not inspired a single tragic poet.

What then could bring about a renaissance of tragedy among us? If my hypothesis is valid, our only reason for hope lies in the visible transformation of individualism, and in the slow recognition by the individual, under the pressure of history, that he does have limits. The world which the individual of the eighteenth century thought he could conquer and transform by reason and science has in fact taken shape, but a monstrous one. Rational and excessive at one and the same time, it is the world of

history. But at this degree of *hubris*, history has put on the mask of destiny. Man doubts whether he can conquer history, all he can do is struggle within it. By a curious fatality, humanity has recarved itself a hostile destiny with the very same weapons that it used to reject fatality. After having deified the human reign, man is once more turning against this god. He is struggling, at the same time both a warrior and a refugee, torn between absolute hope and final doubt. Thus he lives in a tragic climate. Perhaps this explains why tragedy is seeking to be reborn. Today, man is proclaiming his revolt while knowing that this revolt has limits, is demanding liberty and undergoing necessity, and this contradictory man, torn apart, conscious henceforth of human and historical ambiguity, is the essentially tragic man. He is perhaps striding towards the formulation of his own tragedy, which will be reached on the day when *All is well.*

*

And what, in fact, the French dramatic renaissance offers us today are the first tentative movements in this direction. Our dramatic writers are seeking for a tragic language because no tragedy can exist without a language, and because this language is all the more difficult to formulate when it must reflect the contradictions of the tragic situation. It must be, at one and the same time, both hieratic and familiar, barbarous and learned, mysterious and clear, haughty and pitiful. Our authors, in quest of this language, have thus gone instinctively back to its sources, that is to say to the tragic epochs which I have mentioned. We have thus seen a rebirth of Greek tragedy in our country, but in the only forms possible to highly individualistic minds. These are either derision, or highly mannered literary transposition. That is to say, in short, humour and fantasy, comedy alone belonging to the realm of the individual. Two good examples of this attitude are provided by Gide's *Oedipe* or Giraudoux's *La Guerre de Troie.*

Extract

What is also visible in France is an effort to reintroduce the language of religion on to the stage. A logical thing to do. But this had to be done by classical religious images, while the problem of modern tragedy lies precisely in the need to recreate

new sacred images. We have thus witnessed either a kind of pastiche, in both style and sentiment, as in Montherlant's *Port-Royal* which is at the moment triumphing in Paris.

Extract

or the resurrection of authentic Christian sentiments as in the admirable *Partage de midi.*

Extract

But here we can see just how the religious theatre is not tragic: it is not a theatre in which the creature and creation are pitted one against the other, but a theatre in which men abandon the love they had for the creature. In a way, the works of Claudel before his conversion, such as *Tête d'Or* or *La Ville*, are more significant in our immediate context. But, however that may be, religious theatre always precedes tragedy. In a way, it foreshadows it. It is thus not surprising that the dramatic work in which the style, if not the situation, is already perceptibly tragic should be Henri de Montherlant's *Le Maître de Santiago*, from which I should now like to read the two principal scenes:

Extract

For me, a work like this already contains an authentic tension, although a slightly rhetorical and, above all, a highly individualistic one. But I feel that tragic language is taking shape in it and that this language gives us more than does the play itself. In any case, if the attempts and researches that I have tried to present to you through some of their most outstanding examples do not give you the certainty that a dramatic renaissance is possible, they do at least leave us with the hope that it may happen one day. The path still to be travelled must first of all be followed by our Society itself, in search of a synthesis between liberty and necessity, and by each one of us, who need to keep alive in ourselves our power of revolt without yielding to our ability for negation. If we can pay this price, the tragic sensibility which is taking shape in our time will flourish and find its expression. This amounts to saying that the real modern tragedy is the one that I

am not going to read you, because it does not yet exist. To be born, it needs our patience and a genius.

My only aim has been to make you feel that there does exist in modern French dramatic art a kind of tragic nebula within which various nuclei are beginning to coagulate. A cosmic storm may, of course, sweep the nebula away, and with it the future planets. But if this movement continues in spite of the storms of time, these promises will bear their fruit and the West will perhaps experience a rebirth of the tragic theatre. It is certainly in preparation everywhere. Nevertheless, and I say this without nationalism (I love my country too much to be nationalistic), it is in France that the first signs of such a renaissance are visible. In France, of course, but I have surely said enough to make you share my conviction that the model, and the inexhaustible inspiration, remains for us the genius of Greece. To express to you both this hope and a double gratitude, first of all the one which French writers have towards Greece, their common fatherland, and secondly my own gratitude for the welcome you have given us, I can find no better way of ending this lecture than by reading you an extract from the magnificent and learnedly barbarous transposition that Paul Claudel has made of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, in which our two languages are mutually transfigured in one wondrous and inimitable tongue.

Extract

1955

NATIVE CULTURE. THE NEW CULTURE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

Outline of a lecture given at the *Maison de la Culture* on February 8, 1937.

I. The aim of the *Maison de la Culture*, which is celebrating its opening today, is to serve the culture of the Mediterranean. Faithful to the general directions governing *Maisons* of the same type, it seeks to encourage, within a regional framework, the development of a culture whose existence and greatness stand in no need of proof. In this respect, there is perhaps something surprising in the fact that left-wing intellectuals can agree to serve a culture which seems irrelevant to their cause, and which can even, as has happened in the case of Maurras, be monopolized by theoreticians of the Right.

It may in fact seem as though serving the cause of a Mediterranean regionalism is tantamount to restoring an empty traditionalism with no future before it, to celebrating the superiority of one culture over another, or, again, to adopting an inverted form of fascism and inciting the Latin against the Nordic peoples. This is a perpetual source of misunderstandings. The aim of this lecture is to try to dispel them. The whole error lies in the confusion between Mediterranean and Latin, and in the attribution to Rome of what began in Athens. For us it is obvious that our only claim is to a kind of nationalism of the sun. We could never agree to enslaving ourselves to traditions and binding our living future to exploits already dead. A tradition is a past pretending to be the present. The Mediterranean surrounding us, on the contrary, is a country that is alive, full of games and smiles. Moreover, nationalism has judged itself by its acts. Nationalisms always make their appearance in history as signs of decadence. When the vast edifice of the Roman empire collapsed, when its spiritual unity, from which so many different regions drew their justification, fell apart, then and only then, at a time of decadence, did nationalisms appear. Since then, the West has never

rediscovered its unity. At the present time, internationalism is trying to give the West its real meaning and its vocation. However, this internationalism is no longer inspired by a Christian principle, by the Papal Rome of the Holy Roman Empire. The principle inspiring it is man. Its unity no longer lies in faith but in hope. A civilization can endure only in so far as its unity and greatness, once all nations are abolished, stem from a spiritual principle. India, almost as large as Europe, with no nations, no sovereignty, kept its own particular character even after two centuries of English rule.

This is why, before any other consideration, we reject the principle of a Mediterranean nationalism. Moreover, it would never be possible to talk of the superiority of Mediterranean culture. Men express themselves in harmony with their land. And superiority, as far as culture is concerned, lies in this harmony and in nothing else. There are no higher or lower cultures. There are cultures which are more or less true. All we want to do is help a country to express itself. Locally. Nothing more. The real question is this: can a new Mediterranean civilization be achieved?

*

II. *Obvious Facts.* (a) There is a Mediterranean sea, a basin which links together ten or so different countries. The men whose voices boom out in the cafés where you can sing in Spain, who wander in the port of Genoa, on the quayside at Marseilles, the strange, strong race which lives along our coasts, all belong to the same family. When you travel in Europe, and go down towards Italy or Provence, you breathe a sigh of relief as you rediscover these casually dressed men, this violent and colourful life which we all know. I spent two months in Central Europe, between Austria and Germany, wondering what could be the origin of this strange discomfort weighing me down, this muffled anxiety which I felt in my bones. I understood a short while ago. These people were always buttoned right up to the top. They did not know how to relax. They did not know what joy was like, joy which is so different from laughter. Yet it is with details like this that you can give a valid meaning to the word 'Country'. Our Country is not the abstraction which sends men off to be massacred, but a certain way of appreciating life that is shared by

certain people, through which we can feel ourselves closer to someone from Genoa or Majorca than to someone from Normandy or Alsace. That is what the Mediterranean is, this smell or this scent which we do not need to express: we all feel it through our skin.

(b) There are other obvious facts, historical in nature. Each time that a doctrine has reached the Mediterranean basin, it is always, in the resulting clash of ideas, the Mediterranean which has remained intact, the region which has overcome the doctrine. Christianity, in its origins, was an inspiring doctrine, but one closed in upon itself, essentially Judaic, incapable of concessions, harsh, exclusive and admirable. From its encounter with the Mediterranean, there emerged a new doctrine: Catholicism. The initial store of emotional aspirations received the addition of a philosophical doctrine. The monument then reached its highest and most beautiful form—adapted itself to man. Thanks to the Mediterranean, Christianity was able to enter the world and begin the miraculous career which it has since enjoyed.

It was once again someone from the Mediterranean, Francis of Assisi, who changed Christianity from an inward-looking and tormented religion into a hymn to nature and simple joy. And the only effort to separate Christianity from the world was made by a Northerner, by Luther. Protestantism is, in fact, Catholicism wrenched from the Mediterranean, and from the simultaneously pernicious and inspiring influence of this sea.

Let us look even closer. For anyone who has lived both in Germany and in Italy, it is obvious that fascism does not have the same appearance in the two countries. You can feel it everywhere you go in Germany, on people's faces, in the city streets. Dresden, a garrison town, is almost smothered by an invisible enemy. What you feel first of all in Italy is the land itself. What you see first of all in a German is the Hitlerite who greets you with a 'Heil Hitler!'; in an Italian, the cheerful and gay human being. Here again, the doctrine seems to have yielded to the country—and it is a miracle wrought by the Mediterranean which enables men who think humanly to live unoppressed in a country of inhuman laws.

*

III. But this living reality, the Mediterranean, is not something

new to us. And it seems that this culture is the very image of the Latin antiquity which the Renaissance tried to rediscover through the Middle Ages. It is this Latinity which Maurras and his friends try to annex. It was in the name of this Latin order that, on the occasion of the war against Abyssinia, twenty-four Western intellectuals signed a degrading manifesto which celebrated the 'civilizing mission of Italy in barbarous Abyssinia'.

But no. It is not to this Mediterranean that our *Maison de la Culture* lays claim. For this is not the true Mediterranean. This is the abstract and conventional Mediterranean represented by Rome and the Romans. This imitative and unimaginative people nevertheless had sufficient imagination to replace the artistic genius and feeling for life which it lacked by a genius for war. And the order whose praises we so often hear was one imposed by force and not stemming from intelligence. Even when they copied, the Romans lost the savour of the original. And they did not even imitate the essential genius of Greece, but the fruits of its decadence and of its mistakes. Not the strong, vigorous Greece of the great tragic and great comic writers, but the prettiness and affected grace of the last centuries. It was not life which Rome took from Greece, but puerile and over-intellectualized abstractions. The Mediterranean lies elsewhere, in the very denial of Rome and of the Latin genius. It is alive, and wants no truck with abstractions. And it is quite easy to acknowledge Mussolini as the worthy descendant of the Caesar and Augustus of Imperial Rome, if we mean by this that he, like them, sacrifices truth and greatness to a soulless violence.

What we claim in the Mediterranean is not a liking for reasoning and abstractions, but its physical life—the courtyards, the cypresses, the strings of pimentoes. We claim Aeschylus and not Euripides, the Doric Apollos and not the copies in the Vatican, Spain, with its strength and its pessimism, and not the bluster and swagger of Rome, landscapes crushed with sunlight and not the theatrical settings in which a dictator drunk on his own verbosity enslaves the crowds. What we seek is not the lie which triumphed in Ethiopia but the truth that is being murdered in Spain.

*

IV. The Mediterranean, an international basin traversed by

every current, is perhaps the only region linked to the great ideas from the East. For it is not classical and well ordered, but diffuse and turbulent, like the Arab districts in our towns, or the ports of Genoa and of Tunisia. This triumphant taste for life, this sense of boredom and the weight of the sun, the empty squares at noon in Spain, the siesta, this is the true Mediterranean and it is to the East that it is closest. Not to the Latin West. North Africa is one of the few countries where East and West live close together. And there is, at this junction, little difference between the way in which a Spaniard or an Italian lives on the quays of Algiers, and that of the Arabs around them. The most essential aspect of the Mediterranean genius may perhaps spring from this historically and geographically unique encounter between East and West. (In this respect, all we need do is read Audisio.)

This culture, this Mediterranean truth, exists and shows itself all along the line: 1. In linguistic unity—the ease with which a Latin language can be learned when another is already known; 2. Unity of origin—the prodigious collectivism of the Middle Ages—chivalric order, religious order, feudal orders, etc., etc. On all these points, the Mediterranean gives us the picture of a living, highly coloured, concrete civilization, which changes doctrines into its own likeness—and receives ideas without changing its own nature.

But then, people may say, why go any farther?

*

V. The reason is that the same country which transformed so many doctrines must transform the doctrines of the present day. A Mediterranean collectivism will be different from a Russian collectivism properly so-called. The issue of collectivism is not being fought out in Russia: it is being fought out in the Mediterranean basin and in Spain, at this very moment. Of course, man's future has been at stake for a long time now, but it is perhaps here that the struggle reaches its tragic height, and where so many trump cards are placed in our hands. We have, before our eyes, realities which are stronger than we are ourselves. Our ideas will adjust themselves and become adapted to them. This is why our opponents are mistaken in all their objections. No one has the right to prejudge the fate of a doctrine, and to judge our future in the name of a past, even if this past is that of Russia.

Our task here is to rehabilitate the Mediterranean, to take it back from those who claim it unjustly for themselves, and to prepare it for the economic organization which awaits it. Our task is to discover what is concrete and alive in it, and, on every occasion, to encourage the different aspects of this culture. We are all the more prepared for this task in that we are in immediate contact with the Oriental civilization which can teach us so much in this respect. We are, here, on the side of the Mediterranean against Rome. And the essential role that towns like Algiers and Barcelona can play is to serve, in their own small way, that aspect of Mediterranean culture which favours man instead of crushing him.

*

VI. The intellectual's role is a difficult one in our time. It is not his task to modify history. Whatever people may say, revolutions are made and ideas come afterwards. Consequently, it needs great courage today to proclaim oneself faithful to the things of the mind. If the term 'intellectual' is pronounced with so much scorn and disapproval, this is because it is associated in people's minds with the idea of someone who talks in abstractions, who is unable to come into contact with life, and who prefers his own personality to all the rest of the world. But for those who do not want to avoid their responsibilities, the essential task is to rehabilitate intelligence by regenerating the subject-matter which it treats, to give back all its true meaning to the mind by restoring to culture its true visage of health and sunlight. And I was saying that this courage had its part to play. For if, in fact, it is not the task of intelligence to modify history, its real task will nevertheless be to act upon man, for it is he who makes history. We have a contribution to make to this task. We want to link culture with life. The Mediterranean, which surrounds us with smiles, with sea and sunlight, teaches us how this is to be done. Xenophon tells us in *The Persian Expedition* that when the Greek soldiers who had ventured into Asia were coming back to their own country, dying of hunger and thirst, cast into despair by so many failures and humiliations, they reached the top of a mountain from which they could see the sea. They then began to dance, forgetting their weariness and the disgust which they felt at the spectacle of their whole life. We, likewise, do not wish

to cut ourselves off from the world. There is only one culture. Not the one which feeds off abstractions and capital letters. Not the one which condemns. Not the one which justifies the excesses and the deaths in Ethiopia and which defends the taste for brutal conquests. We know that one very well, and want nothing to do with it. What we do seek is the culture which lives in trees, in hills and in men.

This is why men of the left are standing before you today, to serve a cause which at first sight had nothing to do with their own opinions. I should be happy if, like us, you were now convinced of the opposite. Everything which is alive is ours. Politics are made for men, not men for politics. Mediterranean men need policies suited to the Mediterranean. We do not want to live off fables. In the world of violence and death which surrounds us, there is no place for hope. But there is, perhaps, place for civilization, for real civilization, which puts truth before fables and life before dreams. And this civilization is not interested in hope. There, man lives off his truths.[1]

It is to this whole effort that men of the West must link themselves. Within the framework of internationalism, the thing can be achieved. If each one of us in his sphere, his country, his province agrees to work modestly, success is not far away. As far as we are concerned, we know our aim, our limitations and our possibilities. All we need do to become conscious of our task is open our eyes. We shall then make men understand that culture cannot be understood unless it is placed at the service of life, that the mind need not be the enemy of man. Just as the Mediterranean sun is the same for all men, the effort of men's intelligence should be a common inheritance and not a source of conflicts and murders.

Can we achieve a new Mediterranean culture which can be reconciled with our social idea? Yes. But both you and we must help to bring it about.

Published in the first number of the review *Jeune Méditerranée*, monthly bulletin of the Algiers *Maison de la Culture*, No. 1, April 1937.

[1] I have spoken of a new civilization and not of a progress in civilization. It would be too dangerous to handle that evil toy called Progress.

JULES ROY: *LA VALLÉE HEUREUSE*

MODERN writers talk about what happens to them. Tolstoy centred *War and Peace* around the invasion of Russia, which he himself had not experienced. In our own day, he would not receive the approval of his contemporaries unless he replaced the first Napoleon by the third, and cast Prince Andrei into the siege of Sebastopol, in which he, Tolstoy, had fought well (though without, however, being able to overcome his fear of rats).

There are reasons for this, which are complex ones. But, in any case, very few of our writers seem blessed with that innocence which enables them to bring imaginary characters to life, detach themselves from these characters enough to love them truly, and, consequently, make other people love them. This is, after all, because we lack both time and a future, and because we have to hasten to create in the interval between a war and a revolution. We consequently do what is quickest, which is to report what we have done and what we have seen. And it is true that a great work is, in a way, the account of a spiritual adventure. But, in general, this account is presupposed or transfigured. Today, we go no farther than the account, the document, the 'slice of life', as the Naturalists ignorantly called it. A minimum of preparation, a few strips of bacon, two or three sprigs of herbs, and the meat is served raw.

Cooks are consequently becoming rare; there is a touch which is beginning to be lost, or at least, to be forgotten, and in the last resort the best we can do is accept what we are. But this should not deprive us of our perspicacity, or prevent us from realizing that this new liking for displays of raw meat leads to the loss of what has long been the strength, sometimes the explosive strength, of our literature: restraint. (To make myself clear, and by straining words a little, I will say, for example, that there is restraint in Sade.) Sincerity is becoming noisy, and when every-

one plunges into it, it becomes a new conformism. This attitude is, moreover, very understandable. The adventures of writers in the past were almost always concerned with love. Through respect for their partners, and consideration for society, they transposed. Today, the raw material is provided by men, whom no one respects, and by their frenzied embraces which go under the name of wars or revolutions. What is the point of restraint? Let the meat bleed, since that is its function.

But this does not alter the fact that art cannot do without restraint, whose very impulses it shares. It does not alter the fact that art lies in the distance which time gives to suffering or to joy. And, if our time compels us to turn away from art in order to cast ourselves on to new and fresh suffering, it still remains true that the best books are and will be those that restrict the damage, and which, though they refuse nothing of the day's encumbrances, will nevertheless continue to be slightly restrained.

I have not been able to find a better way than this long digression to express the reasons for which I find this book quite exceptional, in spite of the fact that it fulfils all the requirements of the present day. It is *La Vallée Heureuse*, by Jules Roy. It is, precisely, a book that introduces a certain delicacy of touch into accounts of butchery. It deals nevertheless with a personal experience, which the author scarcely transposes. After ten pages, it is obvious that Chevrier is Roy himself. Only the conclusion seems to have been fictionalized. For the rest, it is very clear. Roy is in command of the crew of a bomber, in the R.A.F., and has to carry out the customary tour of duty of thirty bombing missions over Germany. Statistically, it is rare for a bomber to do more than twenty missions. It is shot down in flames before this happens. This dangerous and monotonous struggle against probability forms the subject-matter of the book. Roy climbs into the 'B', his plane, with his crew. He accomplishes his mission. He returns. He waits for the next mission. He climbs back into the 'B', and so on and so forth. All we have is the description of the various circumstances, anti-aircraft barrages, delay in reaching the target when the enemy fighters have already taken off, or collision on landing, when the bomber, in the normal course of events, would have crashed with its load of men and bombs. In conclusion, we have the death of a friend who has not had the incredible luck of reaching his thirtieth mission. This book is

consequently the story of a run of luck, but one enjoyed with suitable humility.

For this is indeed where the originality of *La Vallée Heureuse* is to be found. It is possible that, like all of us, Roy has lost his innocence. But he does not make a fuss about it, and this is another way of approaching innocence. Here, nothing is treated in general, nor made into pretext for lamentation or glorification. In *La Vallée Heureuse*, Roy has not set out to write a book of morals or heroism. It contains no theory of destiny. The author talks about himself and his friends, but without claiming to use this as basis for a judgment on man. If this judgment is implied, then that is the reader's business. In other words, Roy has accepted the experience without trying to place himself above it. He has shut himself up in it, or, rather, other people have shut him up in it, like a rat. And he has found himself caught, as in those formation flights which he describes so admirably: the aeroplanes coagulated in the heart of the night, wing to wing, each crew pursuing its task, isolated in the fantastic noise and the shadow of the sky, with no feeling except the terrible expectation of a perpetually possible collision, and the nervous fear that, when they return, all the bombs will not have been dropped, and the instant of landing will be that of a new death. Month after month, shoulder to shoulder, Roy has thus pursued his task in the night of a war that he did not love. And, rather than draw from it some great view on human destiny, he has limited himself to registering the moments when he was afraid and those when he picked up courage again. This is how he has been able to speak for all of us, while seeking to speak for no one, and this is how for the first time, thanks to him, we can imagine the thoughts of those who, year after year, travelled across the black sky of our imprisoned towns.

La Vallée Heureuse does not therefore take its place among the great books of humanism that we are in the habit of requiring, but among those works of strength and modesty whose taste we had forgotten. When Chevrier tells us that he is afraid (this terrible *Miserere* which mounts up in him at the moment when the bomber takes off on a new mission), it is not so that he can beat his breast. It is normal that, in certain circumstances, a man should be afraid. And, similarly, when he gives the order to aim for the target in conditions made ten times more dangerous by the

fact that the bomber is late, he does not glamorize his action. It is normal that, under all circumstances, a man should do his duty. We thus find, on each page of the book, the same naïvety (in the sense in which Schiller spoke of Greek naïvety). The chapter which I like the least, and which is the one where Roy talks about love, shows in fact that this strange warrior has recognized and accepted his sentimentality for what it was, that is to say something defenceless. In other words, he writes naturally about being sentimental, in the same way as he wrote naturally about fear and courage. And that is enough to justify everything.

At this degree of simplicity and honesty, a man should be accepted or rejected as a whole. I should have no difficulty in saying what I feel on this point, as readers will have guessed. But this book is one that makes us think seriously. In other words, it is the book of a man. What other praise can I add? Let me merely say that after we have followed Chevrier in his long struggle against chance, death and himself, the fraternal esteem which comes irresistibly to us is, I suppose, the truest homage that a writer of good faith can seek to receive from a reader of good faith.

A word finally on the style. It is also a style of struggle. It does not flow easily, it makes an effort. The sentences are generally long, and rather complex. The image is surrounded, approached, released for a moment, then taken up again in the thickness of the words before being finally delivered in its strength and flesh. Such a great tension is, inevitably, accompanied by a few obscurities and excessive complexities of style. But it is this very effort which explains Roy's greatest success, as well as his ability, which is surprising, to make us see what he is describing. For, after this great pitching of words and sentences, grouped likewise into squadrons, assembled like the aeroplanes setting out on a raid, travelling wingtip to wingtip, slowly through the night, where at the very end of their journey through clouds and shadows they will make the gigantic flames of war burst forth, so the image bursts forth, in the end, so terrible in its loveliness that it shakes us like an explosion or a cataclysm. Such a passage occurs where the squadron, coming back from a mission, is suddenly surrounded in the darkness by Very lights and machine-gunned by enemy fighters, which shoot down the heavy bombers

one by one. 'New fires were born with the flapping of the heavy petrol flames as they were flattened by the wind; the bombers rolled over a little, then caught fire by the fuel tanks in the wings, floated on a little longer and burst like stars.'

Published in *L'Arche*, February 1947

ENCOUNTERS WITH ANDRÉ GIDE

I WAS sixteen when I had my first encounter with André Gide. An uncle, who had taken part of my education in hand, sometimes gave me books. A butcher by trade, and with no shortage of customers, his only real passion was for reading and for ideas. He devoted his mornings to the meat trade, and the rest of the day to his library, to reading newspapers, and to interminable discussions in the local cafés.

One day, he held out to me a small book with a parchment-like cover, assuring me that it 'would interest me'. I read everything, indiscriminately, in those days; I probably opened *Les Nourritures Terrestres* after having finished *Lettres de Femme* or a volume of the Pardaillan series. I found these invocations rather obscure. I shied away from this hymn to the goods of nature. In Algiers, at the age of sixteen, I was saturated with these riches; I longed for others, no doubt. And then 'Blida, little rose . . .'. I knew Blida, unfortunately. I gave the book back to my uncle, telling him that it had, in fact, interested me. Then I went back to the beaches, to my listless studies and idle reading, and also to the difficult life that I led. The meeting had not come off.

The next year, I met Jean Grenier. He too, among other things, held out to me a book. It was a novel by André de Richaud which was called *La Douleur*. I have never met André de Richaud. But I have never forgotten his admirable book, which was the first to speak to me of what I knew: a mother, poverty, fine evening skies. He untied deep down inside me a tangle of obscure bonds, freed me from fetters whose hindrance I felt without being able to give them a name. I read it in a night, in the best tradition, and in the morning, secure in the possession of a new and strange liberty, went hesitatingly forward over an unknown land. I had just learned that books dispensed other things than forgetfulness and entertainment. My obstinate silences, these vague but all-embracing sufferings, the strange world that sur-

rounded me, the nobility of my family, their poverty, my secrets, all this, I realized, could be expressed! There was a deliverance, an order of truth, in which poverty, for example, suddenly took on its true face, the one I had suspected it possessed, and that I obscurely revered. *La Douleur* gave me a glimpse of the world of creation, into which Gide was to be my guide. This is where my second encounter with him took place.

I began to read properly. A fortunate illness had taken me away from my beaches and my pleasures. I still read books in the same disorder, but with a new appetite. I was looking for something, I wanted to rediscover the world which I had glimpsed and which seemed to me to be my own. Between books and daydreams, I was gradually discovering, alone or thanks to friendship, new dimensions to life. After so many years, I still keep in my heart the marvel of this apprenticeship. One morning, I tumbled across Gide's *Traités*. Two days later, I knew by heart whole passages of *La Tentative Amoureuse*. As to the *Retour de l'Enfant Prodigue*, it had become the book of which I never spoke: perfection seals our lips. I merely made an adaptation, which together with a few friends I later put on the stage. In the meantime, I read the whole of Gide's work, and received, from *Les Nourritures Terrestres*, in my turn, the upheaval of my whole being that has so often been described. But I received that on my second encounter, as can be seen, perhaps because when I read for the first time I was a young, unenlightened barbarian, but also because this revolution could not be, as far as I was concerned, in any way concerned with the senses. The shock was decisive in quite a different way. Long before Gide himself had confirmed this interpretation, I learned to read *Les Nourritures Terrestres* as the gospel of self-deprivation that I needed.

*

From that point onwards, Gide reigned over my youth, and it is impossible not to be always grateful to those whom we have at least once admired, for having hoisted us to the highest point that our soul can reach. In spite of all this, however, I never saw Gide as my master either in writing or in thinking; I had given myself others. Gide appeared to me rather, because of what I have just said, as the model of the artist, the guardian, the king's son, who kept watch over the gates of the garden in which I wanted to

live. For example, there is almost nothing in what he has written about art with which I do not entirely agree, although our century has moved away from this conception. The reproach addressed to Gide's work is that it is distant from the anguish of our time. We choose to believe that, if a writer is to be great, he must be revolutionary. But if this is true, history proves that he keeps this quality only up to the revolution, and no farther. Moreover, it is by no means certain that Gide did move away from his time. What is more certain is that his time wanted to move away from what he represented. The question is whether it will ever succeed, or will do so only by committing suicide. Gide also suffers from that other prejudice of our day, which is that we have to parade our despair to be intelligent. Here, discussion is easier: this prejudice deserves only contempt.

I nevertheless did have to forget Gide's example, and, of necessity, to turn away very early from this world of innocent creation, at the same time as I left the land where I was born. History, for my generation, has been a compelling force. I had to take my place in the line waiting before the porch of the black years. Then we fell into step, and have not yet reached our goal. How could I not have changed since? At least I have not forgotten the fullness and light in which I began my life, and I have placed nothing above them. I have not denied Gide.

In fact, I met him again at the end of our darkest years. I was then occupying, in Paris, part of his flat. It was a studio with a balcony, and its greatest peculiarity consisted of a trapeze which hung in the middle of the room. I had it taken down, I think, for I was tired of seeing the intellectuals who had come to see me suspending themselves from it. I had been installed in this studio for a good number of months when Gide, in turn, came back from North Africa. I had never met him before; and yet it was as if we had always known each other. Not that Gide ever received me very intimately. He had a horror, as I already knew, of that noisy promiscuity which takes the place of friendship in our world. But the smile with which he greeted me was simple and joyful and, when he was with me, I never saw him on his guard.

As far as the rest was concerned, forty years' difference in age stood between us, together with our mutual horror of embarrassing each other. This is why I spent many weeks living close to Gide, almost without seeing him. He would sometimes knock at

the double door which separated the studio from his library. At arms' length, he would be carrying Sarah, the cat, which had got into his room across the roof. Sometimes, the piano attracted him. On another occasion, he listened by my side to the announcement of the armistice on the wireless. I well knew that the war, which brings most people an end to their loneliness, was for him, as for me, the only true loneliness. For the first time, together round this radio set, we felt that we were sharing something of our times. On other days, all I knew of his presence, on the other side of the door, was footsteps, rustlings, the gentle disturbance of his meditations and musings. But what did it matter? I knew that he was there, next door to me, and that he kept, with his unrivalled dignity, that secret realm into which I used to dream of entering, and towards which I have always turned, in the midst of our struggles and our cries.

*

Today, now that he has turned away from us, who could replace my old friend at the gates of this realm? Who will keep the garden until the day when we can go back to it? He kept watch, at least, until his death; it is therefore just that he should continue to receive the quiet gratitude that we owe to our true masters. The unpleasant noises made at his departure will in no way alter this. Of course, those who know how to hate are still furious over this death. He, whose privileges had been so bitterly envied, as if justice did not consist of sharing these privileges rather than mingling everything in a general servitude, found himself in dispute to the very end, and found people indignant over such a serenity. Not a day goes by without his once again receiving the homage of hatred, of envy, or of that poor insolence which thinks it descends from Retz and which, in fact, comes from the pantry.

Yet what unanimity should have been realized around this little iron bed. To die is such appalling torture for some men that it seems to me as if a happy death redeems a small patch of creation. If I were a believer, Gide's death would bring me great relief. But if those believers I see do believe, what is the object of their faith? Those deprived of grace simply have to practise generosity amongst themselves. As far as the believers are concerned, they lack nothing, they are provided for; or at least they

act as if that were the case. We, on the contrary, lack everything, except the fraternal hand. This is doubtless why Sartre was able to pay Gide, over and above their differences, an exemplary act of homage. Certain men thus find, in their reflections, the secret of a serenity which is neither miserly nor facile. Gide's secret lies in the fact that never, in the midst of his doubts, did he lose the pride of being a man. Dying also formed part of this condition, which he had wanted to assume to the very end. What would they have said of him if, after having lived surrounded by privileges, he had gone trembling to his death? It was then that he would have shown that he had stolen his moments of happiness. But no, he smiled at the mystery, and turned towards the abyss the same face which he had presented to life. Without ever knowing it, we were waiting for him at that moment, for one last time. And for the last time, he did not fail us.

Essay published in the *Hommage de la N.R.F.*
to André Gide, in November 1951

HERMAN MELVILLE

Reprinted by permission of Editions d'Art Lucien Mazenod

IN the days when the whalers of Nantucket stayed at sea for several years, the young Melville, aged 22, took ship on one of them, then changed to a man-of-war and sailed the seas. On his return to America, he enjoyed a certain success with his traveller's tales, and then published his great books in the midst of indifference and incomprehension.[1] After the publication and failure of *The Confidence Man* (1857), Melville, discouraged, 'consents to annihilation'. Having become a customs officer and the father of a family, he entered into an almost complete silence (a few poems, very infrequently) which was to last thirty years. He then hastened to write a masterpiece, *Billy Budd* (completed in April 1891), and died, a few months later, forgotten (a three-line obituary in the *New York Times*). He had to wait until our own day for America and Europe finally to give him his place, among the greatest geniuses of the West.

It is scarcely easier to speak in a few pages of a work which has the tumultuous dimensions of the oceans where it was born than to summarize the Bible or condense Shakespeare. But to judge Melville's genius, if nothing else, we must recognize that his works depict a spiritual experience of unequalled intensity, and that they are to some extent symbolic. Certain critics[2] have discussed this obvious fact, which now scarcely seems open to doubt. His admirable books are numbered among those exceptional works that can be read in different ways, which are at one and the same time both obvious and obscure, as dark as the noonday sun and yet as clear as deep water. The wise man and the child can both draw sustenance from them. The story of Captain

[1] For a long time, *Moby Dick* was considered as an adventure story suitable as a school prize.

[2] Let me, in passing, advise critics to read page 449 of *Mardi* in the French translation.

Ahab, for example, flying from the Southern to the Northern seas in pursuit of Moby Dick, the white whale who has taken off his leg, can doubtless be read as the fatal passion of a character driven mad by grief and loneliness. But it can also be seen as one of the most overwhelming myths ever invented on the subject of the struggle of man against evil, depicting the irresistible logic which finally leads the just man to take up arms first against creation and the creator, then against his fellows and against himself.[1] Let us have no doubt about it: if it is true that talent recreates life while genius has the additional gift of crowning it with myths, Melville is first and foremost a creator of myths.

I will add that these myths, contrary to what people say of them, are clear. They are obscure only in so far as the root of all suffering and all greatness lies buried in the darkness of the earth. They are no more obscure than Phèdre's cries, Hamlet's silences, or the triumphant songs of Don Giovanni. It seems to me, on the contrary (and this would deserve detailed development), that Melville never wrote anything but the same book, which he began again and again. This single book is the story of a voyage, inspired first of all solely by the joyful curiosity of youth (*Typee*, *Omoo*, etc.), then later inhabited by an increasingly wild and burning anguish. *Mardi* is the first, magnificent story in which Melville declares that this quest, which nothing can appease, and in which, finally, 'pursuers and pursued fly across a boundless ocean', now lies open. It is in this work that Melville becomes aware of the fascinating call which for ever echoes within him: 'I have undertaken a journey without maps.' And again: 'I am the restless hunter, the one who has no home.' *Moby Dick* simply carries to perfection the great themes of *Mardi*. But since artistic perfection is also inadequate to quench the kind of thirst with which we are confronted here, Melville will start once again, in *Pierre or Ambiguities*, this unsuccessful masterpiece, to depict the quest of genius and misfortune whose sneering failure he will consecrate in the course of a long journey on the Mississippi which forms the theme of *The Confidence Man*.

[1] As an indication, here are some of the obviously symbolic pages of *Moby Dick* (French translation, Gallimard): pp. 120, 121, 123, 139, 173, 177, 191–3, 203, 209, 241, 310, 313, 339, 373, 415, 421, 452, 457, 460, 472, 485, 499, 503, 517, 520, 522.

This constantly rewritten book, this unwearying peregrination in the archipelago of dreams and bodies, on the ocean, 'of which each wave is a soul', this Odyssey beneath an empty sky, make Melville into the Homer of the Pacific. But we must immediately add that, with him, Ulysses never returns to Ithaca. The country in which Melville weighs anchor with *Billy Budd* is a desert island. By allowing the young sailor, a figure of beauty and innocence, and whom he himself dearly loves, to be condemned to death, Captain Vere submits his heart to the law. And at the same time, by this flawless story which can be placed on the same level as certain Greek tragedies, Melville tells us, in his old age, of his acceptance that beauty and innocence should be put to death so that an order may be maintained, and the ship of men continue to move forward towards an unknown horizon. Has he then truly secured the peace and final dwelling place which he nevertheless said could not be found in the Mardi archipelago? Or are we, on the contrary, faced with this final shipwreck that Melville in his despair asked of the gods? 'One cannot blaspheme and live,' he had proclaimed. At the height of consent, is not *Billy Budd* the highest blasphemy? This can never be known, any more than whether Melville did finally consent to a terrible order, or whether, in quest of the spirit, he allowed himself to be led, as he had asked, 'beyond the reefs, in sunless seas, into night and death'. But no one, in any case, measuring the long anguish which runs through his life and work, will fail to acknowledge the greatness, all the more anguished in being the fruit of self-conquest, of the reply which he has given.

But this, though it had to be said, should mislead no one as to the true genius of Melville and the sovereignty of his art. It is bursting with health, strength, upsurges of humour, and human laughter. It was not he who opened the shop of sombre allegories which today enchant our sad Europe. As a creator, he is for example at the farthest possible remove from Kafka, and he makes us aware of this writer's artistic limitations. However irreplaceable it may be, the spiritual experience in Kafka's work overflows the modes of expression and invention, which remain monotonous. In Melville, this experience is balanced by expression and invention, and constantly finds its flesh and blood in them. Like the greatest artists, Melville constructed his symbols out of concrete things, not from the material of dreams. The

creator of myths partakes of genius only in so far as he inscribes these myths in the denseness of reality, and not in the fleeting clouds of the imagination. In Kafka, the reality which he describes is created by the symbol, the fact stems from the image, whereas in Melville the symbol emerges from reality, the image is born of what we see with our own eyes.[1] This is why Melville never cut himself off from flesh or nature, which are barely perceptible in Kafka's work. On the contrary, Melville's lyricism, which reminds us of Shakespeare's, makes use of the four elements. He mingles the Bible with the sea, the music of the waves with that of the spheres, the poetry of the days with the grandeur of the Atlantic. He is inexhaustible, like the winds which blow for thousands of miles across empty oceans and which, when they reach the coast, still have strength enough to destroy whole villages. He rages, like Lear's madness, over the wild seas where Moby Dick and the spirit of evil crouch among the waves. When the storm and total destruction have passed, a strange calm rises from the primitive waters, the silent pity which transfigures tragedies. Above the speechless crew, the perfect body of Billy Budd turns gently at the end of its rope in the pink and grey light of the approaching day.

T. E. Lawrence placed *Moby Dick* by the side of *The Possessed* or *War and Peace*. One can, without hesitation, place by its side *Billy Budd*, *Mardi*, *Benito Cereno*, and some others. These anguished books, which describe the destruction of man, but in which life is exalted on each page, are inexhaustible sources of strength and pity. We find in them revolt and acceptance, unconquerable and endless love, passion for beauty, language of the highest order, in short, genius. 'To perpetuate one's name,' said Melville, 'one must carve it on a heavy stone and sink it to the depths of the sea: depths last longer than heights.' Depths do in fact have their painful virtue, as did the unjust silence in which Melville lived and died, and as did the ageless ocean which he unceasingly ploughed. From their endless darkness he one day drew his works, those visages of foam and night, carved by the waters, whose mysterious royalty has scarcely begun to shine

[1] In Melville, the metaphor suggests the dream, but from a concrete, physical starting point. In *Mardi*, for example, the hero comes across 'huts of flame'. However, they are made of red tropical creepers, whose leaves had happened to be raised up by the wind.

upon us. Yet it already helps us to emerge effortlessly from our continent of shades and go once more down to the sea, towards its light and secret.

Article published in *Les Ecrivains Célèbres*,
Editions Mazenod, Volume III, 1952

ROGER MARTIN DU GARD

READ, in *Devenir!*, the portrait of old Mazarelles and his wife. From his very first book, Roger Martin du Gard achieves the portrait in depth whose secret seems nowadays to be lost. This third dimension, which extends the range of his work, makes it almost unique in contemporary literature. Our present literary production could, in fact, when it is valid, claim descent from Dostoievski rather than from Tolstoy. Inspired or impassioned shadows trace out a gesticulating commentary for a meditation on man's fate. We can, of course, also find depth and perspective in Dostoievski's characters; but, unlike Tolstoy, he does not make such qualities the rule for his creation. Dostoievski seeks primarily movement, Tolstoy form. Between the young women in *The Possessed* and Natasha Rostov, there is the same difference as between a character in the cinema and one on the stage: more animation and less flesh. These weaknesses on the part of a genius find their compensation, in Dostoievski, through the introduction of a further dimension, spiritual in nature, which is rooted in sin or sanctity. But, with a few exceptions, these notions are declared old-fashioned by our contemporaries, who have consequently retained from Dostoievski only a heritage of shadows. Combined with the influence of Kafka (in whom the visionary triumphs over the artist), or with the technique of the American behaviouristic novel, assimilated by artists who, in their nerves and minds, have more and more difficulty in keeping up with the acceleration of history and who, in order to face up to everything, go deeply into nothing, this imperious example has produced in France an exciting and disappointing literature, whose failures are on a par with its ambitions, and of which it is impossible to say whether it exhausts a fashion or foreshadows a new age.

Roger Martin du Gard, who began writing at the beginning of

the century, is, on the contrary, the only literary artist of his time who can be numbered among the descendants of Tolstoy. But, at the same time, he is perhaps alone (and, in a sense, more than Gide or Valéry) in announcing the literature of today, in bequeathing to it the problems which crush it, and also in authorizing some of its hopes. Martin du Gard shares with Tolstoy a liking for human beings, the art of depicting them in their carnal obscurity, and a knowledge of forgiveness, which are today outdated virtues. The world described by Tolstoy nevertheless formed a whole, a single organism animated by the same faith: his characters meet again in the supreme adventure of eternity. One by one, visibly or invisibly, they all, at some stage in their story, end by falling on their knees. And Tolstoy himself, fleeing in the winter from both family and glory, sought once again to link himself with their misery, with the universal wretchedness, with the innocence of which he could not despair. This faith is lacking in the society which Martin du Gard was to depict, and was also, to a certain extent, lacking in the author himself. This is why his work is also that of doubt, of reason both disappointed and persevering, of ignorance acknowledged, and of a wager on man with no future other than himself. It is through this, as through its invisible audacities or its accepted contradictions, that his work belongs to our time. It can still, today, explain us to ourselves, and soon, perhaps, help those who are to come.

There is a strong possibility, in fact, that the real ambition of our authors, after they have assimilated *The Possessed*, will be one day to write *War and Peace*. After tearing through wars and negations, they keep the hope, even if unacknowledged, of rediscovering the secrets of a universal art which, through humility and mastery in their craft, will once again bring characters back to life in their flesh and length of years. It is doubtful whether this great creation is possible in the present state of society either in the East or in the West. But there is nothing to prevent us hoping that these two societies, if they do not destroy each other in a general suicide, will fertilize each other and make creation possible once again. Let us also bear in mind the chance of genius, and the possibility that a new artist will succeed, through superiority or through freshness, in registering everything of the pressures which he undergoes and in digesting the essential features of the contemporary adventure. His destiny will then be to fix

in his work the prefiguration of what will be, and, quite exceptionally, to bring together in it the power of prophecy and the ability for true creation. These unimaginable tasks cannot, in any case, do without the secrets contained in the art of the past. The work of Martin du Gard, in its solitude and solidity, contains some of these secrets and holds them at our disposition beneath appearances that we recognize. In him, our master and our accomplice at one and the same time, we can both find what we do not possess and rediscover what we are.

*

'Masterpieces,' said Flaubert, 'are like the larger mammals. Their faces never move.' Yes, but their blood still runs with strange and youthful ardours. It is these fires, and these audacities, which, already, bring Martin du Gard's work closer to us. And even more so, after all, in that it does look peaceful. In it, a kind of geniality serves as a mask for a pitiless lucidity, which becomes apparent only on reflection but which then takes on an added dimension.

It is important to note, first of all, that Martin du Gard never thought that exhibitionism could provide an artistic method. Both the man and the work were forged by the same patient effort, in withdrawal from the world. Martin du Gard offers the example, a very rare one in fact, of one of our great writers whose telephone number nobody knows. This writer exists, very strongly, in our literary society. But he has dissolved himself in it as sugar does in water. Fame and the Nobel Prize have favoured him, if I may so express it, with a kind of supplementary darkness. Simple and mysterious, he has something of the divine principle described by the Hindus: the more he is named, the more he disappears. There is, moreover, nothing calculated in this quest for shade. Those who have the honour of knowing him as a man, realize, on the contrary, that his modesty is real, so real that it appears abnormal. I myself have always denied that there could be such a thing as a modest artist; since I met Martin du Gard my certainty has begun to waver. But this monster of modesty also has other reasons, apart from the peculiarity of his character, for seeking to live in withdrawal from the world: the legitimate concern which every artist worthy of the name has to protect the time needed for his work. This reason becomes imperative as

soon as the work is identified by the author with the construction of his own life. Time then ceases to be merely the place where the work is built up, but becomes this work itself, which is immediately threatened by any diversion.

Such a vocation rejects exhibitionism and its calculated devices: it accepts, on the contrary, for everything concerned with literary creation, a truly workmanlike law. At the time when Martin du Gard began his career as a writer, men entered literature (the history of the N.R.F. group is clear proof of this) rather as they enter religion. Today, people enter it—or pretend to do so—as if in derision; it is merely a pathetic derision which can, in certain cases, produce some effect. For Martin du Gard, in any case, there was never any doubt about the seriousness of literature. The first of his published novels, *Devenir!*, is a clear indication of this, being the story of a literary vocation which fails through lack of character. He makes the person in whom he depicts himself say: 'Everyone has a little genius. What they lack nowadays, because this is something which you have to acquire, is a conscience.' The same character likes neither too carefully polished an art, which he describes as 'castrated', nor 'essentially adolescent geniuses'. I hope that readers will forgive the author for the truth and contemporary applicability of this second remark. Moreover, the 'big chap', as Martin du Gard calls him in the novel, continues to put his foot in it. 'In Paris, all the writers seem to have talent; in reality, they have never had time to acquire any: all they have is a kind of cleverness which they borrow from one another, a communal treasure in which individual values are frittered away.'

It is already obvious that, if art is a religion, it will not be an attractive one. On this point, Martin du Gard immediately cut himself off from the theoreticians of art for art's sake. Symbolism, which caused so much exquisite damage among the writers of his generation, never had any effect on him, except in certain stylistic indulgences[1] which he will cast off like a youthful acne. He was only twenty-seven when he wrote *Devenir!*, and the writer who is quoted with enthusiasm in this first work is already Tolstoy. From that point onwards, Martin du Gard was to remain faithful throughout his life to an ascetic vocation, and to a Jansenism in artistic matters that will make him eschew

[1] 'The milky river of the sky sweeps along its silver spangles.'

ostentatious effects in order to sacrifice everything to an uninterrupted labour dedicated to a work that shall endure. 'What is difficult,' says this precocious and clear-sighted thinker, 'is not to have been someone but to stay that way.' Genius runs the risk, in fact, of being only a fleeting chance. Only work and character can transform it into glory and a way of life. Hard work, with organization and humility, thus take up their place at the very centre of a free creation which, from that point onwards, cannot be separated from a world whose law is also labour, but labour in humiliation. It is no exaggeration to say that the very aesthetic of Martin du Gard made it inevitable that his work, in which individual problems occupy pride of place, should widen out to the dimensions of history. The man who draws both his reasons for living and his delights from free work can, in the end, bear every humiliation except the humiliation inflicted on work, in the same way that he can accept every privilege, except those which separate him, through his own liberty, from work in chains. Works like that of Roger Martin du Gard, sometimes without knowing it, restore artistic work to its rightful place in the city, and can henceforth no longer cut themselves off from it, whether this city be defeated or victorious.

But already, before any other discovery, the result will be this work, solid as stone, whose main body is *Les Thibault*, and whose buttresses are called *Devenir!*, *Jean Barois*, *Vieille France*, *Confidence Africaine* and the plays. We can discuss this work; we can try to see its limitations. But we cannot deny that it exists, and does so superbly, with an unbelievable honesty. Commentaries can add to it or take from it, but the fact remains that we have here one of those works, exceptional in France, around which we can turn, as we walk around a building. The same generation which gave us so many aestheticians, so many subtle or delicate writers, brought us a work heavy with people and passions, built according to the plans of a well-tried technique. This nave of men, constructed solely by the rigour of an art exercised during a whole lifetime, bears witness to the fact that at a time of poets, essayists and novelists concerned with the soul, a master craftsman, a Pierre de Craon without religious belief but not without faith, was born in our land.

A law nevertheless exists in art which says that every creator should be smothered by the weight of his most obvious virtues.

The proverbial honesty of his art has sometimes hidden the true Martin du Gard from a period which, for various reasons, placed genius and improvisation above everything else, as if genius could do without a timetable of work and improvisation without laborious leisure. The critics thought they had done enough when they had paid homage to virtue, forgetting that, in art, virtue is only a means placed at the service of risk. And, indeed, there is no lack of audacity in the work which concerns us. It nearly always stems from the obstinate pursuit of a psychological truth. It thus serves to emphasize the ambiguity of human beings, without which this truth is meaningless. We are already surprised, on reading *Devenir!*, by the cruel modernity of the ending, where André, who has just buried his wife and felt great grief as he did so, notices the young servant girl standing at the window. We know that he has desired her, and realize that she will help him digest his sorrow.

Martin du Gard deals frankly with sex, and with the zone of darkness it throws over every life. Frankly, but not crudely. He has never given way to that temptation to be suggestively licentious which makes so many modern novels as boring as guides to social etiquette. He has not provided indulgent descriptions of monotonous excesses. He has chosen rather to show the importance of sexual life by its inopportunity. As a true artist, he has not painted it directly for its own sake, but indirectly, in what it forced people to become. It is, for example, sensuality which, throughout her life, will make Mme de Fontanin weak in the presence of her unfaithful husband. We know this, and yet it is never said, except when Mme de Fontanin is watching over her husband on his deathbed. What is also noticeable in *Les Thibault* is a curious intermingling of the themes of desire and of death. (Once more, it is the night before the burial of Maman Fruhling that Jacques is initiated by Lisbeth.) What we must doubtless see in this intermingling, at the same time as one of the privileged obsessions of the artist, is a means of underlining the oddness of sexual life.

But desire not only mingles with the things of death, it also contaminates morality and makes it ambiguous. The righteous man, the man who observes the outward show of Christianity, the father in *Les Thibault*, writes in his diary: 'Do not confuse with the love of our neighbour the emotion which we feel at the approach, at the touch, of certain young people, even children.'

Then he crosses out only the final words, and this omission reconciles him both with modesty and sincerity. Similarly, Jérôme de Fontanin tastes the delights of the repenting libertine when he saves Rinette from the prostitution into which he had cast her. 'I am good, I am better than people think,' he repeats tenderly to himself. But he cannot resist sleeping with her for one last time, adding the pleasures of the flesh to that of virtue. All Martin du Gard needs, moreover, is one sentence to express both the mechanical and the inspired nature of such an attitude: 'His fingers were automatically unfastening her skirt, while his lips rested on her forehead, in a paternal kiss.'

The whole of the work has this flavour of truth. The admirable *Vieille France* not only offers us the gloomiest character depicted by Martin du Gard, that of the postman Joigneau, a kind of bicycling Astaroth; it also abounds in pitiless revelations about the heart of provincial people, and the final page, in this respect, provides an astonishing conclusion. Similarly, in *Confidence Africaine*, an incestuous brother, by the very simplicity of his tone, will make his unfortunate adventure seem quite natural. In *Un Taciturne*, Martin du Gard dares, in 1931, to put on stage, without the slightest vulgarity of tone, the drama of a respectable industrialist who discovers that he has homosexual leanings. Finally, in *Les Thibault*, brilliant touches of this kind are multiplied. One could quote the scene in which Gise secretly allows the child that the man she loves has had with another women to suck her virgin breast; or the meal between Antoine and Jacques which, after the father's death, takes on almost in spite of themselves a slight air of celebration. But there are two of these touches which I place above everything else, for they show the great novelist at work.

The first is the obstinate silence of Jacques when, for the first time, Antoine comes to see him at the remand home of Crouy. There is no better way of translating humiliation than by this silence. The rapidly muttered words, the onsets of reticence in which this silence is clothed, and which serve to underline it even further, are so accurately calculated and proportioned that mystery and pity suddenly burst into what was until then a straightforward story, and open out much wider vistas than those of the middle-class, Parisian milieu in which it had begun. The objective depiction of humiliation has never been better done

except by Dostoievski, whose technique is either frenzied or grating (I am not counting Lawrence, who describes a personal humiliation) and by Malraux, in the epic mode (especially in *La Voie Royale,* which I persist in liking in spite of what its author may say). No one, however, has ever tried to paint it in subdued and even colours, and Martin du Gard has perhaps achieved what is most difficult in art. If there are artistic miracles, they must in fact be like those performed by grace, and I have always thought it would be easier to redeem by grace a man steeped in vice and crime, than a greedy, narrow-minded and pitiless merchant. Thus, in art, the more prosaic the reality chosen as one's subject-matter, the more difficult is it to transfigure. Even here, however, there is a point beyond which we cannot go, so that any claim to absolute realism is quite unacceptable. It is nevertheless upon this limit, halfway between reality and its stylization, that art can from time to time achieve a perfect tiumph. The portrait of Jacques in his humiliation remains, in my view, one of these triumphs.

To give a final example of the 'range' of Martin du Gard, I shall quote in conclusion the simulated death of the father in *Les Thibault.* It is indeed a brilliant idea, on the novelist's part, to make the play-acting which had, in a sense, formed the whole life of this character, extend even into death. The man who could not prevent himself from constantly playing the part of a Christian is also incapable, in the idleness and depression of an illness which he does not know to be mortal, of resisting the temptation to dramatize the last moments of his life. He thus organizes, from his bed, a dress rehearsal, which is half sincere, and which involves assemblies of servants, exemplary acts of repentance, the praising of virtues, and flights of holiness. The father expects his reward in the guise of protests which will also have the function of dissipating the vague disquiet that sometimes assails him as it does every invalid. But the genuine grief of his family, their tacit acceptance of his speeches on his approaching end, suddenly bring him face to face with his true condition. His play-acting, instead of producing the good results which he had hoped for, offers a cruel reflection of a pitiless reality. He thought he was an actor, and he finds himself a victim. From that moment, he begins to die, and fear sterilizes his faith. His great cry: 'Ah, how can God do this to me?', then crowns this dramatic discovery

that his religious beliefs are empty, deceitful and essential. He will nevertheless die reconciled, but among gasps of pain and childish songs which reveal a man broken in his very core, stripped of his pretence and ostentation, handed over naked to death and simple faith.

Such a canvas bears the signature of a master. The novelist able to depict the successive impulses of a soul which transforms life itself into a device for outward show has nothing to learn from anyone. He has only lessons, and lasting ones, to offer us.

*

But even more than his art, it is the themes of Martin du Gard which link up with our preoccupations. The path which he followed with a happy evenness of pace is one that we have all had to tear along under the pressure of circumstances. I am speaking, in general terms, of the evolution which leads the individual to acknowledge the history of all men, and to accept their struggles. Of course, Martin du Gard retains, even here, his own particular character. He stands midway between his peers and predecessors (who talked of nothing but the individual and accorded only a circumstantial role to history) and his successors (who make only embarrassed allusions to the individual). In *Les Thibault,* on the contrary, and in *Jean Barois,* individuals are intact and the pain of history is still quite fresh. They have not yet worn each other out. Martin du Gard has not experienced our situation, in which we inherit, at one and the same time, both shop-soiled individuals and a history which is stiffened and tetanized by several wars and by the anguish of final destruction. We can say without paradox that the living part of our present-day experience lies behind us, in a work like that of Roger Martin du Gard.

Jean Barois, in any case, sketches out as early as 1913 the movement which concerns us. The subject of this curious novel is a familiar one, although its construction is quite unusual. Technically, in fact, it has nothing of the novel about it. It breaks with all the traditions of the *genre* and there is nothing comparable in subsequent literature. Its author seems to have tried, systematically, to use devices which are quite unlike those normally associated with the novel. The book is made up of dialogues (accompanied by brief stage directions) and of documents, some

of which are incorporated in their original form. Consequently, the interest of the book never weakens, and it can be read straight through. This is perhaps because the subject itself was perfectly suited to such a technique. In fact, Martin du Gard intended to adopt this form for the whole of his future work. It so happens that only *Jean Barois* profited from it. One might say, in this respect, that this book (more than Zola's novels, which were intended to be scientific but which the author could not stop becoming epic) is the only great novel of the age of scientism, whose hopes and disappointments it expresses so well. This documentary novel is also a monograph, which is all the more surprising in that we are concerned with documents on a religious crisis. But it so happens that to make a card-index system of the aspirations and doubts of a soul was, after all, the enterprise best suited to a period which, with a few exceptions, was inspired by the religion of science. Barois, in the course of the book, abandons the old faith for the new. If, face to face with death, he betrays this new belief at the very last moment, he still remains the man of the brief new age which was to collapse in 1914. His story is consequently all the more striking in that it is told to us in the style of the new gospels. This case-report reads like an adventure story because its unusual form is deeply wedded to the tale which it has to tell. The evolution of a man who comes to doubt traditional faith and who thinks that he has found a more certain faith in science[1] could not be better related than by a technique which Martin du Gard intended to make his own and which is that of quasi-scientific description. In the end, science will satisfy neither Barois nor his creator, but its method, or at least its ideal, has been fleetingly raised, in this novel, to the dignity of perfectly effective art. This exploit has not been repeated in our literature or even in the work of Martin du Gard. But the faith which inspired it, already threatened in the book itself, is surely something which is also dead, and which died prematurely as a result of the excesses of mechanized savagery. *Jean Barois* nevertheless remains the book that can be seen as the testament of this faith, and in which we can find moving evidence of vanished beliefs, and prophecies which concern ourselves.

[1] 'This innate need,' says Barois, 'to understand and explain, which today finds its wide and complete satisfaction in the scientific development of our age.'

The conflict between faith and science which so agitated the early years of this century arouses less excitement today. We are nevertheless living out its consequences, which are foreshadowed in *Jean Barois*. To take only one example: irreligion is there shown as closely linked to the rise of the socialist movement, and the book constantly lays bare one of the most powerful driving forces of our history. Fleeing from the encounter with God, Jean Barois discovers men. His liberation will coincide with the great movement that grew up around Dreyfus. The group of the 'Semeur' links Barois to the rest of mankind; it is there that he reaches his full maturity, and what can be called the enjoyment of history (struggle and victory) completes his human experience. Conversely, historical disappointments bring him gradually back to solitude, to anguish, and, when he is faced with death, to the denial of his new faith. Can the community of men, which sometimes helps us to live, also help us to die? This is the question underlying the whole of Martin du Gard's work and which creates its tragic quality. For if the reply is a negative one, the situation of the present-day unbeliever is provisionally madness, even if subdued in tone. This is doubtless why so many men today proclaim with a kind of fury that the human community protects us from death. Martin du Gard never claimed that this was so; this is because, in truth, he does not believe it. He nevertheless gives us in his novel, by the side of Barois, the portrait of a rationalist who does not deny his own beliefs, and who dies without abjuring reason. The Stoic Luce probably represents the ideal which Martin du Gard had in 1913. A particularly severe and sombre ideal, if Luce himself is to be believed. 'I do not acknowledge two standards. We must reach happiness, without being the dupe of any mirage, through truth and truth alone.' No better definition can be given of the enlightened renunciation of happiness. But let us simply remember that the first portrait of these men who turn their face away from all forms of hope and decide to confront death in its entirety, and who were later to swarm into our literature, was traced in 1913 by Roger Martin du Gard.

The great theme of the individual caught between history and God will be orchestrated symphonically in *Les Thibault*, where all the characters travel towards the catastrophe of summer 1914. However, the religious problem no longer enjoys pride of place.

It runs through the first volume, disappears as history gradually swamps individual destinies, and returns, in a negative form, in the final volume describing the solitary death of Antoine Thibault. This return nevertheless remains significant. Like every true artist, Martin du Gard cannot get rid of his obsessions. It is thus important that his great work should end with the constant theme of his books: the death agony, in which man is, if I may thus express myself, finally put to the ultimate question. But in the *Epilogue* which ends *Les Thibault*, the first of Martin du Gard's two main characters—the priest and the doctor—has disappeared, or come very near to doing so. *Les Thibault* ends with the death of a doctor, alone among other doctors. It seems that for Martin du Gard, as for Antoine, the problem has now ceased to present itself solely on an individual human level. And it is indeed the experience of history, and his enforced involvement in it, which explains this evolution on the part of Antoine. Historical passion (in the two senses of the word) is today atheistic, or seems to be so. This means, in more simple terms, that the historical catastrophes of the twentieth century have marked the collapse of bourgeois Christianity. A symbolic illustration of this idea can be seen in the fact that the father, who represents religion in Antoine's eyes,[1] dies just after Antoine has proclaimed his own atheism. Moreover, a general war breaks out at the same time, and the society which had thought it could both live by trade and still be religious collapses in blood. If it is thus legitimate to see *Les Thibault* as one of the first committed novels, the point must simply be made that it has better claims to this term than those published today. For Martin du Gard's characters, unlike those in our novels, have something to commit and something to lose in historical conflicts. Within their very personality, the pressure of immediate events struggles against traditional structures, whether these be religious or cultural. When these structures have been destroyed, then in a certain way man himself has ceased to exist. He is simply ready to exist, some day. Thus Antoine Thibault begins by concerning himself with other people, but this initial progress leads him only to go and confront death in an attempt to discover, outside any consolation or illusion, the final secret of his reasons for living. With *Les Thibault*, we witness the birth of the man of our

[1] 'I have never, alas, seen God except through my father.'

half-century, with whom we are concerned, and whom we can choose to commit or to liberate. He is ready for everything, so long as we have not decided what kind of man he is.

It is in the character of Antoine that this theme is embodied in its most striking form. Of these two brothers, it is Jacques who has been more frequently praised and admired. He has been seen as an example. I, on the contrary, see Antoine as the true hero of *Les Thibault*. And, since I cannot here undertake to comment on the whole of such a vast work, I feel that I can at least underline its essential features by a parallel between the two brothers.

Let me begin by giving my reasons for choosing Antoine as the central character. *Les Thibault* opens and closes on the character of Antoine, and he never ceases to grow in importance throughout the work. Moreover, I feel that Antoine is closer to his creator than is Jacques. A novelist certainly expresses and betrays himself in all his characters at the same time: each one of them represents one of his tendencies or his temptations. Martin du Gard is or has been Jacques, just as much as he is or has been Antoine; the words he puts into their mouths are sometimes his own, sometimes not. But the author will, after all, and for the same reasons, be nearest to the character who combines the largest number of contradictions. From this point of view, Antoine, by his complexity, by the different roles he plays in the novel, is a richer character than Jacques. Finally, and this is my principal reason, the basic theme of *Les Thibault* is more convincing in Antoine than in Jacques. Both of them, it is true, leave their private universe to rejoin the world of men. Jacques even does so before Antoine. But the evolution of the former is less significant since it is more logical and could have been foreseen. What is easier than to pass from individual revolt to the idea of revolution? What can be more profound, on the contrary, what more persuasive, than this great movement which takes place within a happy man, who is well balanced, full of strength and of a sincere esteem for his own qualities (a mark of nobility, according to Ortega y Gasset), and which brings him to the recognition of a common misery in which he will find both his limits and his fulfilment?

The interest which the first readers of *Les Thibault* took in Jacques is of course explicable. Adolescents were then fashion-

able. Martin du Gard's generation is responsible for acclimatizing the cult of youth in France, a cult which began by being joyful and is now fearful, and which has contaminated our literature. (Nowadays, every writer seems riddled with anxiety to find out what young people think of him, when the only interesting thing to discover would be what he really thinks about young people.) Nevertheless, I am not sure that the 1955 reader will be tempted for very long to prefer Jacques to Antoine. Let us at least recognize that Martin du Gard succeeded, with Jacques, in giving us one of the finest portraits of adolescence which our literature possesses. Thin-skinned, courageous, self-willed, determined to say everything he thinks (as if everything we think were worth saying), passionate in friendship but clumsy in love, stiff and stilted like certain virginities, a source of discomfort both for himself and for other people, doomed by his purity and intransigence to lead a difficult life, he is a character superbly depicted by his creator.

But here we are concerned with an exceptional destiny which, in the novel, tears through life like a blind meteor. From one point of view, Jacques is not made for life. His two great experiences, love and the revolution, are proof of this. It will be noted, first of all, that Jacques experiences the revolution before he experiences love. When he goes to bed with Jenny, he tries to live them both at the same time, which is a hopeless idea. Once the revolution has betrayed both itself and him at the same time, he immediately leaves Jenny and goes off to a solitary death that he wants to present as an example. This disappearance is, moreover, the only guarantee that their love will be permanent. Jenny is wild and intractable, she began by hating Jacques, without, moreover, being very fond of anyone, and cannot bear anyone to touch her, which has curious implications; nevertheless, when separated from Jacques, she discovers a kind of dry passion for him, a passion in which there is little tenderness, and she can find lasting fulfilment, if this word has any meaning for her, only as a widow. It would seem that Jenny is of the stuff from which suffragettes are made: faithfulness to the ideas of her dead husband, and the care given to the child of this curious love, will be enough to hold her upright. To tell the truth, what other ending is conceivable for the adventure of these two trapped victims? Their love, in the Paris of August 1914, with Jenny in

mourning following Jacques into all the public places where the socialist betrayal, and the emergence of the catastrophe, will show themselves, with both of them running through the scorching afternoon as the bells boom out the order to mobilize, is full more of pain than of delight. It is not without a certain surprise that we learn that these two lovers have gone to bed together; we would prefer, in fact, not to think about this formality. Artistically, the two characters are more than convincing, they are true. Humanly, only Jacques touches our heart, because he is a figure of torment and failure. Setting out from his solitary revolt, he discovers history and its struggles, takes his place in the socialist movement on the eve of one of its greatest defeats, lives through this defeat in anguish, discovers Jenny for the briefest of moments, abandons her in the same dreamlike state in which he had made her his mistress, and, despairing of everything, goes back into solitude, but this time to the loneliness of sacrifice. 'To give oneself, achieving deliverance through total abnegation.' A definitive act will take him from this life, which he has never really known, but which he at least thinks he is serving in this fashion. 'To be right against everyone else and escape into death!' The expression is a significant one. Jacques, in reality, does not participate, even after having discovered participation. This solitary figure can rejoin other people only through a solitary form of sacrifice. His deepest desire (which is ours, after all) is to be right in company with everybody else. But if this is only a dream, which it is, he prefers, in order to be consistent, to be right against everybody else. To die deliberately is, in this case, the only way of being right once and for all. In reality, Jacques has not only never been able to rejoin other people, except in a great idea, but has always felt himself hemmed in by them. 'I always imagine that I am other people's prey; that if I escaped from them, if I managed to begin somewhere else, far from them, an entirely new life, I should finally reach this serenity.' Here Jacques expresses what we all think, at one time or another. But there is no 'somewhere else', no new life either, or at least not life without men. And anyone who does want always to be right will always feel himself alone against everyone else; it is impossible both to live among men and to be right. Jacques does not know that the only real progress lies, on the contrary, in learning to be wrong alone. But this presupposes a long patience,

the patience to make and to build, the only patience which has ever produced great works, in history or in art. For certain types of men, on the contrary, action is too long for their patience, and acts alone can satisfy them. At the summit of this family of men stands the terrorist, of whom Jacques is one of the first representatives in our literature. He dies alone. Even his example is useless, and the last man who sees him, a policeman, insults him as he finishes him off, because he hates having to kill him. Those who, like Jacques, want to change life in order to change themselves, leave life untouched and, in the end, stay just as they were: the sterile and disturbing witnesses for everything in man that refuses and always will refuse to live.

The portrait of Antoine offers different problems and teaches different lessons. Unlike Jacques, Antoine loves life, and does so carnally, with passion; he has a physical and wholly practical knowledge of it. As a doctor, he reigns in the kingdom of the body. But his nature explains his vocation. In him, knowledge always passes through the medium of the senses. His friendships, his loves, are physical. The shoulder of his friend or brother, a woman's radiance, are the paths by which emotion lights up his heart or warms his mind. He will even come to prefer what he feels to what he believes. In Mme. de Fontanin's presence[1] he will defend protestantism, solely through personal sympathy, for he is never involved in it in any way.

This liking for physical things can sometimes make a man spineless, or lead to the cynicism of the sensualist. But it is balanced in Antoine by two things, which moreover go together, work and character. His life has an order, an occupation, and, above all, a singleness of direction: his profession. Immediately, his sensuality becomes an advantage. It helps him in his job and gives him that sense of direction which no doctor can do without, and which guides him when he probes the human body. It also softens his excessive determination. Hence his unshakeable balance, his informed tolerance, and also his excessive self-assurance. For Antoine is far from being perfect: he has the defects of his qualities. A certain form of solitary happiness, in the man who enjoys being what he is, does not exist without selfishness and blindness. Jacques and Antoine help us to

[1] We can almost talk about the loves of Mme de Fontanin and Antoine, although they never exchange a word or gesture that links them together.

understand that there are two kinds of men, those who will still be adolescents when they die, those who are already adult when they are born. But the adults are in danger of imagining that their balance is the law of the world, and consequently that unhappiness is a sin. Antoine seems to believe that the society in which he lives is the best society possible and that anyone, in fact, can choose to live in a large private house in the Rue de l'Université, pursue the honourable calling of doctor of medicine, and greet life in all that is good. This is his limitation, in the first volumes at least, and it leads him to take up a number of unattractive attitudes. Born a bourgeois, he lives with the idea that everything surrounding him is eternal, since everything which surrounds him suits his convenience. This conviction even influences his true nature, which he then clothes in the doublet of 'Thibault, son and heir'. He behaves as a man of wealth, even in sexual matters: he pays cash for his pleasures, and is not averse to a certain pomposity.

Antoine will thus not have to accept life. He will merely have to discover that he is not the only person alive. The only difference is that, by the logic of his nature, he will follow an opposite path to the one taken by his brother. It is this which reveals the profound truth of the novel. Martin du Gard knows that men's discoveries come not from circumstances themselves, but from the contact of these circumstances with their own nature. They become what they are. And, quite naturally, it is a woman who will break the shell with which Antoine protects himself. Truth can reach a carnal man only through the flesh. This is why its path cannot be foreseen. Here, the path is called Rachel, and the episode of her affair with Antoine remains one of the most beautiful in *Les Thibault*. The love affair between Rachel and Antoine, unlike so many affairs in literature, does not hover in the blissful heavens of verbal effusions. But it does fill the reader with a secret joy, and with gratitude for a world in which such truths are possible. The carnal glow of Rachel lights up the whole of *Les Thibault*, and, until the very eve of his death, Antoine continues to draw warmth from it. He finds in Rachel not the venal or humiliated prey to which he had been accustomed, but his generous equal. She admires Antoine, of course, but she is not his subordinate. She has lived, seen the world, she remains slightly mysterious for him, and cannot free herself

from what she has been. Without ceasing to love Antoine, she says 'I am like this,' and he has to admit that people can exist independently of him, that this is nevertheless something good, which gives an added taste to life. Their first meeting makes them equals from the very beginning. In the stormy summer night in which Antoine operates on a little girl with the emergency resources at his disposal, Rachel holds the lamp steadily and Antoine discovers that the doctor in him is helped simply by the fact that she is there. Later on, exhausted, sitting side by side, they go to sleep. Antoine wakes up with the feeling of a gentle warmth along one side of his body: Rachel has dozed off leaning against him. They will become lovers a little later on, but they are already intimate, linked to each other so that each pours into the other a richer life. From that moment onwards, Antoine joyfully and gratefully abdicates. When Jacques meets his brother again, in Lausanne, after long years of separation, he finds him 'changed'. What a hundred sermons could not have accomplished has been achieved by a woman. But this woman does not belong to the society which Antoine had taken as unique and unchangeable. She is of the race which always departs, the race of nomads; what one breathes in her presence is called liberty. Sensual liberty, of course, in which Antoine discovers, for the first time, that equality within difference which is the highest dream of our hearts and bodies. But this liberty also lies in the heart's freedom from prejudices, and against them Rachel does not even struggle. She does not know that they are there, and quietly denies them through her very existence. This explains how Antoine grows more simple in her presence, and discovers the only valid aspects of his own nature: his personal generosity, his vitality, and his power to admire.[1] He does not become better, he fulfils himself a little more, outside himself and yet nearer to what he really is, in the joyful recognition of a person who, in turn, acknowledges and welcomes him. Here, we perhaps witness a certain sovereign truth: that of the man who feels himself authorized to be what he is, while at the same time freeing another being by loving her in everything she is.

[1] Martin du Gard also takes admiration as his subject matter (in the excellent scenes between Antoine and his teacher, Philip). This is not surprising. Where admiration is lacking, there is a flaw in both our hearts and our work.

Long after their separation, this truth will still inspire Antoine. 'He was laughing with that deep laugh, full and youthful, which he had repressed for so long and which Rachel had permanently freed.' They do in fact separate, without seeing each other, in a night full of rain and mists; their story appears to be a short one. Rachel follows the darker slope of her character, goes back to Africa to rejoin the mysterious man who dominates her (here, the motivation is slightly novelettish). In reality, she is going towards death, with which this living creature has a natural complicity. But she will have helped Antoine to grow up, and she will even have helped him to make a better death since it is once more towards her that he turns when he is about to die. 'Do not despise your uncle Antoine,' he writes in the notebook that he is keeping for Jacques's son . . . 'this poor adventure is, after all, the best thing that happened in my poor life.' The word 'poor' is excessive here, but it is written in self-pity by a dying man. Antoine's love life has doubtless not been a very rich one, but, in this life, Rachel has been a royal gift, the gift which enriches without obligation. When Jacques, to whom Antoine risks confiding something of this love, proclaims from the height of his ignorant purity: 'Ah, no, Antoine, love is something different from that,' he does not know what he is talking about. There is a lesson he has missed, a grateful knowledge that he has not had, which would make him humbler towards love according to the flesh, and freer before the joyful gifts which life and people can bestow.

Liberty and humility, these are the virtues which Rachel awakes in Antoine. Life is bad, Antoine sometimes tries to tell himself, 'as if he were talking to a stubborn optimist; and this stubborn, stupidly satisfied person, was he himself, was the Antoine of every day.' It is this Antoine, still better informed, who survives the liaison with Rachel. He knows that life is good, moves easily through it, can lie when he has to, and patiently waits for life to justify this confidence, which for most of the time it does. But, somewhere within him, a disquiet awoken by Rachel has at the same time humanized this assurance. Antoine now knows that other people exist, and that, in love for example, we do not take our pleasure alone. It is one path among others, but a sure and certain one, to learn that in the advancing movement of history he will not be the only one to suffer. France goes

to war. Jacques refuses the war and dies from this refusal. Antoine accepts to fight, with no love for war,[1] and will also die from this acceptance. He abandons his life as a wealthy and famous doctor, his large, newly decorated town house, where his army equipment chips the new paintwork. The paint flakes off, in fact, the panellings and decorations crumble. In practice, he knows that he will never go back to the world he is leaving behind. But he keeps the essential thing, his job, which he can pursue even in the war and even, as he sincerely remarks, even into the revolution. Faced with the demented history bearing down upon him, Antoine is now free; he has abandoned what he owned, not what he was. He will know how to judge the war: a doctor reads communiqués as lists of wounds and death agonies. Gassed, invalided out, certain that he is going to die, he regrets nothing of the old world. The only two things which concern him in the *Epilogue* are the future of mankind (he hopes for a 'peace with neither conquerors nor humiliated', in order to avoid the rebirth of war) and Jean-Paul, Jacques's son. As for himself, he now owns only memories, among which is that of Rachel, which make up his knowledge of life and which, henceforth, will help him to die.

Les Thibault ends with the diary of a sick doctor and the death of the hero. A society is going to die with him as well; but the problem consists of discovering what can be handed down, by a generous individual, from the old world to the new. History breaks its banks and swamps whole continents and peoples, then the waters retire and the survivors count up what is missing and what remains. Antoine, a survivor of the 1914 war, transmits what he has been able to save from the disaster to Jean-Paul, that is to say to us. And it is here that his greatness lies, which is to have come back, lucidly, to our common level. From the moment that Antoine reads his death warrant in the eyes of his teacher, Philip, until his final solitude, his stature never ceases to grow, but it does so, precisely, as he comes to recognize one by one his weaknesses and doubts. The little, self-satisfied doctor now discovers his ignorance. 'I am condemned to die without having understood very much about myself and about the world.' He knows that pure individualism is not possible, that life does not

[1] 'It would really be too easy to be able to be a citizen until the outbreak of war and then no further.'

consist solely of the selfish glow of youthful strength. With three thousand new babies every hour, and as many deaths, a countless force sweeps the individual away in the uninterrupted flood of birth and death, drowns him in the vast, unfillable ocean of collective death. What else can he do but once again accept himself within his limitations, and try to reconcile the duties which he has towards himself with those he has towards other people? For the rest, he has to wager once again. Ulysses, gassed and fallen from his throne, seeks to define his wisdom, and acknowledges that it must have a face of folly and of risk. To avoid being a burden on anyone, he will first of all kill himself, in a way which is at one and the same time so humble and deliberate that we cannot say whether he is like a successful Barois or a bourgeois Kirilov. And in spite of this sensible suicide, or because it is so reasonable, his wager will be irrational and optimistic: he will wager on the continuity of the human adventure, his last word being written for Jacques's son. This twin obliteration, by death and by fidelity to what will live on, makes Antoine disappear into the very stuff of history, of which men's hopes are made, and whose roots lie deep in human misery. In this respect, the remark of Antoine which touches me most deeply is the one that he notes down shortly before his death: 'Have been only an average man.' This is true, in a way, and Jacques, by the same standards, is someone exceptional. But it is the average man who gives whole work its strength, who lights up its deep movement, and crowns it with this admirable *Epilogue*. After all, the truth which Ulysses represents also includes that of Antigone, whereas the opposite is not true.

But how can we value the creator who can build silently and give us, without comment, two characters who are so different and so commanding?

*

Since I have concentrated on the applicability of Martin du Gard's work to the present day, I still have to show that his very doubts are our own. The birth of an awareness of history in the Thibault brothers is accompanied by the posing of a problem that we are in a position to understand. *Summer 1914*, which shows us, at the same time as the impending war, the failure of socialism in circumstances decisive for the future of the world,

offers a summary of all the doubts which Martin du Gard had on this point. He was not lacking in lucidity. We know that *Summer 1914*, which appeared in 1936, was published long after *The Death of the Father* (1929). During this long interval, Martin du Gard carried out a veritable revolution in the structure of his work. He gave up his original plan, and decided to give *Les Thibault* an ending different from the one he had originally intended. The first plan involved thirty or so volumes; the second reduces *Les Thibault* to eleven. And Martin du Gard had no hesitation in destroying the manuscript of *l'Appareillage* (*Setting Sail*), the volume which was to follow *The Death of the Father* and which had cost him two years' work. Between 1931, the date of this sacrifice, and 1933, the year when, armed with a new plan, he began to write *Summer 1914*, came two years of quite natural disarray. This is perceptible in the very construction. After a long interval, the machine has first of all some difficulty in starting up again, and works really efficiently only from the second volume onwards. But it seems to me that we also feel this change in a number of new perspectives. Begun at the moment of Hitler's arrival to power, when the Second World War can already be sensed on the horizon, this great historical fresco of a conflict which men tried to hope would be the last, is almost compelled to call itself into question. In *Vieille France*, written during the years when Martin du Gard had given up *Les Thibault*, the schoolmistress was already asking herself a formidable question: 'Why is the world like this? Is it really the fault of society? . . . Is it not rather man's own fault?' The same question worries Jacques at the height of his revolutionary fervour, in the same way as it explains most of Antoine's attitudes towards historical events. It can therefore be supposed to have haunted the novelist himself.

None of the contradictions of social action is, in any case, eluded in the long, perhaps over-long, ideological conversations which fill *Summer 1914*. The main conflict, which is that of the use of violence in the cause of justice, is discussed at great length, in the conversations between Jacques and Mithoerg. The famous distinction between the yogi and the commissar has already been made by Martin du Gard: within the revolution, in fact, it brings about the confrontation between the apostle and the technician. Better still, the nihilistic aspect of the revolution

is isolated, in order to be treated in depth, in the character of Meynestrel. The latter believes that, after having put man in the place of God, atheism ought to go even farther and abolish man himself. His reply, when asked what will replace him, is 'Nothing'. The Englishman Patterson, moreover, defines Meynestrel by 'despair at believing in nothing'. Finally, like all those who go to the revolution through nihilism, Meynestrel believes that the best results are achieved by the worst means. He will have no hesitation in burning the secret papers which Jacques has brought back from Berlin, and which prove the collusion between the Prussian and Austrian general staffs. The publication of these documents might have risked altering the attitude of the German social democrats, and thus making the war, which Meynestrel considered as the 'trump card' for a social upheaval, rather less probable.

These examples are enough to show that there was nothing naïve in Martin du Gard's socialism. He cannot manage to believe that perfection will one day be embodied in history. If he does not believe this, it is because his doubt is the same as that of the schoolmistress in *Vieille France*. This doubt concerns human nature. 'His pity for men was infinite; he gave them all the love his heart contained; but whatever he did, however hard he tried, he remained sceptical about man's moral potentialities.' To be certain only about men, and to know that men have little worth, is the cry of pain which runs through the whole of this work, for all its strength and wealth, and which brings it so close to us. For, after all, this fundamental doubt is the very one which is hidden beneath every love and which gives it its tenderest vibration. This ignorance, acknowledged in such simple terms, affects us because it is the other side of a certainty which we also share. The service of men cannot be separated from an ambiguity which must be maintained if we are to preserve the double movement of history. Hence the two pieces of advice which Antoine bequeaths to Jean-Paul. The first is one of prudent liberty, assumed as a duty. 'Don't let yourself be tied down to a political party. Feeling your way in the dark is no joke. But it is a lesser evil.' The other is to be confident in the risks taken: keep going forward, among everyone, on the same path along which, in the night of the species, crowds of men have for centuries been marching and stumbling towards an inconceivable future.

Clearly, this offers no certainty to anyone. And yet this work conveys courage and a strange faith. To wager, as Antoine does, over and above doubts and disasters, on the human adventure, finally amounts to praising life, life which is terrible and irreplaceable. The fierce attachment of the Thibault family to life is the very quality which inspires the whole work. When old Thibault is dying, he thus takes on, in spite of himself, the value of an exemplary figure: he refuses to despair, comes unexpectedly to life again and again, lunges at the enemy, struggles physically against death by bringing nurses and relatives into the fray. Inevitably, we are reminded of the love of life and pleasure of the Karamazov family, of the despairing remark of Dmitri: 'I love life too much. It's even disgusting.' But living is not polite, and Dmitri is well aware of this. In this enormous struggle to escape by all and every means from annihilation lies the truth of history and of its progress, of the mind and all its works. Here, indeed, we have one of these works, born of the refusal to despair. This refusal, this unconsolable attachment to men and to the world, explain the roughness and the tenderness of Martin du Gard's books. Squat, heavy with the weight of flesh in ecstasy and humiliation, they are still sticky with the life which has given them birth. But, at the same time, a vast indulgence runs through all their cruelties, transfiguring and alleviating them. 'A human life,' writes Antoine, 'is always broader than we realize.' However low and evil it may be, a life always holds in some hidden corner enough qualities for us to understand and forgive. There is not one of the characters of this great fresco, not even the Christian and hypocritical bourgeois who is painted for us in the darkest colours, who does not enjoy his moment of grace. Perhaps, after all, in Martin du Gard's eyes, the only guilty person is the one who refuses life or condemns people. The key words, the final secrets, are not in man's possession. But man nevertheless keeps the power to judge and to absolve. Here lies the profound secret of art, which always makes it unusable by propaganda or by hatred, and which, for example, prevents Martin du Gard from depicting a young follower of Maurras except with sympathy and generosity. Like any authentic creator, Martin du Gard forgives all his characters. The true artist, although his life may consist primarily of struggles and of war, has no enemy.

The final secret of this work thus remains the one which it is

difficult to use about a writer since the death of Tolstoy: goodness. Even then I must make it clear that I am not talking about this screen of goodness which hides false artists from the eyes of the world while at the same time hiding the world from them. Martin du Gard has himself defined a certain type of bourgeois virtue as the absence of the energy necessary to do evil. Here, on the contrary, we are concerned with a particularly lucid virtue, which absolves the good man because of his weaknesses, the evil man because of his generous impulses, and both of them together because of their passionate membership of a humanity which hopes and suffers. Thus Jacques, returning home after long years of absence, and having to help lift up his dying father, is overwhelmed by the contact with this enormous body, which in his eyes had formerly symbolized oppression: 'And suddenly the contact with this moistness so overwhelmed him that he felt something totally unexpected—a physical emotion, a raw sentiment which went far beyond pity or affection: the selfish tenderness of man for man.' Such a passage gives the true measure of an art which seeks to be separated from nothing, and which overcomes the contradictions of a man or an historical period through the obscure acceptance of anonymity. The community of suffering, struggle and death is a reality; it alone provides a basis for hope in a community based on joy and reconciliation. Whoever accepts membership of this first community finds in it a nobility, a faithfulness, a reason for accepting his doubts, and, if he is an artist, the deep well-springs of his art. Here man learns, in one confused and unhappy moment, that it is wrong to say he must die alone. All men die when he does, and do so with the same violence. How, then, can he cut himself off from a single one amongst them, how can he ever refuse him that higher life, which the artist can restore to him by pardon, and which man can give to him through justice? Here lies the secret of that applicability of Martin du Gard to the present day of which I have already spoken. But we are concerned here with the only valid applicability, which belongs to all times and all ages, and which makes Martin du Gard, a man of forgiveness and of justice, into our perpetual contemporary.

Preface to the *Pléiade* edition of the complete works of Martin du Gard, published in 1955

ON FAULKNER

IN his preface to *Sanctuary*, André Malraux wrote that Faulkner had introduced the detective story into classical tragedy. This is true. Moreover, there is something of the detective story in every tragedy. Faulkner, who knows this, has had no hesitation in choosing his criminals and heroes in today's newspapers. The *Requiem* is thus, for me, one of the few modern tragedies there are.

In its original form, *Requiem for a Nun* is not a play. It is a novel in dialogue form. But it has a dramatic intensity. First of all because a secret is gradually disclosed and tragic expectation constantly maintained. Secondly because the conflict which brings the characters face to face with their destiny, around the murder of a child, is a conflict that cannot be solved except through the acceptance of this destiny itself.

Faulkner here contributes to bringing forward the time when the tragedy at work in our history can also take up its place in our theatre. His characters belong to our own day, and yet they confront the same destiny which crushed Electra or Orestes. Only a great artist could thus attempt to introduce the great language of pain and humiliation into our apartments. Neither is it the work of chance that Faulkner's strange religion is experienced in this play by a Negress who has been a prostitute and is a murderer. This intense contrast does, on the contrary, sum up the human grandeur of his *Requiem* and of his whole work.

Let me add in conclusion that the great problem of modern tragedy is one of language. Characters in lounge suits cannot talk like Oedipus or Titus. Their language must be at one and the same time simple enough to be our own and lofty enough to be tragic. In my view, Faulkner has found this language. I have

tried to restore this in French, and not to betray the work and the author that I admired.

1956

(Programme note to Camus's own adaptation of *Requiem for a Nun.*)

ON JEAN GRENIER'S *LES ILES*

I WAS twenty when, in Algiers, I read this book for the first time. I cannot do better than compare its overwhelming effect, its influence over my development, to the shock which a whole generation, in France, received from *Les Nourritures Terrestres.* But the revelation offered by *Les Iles* was of a different order. It suited our needs, whereas Gide's glorification of the senses left us at one and the same time both full of admiration and puzzled. We did not in fact need to be freed from the winding sheet of morality, or to sing the fruits of the earth. These were hanging within our reach, in the sunlight. All we had to do was sink our teeth in them.

A number of us, of course, knew that poverty and suffering existed. We merely rejected them with all the strength of our youthful blood. The truth of the world lay only in its beauty, and in the delights it offered. Thus we lived off sensations, on the surface of the world, among colours, waves, the good smell of the soil. This is why *Les Nourritures*, with their invitation to happiness, came too late. Happiness was a faith that we proclaimed, insolently. We needed, on the contrary, to be slightly turned away from our greed, to be torn, in fact, from our happy barbarity. Of course, if gloomy preachers had stalked across our beaches hurling anathema at the world and at the creatures which enchanted us, we should have reacted violently, or sarcastically. We had need of more subtle masters, and of a man, born on other shores and like us in love with light and bodily splendours, who would come and tell us in inimitable language that these outward appearances were beautiful, but that they were doomed to perish and should therefore be loved in despair. Immediately, this great, eternal theme began to echo in us like an overwhelmingly new discovery. The sea, the light, people's faces, from which a kind of invisible barrier suddenly separated us, moved away but still exercised their fascination. *Les Iles*, in short, had just initiated us into disenchantment; we had discovered culture.

This book, in fact, without denying the physical reality of which our kingdom was composed, coupled it with another reality that explained our youthful disquiet. What Grenier did was remind us that the moments of bliss, the instants when we said 'Yes', which we had experienced only obscurely and which inspire some of the finest pages in *Les Iles*, were essentially fleeting and would perish. Immediately, we understood our sudden melancholies. The man who labours painfully between a harsh earth and a sombre sky can dream of another world where bread and the sky will both be light. He hopes. But those whose longings are fully satisfied every hour of the day by the sunlight and the hills, such men have ceased to hope. They can henceforth only dream of an imaginary elsewhere. Thus the men of the North flee to the shores of the Mediterranean, or into the deserts of light. But where can men of sunlit countries fly, except into invisible things? The voyage described by Grenier is a voyage into imaginary and invisible lands, a quest from island to island, like the one which Melville, using other means, illustrated in *Mardi*. Animals take pleasure and die, man marvels and he dies, where lies our harbour? This is the question which echoes throughout the book. It receives, in fact, only an indirect answer. Grenier, like Melville, ends his voyage with a meditation on the absolute and on God. Speaking of the Hindus, he writes of a port which can be neither named, nor situated in any particular place, of another island, but one which is for ever distant, and deserted in its fashion.

There again, for a young man brought up outside traditional religions, this prudent, allusive approach was perhaps the only way of directing him towards a deeper meditation on life. Personally, I had no lack of gods: the sun, the night, the sea. . . . But these are gods of enjoyment; they fill, then they empty. With them alone for company, I should have forgotten them in favour of enjoyment itself. I had to be reminded of mystery and holy things, of the finite nature of man, of a love which is impossible, if I was one day to return to my natural gods less arrogantly. It is thus not certainties which I owe Grenier, for these he neither wanted nor was able to give. But I owe him, on the contrary, a doubt which will never end and which, for example, has prevented me from being a humanist in the sense this word is understood today, I mean a man blinkered by narrow certainties. From

the very day I read it, I admired this tremor that runs through *Les Iles*, and wanted to imitate it.

'I have long dreamed of arriving alone in a foreign town, alone and stripped of everything. I would have lived humbly, in poverty even. Above all else, I would have kept the secret.' This is the kind of music that seemed almost to intoxicate me when I murmured it over to myself as I walked in the Algerian evenings. I felt that I was entering into a new land, that at last there lay open to me one of those high-walled gardens which stood on the heights of my town, and past which I often walked, catching only a whiff of invisible honeysuckle, and of which my poverty dreamed. I was not mistaken. A garden was opening up to me, of incomparable wealth; I had just discovered art. Something, someone was obscurely moving within me and longing to speak. It can happen that reading one book, hearing one conversation, can produce this new birth in someone young. A sentence stands out from the open book, a word still echoes in the room, and suddenly, around the right word, the exact note, contradictions resolve themselves and disorder ceases. Already, at the same moment, in response to this perfect language, a timid, more clumsy song arises from the darkness of our being.

At the time when I discovered *Les Iles*, I wanted to write, I believe. But I really decided to do so only after reading this book. Other books contributed to this decision. Their role accomplished, I have forgotten them. This book, on the contrary, has not stopped living in me, and I have been reading it for twenty years. I still, today, find myself repeating, as if they were my own, phrases that are found in *Les Iles* or in other books by the same author. I in no way regret this. I simply admire my good fortune, in that I, who more than anyone else needed to bow down before someone, should have found a master, at just the right moment, and that I should have been able to continue to love and admire him from year to year and from work to work.

For it is indeed a piece of good fortune to be able to experience, at least once in your life, this enthusiastic submission to another person. Among the half-truths which delight our intellectual society can be found the following, stimulating thought, that each conscience pursues the death of the other. At once we all become masters and slaves, dedicated to mutual annihilation. But the word master has another meaning, whose relation to that of

disciple is only one of respect and gratitude. It is no longer a question of one mind seeking to kill the other, but of a dialogue, which never ceases once it has begun, and which brings absolute satisfaction to certain lives. This long confrontation involves neither servitude nor obedience, but solely imitation, in the spiritual sense of the word. In the end, the master rejoices when the disciple leaves him and achieves his difference, while the latter will always remain nostalgic for the time when he received everything, and knew he could never repay his debt. Mind thus engenders mind, from one generation to another, and human history, fortunately, is built up as much on admiration as on hatred.

But this is not a tone in which Grenier would speak. He prefers to tell us about a cat's death, a butcher's illness, the passage of time. Nothing is really said in this book. Everything is suggested, with incomparable strength and sensitivity. This delicate language, at once so accurate and dreamlike, has the fluidity of music. It flows, swiftly, but its echoes prolong themselves. If a comparison has to be made, we should speak of Chateaubriand or of Barrès, who drew accents from French. But why bother? Grenier's originality goes beyond these comparisons. He merely speaks to us of simple and familiar experiences in an apparently unadorned language. Then he lets us translate, each in his own way. It is only on these conditions that art is a gift, which carries no obligations. As far as I am concerned, I have received so much from this book that I recognize the extent of this gift and acknowledge my debt. The great revelations which a man receives in his life are few, rarely more than one or two. But, like good fortune, they transfigure us. To anyone eager to live and to know, this book offers in each one of its pages a similar revelation. It took *Les Nourritures Terrestres* twenty years to find a public to overwhelm. It is time for new readers to come to this book. I should like still to be among them, as I should like to go back to that evening when, after opening this little volume in the street, I closed it again as soon as I had read the first lines, hugged it to my breast, and ran up to my room to devour it without witnesses. And I envy, with no bitterness, but rather, if I may say so, with warmth, the unknown young man who today approaches *Les Iles* for the first time. . . .

Essay published in *Preuves*, in 1959, and reprinted as a preface in the same year

RENÉ CHAR

ONE cannot render justice in a few pages to a poet like René Char, but one can at least place him in the right context. Certain works justify our use of every pretext to bear witness, even without shades of meaning, to what we owe them. And I am happy that this German edition of my favourite poems should give me the opportunity of saying that I consider René Char to be our greatest living poet, and *Fureur et Mystère* to be the most astonishing book that French poetry has given us since *Les Illuminations* and *Alcools*. . . .

The originality of René Char's poetry is, in fact, startling. No doubt he passed through surrealism, but by lending rather than giving himself to that movement, staying just long enough to realize that his step was firmer when he walked alone. From the publication of *Seuls demeurent*, a handful of poems were in any case enough to make a free and virgin wind blow through our poetry. After so many years in which our poets, devoted first of all to the manufacture of '*bibelots d'inanité*', had relinquished the lute only to put the bugle to their lips, poetry became a health-giving funeral pyre. It blazed, like those great bonfires of grass which, in the poet's own country, give scent to the wind and richness to the earth. Finally, we could breathe. Natural mysteries, with living waters and sunlight, burst into the room where poetry still lay spellbound with echoes and shades. We can, here, speak of a poetic revolution.

But I should have less admiration for the originality of this poetry if its inspiration were not, at the same time, so ancient. Char rightly lays claim to the tragic optimism of pre-Socratic Greece. From Empedocles to Nietzsche a secret has been handed on from summit to summit, and after a long eclipse Char once more takes up this hard and rare tradition. The fires of Etna smoulder beneath some of his unbearable phrases, the royal wind of Sils Maria irrigates his poems and makes them

echo with the sound of clear and tumultuous waters. What Char calls 'wisdom with tear-filled eyes' lives again here, at the very height of our disasters.

This poetry, old and new at one and the same time, combines refinement with simplicity. It bears along both day and night with the same impulse. In the strong light where Char was born, we know that the sun is sometimes dark. At two in the afternoon, when the countryside is replete with warmth, a dark wind blows over it. So, each time Char's poetry seems obscure, it is by a tremendous concentration of images, a thickening of the light which sets it at a distance from that abstract transparence which, most frequently, we seek only because it makes no demands on us. But at the same time, as in the sunlit plain, this black point solidifies around itself vast beaches of light in which faces are stripped bare. At the centre of the *Poème pulvérisé*, for example, there stands a mysterious hearth around which torrents of warm images inexhaustibly whirl.

This is also why this poetry satisfies us so exactly. At the heart of the obscurity through which we move, the fixed, round light of Paul Valéry's skies would be of no use. It would be nostalgia, not aid. Whereas, on the contrary, in the strange and rigorous poetry offered us by René Char, our very night shines forth in clarity and we learn once again to walk. This poet of all times speaks accurately for our own. He is at the heart of the battle, he gives expression to our suffering as he does to our rebirth: 'If we live in a lightning flash, it is at the heart of eternity.'

Char's poetry does indeed live in a lightning flash, and this not only in a figurative sense. The man and the artist, who march in step, were tempered yesterday in the struggle against Hitlerian totalitarianism, and today in the denunciation of the rival but allied nihilisms which tear our world apart. Char has accepted, from the common struggle, sacrifices but not delights. 'We leap, not in the festival, but in its epilogue.' A poet of revolt and liberty, he has never fallen into self-satisfaction, and never, to use his own words, confused revolt with bad temper. It can never be said often enough, and all men confirm this every day, that there are two kinds of revolt, of which one hides principally an aspiration to servitude, whereas the other seeks desperately for a free order, wherein, as Char magnificently says, bread will be healed. Char knows indeed that to heal bread means to give

it its rightful place, above all doctrines, and give it the taste of friendship. This rebel thus escapes from the fate of so many handsome insurgents who end their careers as policemen or accomplices. He will always rise up against those whom he calls guillotine-sharpeners. He will have no truck with the bread of prisons, and to the very end bread will taste better, for him, in the mouth of the tramp than in that of the prosecuting counsel.

It is thus easy to understand why this insurgents' poet has no difficulty in also being the poet of love. On the contrary, his poetry plunges fresh and tender roots into this love. A whole aspect of his ethic and his art is summed up in the proud phrase of the *Poème pulvérisé*: 'Bow down only to love.' For it is indeed, in his view, a question of bowing down and, however virile the love which runs through his work may be, it has the accents of tenderness.

This is again why Char, involved as we all are in the most entangled history, has not been afraid to maintain and celebrate within this history the beauty for which it has given us so desperate a thirst. And beauty surges up from his admirable *Feuillets d'Hypnos*, burning like the rebel's blade, red, streaming with a strange baptism, crowned with flames. We then recognize it for what it is, not the anaemic goddess of academies, but the friend, the mistress, the companion of our days. At the height of the battle, here is a poet who has dared cry out to us: 'Within our darkness, there is not one single place for beauty. Each and every place is for beauty.' From that moment onwards, confronted with the nihilism of his time and opposed to all forms of betrayal, each poem by René Char has been a milestone on the path to hope.

What else can we require of a poet today? Behold! In the midst of our dismantled citadels stands woman, existing by virtue of a generous and secret art, and there too stand peace and rock-like liberty. And, far from diverting us from the fray, we learn that these rediscovered riches are the only ones that justify our struggle. Without seeking to do so, and solely because he has refused nothing of his times, Char does more than express what we are: he is also the poet of our tomorrows. He brings us together, although he himself remains alone, and there mingles with the admiration he arouses that great fraternal warmth in which men bear their best fruit. We can be certain that it is from works

such as his that we can henceforth require both refuge and clear-sightedness. They are messengers of truth, of that lost truth to which each day now brings us closer, although for a long time we have been able to say only that it was our country and that when we were far from it we suffered from exile. But words finally take shape, light dawns, one day the country will receive its name. Today a poet tells us of it in magnificent terms, and already reminds us, to justify the present, that this country is 'earth and murmurs, amid the impersonal stars'.

Preface to the German edition of René Char's *Poésies*, written in 1958, published in 1959

THE RAINS OF NEW YORK

THE rain of New York is a rain of exile. Abundant, viscous and compact, it flows tirelessly between the high cubes of cement, down on to avenues plunged suddenly into the blackness of a pit. As you seek shelter in a cab which stops at a red light, starts off again at a green, you suddenly feel caught in a trap, behind the monotonous and rapid windscreen wipers, which sweep aside a constantly reborn water. You are convinced that you could drive like this for hours, without ever escaping either from these square prisons, or from these cisterns where you flounder along with no hope of seeing a hill or a real tree. In the grey mist, the whitened skyscrapers stand like gigantic sepulchres for a town of the dead, and seem to sway slightly on their foundations. It is at hours like these that you feel forsaken. Eight million men, the smell of iron and cement, the madness of builders, and yet the very height of solitude. 'Even if I were to hold in my arms all the people in the world, I should be protected against nothing.'

This reason perhaps is that New York is nothing without its sky. Stretched right across the horizon, naked and immense, it gives the town its morning glory and the grandeur of its evenings, when a burning sunset sweeps down on Eighth Avenue and on the immense crowds driving past its shop windows, whose lights come on well before nightfall. There are also certain dusks along Riverside Drive, when you watch the freeway leading up to the town along the side of the Hudson River, whose waters are reddened by the setting sun; and from the uninterrupted flow of gently, smoothly running cars, there suddenly rises from time to time a song that recalls the sound of waves. Finally I think of other evenings, so gentle and so swift they break your heart, which cast a purple glow over the vast lawns of Central Park, seen from the heights of Harlem. Clouds of Negro children are hitting balls with wooden bats, shouting with joy, while old Americans, in check shirts, sprawled on park benches, use up what energy

they have left in sucking ice-creams moulded in pasteurized cartons, while round their feet squirrels nose down into the earth in search of unknown tit-bits. In the park trees, a birds' jazzband greets the appearance of the first star above the Empire State Building, while long-legged creatures stride along the paths against a setting of tall buildings, offering to the temporarily gentle sky their splendid visage and their loveless glance. But when this sky grows dull, or the daylight fades, then New York once again becomes the big city, a prison by day and a funeral pyre by night. At midnight, it is a prodigious funeral pyre, as its millions of lighted windows amidst immense stretches of blackened walls, bear these swarming lights halfway up the sky, as if every evening a gigantic fire were burning itself out over Manhattan, the island with three rivers, and raising immense smouldering carcasses still stuffed with dots of flame.

I have my own ideas about other towns. But all I have of New York are these powerful and fleeting emotions, a nostalgia made impatient, and moments of anguish. Even now, after so many months, I still know nothing about New York, whether it is inhabited by madmen or by the most reasonable people in the world; whether life there is as easy as all America says, or whether it is as empty as it sometimes seems; whether it is natural for ten people to be employed where one would be enough, and where you are served no faster; whether the New Yorkers are liberals or conformists, modest people or dead souls; whether it is admirable or unimportant that the garbage men should wear well-cut gloves for their work; whether it serves any purpose that the circus in Madison Square Garden should put on ten simultaneous performances on four different rings, so that you are interested by them all and can watch none of them; whether it is significant that the thousands of young people in the skating rink where I spent one evening, a kind of *Vélodrome d'hiver* bathed in reddish and dusty lights, and who turned endlessly on their roller skates in an infernal din of metal wheels and immense organ music, should look as serious and absorbed as if they were solving simultaneous equations; whether, finally, we should believe those who say that here it is eccentric to want to be alone, or simply those who are surprised that no one ever asks you for your identity papers.

I am, in short, out of my depth when I think of New York, I wrestle with its morning fruit juices, the national drink of

Scotch and soda and its relationship with love, the cab-girls and their secret, fleeting acts of love, the excessive luxury and bad taste which overflow even on to the stupefying ties, the anti-semitism and the love of animals—this last stretching from the gorillas of the Bronx to the protozoans of the Natural History Museum—the funeral parlours where death and the dead receive their make-up at top speed ('Die, leave the rest to us'), the barbers' shops where you can have a shave at three in the morning, the temperature which swings from hot to cold in two hours, the subway that reminds you of Sing-Sing, the clouds of smiles on the advertisement hoardings proclaiming on every wall that life is not tragic, the flower-covered cemeteries beneath the gasometers, the beauty of the girls and the ugliness of the old men, the tens of thousands of operetta generals and admirals working as doormen, some to whistle the green, red and yellow beetle-cabs, others to open the door for you, and finally the ones who, all over the town, go up and down like multicoloured Cartesian divers along fifty-storey-high shafts.

Yes, I am out of my depth. I learn that towns can have the same effect as certain women, who annoy you, overwhelm you and lay bare your soul, and whose scorching contact, at once both scandal and delight, clings to every pore of your body. This is how, for days on end, I walked around New York with my eyes full of tears, simply because the air of the town is filled with cinders, and half the time that you spend in the streets is taken up with rubbing your eyelids or removing from them the minute speck of metal that the thousand New Jersey factories send you, as a joyful greeting gift, from across the Hudson. This is how, finally, I carry New York away with me, as you carry a foreign body in your eye, delicious and unbearable, with tears of tenderness and all-consuming furies.

Perhaps that is what people call passion. All that I can say is that I know on what contrasting images my passion feeds. At dead of night, sometimes, above the skyscrapers, across hundreds of high walls, the cry of a tug would come and meet my insomnia, reminding me that this desert of iron and cement was also an island. Then I rediscovered the sea, and stood on the shore of my own land. On other evenings, at the front of the Second Avenue skyway, which greedily swallows the little red and blue lights as it tears along at fifth-floor level, and, from time to time, allows

itself to be slowly absorbed by half-dark stations, I watched the skyscrapers turning round about our path, and, leaving the abstract avenues of the centre, let myself flow towards the gradually poorer districts, where there were fewer and fewer cars. I knew what awaited me, those nights on the Bowery, where, a few paces from those splendid, half-mile-long shops for bridal gowns (not one of the waxen brides is smiling) live the forgotten men, those who have let themselves slide into poverty in the bankers' city. It is the gloomiest part of the town, the one where you never meet a woman, where one man in every three is drunk, and where in a strange café, apparently straight out of a Western, you see fat old actresses singing about ruined lives and a mother's love, stamping their feet to the rhythm and spasmodically shaking, among the bellowing from the bar, the parcels of shapeless flesh with which age has covered them. The drummer is an old woman as well, who looks like a screech-owl, and some evenings you feel you want to know her life, on one of those rare moments when geography disappears and loneliness becomes a slightly confused truth.

At other times . . . but yes, of course, I loved the mornings and evenings of New York. I loved New York, with that powerful love which sometimes leaves you full of uncertainties and hatred: it can happen that we need exile. And the very smell of the New York rains then clings to you in the heart of the most harmonious and familiar towns, to tell you that there is at least one place of deliverance in the world, and remind you that you, together with a whole people and for as long as you want, can finally lose yourself for ever.

Published in *Formes et couleurs*, 1947

PART THREE

CAMUS ON HIMSELF

PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY EDITION OF *L'ÉTRANGER*

I SUMMED up *L'Étranger*, a long time ago, by a remark which I agree was highly paradoxical: 'In our society, any man who does not weep at his mother's funeral runs the risk of being sentenced to death.' All I meant was that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not stick to the rules. In this respect, he is foreign to the society in which he lives, he wanders, on the fringe, in the suburbs of private, solitary, sensual life. And this is why readers have been tempted to look upon him as a piece of social wreckage. A much more accurate idea of the character, or, at least, one much closer to the author's intentions, will emerge if it is asked just how Meursault refuses to conform. The reply is a simple one: he refuses to lie. To lie is not only to say what is not the case. It also, above all, means saying more than is the case, and, as far as the human heart is concerned, more than we feel. It is what we all do, every day, to simplify life. Meursault contrary to appearances, does not want to simplify life. He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings, and immediately society feels itself threatened. He is asked, for example, to say that he regrets his crime, in the approved manner. He replies that what he feels is not so much true regret as a certain boredom. And this shade of meaning condemns him.

Meursault, for me, is thus not a piece of social wreckage, but a man who is naked and poor, in love with the sun that leaves no shadows. Far from being empty of all feelings, he is inspired by a passion which is deep because it is stubborn, a passion for the absolute and for truth. This truth is still a negative one, the

truth of what we are and what we feel, but without it no conquest of ourselves or of the world will ever be possible.

One would therefore not be much mistaken in reading *L'Étranger* as the story of a man who, with no heroics, accepts to die for truth. I have also happened to say, still paradoxically, that I had tried to present in my character the only Christ whom we deserve. It will be understood, after my explanations, that I said this with no blasphemous intent, and solely with the slightly ironic affection which an artist has the right to feel for the characters he has created.

January 8, 1955

(Preface to the American university edition published in 1956.)

LETTER TO ROLAND BARTHES ON *LA PESTE*

Paris, January 11, 1955

My dear Barthes,

However attractive it may appear, I find it difficult to share your point of view on *La Peste*. Of course, all comments are justifiable, within an honest critical appraisal, and it is both possible and significant to venture as far as you do. But it seems to me that every work contains a number of obvious factors to which the author is justified in calling attention if only to indicate how far the commentary can go. To say, for example, that *La Peste* teaches men to ignore history and abstain from politics, involves, in my view, exposing oneself to a number of contradictions, and, above all, involves going beyond a certain number of obvious facts which I shall briefly summarize here:

1. *La Peste*, which I wanted to be read on a number of levels, nevertheless has as its obvious content the struggle of the European resistance movements against Nazism. The proof is that although this enemy is nowhere named, everyone in every European country recognized him. I will add that a long extract from *La Peste* appeared under the Occupation, in a collection of resistance texts, and that this fact alone would justify the transposition that I have made. *La Peste* is, in a sense, more than a chronicle of the resistance. But it is certainly not anything less.

2. Compared to *L'Étranger*, *La Peste* does represent, beyond any possible discussion, the movement from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from *L'Étranger* to *La Peste*, it is towards solidarity and participation.

3. The theme of separation, whose importance in the book you bring out very well, throws a good deal of light on this point. Rambert, who embodies this theme, does in fact give up private

life in order to take his place in the common struggle. I should point out, in parenthesis, that this character shows how artificial the contrast is between the friend and the militant. For one virtue is common to them both, and this is active fraternity, with which no history, in the last resort, has learned to dispense.

4. *La Peste* ends, moreover, on the announcement and acceptance of further struggles. It bears witness for 'all that had had to be done, and that [men] would doubtless have to do again against terror and its tireless weapons, whatever might be their personal anguish. . . .'

I could develop my point of view further. But even if I do find it possible to consider the ethic at work in *La Peste* inadequate (and it must then be said what more complete ethic is being used as criterion), and legitimate to criticize its aesthetic (many of your remarks are clarified by the very simple fact that I do not believe in realism in art), I find it, on the contrary, very difficult to agree with you when you say in your conclusion that its author refuses to participate in our present history. It is difficult and, let me say this in all friendship, a little depressing.

In any case, the question which you ask, 'What would the fighters against the plague do when confronted with the overhuman face of the disaster?' is unjust in this respect: it ought to have been couched in the past tense, and it would then have received its reply, which is a positive one. What these fighters, whose experience I have to some extent translated, did do, they did in fact against men, and at a cost which you know. They will do it again, no doubt, when any terror confronts them, whatever fact it may take on, for terror has several faces. This, once again, justifies me for not have named any particular one, in order better to strike at them all. It is doubtless the fact that *La Peste* can apply to all resistances against all and every tyranny which explains the reproaches aimed at me. But it is not legitimate to reproach me or, above all, accuse me of refusing history—unless it is proclaimed that the only way of taking part in history is to legitimize tyranny. This is not what you do, I know; as far as I am concerned, I am perverse enough to believe that resigning oneself to such an idea would amount to accepting human solitude. And, far from feeling installed in a career of solitude, I have, on the contrary, the feeling that I am living by and for a community which nothing in history has so far been able to touch.

Here, too briefly expressed, is what I wanted to tell you. I should merely like to assure you in conclusion that this friendly discussion alters nothing of the high opinion which I have of you as a writer and a person.

Albert Camus

Letter published in *Club*, the review of the *Club du meilleur livre*, February 1955

LETTER TO P.B.

February 15, 1953

My dear P.B.,

I will begin by passing over the apology I owe you for last Friday. It was not a question of a lecture on Holland, but I was summoned at the last moment to sign books on behalf of its flood victims. This exercise, which I was doing for the first time, seemed something that I could not refuse, and I thought you would forgive me this unfortunate incident. But this is not the question, for this lies in what you call the difficulties of our relationship. On this point, what I have to say can be expressed simply: if you knew the quarter of my life and obligations, you would not have written a single line of your letter. But you cannot know this, and I neither can nor should explain it to you. The 'haughty solitude' of which you complain, together with many others who lack your quality, would after all, if it existed, be a blessing for me. But people are quite wrong to credit me with this paradise. The truth is that I have to fight with time and other people for each hour of my work, and am, the most often, defeated. I am not complaining. My life is what I have made it, and I am the first person responsible for its dispersion and its rhythm. But when I receive a letter like yours, then I do feel that I want to complain, or at least ask people not to blame me so easily. To deal adequately with everything, I should today need three lives and several hearts. I have only one, which can be judged, as I often judge it myself, to be of only average quality. I physically do not have the time, and above all the inner leisure, to see my friends as I should like to (ask Char, whom I love like a brother, how many times we see each other every month). I have not the time to write for reviews, neither on Jaspers nor on Tunisia, even to take up one of Sartre's arguments. You can disbelieve me if you like, but I have not the time, nor the inner leisure, to be ill. When I do fall ill, my life is all upside down and

I spend weeks trying to catch up with myself. But what is most serious is that I no longer have the time, or the inner leisure, to write my books, and that it takes me four years to write something which, if I were free, would have needed one or two. Besides, for several years now, my work has not freed but enslaved me. If I pursue it, this is because I cannot do otherwise and because I place it before anything else, even before liberty, even before wisdom or true fecundity, and even, yes even, before friendship. It is true that I try to organize myself, to double my strength and my 'presence' by a timetable, by organizing my day, by an increased efficiency. I hope to manage one day. For the moment, I do not. Each letter brings three others, each person ten, each book a hundred letters and twenty correspondents, while life continues, while there is work to do, people I love and people who need me. Life continues, and on some mornings, weary of the noise, discouraged by the prospect of the interminable work to be completed, sickened also by that madness of the world which hits you in the face when you read a newspaper, finally convinced that I shall not manage and shall disappoint everyone, all I want to do is sit down and wait for evening to come. I have this longing, and I sometimes yield.

Can you understand this? Of course, you deserve to be considered and talked to. Of course your friends are as good as mine (who are not so grammatically inclined as you think). Although I have difficulty in imagining (and this is not a pose) that my esteem can matter to someone, this is something which you do enjoy. But for this esteem to transform itself into active friendship, we should indeed require real leisure, and many opportunities to meet. I have met a number of human beings of high quality; this has been the blessing of my life. But it is not possible to have so many friends, and it is my misfortune which condemns me to disappoint people, I know this. I can understand that other people should find it unbearable. It is unbearable. But this is how things are, and if people cannot love me like this, it is normal for them to leave me in a solitude which, as you see, is not so haughty as you allege.

I am, in any case, replying to your bitterness with no bitterness. Letters like yours, coming from someone like you, merely have the gift of making me sad, and add themselves to all the reasons that I have to flee from this town and the life I lead here.

For the moment, although this is what I long for most in the whole world, it is not possible. I am thus compelled to continue this strange existence, and shall have to count what you tell me as the price, rather a high one in my view, that I must pay for having allowed myself to be driven to adopt this existence.

Forgive me, in any case, for having disappointed you, and believe me to be,

THREE INTERVIEWS

1. *No, I am not an existentialist . . .*

'No, I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names coupled together. We have even thought of publishing a short statement in which the undersigned declare that they have nothing in common with each other and refuse to be held responsible for the debts which they might respectively incur. Anyway, that's my joke. Sartre and I published all our books, without exception, before we had ever met. When we did get to know each other, it was to realize how much we differed. Sartre is an existentialist, and the only book of ideas that I have published, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, was directed against the so-called existentialist philosophers.

.....

Sartre and I do not believe in God, it is true. And we don't believe in absolute rationalism either. But neither do Jules Romains, Malraux, Stendhal, Paul de Kock, the Marquis de Sade, André Gide, Alexandre Dumas, Montaigne, Eugène Sue, Molière, Saint-Évremond, the Cardinal de Retz and André Breton. Do we have to put all these people in the same school? But we should do better to leave that aside. After all, I don't see why I should apologize for being interested in all those who live outside Grace. It is high time we began concerning ourselves with them, since they are the most numerous.

Is it not true to say that a philosophy which insists upon the absurdity of the world runs the risk of driving such people into despair?

All I can do is reply on my own behalf, realizing that what I say is relative. Accepting the absurdity of everything around us is a stage, a necessary experience: it should not become a dead end. It arouses a revolt which can become fruitful. An analysis of the concept of revolt could help us to discover notions capable of restoring a relative meaning to existence, although a meaning that would always be in danger.

Revolt takes on a different form in every individual. Would it be possible to pacify it with notions valid for everyone?

. . . Yes, because if there is one fact that the last five years have brought out, it is the extreme solidarity of men with one another. Solidarity in crime for some, solidarity in the upsurge of resistance in others. Solidarity even between victims and executioners. When a Czech was shot, the life of a grocer in the Rue de Beaune was in jeopardy.

The individualism of the French makes it difficult for them to have a real experience of this solidarity.

That remains to be proved. And besides, in a world whose absurdity appears to be so impenetrable, we simply must reach a greater degree of understanding amongst men, a greater sincerity. We have to achieve this or perish. To do this, certain conditions must be fulfilled: men must be frank (falsehood confuses things), free (communication is impossible with slaves). Finally, they must feel a certain justice around them.

You wrote in Le Mythe de Sisyphe: '*A man without hope, and conscious of this condition, no longer belongs to the future.*' *Since you do not believe that men can escape into religion, are you not afraid that young people today will be led into a dangerous neglect of action?*

If it were not possible nowadays to live or act without reference to God, then perhaps a very great number of people in the West would be condemned to sterility. Young people know this very well. And if I feel so great a solidarity with so many students, for example, it is because we are all confronted with the same problem, and because I am confident that, like me, they want to solve it by trying to act more effectively and to serve man.

Since you know young people so well, does this mean that you have been a teacher?

Never. But to continue my studies, I had to work at a number of jobs. I have sold spare parts for cars, worked in a meteorological office, in a shipping firm, and in a *préfecture*. I have been an actor (I belonged to a company which performed for a fortnight each month, and during the rest of the time I prepared my

licence), and, finally, I worked as a journalist, which made me travel.

To write after having had a number of jobs is more frequent in America than in France. Your first novel, L'Étranger, *recalls certain works by Faulkner and Steinbeck. Is this simply coincidence?*

No. But the technique of the American novel seems to me to lead to a dead end. I used it in *L'Étranger*, it is true. But this is because it suited my purpose, which was to describe a man with no apparent awareness. By generalizing this particular technique, we would end up with a universe of automatons and instincts. It would be a considerable impoverishment. This is why, although I appreciate the real value of the American novel, I would give a hundred Hemingways for one Stendhal or one Benjamin Constant. And I regret the influence of this literature on many young writers.

You are nevertheless considered to be a revolutionary writer.

I don't know what this means. If it is revolutionary to ask oneself questions about one's art, then perhaps.... But I cannot imagine a literature without style. I know of only one revolution in art, it belongs to all ages, and consists of the exact adjustment of form to subject matter, of language to theme. From this point of view, I have a deep love only for great classical French literature. It is true that I include in this Saint-Évremond and the works of the Marquis de Sade. It is also true that I exclude certain academicians, both present and past.

What are your projects?

A novel on *la peste*, an essay on *l'homme révolté*. And perhaps I ought to make my mind up to study existentialism....

Interview with Jeanine Delpech,
Les Nouvelles Littéraires, November 15, 1945

2. *Encounter with Albert Camus*

Albert Camus, who is still a young writer, is considered as one of the intellectual leaders of the younger generation.

However, I will say at once that when I was with him he never

put on the tense air of a Master or of a director of consciences. I will even go so far as to say that he seemed very little interested in such matters. 'I am often depicted as an austere character,' he told me, not without irony, the irony which makes itself felt here and there, in a barely noticeable form, through the gravity of his books.

He also has a discreet smile on his tormented face, with a high, wrinkled forehead beneath very dark, crisp hair, a manly, North African face which has grown paler in our climate. A discreet but a frequent smile, and his rather deep voice is not afraid of humorous inflexions.

The world did not begin by being hostile to me. I had a happy childhood. . . .

Happy in its poverty, in spite of its poverty. Born in a village in the province of Constantine, Mondovici, the birthplace of General Juin, he was only a year old when his mother, widowed in the First World War, took him to Algiers where she had to work hard to bring up her two sons. Nevertheless, he was never to hear an envious or a bitter word. So that he doesn't know what envy or bitterness are like. He feels himself rich in natural goods. In Africa, of course, this is easier. He enjoys the sun and the sea, lives happily in the street or on the beach, until the day when he allows himself to be convinced of the usefulness of acquiring knowledge. He studies at the Lycée d'Alger, has to take a number of jobs in order to carry on up to the licence. *He even works as an actor. . . .*

I have had my share of difficult experiences. However, I did not begin my life by a feeling of anguish. Similarly, I did not enter literature with curses or sneers, as many people do, but through admiration.

How did the desire to write first show itself in you? Can you remember its first appearance?

It is rather difficult to say. But I can remember how overwhelmed I was by a book written by a young man and lent to me by Jean Grenier. It was called *La Douleur*, by André de Richaud. You must see this shock as taking place in the life of a very young man. At that time, I read everything, up to and including Marcel Prévost. But Richaud, in *La Douleur*, talked about things that I knew: he depicted poor areas, he described the nostalgias I had felt. I saw, while reading his book, that I too might perhaps have something personal to express.

You spoke of Jean Grenier. I believe he was your teacher in the Lycée d'Alger.

Yes, Grenier gave me the taste for philosophical meditation; he guided my reading. Both by style and sensibility, he is one of our leading writers. Perhaps we should be sorry that his modesty, and a certain detachment, prevent him from showing himself more frequently. But the fact remains that *Les Iles* is an admirable book. And what a marvellous friend, always bringing you back to the essential, in spite of yourself. Grenier was my master, and still is.

The highly classical purity of your art has often made me think that Gide was your master as well.

He reigned over my youth—while Grenier nevertheless remained the keeper of the garden—Gide, or to be more accurate, the Malraux-Gide conjunction . . . Montherlant also affected me very deeply at that time. Not only by the ascendancy of his style: *Service Inutile* is a book which moved me. . . . As to the earlier writers, the ones you go back to when you are tired of reading your contemporaries, it is Tolstoy whom I most like to re-read nowadays. There is in Tolstoy an anguish and a tragic sense which are doubtless less spectacular than in Dostoievski, but which I persist in finding overwhelming since it remained his own fate until the very end: of the two, it was after all Dostoievski who died in his own bed. . . .

You yourself are often thought of as riddled with anguish. You are seen as a pessimistic writer. What do you think of this heavy reputation?

First of all that I very obviously do not adopt the opposite attitude. Comfortable optimism surely seems like a bad joke in the present-day world. Having said this, I am not one of those who proclaim that the world is rushing to its doom. I do not believe in the final collapse of our civilization. I believe—without, of course, nourishing anything but . . . reasonable illusions on this subject—that a renaissance is possible. If the world were rushing to its doom, we should have to lay the blame for this on apocalyptic modes of thought. Not every pose horrifies me. I have no sympathy at all for that of *poète maudit.*

When I do happen to look for what is most fundamental in me, what I find is a taste for happiness. I have a very keen liking for people. I have no scorn for the human race. I think that we can feel proud at having as contemporaries a certain number of men of our day whom I respect and admire. . . . At the centre of my work, there is an invincible sun. Surely all this does not make up a very sad philosophy?

Not sad. Grave and concerned. How could this not be the case, when one is as sensitive as you are to the drama of our century?

I am, in fact, very sensitive to this, and it is perhaps this sensitivity which has led me to write books which are, up to now, 'blacker' than I would have liked.

But it is also this sensitivity which has given you the attention and trust of a large section of young people. Now, in turn, the new generation looks on you today as one of its masters. . . .

(This time, the author of *La Peste* laughs out loud).

A master, already! But I don't claim to teach anybody! Whoever thinks this is mistaken. The problems confronting young people today are the same ones confronting me, that is all. And I am far from having solved them. I therefore do not think that I have any right to play the role you mention. . . .

What are young people looking for? Certainties. I have not many to offer them. All I can say definitely is that there is a certain order of degradation which I shall always refuse. I think that this is something which they feel. Those who trust me know that I shall never lie to them. As to the young people who ask others to think for them, we must say 'No' to them in the clearest possible terms.

That is what I have to say.

Let us go back to your own formation. You acknowledge having learnt from André Gide. But which André Gide? For there are several, are there not? And in any case there are no traces of this influence in your work, in which you never give away any secrets about your own life, as Gide does in Si le grain ne meurt *or the* Journal.

Well, my cult was directed above all to the artist, the master of modern classicism, let us say to the Gide of the *Prétextes*.

Being fully aware of the anarchy of my nature, I need to give myself barriers in art. Gide taught me how to do this. His conception of classicism as a romanticism brought under control is something which I share. As for his deep respect for artistic matters, I agree with him completely. For I have the highest possible idea of art. I place it too high ever to agree to subject it to anything.

So I shall not have to ask Albert Camus what is by now the ritual question on 'committed' literature. You have just heard his reply. But immediately, with that care for accuracy which characterizes him, and is at one and the same time a scruple and a liking for nuances:

Nevertheless, I do not want to defend aesthetic ideas and artistic forms that are out of date. The writer who allows himself to be fascinated by the political Gorgon is doubtless making a mistake. But it is also a mistake to pass over in silence the social problems of our time. . . . And besides, it would be quite pointless to run away from them: turn your back on the Gorgon, and it starts to move. . . . What, in fact, is the aim of every creative artist? To depict the passions of his day. In the seventeenth century, the passions of love were at the forefront of people's minds. But today, the passions of our century are collective passions because society is in disorder.

Artistic creation, far from taking us away from the drama of our time, is one of the means we possess for drawing closer to it. Totalitarian regimes are well aware of this, since they consider us as their first enemies. Is it not obvious that everything which destroys art aims at strengthening the ideologies which make men unhappy? Only artists have never harmed the world.

Would you say the same of philosophers?

The evil geniuses of contemporary Europe bear philosophers' names: they are called Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche.

Nietzsche? I should have thought him one of your spiritual ancestors.

He is, undoubtedly. What is admirable, in Nietzsche, is that you always find in him something to correct what is dangerous

elsewhere in his ideas. I place him infinitely higher than the two others.

We are living in their Europe, the Europe which they have made. When we have reached the final stage in their logic, we shall remember that another tradition does exist: the one which has never denied man's greatness. There is, fortunately, a light which we men of the Mediterranean have been able to keep. If Europe were finally to give up certain values of the Mediterranean world—moderation, for example, true moderation, which has nothing to do with the more comfortable variety—we can imagine what the results would be. Indeed, they are already visible.

Yes, of course, the Mediterranean has its word to say in this tragic juncture. But is it not too detached to assume such a role, too sceptical?

It was, until it was stricken in its own truths. It is far less detached and sceptical today, now that it is stifling in a barbarous Europe. I am judging, it is true, as a Mediterranean from North Africa, which is a harder and a harsher earth than your Provence.

But equally fecund in new talents, I feel?

Indeed. It's a real nest of singing birds! The generation before ours did not know even how to read. And now we have an Audisio, a Roblès, a Jules Roy, a de Fréminville, a Rosfelder, a Pierre Millecan, etc., a young author who is going to make his début with Gallimard, with a very curious novel. Fruits grow quickly over there. It is true that it was the country of Jugurtha and Saint Augustine. A singularly explosive mixture, don't you think?

Let us come back to our sad Europe. I was thinking about certain European novelists whom many people will be surprised not to have heard you name among your intellectual mentors. The Czech writer Franz Kafka, for example, the great painter of the Absurd.

I look upon Kafka as a very great story-teller. But it would be wrong to say that he has influenced me. If a painter of the Absurd has played a role in my idea of literary art, it is the author of the admirable *Moby Dick*, the American Melville. . . . I think that what repels me a little in Kafka is the fantastic element. I am

not at home in fantasy. The artist's universe should exclude nothing. But Kafka's universe excludes practically the whole world. And then . . . then, I cannot really entertain an affection for a literature of total despair.

To what extent should we look upon your books, whether they are novels or plays, as symbolic translations of the philosophy of the Absurd? People have often done this.

This word 'Absurd' has had an unhappy history, and I confess that now it rather annoys me.

When I analysed the feeling of the Absurd in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, I was looking for a method and not a doctrine. I was practising methodical doubt. I was trying to make a *tabula rasa*, on the basis of which it would then be possible to construct something.

If we assume that nothing has any meaning, then we must conclude that the world is absurd. But does nothing have a meaning? I have never believed that we could remain at this point. Already, when I was writing *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, I was thinking about the essay on revolt that I would write later on, and in which I would attempt, after having described the different aspects of the feeling of the Absurd, to describe the different attitudes of *L'Homme Révolté*. (That is the title of the book I am completing.) And then there are new events which enrich or correct what has come to you through observation, the continual lessons which life offers, and which you have to reconcile with those of your earlier experiences. This is what I have tried to do . . . though, naturally, I still do not claim to be in possession of any truth.

Robert de Luppé seems to have brought out this constant development of your ideas very well in the little book which he has just published on your work.

It is, at any rate, a book written in a spirit of sympathetic objectivity, and for this I am grateful to its author. I appreciate the way he has not presented me as a doctrinal writer enslaved to one particular system.

What is more complex than the birth of a reflection? The right explanation is always double, at least. Greece teaches us this, Greece to which we must always return. Greece is both

shade and light. We are well aware, are we not, if we come from the South, that the sun has its black side?

That sun which a painter like Jean Marchand likes to bring bursting into his skies?

Exactly. René Char has also given very fine expression to this duality. I consider him to be one of the few French poets who are great today and will still be great tomorrow. . . . I mean that he is in advance of his time, although he is at one with it. It is, indeed, a very hard fate to be born in a pagan land in Christian times. This is my own case. I feel myself closer to the values of the classical world than to those of Christianity. Unfortunately, I cannot go to Delphi to be initiated!

Interview with Gabriel d'Aubarède,
Les Nouvelles Littéraires, May 10, 1951

3. *Replies to Jean-Claude Brisville*[1]

At what period of your life did you become clearly aware of your vocation as a writer?

Vocation is perhaps not the right word. I wanted to be a writer when I was about seventeen, and at the same time I was vaguely aware that I would become one.

Did you then think about another profession?

Teaching. By necessity. But I always wanted to have a second profession to ensure my freedom to work as a writer.

At the time of L'Envers et l'Endroit, *did you have any idea of what your literary future would be?*

After *L'Envers et l'Endroit*, I had doubts. I wanted to give up. And then an overwhelming upsurge of life sought to express itself in me: I wrote *Noces*.

Do you find it difficult to reconcile your role as a creator with the social role that you see yourself obliged to fulfil? Is this an important problem for you?

[1] J.-C. Brisville, a writer of whom Camus had a high opinion, is a critic and novelist, and reader for the publishing house of Julliard. His study of Camus in the collection entitled *La Bibliothèque idéale* was published by Gallimard in 1959.

Of course. But our century has reached the point where it gives so derisory or odious a face to 'social preoccupations' that it helps us to feel free in this respect. The fact remains that writing while others are gagged or imprisoned is a delicate undertaking. So as not to fall short, either in one direction or in the other, we have to remember that the writer lives for his work and fights for liberties.

Do you feel at ease in your personality as a writer?

Very much at ease in my private relationships. But I have never liked the public aspect of my calling, and it is becoming unbearable to me.

If for any reason you had to give up writing, do you think that you could nevertheless be happy? Would the simple 'agreement between the earth and the foot' of which you speak in Caligula *be enough to compensate for the happiness of expressing yourself?*

When I was younger, I could have been happy without writing. Even today I have great gifts for silent happiness. However, I have to acknowledge now that I probably could not live without my art.

Do you think that your early success—the fact of having been considered, whether you wanted it or not, as an 'intellectual master' after the publication of Le Mythe de Sisyphe*—has given any particular direction to your work? Do you, in short, think that you would have written the same books if you had composed them in relative obscurity?*

Of course, having a reputation changed many things. But, on this point, I have few complexes. My rule has always been a simple one: refuse all that could be refused quietly; in any case, make no effort to obtain either reputation or obscurity. Accept either in silence, if it comes, and perhaps accept them both. As to being an 'intellectual leader', it simply makes me laugh. To teach, you need to know. To guide other people, you must know how to guide yourself.

Even so, it is true that I experienced the servitudes of having a reputation before I had written all my books. The most obvious consequence of this is that I have been obliged, and still am

obliged, to struggle against society to find time for my work. I manage, but at a high price.

Do you consider the main part of your work as completed?

I am forty-five, and have a rather disturbing vitality.

Does the development of your work follow a general plan established long in advance, or do you discover this plan while you are actually writing?

Both. There is a plan which circumstances, on the one hand, and the actual writing of my books, on the other, do modify.

What is your method of working?

Notes, scraps of paper, vague musing, and this for years on end. One day, the idea, the conception which causes these scattered fragments to coagulate, comes along. There then begins the long and painful task of setting these into order. And this task is all the longer because of the immensity of my profound anarchy.

Do you feel the need to talk about the work while you are writing it?

No. When, exceptionally, I happen to talk about it, I am not pleased with myself.

When it is completed, do you ask the views of a friend—or do you content yourself with your own opinion?

I have two or three friends who read my manuscripts and note down what they don't like. Nine times out of ten, they are right, and I make the correction.

What, in your work as a writer, is the moment that you prefer? (The conception, the first draft, the working over of what you have written?)

The moment of conception.

Do you see any kind of relationship in the artist between the life of the body and his inspiration (or the nature of his work)? If so, what do you think this relationship is?

Physical life in the open air, in the sun, sport and a proper

balance in my body are, for me, the conditions under which I do my best intellectual work. Together (and the two things are connected) with a good timetable. To tell the truth, I rarely find myself in these conditions. But in any case I know that creation is an intellectual and bodily discipline, a school of energy. I have never achieved anything in anarchy or physical slackness.

Do you work regularly?

I try to. When everything is going well: four or five hours at the start of every day. When everything is going badly! . . .

Do you feel at fault towards yourself when you put your work off to the next day?

Yes. I feel guilty. How shall I put it? I don't like myself.

Is there a character in your work of whom you are particularly fond?

Marie, Dora, Céleste.

There seem to be two families of people in your work: the first, illustrated by Caligula, seems to correspond to a taste for powerful individuality; the second, which might be represented by Meursault, corresponds to the temptation of self-effacement. Can you recognize this double direction in yourself?

Yes, I have a liking for energy and conquests. But I soon tire of what I have obtained. This is my great weakness. I also have a liking for obscurity, for self-effacement. But the passion for life urges me forward again. In short, I never solve the dilemma.

Which technique—fiction, the theatre or the essay—gives you most satisfaction as a creator?

The alliance of all these techniques in the service of a single work.

It seems from some of your writings that you see the theatre as offering an art of living. Do you agree with this?

That would be saying a great deal. But I sometimes feel that I could have been an actor and been satisfied with this profession.

To what values in a work of art—and especially in a literary work of art—are you most sensitive?

Truth. And the artistic values which reflect it.

Is there a theme in your work which you think is important and which you consider has been neglected by your commentators?

Humour.

How do you look on the part of your work which is already completed?

I don't re-read it. All that is dead for me. I would like, I want, to do something else.

What, in your view, distinguishes the creator?

The ability to renew himself. He always says the same thing, no doubt, but he tirelessly renews the forms in which he says it. He has a horror of rhymes.

Which writers have formed you—or, at least, have helped you to become aware of what you wanted to say?

Among the moderns: Grenier, Malraux, Montherlant. Among classical writers: Pascal, Molière. Nineteenth-century Russian literature. The Spanish writers.

What importance do you attribute to the plastic arts?

I should have liked to be a sculptor. Sculpture for me is the greatest of arts.

And music?

When I was young, I used to gorge myself on it. Nowadays, very few musicians move me. But Mozart still does.

What do you think of the cinema?

And you?

There are often misunderstandings in the way artists are admired. What is the compliment that annoys you the most?

Honesty, conscience, humanity, you know, all the modern mouthwashes.

What, in your view, is the most marked feature of your character?

That depends on the day. But, often, a kind of blind, heavy obstinacy.

Which human characteristic do you value highest?

There is a mixture of intelligence and courage, which is fairly rare, and which I do like.

Your last hero, the narrator in La Chute, *seems discouraged. Does he express what you feel at the present moment?*

My hero is indeed discouraged, and this is why, as a good modern nihilist, he exalts servitude. Have I chosen to exalt servitude?

You wrote one day: 'Secret of my universe: imagine God without the immortality of the soul.' Can you define more exactly what you meant?

Yes. I have a sense of the sacred and do not believe in a future life, that is all.

Has the simple pleasure of being alive—and the dispersion which it implies—anything to fear, in your view, from a vocation—an artistic one, for example—and from the discipline which this demands?

Yes, unfortunately. I like burning, active days, a free life. . . . And this is why discipline is hard, and necessary. And this is why it is good to escape from it sometimes.

Have you a rule for living—or do you improvise, according to the circumstances and your reactions at the time?

I make strict rules for myself, in order to correct my nature. It is my nature that I finally obey. The result is by no means brilliant.

What, for example, was your first reaction to the personal attacks directed against you in the Press after the award of the Nobel Prize?

First of all, I felt hurt. When a man has never asked for anything in his life, and is then suddenly subjected to excessive praise and excessive blame, both praise and blame are equally painful. And then I soon rediscovered the notion on which I normally rely whenever things go against me: that this was in the order of things. Do you know the remark of a man who was a great solitary in spite of himself? 'They have no love for me. Is this a reason for not blessing them?' No, everything that

happens to me is good, in a sense. Besides, these noisy events are essentially secondary.

What wish would you make, at this stage in your life?

'Within a superabundance of life-giving and restoring forces, even misfortunes have a sunlike glow and engender their own consolations.' This remark of Nietzsche's is true, and I have experienced it myself. And all I ask is that this strength and this superabundance should be given to me once more, even if infrequently. . . .

La Bibliothèque Idéale, Gallimard, 1959