PENGUIN CLASSICS

RAINER MARIA RILKE

# *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

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# THE NOTEBOOKS OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE

RAINER MARIA RILKE, born in Prague in 1875, was one of the twentieth century's greatest poets. After a precocious start with decorative Art Nouveau verse, he found a hallmark voice of his own in *The Book of Images* (1902) and *The Book of Hours* (1905), and in the two volumes of *New Poems* (1907/8) produced a first undisputed masterpiece. Always closely involved with the visual arts, he wrote illuminatingly on Cézanne, Rodin and the artists of the Worpswede colony, one of whom, the sculptor Clara Westhoff, he married. In 1910 he published his one novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Rarely in any one place for long, Rilke travelled constantly throughout Europe, and was fortunate in attracting patronage. Before the First World War he began his greatest work, the *Duino Elegies*, which he completed, together with the entire cycle of *Sonnets to Orpheus*, in early 1922. He died in Switzerland in 1926.

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## The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge

*Translated and edited by*
MICHAEL HULSE

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England www.penguin.com

First published in Germany as *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* 1910
This translation first published in Penguin Classics 2009

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 ISBN: 978-0-14-192846-3

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# Chronology

1875 Rainer Maria Rilke is born on 4 December in Prague, an only child, and is christened René Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria on 19 December.
1882 Rilke starts attending a Roman Catholic primary school.
1885 Following years of tension due to his father's frustrated career prospects, his parents, Sophie and Josef, separate.
1886 He starts at a military school in the Austrian town of St Pölten. In retrospect, Rilke always describes this period in his life as traumatic.
1891 He transfers to the Linz Academy. Rilke remains there for less than a year, and returns to Prague to prepare privately for his school-leaving examinations.
1894 *Leben und Lieder* (Life and Songs), his first collection of poems, is published in November.
1895 He matriculates at the University of Prague, to study art history, philosophy and literature.
1896 *Larenopfer* (Offerings to the Lares) is published. Rilke spends two semesters studying art history in Germany, at the University of Munich.
1897 He publishes *Traumgekrönt* (Crowned with Dreams). In October, he moves to Berlin.
1898 Rilke divides his year between Germany, Bohemia and Italy, and publishes his fourth collection of poems, *Advent*.
1899 From April to June, Rilke makes his first journey to Russia. The rest of the year is spent mainly in Berlin and Prague. He publishes *Zwei Prager Geschichten* (Two Prague Stories) and another book of poems, *Mir zur Feier* (In Celebration of Myself).
1900 From May to August, he is in Russia for the second time. Accepting an invitation to Worpswede, Germany, from artist Heinrich Vogeler, he meets the sculptor Clara Westhoff.
1901 Rilke marries Clara on 28 April. Their daughter, Ruth, is born on

12 December.

1902 In August, Rilke moves to Paris, to begin work on a study of the French sculptor Auguste Rodin. *Das Buch der Bilder* (The Book of Images) is published.

1903 Rilke spends the first half of the year mainly in Paris, and the months from September in Rome, paying additional visits to Worpswede in the summer and to Venice and Florence. His monographs *Worpswede* and *Auguste Rodin* are published.

1904 Until June he is in Rome; from June to December in Denmark and Sweden. He publishes *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* (Tales of God) and *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke* (The Lay of the Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke), which in Rilke's lifetime was the best-selling of all his works, sales exceeding 300,000 by the time of his death.

1905 Most of the year is spent in various parts of Germany, except for six weeks with Rodin at Meudon during the autumn. *Das Stunden-Buch* (The Book of Hours) is published.

1906 In March, Rilke's father dies. Rilke lives variously in France (Paris and Meudon), Belgium and Germany.

1907 He spends the first half of the year in Italy (on Capri and in Naples and Rome), and the second half in Paris, Prague, Vienna and Venice. The *Neue Gedichte* (New Poems) are published.

1908 Again Rilke is mainly on Capri and in Rome and Paris. He publishes *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (New Poems, Part Two).

1909 For most of the year, Rilke is in France. In the autumn, he visits Orange, Avignon and Les Baux in Provence.

1910 In January, Rilke delivers the completed *Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge) to his publisher; the book is published in the summer. Rilke visits the Castle of Duino in Italy, and travels to Algeria and Tunisia.

1911 Rilke spends this year in Egypt, Italy, Germany and France, ending with two months at Duino.

1912 He remains at Duino till May, beginning the cycle of poems which will one day become the *Duineser Elegien* (Duino Elegies), then lives in Venice till September, before moving to Spain for the winter months.

1913 Rilke divides his time between various parts of Germany and France. He publishes *Das Marienleben* (The Life of Mary) and a

translation of Mariana Alcoforado's letters.

1914 He publishes a translation of André Gide's *Le Retour de l'enfant prodigue* (The Return of the Prodigal Son). The outbreak of war in August finds him in Germany, where he is obliged to remain.

1915 On 26 November, Rilke is called up by the Austro-Hungarian army.

1916 After three weeks of basic training, he is re-assigned to the Imperial War Archives in Vienna. In June, he is discharged, and returns to Munich.

1917 Rilke spends the year mainly in Munich and Berlin.

1918 His translation of Louise Labé's sonnets is published.

1919 Rilke spends the first half of the year in Germany and the second in Switzerland.

1920 He is mainly in Switzerland and Italy.

1921 Werner Reinhart, a businessman from a wealthy Winter-thur family, instals Rilke in the Swiss château of Muzot, in the Valais.

1922 In a few weeks in February, Rilke completes the *Duineser Elegien* (Duino Elegies) and writes the entire cycle of *Sonette an Orpheus* (Sonnets to Orpheus). He writes to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis: ‘Every fibre in me, every tissue, cracked.’

1923 The *Duineser Elegien* and *Sonette an Orpheus* are published. He spends December in a sanatorium at Valmont.

1924 Rilke stays twice in the sanatorium.

1925 He lives in Paris from January to August, returning to Switzerland in September.

1926 Much of the year is spent in the sanatorium once again. Rilke dies of leukaemia on 29 December.

1927 He is buried on Sunday 2 January in Raron in the Valais, above the valley of the Rhône.

1931 Death of Rilke's mother, Sophie.

1954 Death of his wife, Clara.

# Introduction

In the final quarter of the nineteenth century, two German-speaking writers who would both cast long shadows over the world's literature in the twentieth century were born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the Bohemian capital of Prague. One was the great master of disquiet Franz Kafka (born in 1883), whose novels and stories taught us all to rethink how we know our own selves. The other, Kafka's senior by eight years, was the poet of whom Paul Valéry wrote that ‘of all the people in the world, he possessed the greatest tenderness and spirit’, the poet who has taught us to see afresh the things we live among and to discover through them as much as it is possible to know of an absolute value in life: Rainer Maria Rilke.

It was Rilke who gave to the twentieth century its clearest understanding of the pure poet, the poet whose raison d'être is simply to express the nature of the world in words of lambent, tranquil beauty. Everyone who takes an interest in modern poetry is familiar with the story of the *Duineser Elegien* (Duino Elegies), begun before the First World War at the Castle of Duino on the northern Adriatic and completed a full decade later in early 1922, at Muzot in Switzerland, in an extraordinary outpouring that saw Rilke writing the remaining elegies and all fifty-five of the *Sonette an Orpheus* (Sonnets to Orpheus) within a very few weeks, as if ‘taking dictation within’ (as he put it). The story is the stuff of myth, and has fuelled an image of the poet as an inspired, Orphic singer, even a medium for utterance from some imagined ‘beyond’; and it was of course Rilke himself, notwithstanding the level-headed remarks on writing that we find him making elsewhere (for example, in his letters of advice to a younger poet), who created the myth in the letters and telegrams that he fired off in February 1922, writing of the ‘storm of spirit and heart’ that had broken over him. However we may choose to respond to the myth, though, Rilke's unique poetic tone and style, and his breathtaking

fertility and facility, have long commanded awed respect, and fellow-poets from Marina Tsvetaeva to W. H. Auden have recognized and responded to his genius; even those others, from Bertolt Brecht to Ian Hamilton, who have seen him as a toadying freeloader whose narcissism failed to respond to the socio-political agendas at the heart of modern times, have found it necessary to engage with the example and presence of Rilke. There is no ignoring him.

Born in 1875, Rilke spent his first twenty years in Prague or in Austria, undergoing an education (first in a Roman Catholic school, then at military schools) that reflected the concerns of his parents. Beginning in 1896, he began to travel, and from that time returned only rarely to Austria-Hungary. First he ventured into Germany (where he was nominally a student) and Italy; in 1899 and 1900 he made two extended visits to Russia with his then lover, the remarkable writer and psychoanalyst Lou Andreas-Salomé; and after his marriage to the sculptor Clara Westhoff and a period of quiet in northern Germany, he led a life of continual movement from one temporary home to another, chiefly in Italy, France, Germany and Scandinavia (he also visited North Africa and Spain in the years immediately before the First World War). In fact he might plausibly be described as the first truly ‘European’ poet, in the sense that so many different national heritages, histories and literatures, so many places, customs and languages, occupied those parts of his nature that in other writers are occupied by a single nation. *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge) exemplifies this on almost every page: Rilke's understanding of art, of history, of life, does not inhabit a national pigeonhole.

Rilke never had much money of his own, and frequently lived as the guest of aristocratic admirers and well-to-do patrons – to the end of his life, he was fortunate in attracting the generosity of those who understood and valued his gift and took pleasure in being associated with it. His mother Sophie, known to the family as Phia, was from an upper-middle-class background, high enough on the social scale to have hopes of access to aristocratic circles, and quite likely it is to her that we can trace not only his devotion to poetry (she read it to him from infancy) but also his apparent sense that the more refined

sensibility of the nobility was his natural element. What we like to call the real world, however, refused to leave him undisturbed in that cosy belief. In late November 1915, shortly before his fortieth birthday, he was called up for military service, and in January 1916 began three weeks of basic training in the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an agonizing period for Rilke, which ended with his transfer to the Imperial War Archives in Vienna, where he worked until his discharge from the armed forces that June. With the exception of this distant brush with the terrible reality of his age, Rilke could fairly be said to have led a charmed life, and in the post-war world he presently found himself in a position to return permanently to that life, in the modest and secluded Swiss château of Muzot, where he was installed by Werner Reinhart, a wealthy businessman and patron. There, remote from the horrors of the world, Rilke spent his final years, until his death from leukaemia in December 1926.

Throughout his adult years, Rilke was supremely conscious of his calling as a poet. His decisions concerning the conduct of his life were always made with a thought to what circumstances would be most conducive to his writing. He was not yet nineteen when he published his first collection, *Leben und Lieder* (Life and Songs). His earliest work shared in the excessive sweetness that could mar any of the arts in the fin-de-siècle period, but with *Das Buch der Bilder* (The Book of Images, 1902) and *Das Stunden-Buch* (The Book of Hours, 1905) he had already found an individual voice, one in which intuitions of a divine immanence in the things of this world could be expressed with intoxicating rhythmic poignancy. By the time those two books had been published, however, Rilke's poetry had already taken the new direction that led to the first great achievement of his writing life, the two volumes of the *Neue Gedichte* (New Poems, 1907 and 1908). From the autumn of 1902, partly under the influence of Auguste Rodin, Rilke had developed a closer scrutiny of things, hoping to penetrate to an inner quiddity, to express or reveal their inmost being, and the poems he wrote out of this endeavour, close to two hundred in all, remain one of the great milestones of twentieth-century poetry in any language. In the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, already touched on, Rilke in due course created another.

Poetry was the stuff of life to him, and it is astonishing to think of him writing a novel at all, even an anti-novel such as *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* – so astonishing, in fact, that it may be aptest to think of the work as a long prose poem. But let us now turn to the roots of the *Notebooks*, which lie in his move to Paris in 1902, his experience of the city, and his adoption of a new approach to his work.

When Rilke arrived in Paris in late August 1902, he was a man of twenty-six with a wife and an eight-month-old daughter, both of whom remained behind in northern Germany. Two years before, he had accepted the invitation of the painter Heinrich Vogeler to repeat an earlier visit to Worpswede, a village near Bremen where the elder man was at the centre of an artists' colony of substantial and growing repute. Rilke delighted in the peaceful countryside, with its meadows and birches and old farmsteads, and at Vogeler's residence, the Barkenhoff, he warmed to a community of like-minded spirits that included the painters Fritz Mackensen, Fritz Overbeck, Hans am Ende and Otto Modersohn; Paula Becker, shortly to become Modersohn's second wife, whose name as an artist would in due course stand higher than that of all the others; and Paula's friend and ‘sister spirit’, the sculptor Clara Westhoff. In the autumn of 1900, Rilke seemed equally attracted to Paula and Clara, but after he learned in November of Paula's understanding with Modersohn he settled his interest on her fellow-artist. The following year, on 28 April, he and Clara married in Bremen; they spent much of 1901 together at a cottage they rented in nearby Westerwede, where Clara had her studio; and on 12 December their daughter, Ruth, was born. But January 1902 brought a harsh reminder of the weak economic foundation of their life. Rilke's family discontinued the allowance they had paid him when he was still a student, a sum on which he still depended. What he earned from newspaper reviewing would not keep him, and certainly not a family, nor would royalties or the anticipated income from his next collection of poems, *The Book of Images* (which was to be published in July); so he was glad to accept a commission to write a monograph on the Worpswede artists, and wrote it quickly that spring, before in June accepting another commission, this time to write on the great French

sculptor Auguste Rodin. Clara and Rilke had talked of relocating to Paris, and she for her part already knew Rodin, but in the event Clara did not find it feasible to move, and when Rilke set off on 26 August their thoughts of establishing working lives together in Paris had been shelved. He went alone.

His work went well. Within days he had paid a first call on Rodin, and he swiftly established an almost daily routine of studio visits; as the autumn deepened into winter, he found the monograph growing almost of its own accord, and his little book on Rodin, with which he declared himself satisfied, was speedily published, in March 1903. His poetry benefited as well, and the habit of looking fully and carefully at the subject in hand, which he had seen in Clara and which he now acquired from Rodin, bore fruit that autumn in the first of those poems he immediately recognized as 'new', one of the most frequently translated of all twentieth-century poems, 'The Panther'. In letters to Clara, he emphasized the possibilities for work, for a life dedicated to beauty and art, that Paris held for both of them. But, while his regained solitude was conducive to productivity and a sense of aesthetic purpose, the experience of the immense modern city, coming hard as it did upon rural tranquillity and the company of sensitive friends, was altogether terrible and unsettling.

In the following summer, back in Worpswede, he felt able fully to take stock of the impact of Paris upon him, in a letter of 18 July 1903 to his friend and former lover Lou Andreas-Salomé. 'Paris,' he told her, 'was an experience similar to that of the military school; just as in those days I was seized by an immense, fearful amazement, so now I was beset by horror of everything that is known, as if in some inexpressible confusion, as life.' The Paris he described to Lou was a place where the fear within him had grown rapidly. It was a city where people were merely 'transients among transients, abandoned and left to themselves in their own fates. One registered them as an impression, at most, and observed them with a calm, objective curiosity as if they were a new species of animal that had of necessity evolved special organs, organs of hunger and dying.' Among those he observed were the sick being transported to the Hôtel-Dieu, old women, beggars and a man with St Vitus's dance:

> And all these people, men and women, who are in some kind of transition, perhaps from madness to health, or perhaps into madness; all with something infinitely delicate in their faces, a love or knowledge or joy, as if it were a light burning just a little dimly and fitfully, which could surely grow bright once again if only someone were to see and help… But there is no one who does help.

Rilke's great terror was that he might become one of them:

> Often I had to say to myself out loud that I was not one of them, that I would once again leave that dreadful city where they would die; I said it to myself and was aware that it was no self-deception. And yet, when I realized that my clothes were becoming shabbier and heavier from week to week, and saw there was many a threadbare patch in them, I was alarmed, and felt that I would inevitably be numbered among the lost if some passer-by saw me and half unconsciously counted me as one of them.

Was he himself not as good as homeless? Was he himself not hungry too? Was he himself not poor?

The life we think of as Rilke's – a life of graceful acceptance of patronage freely and gladly given by a number of the wealthy or influential around Europe, from aristocrats to publishers, who themselves felt privileged to be connected with so extraordinary a writer – was one he had as yet barely begun to establish. At this still precarious point in his life, nothing could afford him the certainty that he might not indeed slip into anonymous poverty. Of course his horrified recoil from the street life of a crowded modern city, with its unstable or sick or down-and-out characters, has in it a fastidious hypersensitivity, a revulsion from what his age was learning to think of as the masses, that is not attractive. But the existential panic is overwhelming in its raw sincerity, and cries out to be taken seriously. At the time of his letter to Lou, Rilke did not yet know where that panic might lead him, and in particular despaired of being able to transform it into a *thing*, an enduring work:

> If I had been able to *make* something of the fears I had, if I had been able to fashion things out of them, things of true repose, which it is serenity and freedom to create and which, once they exist, are calming, all would have been well with me. But the fears that beset me every day roused up a hundred other fears, and, within me, they all rose up against me […]

What he had not yet been able to achieve, Rilke told Lou, was ‘to make things out of fear’.

It is here, in the disturbing experience of Paris, in the first sustained attempt to put that experience into words in this and other letters of summer 1903 to Lou Andreas-Salomé, and in the resolve to ‘make things out of fear’, that we find the seed that grew, over a six-year writing period from February 1904 to January 1910, into *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.

The novel is brimful of autobiographical detail, if by that we mean Rilke's own observations in Paris. The woman at the corner of the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, the man coming round the corner from the Champs-Elysées carrying a crutch, the woman pushing a barrel-organ on a hand-cart, the shopkeepers in the rue de Seine, the man selling cauliflowers from a barrow of vegetables, the patients waiting at the Salpêtrière, the women feeding the birds, the man with St Vitus's dance, and (in the second part of the novel, where people seen on the streets of Paris make far fewer appearances) the blind newspaper-seller – all of these will have been seen by Rilke, and some can be discovered in his letters. But once they have been woven into the fabric of the text, their effect ceases to seem merely autobiographical. Instead, the paraded ‘transients’, simply by lacking their names and identities, have the effect of shading Rilke's named narrator with colourlessness. An illuminating comparison might be made with the unnamed convalescent who narrates Edgar Allan Poe's story ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (1840). The man is defined by the ‘clerks’ and ‘pick-pockets’ and ‘gamblers’, the ‘street beggars’ and ‘ghastly invalids’ and ‘modest young girls’, the ‘drunkards’ and ‘organ-grinders’ and ‘exhausted laborers’ he observes on the city streets – defined (for his existence consists in observing) but not individuated (for he himself remains shadowy and indistinct). Rilke's Malte, like Poe's narrator, is an observer, and the more we are shown the people and things that he sees, the more we become conscious that Malte himself is a blank screen on to which images can be projected, rather than a sharply contoured and richly realized individual.

As the comparison with Poe's story implies, there is a literary dimension to Rilke's purely personal response to the city, a dimension that involves literary responses to the modern city. The experience of cities so populous as to render individuality an anachronistic anomaly

was still relatively novel in Rilke's time. His response to it, as transmuted into the *Notebooks*, takes its place in a fictional lineage that passes from Poe and Charles Dickens through Knut Hamsun and Andrei Bely to James Joyce and Alfred Döblin, writers who all sought to make sense, in very different ways, of the metropolitan onslaught on the self. As cities sprawled, and the crowds inhabiting them became larger, and the technology (first railways and tramcars, then automobiles) became louder and more unavoidable, it could seem that human values and human contact were being stifled. The narrator of Hamsun's *Hunger* (1890), who spends the duration of the novel wandering the streets of Christiania (Oslo), admittedly bears a family resemblance to Fyodor Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*, 1866), but what is more striking is the frantic, pressured, often panic-stricken nature of his responses to the people with whom he comes into contact. This man exhibits, in every nervous recoil, in every frenetic surge of hope, the sense of dislocation and alienation that was coming to be widely recognized as a characteristic response to the experience of anonymity in the crowded modern city. In its exploration of this traumatic state, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* is very much a novel of its time – of the Age of the Masses.

But if the oppressive experience of the city, and his determination to take his fear and make something lasting of it, were the trigger for Rilke's writing, there was more than mere autobiography, and more too than mere ‘autotherapy’ (Donald Prater's apt word), in his conception of his main character.

Rilke had developed an informed and steadily deepening interest in Scandinavia generally, and Denmark in particular. The philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard was important to him, and the Danish novelists Jens Peter Jacobsen (1847–1885) and Herman Bang (1857–1912) meant a great deal in his personal canon; Rilke's idea of dying ‘one's own death’ was perhaps sparked by a passage in Jacobsen's *Fru Marie Grubbe* (1876), while Malte's mother, with her fear of needles, has been found to owe a debt to the mother in Herman Bang's novel *The White House* (1898), which Rilke had reviewed in 1902. In the Swedish writer Ellen Key (1849–1926), Rilke found an advocate of his own work who was able to organize invitations to Denmark and Sweden,

with the result that from 1904 onwards he had increasing opportunity to steep himself in the spirit of northern Europe. His Danish narrator, complete with his family ramifications and his recounting of the death of King Christian IV, emerged from a real engagement with the literature and history of Scandinavia: in that sense, Rilke's protagonist is a response to the world outside rather than the world within. Though the *Notebooks* is a work with autobiographical dimensions, its gaze is consistently on other people, other things, other experiences.

Moreover, in long conversations in 1925 with his French translator, Maurice Betz, Rilke left no doubt of his abiding interest in a Norwegian writer of no especial fame, Sigbjørn Obstfelder (1866–1900), whose *Diary of a Priest* he had read in 1901 and whose posthumous works in German translation he had reviewed enthusiastically in November 1904, when his own work on the *Notebooks* was begun but not yet far advanced. The journal form of both books may have confirmed Rilke in his instinct to assemble a collage rather than a conventional narrative (though a vogue for writing the 'papers' of fictional characters was observable around the turn of the nineteenth century in other writers Rilke was probably reading, from Hamsun and André Gide to Ricarda Huch and Robert Walser); in addition, Obstfelder had died young, and in Paris, and had 'probably not expressed the full greatness of his noble, troubled soul in his work', as Rilke put it to Betz, and this evidently appealed to Rilke's sense of the adverse terms on which his own protagonist existed with the world. In the air of crisis that is fundamental to Malte's presence throughout the *Notebooks*, and furthermore his illness, his consciousness of being the last of his line (his phrase 'the breaking of the helmet', after the perforation of his father's heart, pages 101–3, recalls an ancient custom when a great family became extinct), and his self-consciously exquisite taste and rarefied reading, Rilke's Dane of course shares traits with fictional heroes of the fin-de-siècle decadence, such as Joris-Karl Huysmans's des Esseintes (*Against Nature*, 1884). Here too we are in the presence of a literary craft carefully deliberated and wrought, and Malte's passing remarks on a Charles Baudelaire or Gustave Flaubert only serve to remind us that Rilke was steadily thinking through the fundamentals of his vocation.

Perhaps it would be unnecessary to stress that *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* is a fiction that goes beyond the autobiographical, were it not that Rilke himself, in comments that allowed Malte the near-autonomous existence of an alter ego, gave frequent reminders that self and fiction are intricately interwoven. Maurice Betz reported him as saying:

> The unity I needed was no longer that of a poem but that of a personality which, in all its infinite diversity, had to come to life, from start to finish. The rhythm that forced itself upon me was chopped and broken, and I was drawn in many an unforeseen direction. One moment it was childhood memories, the next Paris, then the atmosphere of Denmark, then images that seemed to have no connection with my own self. At times I well nigh merged into Malte, at others I lost him from sight: if I made a journey, he seemed out of my range, but once I returned to Paris I found him again, more present than ever. Many pages I wrote without knowing what would come of them. Some were letters, others notes, fragments of a diary, prose poems. Despite the density of this prose, which was quite new to me, I was forever groping about or heading off on a seemingly never-ending march into the dark. But in the end it turned out that he really was there, my companion of so many nights, my friend and confidant. He had accompanied me to Venice, he had wandered the streets of Paris as I had, he had stood with me in the shadow of Les Alyscamps, together we had met the shepherd at Les Baux. In Copenhagen I saw him on the Langelinie, we met in the yew avenues of Fredensborg, he recalled the heavily sweet scent of phlox in summer, his childhood was mine, he was my self and was someone else.

What ending can there be to such a book? The question is not only a technical one, though there is a sense in which this compilation of everyday observations, historical reports, ghost stories, childhood recollections and so on need not obviously come to a conclusion. The question is also teleological. To end the existence of so intimate an alter ego would be like ending one's own existence. Goethe had solved this problem, in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), by overlapping his own experience and that of an acquaintance who had committed suicide: this gave him the ending he needed, an ending which might conventionally be thought inevitable. Rilke's Malte has been in a state of crisis since the beginning of the *Notebooks*, and, while it is true that the second part exposes him less to the everyday horrors of the detested city, it is striking that the stories he now sees a meaning in retelling – the death of Charles the Bold, the sermons and recantation of Pope John XXII – draw their power to fascinate from grim physical facts of mortality and equally grim metaphysical dispute over life

beyond the mortal. In the first part, the hard dying of Chamberlain Brigge was offset by a relaxed approach to familiar spirits of the dead, and by a steady, quasi-musical movement towards celebration of the senses and of love in the *Dame à la licorne* tapestries; in the second part, the triumph of love is balanced against the triumph of death, and it is by no means clear which will emerge as the more persuasive, more enduring triumph.

Rilke discarded two versions of an ending that described Leo Tolstoy, whom he had visited in Russia together with Lou Andreas-Salomé. These endings confront Tolstoy's fear of death, which had powerfully affected Rilke, as this extract from the second of his drafts demonstrates:

> What if he were to have been right, in all his fear of death, because he would now end his life as one who was interrupted at the very beginning? In that house there was not one room where he had not been afraid of dying. […] And with an unparalleled horror he realized that what was within him was scarcely begun; that, if he were to die now, he would not be capable of living in the afterlife; that they would be ashamed, over there, of his rudimentary soul, and would hide it away in eternity like a premature baby.

To discard writing of this order was surely a wise decision, not only because within itself it is ungenerous in tone, in a way that very little else is ever ungenerous in Rilke, but also because it offers no sense of an ending to the complex of experiences which we have been offered in the name of Malte. In the event, Rilke had it both ways, choosing both love and death. His apparent instinct that the triumph of love should be the greater, an instinct that places him on the side of life and accords well with many passages throughout the *Notebooks*, was difficult to bring to narrative fruition (since this most plotless of anti-novels conspicuously lacks any significant object of Malte's love – other, that is, than Malte himself). But in ending with his interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son, with ‘that unprecedented gesture that no one had ever seen before, that gesture of supplication with which he threw himself at their feet, imploring them not to show love’ (Rodin's sculpture shows the prodigal on his knees), Rilke contrived to give a new dimension to the self-abnegation he had admired in (women) lovers throughout his text. To set ourselves aside from the love of those who suppose themselves closest

to us (so the contention seems to run) is to place ourselves in a position of readiness for a higher love, and by extension a position of acquiescence in death.

This stance, which relinquishes love as it is conventionally known in the home and in the family (and so implicitly vindicates Rilke in the conduct of a life devoted to his art), prompted Ellen Key to write in her review of the *Notebooks*, in October 1910, that 'a spiritual condition such as Brigge's bears within it suffering so great that it occasions suffering in others'. The American writer William Gass wrote more bluntly in 1984: '*The Notebooks*' last words make a dismal sound.' It may be so. But it is appealing to think that his story of the prodigal was the closest Rilke could approach to a way forward out of the maze of irreconcilables he had written into being. I like to imagine that when Rilke arrived in Leipzig in January 1910, with the manuscript in his luggage and a growing sense of having at last completed an immense and difficult labour that had weighed upon him cruelly for years, and was welcomed into the warm hospitality of his publisher Anton Kippenberg and his charming wife Katharina, and given for a fortnight the services of a typist in a quiet room in a turret of the Kippenberg home, he chose to accept that the *Notebooks* could quite simply end with that sentence: 'But He was not yet willing.' With no need for anything more. For a fiction, like a poem, is never finished, only abandoned. And 'not yet' leaves a window open for hope: it does not mean 'never'.

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*June 2008*

## *Notes to the Introduction*

The jubilant letters Rilke wrote in February 1922 following completion of the *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus* to (among others) Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis, Gertrud Ouckama Knoop (mother of the deceased Wera, to whose memory the *Sonnets* were dedicated), Anton Kippenberg (Rilke's publisher) and Lou Andreas-Salomé, are to be found in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe* (Wiesbaden:

Insel, 1950), pp. 740–55. His letter of 9 February 1922 to Kippenberg, in which he wrote of the ‘storm of spirit and heart’, is on p. 741. His sense of ‘taking dictation within’ was expressed in a letter (now held in the German Literature Center, Pittsburgh) of 7 February 1922 to Professor Jean Strohl, a Zurich friend; Rilke's phrase, ‘*une dictée intérieure*’, is quoted in Donald Prater's *A Ringing Glass* (see Further Reading), p. 347.

His very long letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé of 18 July 1903, from which several passages describing his recoil from city life in Paris and his sense of a need to ‘make things out of fear’ are quoted here, is in Rainer Maria Rilke/Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer (Zurich: Max Niehans Verlag, 1952), pp. 53–65.

His remarks to his French translator, Maurice Betz, were reported in Betz's *Rilke in Paris* (Zurich, 1958) and are quoted here from Hartmut Engelhardt's *Materialien* (see Further Reading), pp. 157–72. Two unused drafts of the opening of the novel, and two discarded versions of the Tolstoy ending, are included in Engelhardt's *Materialien*, pp. 55–73. The passage quoted in the Introduction is to be found on p. 72.

Donald Prater uses the word ‘autotherapy’ in *A Ringing Glass*, p. 173. Ellen Key's remarks on Malte were collected in her *Seelen und Werke* (Berlin, 1911) and are here quoted from Engelhardt's *Materialien*, p. 151. William Gass's remark on the closing words of the novel is in his introduction to Stephen Mitchell's translation (New York: Random House, 1983), p. xxiv.

# Further Reading

The most lucid and judicious critical biography in English remains Donald Prater's magnificent *A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). Another clear and informative biographical study is Ralph Freedman's *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

An invaluable explication, section by section, of the entire novel is offered by George C. Schoolfield in his succinct article '*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*', in Erika A. Metzger and Michael M. Metzger (eds.), *A Companion to the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2001), pp. 154–87.

Other articles in English that can be recommended include: Barbara Carvill, 'Homage á Cézanne: The blind news vendor in Rilke's novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*', and Joan E. Holmes, 'Rodin's *Prodigal Son* and Rilke's *Malte*', both in Frank Baron (ed.), *Rilke and the Visual Arts* (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1982), pp. 61–72 and 19–26; Idris Parry, 'Malte's Hand', *German Life and Letters*, NS 11 (1957), pp. 1–12; and Walter H. Sokel, 'The Devolution of the Self in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*', in Frank Baron, Ernest S. Dick and Warren R. Maurer (eds.), *Rilke: The Alchemy of Alienation* (Lawrence, Kansas: Regents Press of the University of Kansas, 1986), pp. 171–90.

For those with German, an indispensable source book is Hartmut Engelhardt (ed.), *Materialien zu Rainer Maria Rilke 'Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge'* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974). William Small's *Rilke-Kommentar zu den* '*Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*' (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983) is a detailed gloss that can usefully be read together with Schoolfield's.

# A Note on the Text

The numbering of sections in the novel, from 1 to 71, is not Rilke's, but was devised by the critic August Stahl in his *Rilke-Kommentar zu den 'Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge', zur erzählerischen Prosa, zu den essayistischen Schriften und zum dramatischen Werk* (Munich: Winkler, 1978). It was intended as a convenience, for ease of reference, and has been widely adopted in Rilke criticism. It should be emphasized that these numbers are not part of Rilke's understanding of the text; it was of course part of his conception that the text should read as if it were indeed notebooks, and numbered divisions would have ruined any such illusion. The only major break envisaged by Rilke comes between sections 38 and 39, where the gap left is perhaps intended to signal Malte's moving on from one notebook to the next.

Footnotes appearing in the body of the text are Rilke's own.

# THE NOTEBOOKS OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE

*11 September, rue Toullier*

[1] This, then, is where people come to live; I'd have thought it more of a place to die. I have been out. I saw hospitals. I saw one man who tottered and then collapsed. People gathered around him, which spared me the rest. I saw a pregnant woman. She was inching ponderously along by a high, sun-warmed wall, occasionally touching it as if seeking assurance that it was still there. Yes, it was still there. And behind the wall? I located it on my map: Maison d'Accouchement. Very well. She will be delivered of her child – that is where their skill lies. Further on, rue Saint-Jacques, a large building with a cupola. The map read: *Val-de-Grâce, hôpital militaire*. That I did not need to know, but it does no harm. The street began to smell from all sides. As far as I could distinguish the odours, it smelled of iodoform, the fat in which *pommes frites* are fried, and fear. Every city reeks in summer. Then I saw a building curiously blinded with cataracts, unmarked on the map, though the words over the door were still quite legible: *Asyle de nuit.*[1] Beside the entrance was the tariff of charges. I read it through. It was not expensive.

What else? a baby in a halted pram, plump, greenish, with quite a rash on its forehead. The rash was clearly healing and not painful. The child was asleep, its mouth hung open, it was breathing in iodoform, *pommes frites*, fear. That was simply the way it was. The main thing was to be living. That was the main thing.

[2] That I cannot give up sleeping with the window open! The trams rattle jangling through my room. Automobiles drive over me. A door slams. Somewhere a window smashes; I hear the laughter of the larger shards and the sniggering of the splinters. Then suddenly a thudding, muffled noise from the other direction, inside the house. Someone is climbing the stairs, coming, coming steadily, reaches my door, pauses for some time, then goes on. And once again the street. A girl shrieks: '*Ah, tais-toi, je ne veux plus!*' The tram races up all agitated, then rushes

on headlong. Somebody shouts. People are running, overtaking each other. A dog barks. What relief: a dog. Around dawn, a cock even crows, affording balm unlimited. Then quite abruptly I fall asleep.

[3] Those are the sounds I hear. But there is something more fearful still: the silence. I have a notion that, at big fires, a moment of extreme suspense can sometimes occur, when the jets of water slacken off, the firemen no longer climb, no one moves a muscle. Without a sound, a high black wall of masonry cants over up above, the fire blazing behind it, and, without a sound, leans, about to topple. Everyone stands waiting, shoulders tensed, faces drawn in around their eyes, for the terrible crash. That is how the silence is here.

[4] I am learning to see. Why, I cannot say, but all things enter more deeply into me; nor do the impressions remain at the level where they used to cease. There is a place within me of which I knew nothing. Now all things tend that way. I do not know what happens there.

Today, as I was writing a letter, I realized that I have been here for a mere three weeks. Three weeks in some other place – say, in the country – could seem a day; here they are years. I have resolved to write no more letters. Why should I inform anyone of the changes within me? If I am changing, I no longer remain the person I was, and if I become someone else, it follows that I have no friends or acquaintances. And to write to strangers, to people who do not know me, is quite out of the question.

[5] Have I mentioned already that I am learning to see? Yes, I am making a start. I have not made much progress yet, but I mean to make the most of my time.

To think, for example, that I have never consciously registered just how many faces there are. There are a great many people, but there are a great many more faces, for every person has several. There are people who wear the same face for years on end; naturally it shows signs of wear, it gets dirty, it cracks at the creases, it splays out like gloves worn on a journey. These are simple people, practising economies, and they do not change their face or even have it cleaned. It'll do fine, they insist, and who is to prove them wrong? The

question, of course, since they have several faces, is what they do with the others. They keep them for best: their children can wear them some day. But it has been known for their dogs to go out wearing them, too. And why not? A face is a face.

Other people are disconcertingly quick to change their faces, one after another, and they wear them out. At first they suppose they have enough to last for ever, but hardly have they reached forty when they come to the last of them. There is of course a tragic side to this. They are not used to looking after their faces; the last is worn out in a week, holed and paper-thin in numerous places, and little by little the underlay shows through, the non-face, and they go about wearing that.

But that woman, that woman: she was wholly immersed within herself, bowed forward, head in hands. It was at the corner of the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs. The moment I saw her, I began to tread softly. The poor should not be disturbed when they are lost in thought. The thing they are trying to think of may yet come to them.

The street was too deserted, its emptiness was wearied with itself and pulled out the footfall from under my feet and banged it about as if it were knocking a wooden clog. The woman was startled and started out of herself too rapidly and roughly, so that her face was left in her hands. I could see it lying in them, the hollow mould of it. It cost me an indescribable effort to keep my gaze on those hands and not look at what had been torn from out of them. I was appalled to see the inside of the facial mask, but I was far more terrified still of seeing a head bare and stripped of its face.

[6] I am afraid. It is essential to do something about your fear once you are afraid. It would be odious to fall ill here, and, if anyone thought of taking me to the Hôtel-Dieu, I should indubitably die there. The Hôtel is very pleasant, and extremely popular. It is hardly possible to view the façade of the cathedral of Paris[2] without the risk of being run over by one of the many vehicles speeding as fast as they can go across the square to the Hôtel. These little omnibuses ring their bells continuously, and even the Duc de Sagan would needs have his carriage halted if some person or other at death's door took it into his

head that he had to get to God's own Hôtel. The dying will have their way, and the whole of Paris stops in its tracks if Madame Legrand, the *brocanteuse* in the rue des Martyrs, comes to this *Cité* square. It is worth noting that these fiendish little vehicles have frosted-glass windows that excite the imagination quite extraordinarily: it takes no more than a concierge's powers to picture the most extravagant agonies behind them, and if one is possessed of greater imaginative resources, and allows them to wander freely in other directions, there need be no limit to speculation. But I have also seen open hackney carriages arriving, hired cabs with the tops folded down, making the trip for the standard fare of two francs per hour of death throes.

[7] This excellent Hôtel goes back a long way. In the days of King Clovis,[3] people were already dying in some of the beds. Now they die in five hundred and fifty-nine of them. It is a factory production line, of course, and with such an immense output the quality of individual deaths may vary. But that is neither here nor there; it's quantity that counts. Who cares about a well-made death these days? No one. Even the rich, who could afford to die in well-appointed style, are lowering their standards and growing indifferent; the wish for a death of one's own is becoming ever more infrequent. Before long it will be just as uncommon as a life of one's own. Dear God, it is all there waiting for us; along we come and find a life ready to wear on the rail, and all we have to do is put it on. You wish to go, or have to, and that too is no trouble at all: *Voilà votre mort, monsieur*. You die as you happen to die; you die the death that comes with your illness (and now that we are familiar with every disease, we know too that the various terminal issues are peculiar to those diseases and not to the people who suffer from them; the sick person has nothing to do, as it were).

In sanatoriums, where people die so readily and with so much gratitude towards their doctors and nurses, you die one of the deaths available at the institution, and are approved of accordingly. If, however, you die at home, the natural choice is that courteous death the genteel classes die, which initiates, as it were, a first-class funeral with its beautiful sequence of funerary customs. The poor stand and gape at a house where these rites are in train. Their death is of course a banal one, with neither pomp nor circumstance. They are happy to

find one that more or less fits. They don't mind if it's a little too large, because they can always grow into it. But it's bothersome if the front won't do up or it's tight at the throat.

[8] If I think of home, where there is no one any more, I have a feeling that at one time it must have been different. In the old days, people knew (or perhaps had an intuition) that they bore their death within them like the stone within a fruit. Children had a small one within and adults a large one. Women bore theirs in the womb and men theirs in their breast. It was something people quite simply *had*, and the possession conferred a peculiar dignity, and a tranquil pride.

My grandfather, old Chamberlain Brigge, visibly bore his death about within him. And what a death: he was two months in the dying, and departed so loudly that he could be heard to the far-flung corners of the estate.

The rambling old manor house was too small for that death. It seemed as if additional wings would have to be built on, for the Chamberlain's body grew larger and larger, and he was forever demanding to be carried from one room to the next and falling into a fearful rage if the day was not yet done and no room remained in which he had not lain. At such times, he would be borne upstairs, accompanied by the entire retinue of servants, maids and dogs that were forever in attendance, and with the major-domo leading the way he would enter the room in which his sainted mother had passed away twenty-three years before, which had been kept precisely as she had left it and in which none but he was permitted to set foot. Now the whole mob burst in. The curtains were flung open, and the robust light of a summer afternoon strayed inquisitively among the wary, startled objects and turned awkwardly in the wide-eyed mirrors. And the people did the same. There were chambermaids so consumed by curiosity that they knew not what their hands were up to, young servants who gaped at everything, and elder staff who walked about trying to recall what they had been told concerning this locked room which they now had the good fortune to have entered.

The dogs in particular seemed immensely excited to find themselves in a room where everything had its smell. The great lean Afghan hounds ran to and fro behind the armchairs, worrying, criss-crossing

the chambers with lengthy, swaying dance-steps or rearing upright like heraldic hounds, resting their slender forepaws on the white and gold window sill and, their faces eager and alert and foreheads expectant, gazed out to right and left into the courtyard. Little dachshunds the colour of buff gloves sat in the broad, silk-upholstered chair by the window, wearing expressions suggesting all manner of thing was well, and a wire-haired grouchy-looking pointer rubbed his back on the edge of a gilt-legged table, setting the Sèvres cups on the painted tabletop atremble.

For the absent-minded, sleepy objects in that room it was indeed a frightful time. When books were opened carelessly by hasty hands, rose leaves would fall out and be trodden underfoot; small and fragile *objets* were snatched up, instantly broken and hurriedly set down again; damaged things were hidden behind the drapes or even tossed behind the gold mesh of the fire-screen; and now and then something would fall, with a muffled thud on the carpet or with a sharp crack on the hard parquet, smashing, breaking with a crashing snap or almost without a sound, for these objects, spoiled as they were, could not survive a fall.

And if anyone had thought to ask what the cause of it all was, what had brought down the fullness of destruction upon this anxiously guarded room, there could have been but one reply: death.

The death of Chamberlain Christoph Detlev Brigge at Ulsgaard. For there he lay, bulging massively out of his dark blue uniform, in the middle of the floor, and never moved an inch. The eyes in that great and unfamiliar face, which no one recognized any more, had fallen shut: he no longer saw what was happening. At first an attempt was made to lay him on the bed, but this he resisted, for he had hated beds ever since the first nights of his present illness. In any case, the bed up there proved too small, so there was no alternative but to lay him on the carpet as he was; for he refused to go downstairs again.

There he lay now, looking for all the world as if he had died. Dusk was settling, and the dogs had crept away one after another through the half-open door; only the wire-haired grouchy-looking one remained by his master, one of his thick, shaggy forepaws resting on Christoph Detlev's great grey hand. Most of the servants, too, were now outside in the white passageway, which was brighter than the

room; those who had remained in the room stole an occasional wary glance at the great darkening mound in the middle, and wished it were nothing worse than a large cloak slung over some rotten matter.

There was one other thing, though. There was a voice, a voice that no one had yet been familiar with seven weeks before, for it was not the voice of the Chamberlain. This voice was not that of Christoph Detlev. It was the voice of his death.

For many a day, Christoph Detlev's death had been living at Ulsgaard, talking to everyone and making demands – demanding to be carried, demanding the blue room or the little salon or the large drawing room, demanding the dogs, demanding laughter or talk or games or silence or all of it at once, demanding to see friends, women, people who were dead, demanding to die – making one demand after another, demanding and shouting.

For when night fell and the servants who were not in attendance, thoroughly worn out, tried to sleep, Christoph Detlev's death would shout out loud, and groan, and roar so long and uninterruptedly that the dogs, which began by howling too, fell silent and did not dare to lie down but remained standing on their long, slender, trembling legs, stricken with fear. And when the sound of that roar was heard in the village through the wide-open, silver Danish summer night, the people got up as they might in a thunderstorm, dressed and sat wordless around the lamp until it had passed. And women who were shortly to give birth were removed to the furthermost rooms, to beds in alcoves far from hearing; yet still they heard it, heard it as though the roaring were within their own bodies, and they begged to be allowed to get up as well, and came white and great with child to sit with the others with their smudged-out faces. And the cows that were calving at the time were helpless, and their young stillborn, and one calf had to be plucked forth dead, together with all the mother's entrails, when it absolutely would not come. And all the labourers did their work poorly, clean forgetting to bring in the hay because all day long they went in fear of the night, for the rising in terror and the long hours of waking had left them so exhausted that their thoughts were quite scattered. And on Sunday, when they went to the peaceful white church, they prayed for an end to lords of the Ulsgaard manor: for this

one was a terrible master. And the minister voiced aloud from the pulpit what was in the thoughts and prayers of them all, for he too no longer enjoyed a night's rest, and had ceased to understand God. And the bell said it too, having found a fearsome rival who roared all night, a rival against whom it was powerless, even when the full weight of its metal was in its pealing. In fact, everyone said it; and one of the youngsters had dreamed he went to the manor and killed their lord and master with a pitchfork; and the others were so tense, worn out and agitated that they all listened attentively as he recounted his dream, speculating unconsciously whether he might in fact be up to doing the deed. And this was how people felt and spoke in the entire district, where only weeks before the Chamberlain had been held in such affection and compassion. But despite the talk, nothing changed. Christoph Detlev's death was installed at Ulsgaard and would not be hurried. It had come for a ten-week stay, and stay it did; and for the duration of that time it was more completely the lord and master than Christoph Detlev had ever been, like a king known for ever to history as ‘the Terrible’.

It was not the death of some wretch dying of a dropsy; it was the evil, regal death the Chamberlain had borne with him his whole life long, nurturing it from within himself. All those vast resources of pride and will and mastery that he had been unable to use up himself in his calmer days had passed over now into his death, into that death which now presided at Ulsgaard, throwing it all away.

Chamberlain Brigge would have given short shrift to anyone who had suggested he die some other death rather than this one. He died his terrible death.

[9] And if I think of others whose deaths I have witnessed or heard of, it is always the same: they have all died their own deaths. Those men who carried their death inside their armour, like a prisoner; those women who grew very old, and tiny, and then departed this life discreetly and magisterially, in an immense bed, as if on a stage, in the presence of their whole family, the servants and the dogs. Even the children, the very young ones too, did not die simply any child's death, but summoned up all their command and gave death to what they already were and what they would have been.

And what a rueful beauty was lent the women at times when they were pregnant and stood, hands involuntarily resting on their large bellies, in which there was a twofold fruit: a child, and a death. Did not the replete, almost nourishing smile on their faces, free of all else, come from their intermittent notion that both were growing?

[10] I have been doing something to ward off fear. I have sat up all night writing, and now I am as tired out as if I had taken a long walk through the Ulsgaard fields. The thought that all of that is no more and that strangers are living in the rambling old manor house is difficult to grasp. Perhaps at this very moment the maids are asleep in the white room under the gable, sleeping their heavy, moist slumbers from evening till morn.

And one has no one and nothing oneself, and one travels the world with a suitcase and a box of books and, when all's said and done, no curiosity at all. What kind of life is it, with neither house nor inherited things nor dogs? If only one had one's memories, at least. But then, who does? If only one had one's childhood – but it is as if it were buried deep. Perhaps one has to be old to have access to all of this. I suspect it may be good to be old.

[11] Today's was a fine autumn morning. I strolled through the Tuileries. Everything to the east, before the sun, was dazzling; but where the sunlight fell, the mist still hung like a grey curtain of light. Grey amid the grey, the statues took the sun in gardens still draped. Solitary flowers in the long beds rose up and said ‘Red’ in a timorous voice. Then a very tall, slim man came around the corner from the Champs-Elysées; he was carrying a crutch, not jammed in under his shoulder but lightly outstretched before him, and now and then he held it firmly upright, like a herald's staff. He could not repress a smile of pleasure, and smiled upon everything as he went, the sun, the trees. He walked as shyly as a child, but unusually light of step, brimful of memories of walking in younger days.

[12] What such a small moon can achieve. There are days when everything about one is luminous, light, scarcely defined in the bright air, and nonetheless distinct. Even the nearest of things have the

shades of distance upon them; they are remote, merely sketched in rather than bodied forth; and all things that do indeed partake of distance – the river, the bridges, the long streets and the prodigal squares – have absorbed the distance within themselves and are painted on to it as upon silk. Who can say what a light green vehicle on the Pont Neuf might be at such times, or some red bursting forth, or even a mere poster on the fire wall of a pearly-grey group of buildings. Everything is simplified, rendered into a few exact, bright planes like the face in a portrait by Manet. And nothing is of slight importance or irrelevance. The booksellers along the Quai open up their stalls, and the fresh or faded yellow of the books, the violet brown of the bindings, the more commanding green of an album: all of it is just right and has its worth and is a part of the whole and adds up into a fullness where nothing is lacking.

[13] Down below is the following group: a small hand-cart pushed by a woman; across the front of it, lengthwise, a barrel-organ. Behind it a child's wicker cot and a very young infant standing up in it on firm legs, contented in its bonnet, simply refusing to be sat down. From time to time, the woman turns the handle of the organ, at which the infant stands up straight in its cot once again, stamping, and a little girl in a green Sunday frock dances and shakes a tambourine up at the windows.

[14] I suppose I ought to embark on some work or other, now that I am learning to see. I am twenty-eight, and next to nothing has happened in my life. To recapitulate: I have written a study of Carpaccio, which is poor; a play titled *Marriage*, which deploys ambiguities in the attempt to prove a truthless point; and verses. Ah, but verses are so paltry an achievement if they are written early in life. One should wait, and gather meaning and sweetness a whole life long, a long life if possible, and then, at the very end, one might perhaps be able to write ten good lines. For verses are not feelings, as people imagine – those one has early enough; they are experiences. In order to write a single line, one must see a great many cities, people and things, have an understanding of animals, sense how it is to be a bird in flight, and know the manner in which the little flowers open every morning. In

one's mind there must be regions unknown, meetings unexpected and long-anticipated partings, to which one can cast back one's thoughts – childhood days that still retain their mystery, parents inevitably hurt when one failed to grasp the pleasure they offered (and which another would have taken pleasure in), childhood illnesses beginning so strangely with so many profound and intractable transformations, days in peacefully secluded rooms and mornings beside the sea, and the sea itself, seas, nights on journeys that swept by on high and flew past filled with stars – and still it is not enough to be able to bring all this to mind. One must have memories of many nights of love, no two alike; of the screams of women in labour; and of pale, white, sleeping women in childbed, closing again. But one must also have been with the dying, have sat in a room with the dead with the window open and noises coming in at random. And it is not yet enough to have memories. One has to be able to forget them, if there are a great many, and one must have great patience, to wait for their return. For it is not the memories in themselves that are of consequence. Only when they are become the very blood within us, our every look and gesture, nameless and no longer distinguishable from our inmost self, only then, in the rarest of hours, can the first word of a poem arise in their midst and go out from among them.

All of my poems, however, originated in a different manner, and so they are not poems. – And when I wrote my play, what a mistake I made. Was I an imitator, and a fool, that I needed a third person to describe the fate of two people who were making things difficult for each other? How easily I fell into the trap. And I ought to have known that that third person who is present in every life and every literature, that ghost of a third who has never existed, is quite without meaning, and must be disavowed. He is one of the pretexts of Nature, who is always trying to distract humankind's prying attentions from her inmost secrets. He is the screen behind which a drama occurs. He is the noise that precedes the voiceless silence of true conflict. One has the impression that every dramatist to date has found it too difficult to speak of those two who are in fact the crux; the third, precisely because he is so unreal, is the unproblematic part of the task, and they have all been able to deal with him. From the very start of their plays, one senses their impatience to bring on this third person. They can

hardly wait. Once he makes his appearance, all is well. But how tedious it is if he is late: nothing whatsoever can happen without him, everything comes to a standstill, drags, hangs fire. And what if this dammed-up stasis were all that there was to the play? How would it be, my dear dramatist, and you, the audience, who know what life is, if he had gone missing, that popular man of the world or that toffee-nosed young man who fits every marriage like a skeleton key? What if, say, the devil had spirited him away? Let's say that is what happens. All of a sudden, one becomes aware of the unnatural emptiness of the theatres; they are walled up like dangerous holes – only the moths that inhabit the padded coping of the boxes reel on their giddy way through the parlous vacancy. The dramatists are no longer at ease in their smart parts of town. All the public watchdogs are snuffling far and wide on their behalf, seeking that one irreplaceable third person who *was* the plot.

Yet all the time they are living in the midst of other people, not those 'third' persons but the two of whom so incredibly much might be said, of whom nothing has ever yet been said although they suffer and do things and are altogether unable to cope.

It is ridiculous. Here I sit in my little room, I, Brigge, twenty-eight years old now and known to no one. Here I sit, and I am nothing. And yet, this nothing begins to think, and five flights up, on a grey Paris afternoon, thinks this:

Is it possible, it thinks, that we have neither seen nor perceived nor said anything real or of any importance yet? Is it possible that we have had thousands of years to look, ponder and record, and that we have let those thousands of years pass like a break at school, when one eats a sandwich and an apple?

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible that despite our inventions and progress, despite our culture, religion and knowledge of the world, we have remained on the surface of life? Is it possible that even that surface, which might still have been something, has been covered with an unbelievably boring material, leaving it looking like drawing-room furniture in the summer holidays.

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible that the entire history of the world has been

misunderstood? Is it possible that we have the past all wrong, because we have always spoken of its masses, exactly as if we were describing a great throng of people, rather than speaking of the one man they were all gathered around – because he was a stranger and was dying?

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible that we imagined we had to retrieve what had happened before we were born? Is it possible that every single one of us had to be reminded that he came from all those who had gone before, and that, knowing this, he would refuse to listen to others possessed of other knowledge?

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible that all these people have an exact knowledge of a past that never happened? Is it possible that all realities are nothing to them; that their life is winding down, connected to nothing at all, like a clock in an empty room –?

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible that one knows nothing of girls, who are nonetheless living? Is it possible that one says ‘women’, ‘children’, ‘boys’ without any suspicion (none whatsoever, despite all one's education) that these words have long since had no plural, but only countless singulars?

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible that there are people who say ‘God’ and suppose they mean something shared by all? – Only consider two schoolboys: one of them buys a knife, and the other buys an identical one on the same day. And a week later, they show each other the two knives, and they turn out to be only remotely similar, so differently have they been shaped by different hands. (Well, comments the mother of one, if you *will* go wearing everything out right away.) – Ah, yes: is it possible to believe we could have a god without making use of him?

Yes, it is possible. i

But if all of this is possible, if there is even so much as a glimmer of possibility to it, then something must be done, for pity's sake. Anyone – anyone who has had these disquieting thoughts – must make a start on some of the things that we have omitted to do; anyone at all, no matter if he is not the aptest to the task: the fact is, there is no one else. This young foreigner of no consequence, Brigge, will have to sit himself down, five flights up, and write, day and night: yes, that is

what it will come to – he will have to write.

[15] Twelve years old I must have been at the time, or at most thirteen. My father had taken me with him to Urnekloster. I do not know what prompted him to visit his father-in-law. For years, ever since my mother died, the two men had not seen each other, and my father had never himself set foot in the old manor house to which Count Brahe had retired late in life. In later times, I never saw that remarkable house again, for it passed into the possession of strangers after my grandfather's death. In the memories I have of it, shaped as they were by a child's understanding, it is not a building; to my mind, it consists of discrete parts: here a room, there a room, and here a stretch of passageway that does not connect these two rooms but is preserved in isolation, as a fragment. In this way, it is all dispersed within me: the rooms, the staircases that descended with such elaborate ceremony, and other tight, spiral stairs where one passed through the dark as the blood passes through the veins; the rooms in the towers, the balconies hung on high, the unexpected galleries on to which one was thrust by a little door – all of these things are still within me, and will never cease to be in me. It is as though the image of this house had fallen into me from a measureless height and shattered on the bottom-most part of myself.

All that has been preserved in my heart in its entirety, it seems to me, is the dining hall where we met for dinner every evening at seven. I never saw that room by day, and do not even recall whether it had any windows or what they looked out on; every time the family entered, the candles would be burning in the heavy chandeliers and within minutes one no longer knew what time of day it was and forgot everything one had seen outside. That lofty room, which I take to have been vaulted, was altogether overwhelming; with its darkness deepening on high, and its corners never fully lit, it drained one of images without giving any particular recompense in return. One sat there feeling void, utterly bereft of will, thought, desire or resistance. One was like an empty space. I remember that at first this annihilating state almost made me nauseous, bringing on a sort of seasickness which I could only dispel by stretching out a leg till I touched the knee of my father, who was sitting opposite me, with my foot. Only later

did it strike me that he seemed to understand, or at least put up with, this odd behaviour, despite the fact that our relationship was almost cool and a gesture of this kind normally had no place in it. At all events, it was that light touch that gave me the strength to get through those long meals. And after a few weeks of tense endurance, I had grown so used to the unsettling atmosphere of those gatherings, with the well-nigh endless adaptability of a child, that it no longer cost me any effort to sit at table for two hours; now, indeed, the time passed relatively quickly, because I kept myself occupied observing the others present.

My grandfather called us all ‘the family’, and I heard the others use this wholly arbitrary term as well. In fact these four people, though distantly related, did not belong together in any way. My uncle, who sat next to me, was an old man on whose tough, tanned face there were a number of black flecks which I learned he had got when a powder charge exploded; a sullen malcontent, he had retired from the army at the rank of major and now conducted alchemical experiments in some room in the manor that was unfamiliar to me, and moreover, as I heard the servants say, was in touch with a prison which supplied him with corpses once or twice a year, whereupon he would lock himself away with them for days and nights, dissecting the bodies and preparing them in some mysterious manner to resist decomposition. Opposite him sat Miss Mathilde Brahe. She was a person of uncertain age, a distant cousin of my mother's, and nothing was known about her except that she maintained an extremely vigorous correspondence with an Austrian spiritualist who called himself Baron Nolde and was completely under his thumb, never doing the smallest thing without first obtaining his approval or, rather, what amounted to his blessing. At that time, she was exceptionally sturdy of build, of a soft and buxom languor that seemed to have been negligently poured, as it were, into her loose, light-coloured dresses; her movements were weary and vague, and her eyes were forever watering. And nonetheless there was something in her that reminded me of my delicate and slender mother. The longer I looked at her, the more I perceived in her face all those fine and gentle features which I had never been able to remember clearly since my mother's death; only now, seeing Mathilde Brahe every day, did I know again what my

mother had looked like; indeed, it may have been that I knew it for the first time. Only now did the hundreds and hundreds of details come together within me, making an image of my dead mother, the image that accompanies me everywhere. Later I realized that all of the characteristics of my mother's features really were present in Miss Brahe's face – but it was as if some unfamiliar face had been interposed among them, thrusting them apart, distorting them, leaving them unrelated to each other.

Beside this lady sat the little son of a cousin, a boy about my own age, but smaller and more weakly. His slender, pale neck rose from a pleated ruff and disappeared beneath a long chin. His lips were thin and shut tight, and his nostrils trembled slightly. He could move only one of his beautiful dark brown eyes; from time to time, it gazed across at me, tranquil and melancholy, while the other always remained fixed in the same direction, as if it had been sold and there were no longer any point in considering it.

At the head of the table stood my grandfather's enormous armchair, which a servant with nothing else to do pushed in beneath him, and in which the old man took up very little room. He was an imperious old gentleman, hard of hearing, and some people addressed him as ‘Your Excellency’ or ‘Marshal’, while others styled him ‘General’. And undoubtedly he possessed all the distinction that went with these titles; but it had been so long since he had held any position that using them no longer made much sense. For myself, I had the sense that no particular name could attach to his personality, which at times was so keen and yet was forever losing its focus. I could never bring myself to call him Grandfather, although on occasion he could be friendly to me and would even call me to him, trying to say my name in a playful way. The fact was that the entire family was overawed and intimidated by the Count, and little Erik was the only one to enjoy any kind of intimacy with the ancient master of the house; at times his one good eye would flash a look of accord, which Grandfather returned with an equal swiftness; and sometimes on the long afternoons they could be seen appearing at the end of the long gallery and walking hand in hand past the dark old portraits, not saying a word but evidently communicating in some other way.

I spent most of the day in the grounds or out in the beech forests or

on the heath. As good fortune would have it, there were dogs at Urnekloster to keep me company; and there would be a tenant's house or dairy croft here and there, where I could get milk and bread and fruit. I think I took a fairly carefree pleasure in my freedom, without letting the thought of the evening gatherings frighten me, at least for the next week or so. I spoke to hardly anyone, for I delighted in solitude; the dogs were the only ones I had the odd brief conversation with, and we understood each other very well. Taciturnity ran in the family, anyway; I was used to it from my father, and it did not surprise me that next to nothing was said at dinner.

In the first few days after we arrived, however, Mathilde Brahe was distinctly talkative. She asked my father about old acquaintances in foreign cities, she brought impressions of far-off times back to mind, and she moved herself to tears by recalling women friends who had died and a certain young man who, she intimated, had been in love with her, though she had felt unable to return his fervent, hopeless affections. My father listened politely, inclining his head now and then in agreement and offering only the essential minimum by way of reply. The Count, at the head of the table, had a constant smile on his down-turned lips; his face seemed larger than usual, as if he were wearing a mask. From time to time, he put in a word himself, addressing no one in particular in a voice which, though very soft, could nonetheless be heard in the whole dining hall. It had something of the regular, unconcerned tocking of a clock; the silence around it seemed to have an empty resonance all of its own, the same for every syllable.

Count Brahe intended a particular courtesy towards my father in talking of his late wife, my mother. He called her Countess Sibylle, and whenever he finished a sentence it was as if he were enquiring after her. Indeed, for some unaccountable reason I felt he was referring to some very young girl dressed in white who might enter the room at any moment. I heard him speak in the same tone of ‘our little Anna Sophie’. And one day, when I asked about this young lady of whom Grandfather seemed so especially fond, I found that he was talking of the daughter of High Chancellor Conrad Reventlow, the second, morganatic wife of Frederick IV, who had been reposing at Roskilde for almost a hundred and fifty years.[4] The passage of time

was wholly immaterial to him, death was a minor incident which he completely ignored, and people whom he had once lodged in his memory continued to exist, regardless of whether they had passed away. Some years later, after the old gentleman had died, he was described as having perceived the future as present too, with the selfsame wilfulness. On one occasion, he reportedly spoke to one young woman of her sons, and in particular the travels of one of these sons, while all the time the young woman, then in the third month of her first pregnancy, sat there almost fainting with fright and dismay as the old man talked relentlessly on.

But it all began with my laughing. To be exact, I laughed out loud and could not stop. That evening, Mathilde Brahe did not appear for dinner. The old and almost completely blind servant nonetheless proffered the dish when he came to her place at table. For a short while he stood there like that, then moved on with an air of satisfied dignity, as if everything were in order. I observed the scene, and at that moment, as I watched, it did not strike me as funny. But a little later, as I had just taken a mouthful of food, the laughter rose so fast within me, to my head, that I swallowed the wrong way and caused a commotion. And although I found the situation embarrassing, although I did everything I could to remain serious, the convulsive laughter kept on returning and had me totally in its power.

My father, as if to cover for my conduct, enquired in his full but muted tones: ‘Is Mathilde unwell?’ Grandfather smiled in that way of his and replied with a comment – to which, being taken up with myself, I paid no attention – roughly to this effect: No, she simply does not wish to meet Christine. Nor did I grasp that it was in response to these words that my neighbour, the tanned major, rose and, with an indistinct murmur of excuses and a bow to the master of the house, left the room. I did notice, however, that he turned once more in the doorway, behind the Count's back, and beckoned and nodded to little Erik and suddenly, to my great astonishment, signalled to me as well, as if he wanted us to follow him. I was so surprised that my laughter ceased to trouble me. For the rest, I paid no further attention to the major; I found him unpleasant, and I noted that little Erik took no notice of him either.

The meal dragged on as always, and we had just reached the dessert

when my eye was caught and held by a movement at the far end of the hall, where it was half dark. A door which I had supposed was always locked, and which I had been told gave on to the mezzanine floor, had opened gradually, and now, as I looked on with an entirely unfamiliar feeling of curiosity and alarm, a slender woman in a light-coloured dress stepped into the darkness of the doorway and slowly came towards us. I do not know if I made any movement or sound myself; the racket of a chair being overturned forced me to tear my eyes from the strange apparition, and I saw my father, who had leaped to his feet, walking towards the woman, his face as pale as death, his fists clenched at his sides. She herself, quite unmoved by this scene, continued coming towards us, pace by pace, and she was already close to where the Count was sitting when he abruptly rose and, seizing my father by the arm, drew him back to the table and held him there; while the strange woman moved on, slowly and unconcernedly, through the space thus vacated, pace by pace, through an indescribable silence in which the only sound was the tremulous clink of a glass somewhere or other, and vanished through a door in the opposite wall of the dining hall. At that moment, I noticed that it was little Erik who, with a deep bow, closed the door behind the stranger.

I was the only one who had remained sitting at the table; I had grown so heavy in my chair, I felt as if I would never be able to get up again by myself. For a time, I looked without seeing. Then my thoughts turned to my father, and I realized that the old man was still holding him by the arm. My father's face was angry and blood-red now, but Grandfather, whose fingers gripped my father's arm like a white claw, was smiling his mask-like smile. Then I heard him say something, and I made out every syllable but without understanding the meaning of his words. Nonetheless I must have registered them deep down inside, for one day about two years ago I found them buried in my memory, and since then I have retained them. He said: ‘You are impetuous, Chamberlain, and discourteous. Why do you not let people go about their business?’ ‘Who is that?’ my father yelled, interrupting. ‘Someone who has every right to be here. Not a stranger. Christine Brahe.’ – The same strangely attenuated silence ensued, and once again the glass began to tremble. But then my father abruptly broke loose and rushed out of the room.

I heard him pacing to and fro in his room all night long; for I could

not sleep either. But suddenly, as morning approached, I awoke from a drowsiness close to sleep and, with a horror that numbed me to the very heart, saw something white sitting on my bed. In my desperation I finally mustered the strength to hide my head under the covers, and there, for fear and helplessness, I began to cry. Suddenly there was a coolness and brightness above my crying eyes; I scrunched them tight shut over my tears, so that I would not have to see anything. But the voice that now spoke to me from very near brushed my face with a mild sweetness, and I recognized it as that of Miss Mathilde. Right away I felt soothed, though I allowed her to go on comforting me even after I had become quite calm; I did feel that this kindness was too effeminate, true, but I enjoyed it nonetheless and thought that I had somehow deserved it. 'Aunt,' I said at last, trying to distinguish in her tear-blurred face the features of my mother: 'Aunt, who was that lady?'

'Ah,' replied Miss Brahe, with a sigh that struck me as comical, 'an unhappy person, my child, an unhappy person.'

That morning, I noticed a number of servants busy packing in one of the rooms. I assumed this meant we were leaving, and I found it only natural that we should do so. Perhaps it was indeed my father's intention. I never found out what moved him to stay on at Urnekloster after that evening. But the fact was that we did not leave. We remained another eight or nine weeks in that house, enduring its oppressive strangeness, and we saw Christine Brahe on three further occasions.

At that time, I knew nothing of her story. I did not know that she had died a long, long time before while giving birth to her second child, a boy, who was destined for a fearful, cruel life – I did not know that she was dead. But my father knew it. Did he mean to force himself, a passionate temperament with a strong sense of clarity and logic, to retain his composure as he saw out this adventure, without asking questions? I observed how he struggled with himself, without understanding what it meant; I saw that he mastered himself in the end, without grasping how he did it.

It was on the occasion when we last saw Christine Brahe. This time Miss Mathilde had made her appearance for dinner too; but she was not her usual self. As in the early days after our arrival, she talked

incessantly, confused and unstructured talk, and was physically restless, feeling some need to be forever adjusting her hair or her dress – till she abruptly leaped to her feet with a shrill wail and was gone.

At the same moment, my eyes turned involuntarily to that one door, and there was Christine Brahe, entering the room. The major, beside me, made a short, agitated movement that ran on palpably through my own body, but he evidently no longer had the strength to rise. His tanned old flecked face turned from one to another, his mouth hung open, and his tongue worked behind his decayed teeth; and then all at once his face was not there, and his grey head lay on the table, and his arms lay over and under his head as if they were broken, and from somewhere a flecked and withered hand crept out, trembling.

And now, pace by pace, moving slowly like a sick woman, Christine Brahe walked past, through an indescribable silence in which the only sound was a single whimper like that of an old dog. But then, to the left by the large silver swan filled with narcissi, the great mask of the old man appeared, with its grey smile in place. He raised his wine glass towards my father. And now, just as Christine Brahe was passing behind his chair, I saw my father reach for his glass and, as if it were extremely heavy, raise it a hand's-breadth above the table.

And that same night we left.

*Bibliothéque Nationale*

[16] I am sitting here reading a poet.[5] There are a large number of people in the room, but one is unaware of them. They are in the books. At times they move among the pages, like sleepers turning over between two dreams. Ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading. Why are they not always like this? You can go up to one and touch him lightly: he feels nothing. And if you happen to jostle against the next man as you get up, and apologize, he nods in the direction of your voice, with his face turned towards you but not seeing you, and his hair is like the hair of someone sleeping. How pleasant that is. And I am sitting here and have a poet. What good fortune. There are some three hundred people in the room right now, all reading; but it is not possible that every one of them has a poet. (God knows what they do have.) There are not so many as three hundred poets. But just consider

this fate, that I, perhaps the sorriest of all these readers, and a foreigner, have a poet. Although I am poor. Although the suit I wear every day is starting to show signs of wear, although my shoes might be faulted in one way or another. True, my collar is clean, and so are my undergarments, and just as I am I might go into any café, even one of those on the great boulevards, and reach into a platter of pastries and help myself. No one would think anything of it, no one would shout at me or show me the door, for after all my hand bespeaks gentility and is washed four or five times a day. There is no dirt under my fingernails, there are no ink stains on my forefinger, and my wrists in particular are beyond reproach. It is a well-known fact that the poor do not wash that far up. So there are conclusions to be drawn from the cleanliness of my wrists. And people draw them. They draw them in shops. But nevertheless there are those, say in the boulevard Saint-Michel or the rue Racine, who are not deceived and are unimpressed by my wrists. They give me one look and they know. They know that really I am one of them, and am only play-acting a little. This is carnival season, after all. And they don't want to spoil my fun; but they grin and wink at each other when no one is looking. For the rest, they treat me as a gentleman. If someone else happens to be around, they even put on a servile show, behaving as if I were wearing furs and my carriage were in attendance. Now and then I tip them two sous, trembling in case they refuse them; but they accept them. And all would be well if they hadn't briefly exchanged their grins and winks again. Who are these people? What do they expect of me? Do they lie in wait? How do they recognize me? It is true that my beard looks a little unkempt, and it bears a very distant resemblance to their own sickly, old, faded beards, which have always made an impression on me. But do I not have the right to neglect my beard? Many a busy man does just that, and it never occurs to a soul to number them among the untouchables[6] on that account. For it is clear to me that untouchables is what they are, not mere beggars; no, they really are not beggars, one must make distinctions. They are human refuse, the husks of men, spat out by fate. Moist with the spittle of fate, they cling to a wall, a lamp-post, a Morris column, or they dribble slowly down the street, leaving a dark, dirty trail behind them. What on earth did that old woman want of me, who had crept out of some hole carrying

a bedside-table drawer with a few buttons and needles rolling about in it? Why did she keep walking at my side, watching me? As if she were trying to recognize me with those bleary eyes of hers, which looked as if someone with a disease had spat green phlegm under her bloody eyelids. And what possessed that little grey woman to stand beside me for a full quarter of an hour in front of a shop window, showing me some long old pencil thrust out infinitely slowly from her sorry, clenched hands? I affected to be studying the window display and to have noticed nothing. But she knew that I had seen her, she knew that I was standing there wondering what she was doing. For I was perfectly aware that it wasn't about the pencil: I sensed that it was a signal, a sign for the initiated, a sign the untouchables recognize; I felt intuitively that she was prompting me to go somewhere or do something. And the strangest thing of all was that I could not shake off the feeling that there was some kind of agreement between us, that the signal was part of an assignation, and that essentially I ought to have been expecting the scene to occur.

That was two weeks ago. Now, however, hardly a day goes by without some similar encounter, not only at dusk: in broad daylight, in the busiest of streets, a little man or an old woman will suddenly appear, nod, show me something and disappear again, as though all that was needed had now been attended to. It is possible that one day they will even venture as far as my room; they no doubt know where I live, and they'll have their ways of getting past the concierge. But here, my dears, here I am safe from you. One needs a special card to gain access to the reading room. I do have a card, and with it an advantage over you. I walk the streets somewhat warily, as may be imagined, but at length there I stand, at a glass door, open it as if I were at home, show my card at the next door (just as you show me your things, but with the difference that here they understand and know what I mean) – and then I am among these books, beyond your reach as though I were dead, and sit here reading a poet.

You do not know what a poet is? – Verlaine… Nothing? No memory of him? No. For you, he did not stand out among those you knew? You make no distinctions, I know. But it is another poet I am reading, one who does not live in Paris, quite another poet. One who has a quiet house in the mountains. He rings like a bell in clear air. A happy poet,

who tells of his window and of the glass doors of his bookcase, which offer a pensive reflection of the solitary, dearly loved distance. Of all poets, this is the one I should have wanted to become; for he knows so very much about girls and I too would have known a lot about them. He knows about girls who lived a hundred years ago; it does not matter that they are dead, for he knows everything. And that is the main thing. He utters their names, those soft names written in a fine hand with old-fashioned loops in the long letters, and the grown-up names of their older girl friends, in which a little of their fate sounds through, a little disillusionment and death. Perhaps in some pigeonhole of his mahogany bureau he has their faded letters and leaves from their diaries, noting birthdays, summer outings, birthdays. Or it may be that in the pot-bellied chest of drawers to the rear of his bedroom there is a drawer where their spring clothes are kept: white dresses that were worn at Easter for the first time, dresses of tufted tulle which were really meant for summer, but they couldn't wait. Oh, what a happy fate, to sit in the silent room of an ancestral house among the quiet things in their abiding places, and to hear the tits sounding their first notes outside in the green and sun-shot garden, and away in the distance the village clock. To sit and gaze upon a warm strip of afternoon sunlight and to know a great deal about girls from the past and to be a poet. And to think that I too might have become such a poet if I had been able to live somewhere, anywhere on earth, in one of the many closed-up country houses that no one looks after. I would have required only one room (the sunny room under the gables). There I would have lived with my old things, my family portraits, my books. And I would have had an armchair and flowers and dogs and a stout stick for the stony paths. And nothing else. Nothing but a book bound in yellowish, ivory-coloured leather with old-style floral endpapers: in this I would have written. I would have written a great deal, for I would have had a great many thoughts and memories of a great many people.

But things turned out differently, and God no doubt knows why. My old furniture is rotting in a barn where I was permitted to store it, and as for myself, dear God, I don't have a roof over my head and it is raining into my eyes.

[17] Occasionally I stroll by little shops, in the rue de Seine, for instance. The shops of antiques dealers, or small antiquarian booksellers, or dealers in engravings, the windows overcrowded. Not a soul ever enters these shops. Plainly they do no business. But if you look in, there they sit, reading, without a care; they take no thought for tomorrow, they are unconcerned about success, they have a dog sitting contentedly at their feet or a cat that makes the stillness all the profounder as it slinks along the rows of books as if wiping the names from the spines.

Ah, if that were only enough: at times I could wish to buy a crowded window like that for myself and to sit behind it with a dog for twenty years.

[18] It is good to say it out loud: 'Nothing happened.' Once more: 'Nothing happened.' Does that help at all?

The fact that my stove was filling the room with smoke again, and I had to go out, is really no catastrophe. If I feel cold and weary now, it is of no consequence. If I spent the whole day wandering the streets, it is nobody's fault but mine. I could just as well have sat in the Louvre. Or rather, no, I couldn't. There are people who go there to warm up. They sit on the velvet benches, and their feet are like big empty boots side by side on the heating vents. They are inordinately modest men, grateful if the attendants in their dark uniforms hung with numerous medals tolerate their presence. But when I go in, they grin. They grin and nod a little. And then, when I walk to and fro before the pictures, they keep their eyes on me, those eyes, always those bleared and runny eyes. So it was just as well that I did not go to the Louvre. I kept walking, on and on. Heaven only knows through how many cities, districts, cemeteries, bridges and alleyways. Somewhere I saw a man pushing a barrow of vegetables. He was calling out: '*Chou-fleur, chou-fleur!*' giving a markedly flat pronunciation to the *eu* of *fleur*. Beside him walked an ugly, angular woman who nudged him every so often. And whenever she nudged him, he made his call. At times he called out of his own accord, too, but those times didn't count, and he was promptly required to call out again because they had reached a building where there were regular customers. Have I already

mentioned that he was blind? No? Well, he was blind. He was blind and he was calling out. If I put it like that, I am falsifying it, I am omitting the barrow he was pushing, I'm affecting not to have noticed that he was calling out ‘Cauliflower’. But is that of the essence? And even if it were, doesn't the point of it lie in what the whole thing meant to me? I saw an old man who was blind and who was calling out. That was what I saw. Saw.

Will anyone believe that there are buildings such as these? No; they will say I am falsifying things again. This time it is the truth, with nothing omitted and of course nothing added. Where would I get anything to add? It's no secret that I am poor. People know. Buildings? Rather, to be exact, they were buildings that were no longer there. Buildings that had been torn down, top to bottom. What remained was the buildings that had stood next to them, the tall neighbouring structures. Evidently they were in danger of collapsing, now that nothing was left beside them; a complex scaffolding of long, tarred poles had been driven in at an angle between the rubble-covered waste ground and the exposed wall. I do not know if I have already said that it is that wall that is in my thoughts. It was not, as it were, the first wall of the existing buildings (as one would have supposed) but the last of those that were no longer there. You could see the inner side. You could see the walls of rooms on the various floors, with wallpaper still adhering, and here and there a fragment of the floor or ceiling. Next to the walls of the rooms, a dirty-white space ran down the entire wall, and through it, describing an inexpressibly disgusting, worm-like twist like that of the digestive tract, crept the wide-open, rust-speckled channel of the toilet plumbing. The course of the gas pipes for the lighting was visible in grey, dusty traces along the edge of the ceiling, and in places they had unexpectedly doubled round and run down the colourful walls and into some black hole that had been gashed uncaringly. Most unforgettable of all, though, were the walls themselves. The stubborn life of those rooms had refused to be stamped out. It was still there, it clung to the nails that were left, it stood on the remaining hand's-breadths of floor, it had crept under the corner joists where there was still a little of the interior. You could see it was in the paint, which it had gradually changed, from year to year: blue into mouldy green, green into grey, and grey into an old, stale,

putrescent white. But it was also in the fresher spots that had survived behind mirrors, pictures and wardrobes; for it had traced the outlines of these things, over and over, and had been with its spiders and dust even in these hidden-away places, now exposed to view. It was in every flayed strip, it was in the damp blisters at the lower edges of wallpaper, it flapped in the torn-off shreds, and it sweated out of nasty stains made long ago. And from these walls that had once been blue, green or yellow, walls framed by the lines that showed where partition walls had now been demolished, there issued the air of those lives, a stale, idle, fuggy air, not yet dispersed by any breeze. There they all hung, the midday mealtimes and the illnesses and the breath exhaled and the smoke of years and the sweat from armpits that makes clothing heavy and the flat reek of mouths and the clammy odour of perspiring feet. There they hung, the acrid tang of urine and the smell of burning soot and the steamy greyness of potatoes and the slick, heavy stink of old lard. The sweet, lingering smell of neglected infants hung there, and the whiff of children frightened of going to school, and the stuffiness of pubescent boys' beds. And a good deal more was admixed – vapours from down below in the street or trickles brought from above by the rain, which is not clean over cities. And still more had been wafted in by the weak, tame, domesticated breezes that always stay in the same street. And there was a lot more besides of unknown origin. I did say, did I not, that all the walls had been demolished but for the last –? It is that last wall that I have been talking of all along. You might assume I stood looking at it for a long time, but I swear I broke into a run the moment I recognized that wall. For that is the terrible thing: I recognized it. I recognize everything here, and that is why it enters into me so readily: it is at home in me.[7]

After all this I was feeling quite wearied, I might even say weakened, and it was too much for me to find him waiting for me, too. He was waiting in the little dairy shop where I was meaning to have a couple of fried eggs; I hadn't got round to eating all day, and was hungry. But I wasn't able to eat now, either; before the eggs were ready, I felt compelled to go back out into the streets, where a viscous tide of humanity flowed towards me. It was carnival time, and evening, and everyone was at leisure, out and about, rubbing up against each other. And their faces were filled with the light that fell

from the stands, and the laughter oozed from their mouths like pus from open wounds. The more impatiently I tried to make my way through, the more they laughed and thronged closer together. Somehow a woman's shawl got caught on me; I dragged her behind me, and people stopped me and laughed, and I felt I ought to laugh as well but I couldn't. Someone threw a handful of confetti in my eyes, and it stung like a whip. The people were wedged together at the street corners, jammed tight, with no way of moving on, merely swaying gently to and fro as if they were coupling as they stood. But although they were standing still while I raced about like a lunatic at the roadside, wherever there were gaps in the crowd, the truth of it was that they were moving and I never budged an inch. For nothing changed; whenever I looked up, I saw the selfsame buildings on the one side and the carnival stands on the other. Perhaps everyone really was stuck in one place, and it was only because I and they were giddy that everything seemed to be in a whirl. I had no time to think about it, I was heavy with perspiration, and a numbing pain was coursing through me, as if something too large were being borne upon my blood, distending the veins wherever it went. And all the while, I felt that the air had long since been exhausted and I was merely breathing in exhalations, which my lungs refused.

But now it is over; I have survived. I am sitting in my room, by the lamp; it is on the cold side, as I do not dare try the stove; what if it smoked and drove me out again? I sit here and think: if I were not poor, I would rent another room, a room with furniture not quite so worn, not so redolent of former tenants as this furniture is. At first I really found it hard to lay back my head on this armchair; there is a particular greasy, grey depression in the green upholstery, which looks as if any and every head would fit it. For a long time, I took the precaution of spreading a handkerchief under my hair, but now I am too tired to do it; I find it is all right as it is, and the slight hollow exactly fits the back of my head, as if made to measure. However, if I were not poor I would make a point of buying a good stove, and I would burn good clean wood from the mountains and not these wretched *têtes-de-moineau*,[8] the fumes of which inhibit the breathing and dizzy the head. And then I would need someone to keep the place tidy and tend the stove, as I require it, without making an uncouth

racket; for often, when I have to kneel at the stove for a quarter of an hour, poking it, the skin of my forehead taut with the glow of the coals, the heat full in my eyes, it costs me all the strength I have for the day, and, if I go out afterwards, of course people easily get the better of me. At times, when the street is crowded, I would take a hackney carriage and ride past; I would eat in a Duval[9] every day… I would not creep into the dairy shops any more… Would he have been in a Duval, I wonder? No. They wouldn't have let him wait for me there. They don't allow the dying in. The dying? Now I am sitting in my room, I can try to reflect calmly on what happened. It is good not to leave anything uncertain. So, I went in, and at first all I saw was that somebody else had taken the table I frequently occupied. I said a good-day in the direction of the little food bar, gave my order and sat at the next table. There I could sense him, though, even though he did not move. It was his very immobility that I sensed, and all of a sudden I knew what it meant. A link had been forged between us, and I realized that he was rigid with terror. I knew that he had been paralysed by terror – terror at something that was occurring within him. Perhaps a blood vessel was bursting, perhaps some poison he had long dreaded was at that very moment entering his heart, perhaps a great canker had burgeoned in his brain like a sun, changing the whole world for him. Making an indescribable effort, I forced myself to look over his way, still hoping it was all in my imagination. But then I was on my feet and rushing outside; for I had not been mistaken. There he sat in a thick, black winter coat, and his grey, strained face was buried deep in a woollen scarf. His mouth was closed as if it had fallen heavily shut, but it was impossible to tell whether his eyes still saw anything; they were behind misted, smoke-grey glasses that trembled slightly. His nostrils were flared, and the long hair over his wasted temples looked wilted as if subjected to too great a heat. His ears were long and sallow, with big shadows behind them. Yes, he knew he was now making his withdrawal from everything: not only from humankind. One moment more and all of it would have lost its meaning, and this table and the cup and the chair he clung hold of, all the everyday things, the familiar things, would have become incomprehensible, strange to him, and difficult. And so he sat, waiting for it to have happened, no longer offering any

resistance.

While I do still offer resistance. I offer resistance, although I know that my heart has already been ripped out and I could not go on living even if my torturers were to leave me alone now. I say to myself: 'Nothing happened.' And yet I was only able to understand that man because something is happening within me as well, something that is starting to withdraw me and part me from everything. How horrified I always used to be when people said that somebody dying could no longer recognize anyone. At such times, I would picture a lonely face upraised from the pillows, searching, searching for something familiar, searching for something already seen, but finding nothing at all. If my fear were not so great, I would console myself with the thought that it is not impossible to see everything differently and still be alive. But I am afraid; I have a nameless fear of that transformation. I have not yet grown accustomed to this world, which seems a goodly one. Why should I move on to another one? I should dearly like to remain among the meanings I have grown fond of, and if something really does have to change, I should at least like to be able to live among dogs, whose world is related to this one, and who have the same things.

For some time yet, I shall still be able to write all of these things down or say them. But a day will come when my hand will be far away from me, and, when I command it to write, the words it writes will be ones I do not intend. The time of that other interpretation will come, and not one word will be left upon another,[10] and all the meanings will dissolve like clouds and fall like rain. Though I am full of fear, I am yet like a man in the presence of greatness, and I recall that I often used to have this sensation within me before I began to write. But this time it is I who shall be written. I am the impression that will be transformed. Ah, it would take so very little for me to understand it all and assent. Only one step, and my bottomless misery would be bliss. But I cannot take that step; I have fallen and, being broken, cannot rise again. I did still suppose that help might be to hand. There they are before me, in my own hand, the words I have prayed, every evening that came. I copied them from the books in which I found them, that they might be very near to me, issued from my hand as if they were my own. And I shall write them out once

again now, kneeling here at my table I want to write them down; if I do this, I have them for longer than if I read them, and every word lasts and has time to die away.

> *Mécontent de tous et mécontent de moi, je voudrais bien me racheter et m'enorgueillir un peu dans le silence et la solitude de la nuit. Ames de ceux que j'ai aimés, âmes de ceux que j'ai chantés, fortifiez-moi, soutenez-moi, éloignez de moi le mensonge et les vapeurs corruptrices du monde; et vous, Seigneur mon Dieu! accordez-moi la grâce de produire quelques beaux vers qui me prouvent à moi-même que je ne suis pas le dernier des hommes, que je ne suis pas inférieur à ceux que je méprise.*[11]

> They were children of fools, yea, children of base men: they were viler than the earth.
>
> And now I am their song, yea, I am their byword…
>
> … they raise up against me the ways of their destruction… they set forward my calamity, they have no helper…
>
> And now my soul is poured out upon me; the days of affliction have taken hold upon me.
>
> My bones are pierced in me in the night seasons: and my sinews take no rest.
>
> By the great force of my disease is my garment changed: it bindeth me about as the collar of my coat…
>
> My bowels boiled and rested not: the days of affliction prevented me…
>
> My harp also is turned to mourning, and my organ into the voice of them that weep.[12]

[19] The doctor did not understand me. Not a thing. True, it was difficult to describe. They proposed to try electrotherapy. Very well. I was given a note of my appointment: one o'clock at the Salpêtrière. I was there. I had to walk quite a way past a number of low buildings and across several courtyards where people in white caps, looking like convicts, stood here and there below the leafless trees. At length I entered a long, dark room like a passageway, with four windows of greenish, translucent glass on the one side, separated one from another by a broad black expanse of wall. Before these windows was a wooden bench, along the whole length, and on this bench they sat, the people who knew me, waiting. Yes, they were all there. Once I had grown accustomed to the dim light in the room, I saw that among those sitting there shoulder to shoulder in that never-ending row there could be others too, of a lower class, working people, maids and carters. Down at the narrow end of the passage, on chairs apart from the rest, two fat women, probably concierges, had spread themselves out and were talking. I glanced at the clock; it was five to one. It

would be my turn in five or ten minutes, so it was not so bad. The air was poor, stuffy, full of clothing and breath. In one place the strong, bracing coolness of ether blew in through a door left ajar. I started to pace to and fro. It occurred to me that I had been directed here, among these people, in this overcrowded public waiting room. This was the first official confirmation, as it were, that I was one of the untouchables; had the doctor known by my appearance? But I had gone to see him wearing a passable suit, and had sent in my card. Even so, he must have worked it out somehow or other; perhaps I gave myself away. At all events, now that that was how it was, I did not find it so very dreadful; the people were sitting there placidly and took no notice of me. Some of them were in pain, and to make it more bearable were lolling one leg a little. A number of the men had their heads in their hands, while others were fast asleep, their faces heavy, deeply submerged. One fat man with a red, swollen neck was sitting bent forward, staring at the floor, and from time to time he spat out smack at a spot he appeared to find suitable for the purpose. A child was sobbing in a corner; it had drawn up its long thin legs, up on the bench, and held them tight to its body as though it had to say farewell to them. A small, pale woman, wearing a crêpe hat with round, black flowers at an angle on her head, wore the grimace of a smile on her meagre lips, but from under her sore eyelids the tears were forever running. Not far from her they had sat a girl with a round, smooth face and protuberant eyes without any expression; her mouth hung open, so that her white, slimy gums and old, decayed teeth were visible. And there were bandages everywhere – bandages wrapped layer upon layer around a whole head till only one single eye was to be seen, belonging to no one; bandages that concealed and bandages that exposed what lay beneath them; bandages that had been undone and in which, as in a soiled bed, a hand that was no longer a hand now lay; and a bandaged leg that stuck out from the row of people, big as a man. I paced to and fro and tried hard to stay calm. I gave a good deal of attention to the wall that faced me. I noticed that there were a number of single doors in it, and that the wall did not extend right up to the ceiling, so that the passage was not entirely separated from the rooms off it. I checked the clock; I had been pacing to and fro for an hour. A while later, the doctors arrived. First a couple of young

men who passed by with indifferent expressions, then at last the one I had been to see, wearing light gloves, a *chapeau à huit reflets* and an immaculate topcoat. When he saw me, he raised his top hat a little and smiled absently. I now hoped I would be called in right away, but another hour went by. I cannot remember how I passed it; it went by. An old man in a smirched apron, some kind of attendant, came up and tapped me on the shoulder. I went into one of the adjoining rooms. The doctor and the young men were sitting around a table, and looked at me. I was given a chair. Very good. And now I was expected to describe what was the matter with me. As briefly as possible, *s'il vous plaît*; these gentlemen did not have much time. I felt most disconcerted. The young men sat there looking at me with that superior, professional curiosity they had learned. The doctor I knew stroked his black goatee beard and smiled absently. I thought I was going to burst into tears, but instead I heard myself saying in French: 'Sir, I have already had the honour of telling you all I can. If you consider it necessary that these gentlemen be privy to the matter, you will doubtless be in a position, from our conversation, to describe it in a few words, whereas I find it difficult to do so.' The doctor rose with a courteous smile, crossed to the window with his assistants, and said a few words, waving his hand levelly to and fro for emphasis. Three minutes later, one of the young men, a short-sighted, nervous fellow, came back to the table and, attempting a severe look, said: 'Do you sleep well, sir?' 'No, badly.' Whereupon he leaped back to rejoin the others. When the group had deliberated together for a time, the doctor turned to me and informed me that I would be called. I reminded him that my appointment had been for one o'clock. He smiled and rapidly flapped his small white hands a couple of times, to indicate that he was exceptionally busy. So I returned to my passageway, where the air was now far more oppressive, and began to pace to and fro again, although I felt dead tired. At length I grew giddy from the stale, humid odours; I went to stand by the front door and opened it a little. I could see that it was still afternoon and there was sunshine outside, and this made me feel inexpressibly better. But I had hardly been standing there a minute when I heard my name called. Some female sitting at a small table a couple of paces from me was hissing across at me. Who had told me to open the door? I said I could not stand the air

inside. All right, that was my business, she said, but the door had to be kept shut. In that case, might it not be possible to open a window? No, that was not permitted. I decided to go back to pacing to and fro, since it did have a calming effect, after all, and hurt no one. But now the woman at the small table took exception to that as well. Didn't I have anywhere to sit? No, I didn't. Walking about was not allowed; I would have to find myself a seat; there must be one still free. The woman was right. I did find a seat, right away, beside the girl with protuberant eyes. So there I sat, feeling that the situation must surely be the preliminary to something terrible. To my left, then, was the girl with the rotting gums; it was some time before I could make out what was to my right. It was someimmense, immovable mass, with a face and a large, heavy, inert hand. The side of the face that I could see was vacant, wholly innocent of features or memories, and it was unsettling to see that the clothes were like those of a corpse dressed to lie out in a coffin. The narrow black cravat had been tied at the collar in the selfsame slack, impersonal way, and the jacket had plainly been pulled on to this unresisting body by others. The hand had been placed on the trousers where it lay, and even the hair looked as if it had been combed by the women who lay out bodies, and was stiff like the hair of stuffed animals. I observed all of this attentively, and it came to me that this must be the place I was destined for; this at last was the place in my life in which I would remain, or so I believed. Fate does indeed move in mysterious ways.

Suddenly, the frightened, cornered screams of a child burst out very close to me, one scream after another in quick succession, followed by a muted, subdued weeping. While I was trying to make out where the sounds might have come from, a low, suppressed scream quavered once again, and I heard voices questioning, and one voice giving orders in an undertone, and then some machine or other began to hum, indifferent to everything. Now I remembered the wall that did not meet the ceiling, and realized that all the sounds were coming from the other side of the doors: they were at their work in there. Every so often, the attendant in the smirched apron did in fact appear and beckon. I had abandoned all thought that he could mean me. Was he signalling to me? No. There were two men with a wheelchair; they lifted the mass into it, and now I saw that it was an old, paralysed

man who had another side to him, smaller and worn down by life, with one eye open, dim and doleful. They took him in, leaving a large amount of room vacant beside me. And there I sat, wondering what they would do to the dull-witted girl and whether she would scream as well. The hum of the machines had a pleasant, factory sound to it, not at all disquieting.

But suddenly everything was quiet, and in that silence a superior, complacent voice that I thought I knew said: '*Riez.*' A pause. '*Riez. Mais riez, riez.*' Already I was laughing. Why the man on the other side would not laugh was unaccountable. Some machine began to rattle but immediately fell silent again; words were exchanged, then the same brisk voice was upraised once again in command: '*Dites-nous le mot: avant.*' Spelling it out: '*a-v-a-n-t*'… Silence. '*On n' entend rien. Encore une fois:…*'

And then, with that warm, flaccid babble going on beyond the partition, it was there again for the first time in many, many years – that big thing that had instilled a first profound terror into me when as a child I lay sick with a fever. That was what I had always called it when they all stood around my bed, taking my pulse and asking what had frightened me – that big thing. And when they sent for the doctor, and he came and talked comfortingly with me, I asked him just to make the big thing go away, nothing else mattered. But he was like the others. He could not remove it, although I was small at the time and could easily have been helped. And now it was there again. In later times, it had simply not appeared; even in nights of fever it did not return; but now it was there, although I was not feverish. Now it was there. Now it was growing from within me like a tumour, like a second head, and it was a part of me, though it surely could not be mine, since it was so big. There it was, like a big dead animal that had once been my hand when it was still alive, or my arm. And my blood was flowing through me, and through it, as if through one and the same body. And my heart was having to make a great effort to pump the blood into the big thing: there was very nearly not enough blood. And the blood was loth to pass in, and emerged sick and tainted. But the big thing swelled and grew before my face, like a warm, bluish boil, and grew before my mouth, and already its margin cast a shadow on my remaining eye.

I cannot remember how I made my way out through the many courtyards. Evening had fallen and, losing my way in a neighbourhood that was unfamiliar to me, I walked up boulevards with never-ending walls and, having taken one direction and found there was no end to it, went back the opposite way till I came to some square or other. Then I started down one street, and passed others I had never seen before, and still more. At times trams raced towards me and passed me, glaringly lit, their bells hard and clanging. But the names on their direction boards were names I did not know. I did not know what city I was in, or whether I had a dwelling-place somewhere thereabouts, or what I had to do so that I would not have to go on walking.

[20] And now, on top of everything, this illness which has always had so curious an effect on me. I am certain it is not taken seriously enough, just as the gravity of other illnesses is exaggerated. This illness has no particular characteristics; it assumes those of the person it befalls. With a somnambulist assurance it draws from within each one the deepest danger, which had seemed overcome, and confronts him with it afresh, right up close, any time now. Men who once in their schooldays tried out the helpless vice, which has for its deceived intimates the poor hard hands of lads, fall prey to it again; or an illness they overcame as children recurs in them; or a habit they lost returns to them, a certain tentative way of turning their head, which was distinctive in them years before. And with whatever it is that comes back, there rises a whole tangle of muddled memories, clinging to it like wet seaweed on some sunken thing. Lives of which one knew nothing come to the surface and commingle with what has really been, displacing the past one thought familiar: for there is a fresh and rested strength in whatever it is that rises to the surface, while the things that have always been there are tired from too frequent remembering.

I am lying in my bed, five flights up, and my day, interrupted by nothing, is like a clock-face without hands. Just as one morning a thing long missing is back in its accustomed place, safe and sound, almost newer than when it was lost, quite as though someone had been looking after it –: so things from my childhood that were lost are lying here and there on my blanket, seeming new again. All my long-

lost fears are back.

The fear that a small thread of wool sticking out of the hem of the blanket might be hard, hard and sharp as a needle; the fear that this little button on my nightshirt might be larger than my head, large and heavy; the fear that this crumb of bread, falling right now from the bed, might be glass when it hits the floor, and smash, and the oppressive worry that, when it does, everything will be shattered, everything, for ever; the fear that the edge of a torn-open letter might be something forbidden which no one should see, something indescribably precious for which no place in the room is safe enough; the fear that if I fell asleep, I might swallow that lump of coal in front of the stove; the fear that some number might start growing inside my brain, till there is not enough space for it in me; the fear that what I am lying on might be granite, grey granite; the fear that I might scream, and people would come running and gather at my door and force it open; the fear that I might betray myself and speak of everything I am afraid of; and the fear that I might not be able to say anything, because it is all beyond saying – and the other fears… the fears.

I prayed to have my childhood, and it has come back again, and I sense that it is as heavy a burden as it was then, and that growing older has served no purpose at all.

[21] Yesterday my fever was better, and today began like the spring, like the springtime in paintings. I mean to try and go out, to the Bibliothèque Nationale, to my poet, whom I have not read for so long, and maybe afterwards I can take a leisurely stroll about the gardens. Perhaps there will be a wind over the big pond, where the water is so real and the children come to float their red-sailed boats and watch them.

Today I did not anticipate a thing; I went out so jauntily, as though it were the most natural, most straightforward of things. And yet there was something, something quite extraordinary, something that took me and crumpled me up like a piece of paper and tossed me away.

The boulevard Saint-Michel was deserted and vast, and walking up the gentle slope was easy. Casement windows overhead opened with a glassy sound, sending a flash flying across the street like a white bird.

A carriage with bright red wheels passed by, and, further on, someone was wearing something of a light green colour. Horses in glinting harness trotted along the road, which was freshly washed down and dark. The breeze was brisk, fresh, mild, and bore everything up: smells, shouts, bells.

I passed one of the cafés where musicians wearing red and pretending to be gypsies play in the evenings. From the open windows, the stale air of the night before crept out with a bad conscience. Slickly combed waiters were busy scouring the doorstep. One of them was stooped over, throwing handful after handful of yellowish sand under the tables. A passer-by prodded him and pointed down the street. The waiter, who was quite red in the face, gazed closely in that direction for a moment or so; then a laugh spread over his whiskerless cheeks, as if it had been spilled on them. He beckoned the other waiters over, turning his laughing face rapidly from right to left a couple of times, so that while he called them all across he missed nothing himself. There they now all stood, looking down the street, or trying to see, smiling or vexed, whatever the absurdity was that they had not yet made out.

I sensed a touch of fear rising within me. Something was impelling me to cross the street; but I merely started to walk faster, and eyed the few people ahead of me, without really meaning to and without noticing anything out of the ordinary. I did see, however, that one of them, an errand boy wearing a blue apron and with an empty basket slung over his shoulder, was following someone with his gaze. When he had looked long enough, he turned on his heel to face the houses and, to a laughing clerk across the street, made that unsteady gesture of the hand before the forehead that everyone is familiar with. Then his dark eyes flashed and he swaggered towards me with a satisfied air.

I supposed that, as soon as I could see better, there would be some unusual and striking figure in view, but there proved to be no one else ahead of me but a tall, lean man in a dark greatcoat,[13] wearing a soft black hat on his short, ash-blond hair. I could see to my satisfaction that there was nothing at all ridiculous either in this man's clothing or in his behaviour, and was already trying to look past him, down the

boulevard, when he tripped over something. Since I was following close behind him, I took care when I came to the spot, but there was nothing there, nothing whatsoever. We both continued walking, he and I, the distance between us remaining the same. We came to a crossing, and the man ahead of me raised one leg and hopped down the steps to the street, as children who are having fun sometimes hop and skip when they're walking. The steps on the other side he cleared in a single bound. But scarcely was he up on the pavement than he again drew up one leg a little and hopped up high on the other foot, then did it again and again. At this point, you might easily once again have taken the sudden movement for tripping, if you'd concluded that there was some little thing there, the pit or the slippery skin of a fruit, something or other; and the odd thing was that the man himself seemed to imagine there was something in his way, because every time he gave the offending spot one of those looks, part vexed, part reproachful, that people do give at such moments. Once more some warning instinct urged me to cross the street, but I disregarded it and stayed hard on the man's heels, all my attention fixed on his legs. I must confess that I felt a curious sense of relief when he did not hop for some twenty paces; but when I looked up, I observed that something else was now bothering the man. The collar of his greatcoat was turned up; and however hard he tried to fold it down, now with one hand, now with both, he simply couldn't manage it. These things happen. I didn't find it disconcerting. But then I realized, to my boundless astonishment, that the man's busy hands were in fact describing two movements: one a hasty, secretive motion with which he covertly flapped up the collar, and the other the elaborate, prolonged, over-explicit motion, as it were, with which he was trying to fold it down. This observation so perplexed me that a full two minutes passed before I saw that the selfsame fearful, two-syllable hopping motion that had just deserted the man's legs was now going on in his neck, behind the raised greatcoat collar and his nervously busy hands. From that moment on, I was tethered to him. I grasped that this hopping motion was wandering about his body, trying to break out here or there. I understood his fear of other people, and myself began warily to check whether passers-by noticed anything. A thrill of cold went down my spine when his legs suddenly made a low,

convulsive jump, but no one had seen it, and I decided that I would stumble a little too if anyone did notice. That would doubtless be one way of making people who couldn't mind their own business think there was something small and unimportant in the way, which we had both happened to trip on. But while I was thinking of how I might help, he himself had hit upon an excellent new expedient. I have forgotten to say that he was carrying a stick; it was a plain stick, of dark wood, with a simple, rounded handle. And as he cast about in his anxiety, it had occurred to him to hold this stick against his back with one hand (who could say what the other might be needed for), right along his spine, pressing it firmly into the small of his back and thrusting the crook under his coat collar, so that it would be hard and offer a kind of support behind the neck and the first dorsal vertebra. This posture was not one to attract attention, and looked at worst a little cocky; the unexpected spring day might excuse that. No one turned to stare at him, and now all was well, all was perfectly fine. True, at the next crossing he did indulge in two hops, but they were two small, half-suppressed hops of no consequence at all; and his one fully visible leap was so cannily timed (a hose-pipe lay across his path) that there was no cause for concern. Indeed, everything was still going well; now and then, his other hand would grip the stick and press it more firmly to him, and instantly the danger was averted once again. Even so, I could not keep my anxiety from growing. I knew that as he walked along, making an infinite effort to appear nonchalant and carefree, the terrible convulsions were gathering within his body; within me, too – I shared the fear with which he sensed them growing and growing, and I saw how he clutched the stick when the spasms began inside him. At those times, the expression of his hands was so severe and relentless that I placed all my hope in his will, which must be a mighty one. But what could the mere will do? The moment must inevitably come when his strength would be exhausted; it could not be long now. And I, following him with my heart pounding, I gathered what little strength I had, like cash, and, looking at his hands, begged him to take it if he had any need for it.

I think he took it; it was not my fault that I had no more to give.

The Place Saint-Michel was busy with large numbers of vehicles and people hurrying to and fro, and often we would be caught between

two carriages; then he would take a breath and relax, as if he were resting, and there would be a little hopping and nodding of the head. Maybe that was the stratagem by which his cornered malady meant to get the better of him. His will had been breached in two places, and in submitting his obsessed muscles had been left with a mild, goading animation and that compulsive two-beat rhythm. But the stick was still in its place, and the hands looked grim and wrathful; in this way, we walked out on to the bridge, and all was well. It went well. Now, an element of uncertainty affected his walk, and he would take two paces, then he stood still again. Stood. His left hand gently released its grip on the stick and rose, so slowly that I saw it tremble against the air; he pushed his hat back a little and wiped his brow. He turned his head slightly, and his gaze swept unsteadily across the sky, the houses and the water, without taking any of it in, and then he gave in. The stick was gone, he flung wide his arms as if he meant to fly, and something like a force of Nature broke forth from him and doubled him up and tore him back and set him to nodding and bowing and slung some dancing power out of him and into the crowd. For by now a large number of people had gathered around him, and I saw him no more.

What sense would there have been in going anywhere after that? I was drained. Like a blank piece of paper I drifted along, past the houses, back up the boulevard.

[22] *I am trying to write to you, although really there is nothing to say after a necessary parting. I am trying nonetheless; I think I must, because I saw the saint in the Panthéon,[14] the solitary, saintly woman and the roof and the door and the lamp inside with its modest circle of light, and, beyond, the sleeping city and the river and the moonlit distance. The saint watches over the sleeping city. I wept. I wept, because there it all was, all at once and so unexpectedly. I wept before her; I could not help it.

I am in Paris; those who hear this are pleased, and most of them envy me. They are right to do so. It is a great city, great, full of curious temptations. For myself, I must admit that in a sense I have yielded to them. I do not think there is any other way of putting it. I have yielded to these temptations, and this has resulted in various

changes, if not in my character, then in my outlook on the world, and at all events in my life. Under these influences, I have formed an altogether different conception of everything under the sun; certain differences now mark me off from other people more than anything ever did in the past. A world transformed. A new life full of new meanings. At the moment I am finding it a little difficult, because it is all too new. I am a beginner in the circumstances of my own life.

Might it not be possible, just for once, to see the sea?

Yes, but just think, I was imagining you would be able to come. Could you perhaps have told me if there was a doctor? I forgot to enquire. But in any case I no longer need the information.

Do you remember Baudelaire's incredible poem 'Une Charogne'? It may be that I understand it now. Apart from the last stanza, he was quite right. What was he to do after such an experience? It was his task to see, in these matters that were terrible but only seemingly repellent, the abiding essence of being that lies below all that is. There is no choice, and no refusing. Do you suppose it was chance that Flaubert wrote 'Saint Julien l'Hospitalier'? That, it seems to me, is the crux: whether a man can bring himself to lie down beside a leper and warm him with the heart's warmth, the warmth of nights spent in love – only good could come of such an action.[15]

Do not suppose that I am smarting under disappointments. Quite the contrary. At times I am bemused to find how readily I relinquish all my expectations for the sake of reality, even when it is harsh.

My God, if only some of this could be shared. But would it then *be*, would it *be*? No, it *is* only at the price of solitude.

[23] The existence of the terrible in every particle of the air. You breathe it in as part of something transparent; but within you it precipitates, hardens, acquires angular, geometrical forms in among your organs; for all the torments and horrors suffered at places of execution, in torture chambers, in madhouses, in operating theatres, under the arches of bridges in late autumn – all this is possessed of a tenacious permanence, all of it persists and, jealous of all that is, clings to its own frightful reality. People would prefer to be able to forget much of it; sleep files away gently at the grooves in the brain, but dreams drive it away and trace the lines anew. And they wake,

panting, and dissolve the gleam of a candle in the dark, and drink in the half-lit solace as if it were sugared water. Ah, but how precariously that security is poised. The slightest movement, and again the gaze races beyond what is familiar and friendly, and the outline that was so comforting a moment ago becomes clearly recognizable as the brink of horror. Beware of the light, for it hollows out space; don't look round to see whether, as you sat up, a shadow has arisen, as your master. It might have been better if you had stayed in the dark, and your heart, unconstrained, had tried to be the heavy heart of all that cannot be distinguished. Now you have gathered yourself up; you see your own end before you, in your own hands; every now and then, with an imprecise movement, you trace the contours of your face. And within you there is scarcely any room; and it almost calms you, to think that it is impossible for anything of any great size to abide in those cramped confines, that even something quite monstrous must needs become an inner thing and accept the limits imposed by circumstance. But outside, outside there is no end to it; and when it rises out there, it fills up inside you as well – not in the vessels, which are partly in your own control, or in the phlegm of your more impassive organs, but in the capillaries, sucked as if up a tube into the furthermost branches of your infinitely ramified being. There it arises, there it passes over you, rising higher than your breath, to which you have fled as if to your final resting place. Ah, but where will you go from there, where? Your heart is driving you out of yourself, your heart is after you, and you are almost beside yourself and you can't go back. Like a beetle stepped on, you ooze out of yourself, and your little scrap of carapace and adaptability is meaningless.

O night without objects, O insensible window on the world, O doors kept carefully shut, O the olden ways of living, adopted, approved, but never fully understood. O the silence on the staircase, the silence in the next room, the silence high up under the ceiling. O Mother: O you, the only one who dealt with all that silence, back in my childhood; who took it upon herself, saying: Do not be afraid – it's me; who had the courage, in the dead of night, to *be* that silence for one who was frightened, who was scared stiff. You light a lamp, and that sound is already you. And you hold out the lamp before you, and say: It's me – don't be frightened. And you put it down, slowly, and there's no doubt

about it: it is you, you are the light that enfolds these familiar, intimate things that are there without any hidden agenda, good, simple, unambiguous. And if anything should stir behind the wall, or a step be heard on the floorboards, you merely smile; you smile, you give a transparent smile on a bright ground to that fearful face looking searchingly at you, as if you were one, and in on the secret, with every half-formed sound, and everything were agreed and understood between you. Is there any power to equal your power among all the lords of the earth? See, kings lie with a fixed stare, and no teller of tales can distract them. Though they lie at the blessed breast of their loved one, horror steals upon them and leaves them shaking and listless. But you, when you come, keep all that is monstrous behind you, and are altogether in front of it, not like some curtain that it might pull aside here or there, no, but as if you had passed it by in answering the call of one who needed you. As if you had anticipated, by a long way, anything that might happen, and the only thing at your back was your own haste, the path you eternally take, the flight of your love.

[24] The *mouleur*[16] whose shop I pass every day has hung two masks beside his door. The face of the young woman who drowned, which they took a cast of in the morgue because it was beautiful, because it was smiling, smiling so deceptively, as if it knew. And under it, his face, which did know. That firm knot of tightly drawn senses. That relentless self-compression of music forever wanting to steam right out. The countenance of one whose hearing a god had sealed up, that there might be no sounds but his own; that he might not be led astray by what is muddied and ephemeral in noises – he, in whom their clarity and permanence resided; that only the soundless senses might bear in the world to him, silently, a tensed and waiting world, unfinished, before the creation of sound.

Consummator of the world: just as that which falls as rain upon the earth and the waters, carelessly, as chance would have it, rises once again from all things, even less visible than before, joyous by the law within, and ascends and is suspended and forms the heavens, so too from out of you there came the new arising of all that had fallen in us, and it domed the world with music.

Your music: if only it could have mantled the whole world, not merely us! If only a *Hammerklavier*[17] could have been built for you in the Theban desert, and an angel would have led you out to that solitary instrument, out through the mountains of the wilderness where the kings and courtesans and anchorites lie at rest. And he would have sprung aloft and away, fearful that you would begin.

And then, you mighty spring, you would have poured forth, unheard, giving back to the universe what only the universe can endure. The Bedouins would have hastened by, keeping a superstitious distance; but the merchants would have cast themselves down on the ground, out on the edges of your music, as if you were a tempest. Only a few lone lions would have prowled around you at night, alarmed at what was within themselves, threatened by their own troubled blood.

For who will take you back now, from ears grown lascivious? Who will drive them out of the concert halls, those venal ones whose hearing is barren, prostituting themselves but never conceiving? The semen spurts out, and they lie beneath it like whores and play with it, or it falls among them like the seed of Onan[18] while they lie pleasuring without issue.

But if ever a virgin with an untouched ear were to lie with your sound, Master, he would die of bliss, or he would grow pregnant with the infinite, and his fertilized brain would needs burst for sheer birth.

[25] I do not underestimate it. I know it takes courage. But let us suppose for a moment that someone does have the *courage de luxe* to follow them, and then to know for ever (for who could forget or confound it?) where they creep away to and what they do with the rest of the livelong day and whether they sleep at night. That in particular needs to be ascertained: whether they sleep. Still, it takes more than courage. For they do not come and go as other people do, whom it would be easy to follow. One moment they're there, the next they are gone, like lead soldiers positioned and then moved somewhere else. They are found in places that are somewhat off the beaten track, but by no means concealed. The bushes recede, the path describes a slight curve around a plot of lawn: there they stand, with a vast transparent space about them, as if they were standing beneath a

glass dome. You might take them for people out for a walk, lost in thought, these unprepossessing men of slight build and in every respect modest. But you would be mistaken. Do you see the left hand feeling for something in the slant pocket of that old overcoat, and finding it, and pulling it out, and holding a little something up in the air, awkwardly, attracting attention? In less than a minute, two or three birds have appeared, sparrows, hopping up inquisitively. And if this man manages to satisfy their very precise conception of immobility, there is no reason why they should not come even closer. And at length one of them flies up and for a while flaps warily on a level with that hand, which (God knows) is holding out a small piece of tired sweet bread in its undemanding, manifestly unexpectant fingers. And the more people gather around him – keeping the right distance, of course – the less he has in common with them. He stands there like a candle burning down, the remainder of the wick still glowing, warm through and never moving an inch. And how it is that he tempts and entices them is beyond anything that the many witless little birds can judge. If there were no onlookers, and he were left standing there long enough, I am certain that an angel would suddenly appear and, overcoming an aversion, would eat the stale, sweet scrap from out of that withered hand. But it is the people who prevent this from happening, as they always do. They ensure that only the birds put in an appearance; they claim that that is quite enough, and insist that he expects nothing else. And what else should he expect, this old rain-sodden puppet, stuck in the ground at a slight angle like ships' figureheads in small gardens back home?[19] Is he standing like that because at one time he was right at the forefront, where movement is greatest? Is he so faded now because once he was bright and colourful? Will you be the one to ask him?

Ask the women nothing, though, if you see them feeding the birds. One might indeed follow them; they scatter feed as they walk, and it would be easy. But let them be. They don't know how it came to be this way, but suddenly they have a large amount of bread in their bag, and they're holding out large chunks from under their thin shawls, chunks that are slightly chewed and moist. It does them good to know that their saliva is getting out a little into the world, that the small birds will fly about with that taste in their mouths, even if, of course,

they presently forget it again.

[26] There I sat with your books, you headstrong man,[20] trying to form an opinion of them, as others do who have not read you all of a piece but have taken a part for themselves and been satisfied. For I did not yet appreciate the nature of fame, that public demolition of one who is in the making, on to whose building site the mob irrupt, knocking his stones all over the place.

Dear youngster, somewhere or other, in whom something is burgeoning that makes you tremble: make good use of the fact that no one knows you! And if those who see your worth as nil contradict you, and if those you keep company with abandon you completely, and if they would destroy you on account of your tender thoughts – why, what is that manifest danger, which gives you your inner strength, compared with the wily enmity of fame that will come later, which renders you harmless by scattering you piecemeal?

Ask no one to speak of you, not even with contempt. And if time passes and you realize that your name is on people's lips, do not take this more seriously than anything else you find in their mouths. Think instead that your name has become a wretched thing, and cast it off. Adopt another, any at all, so that God may call you in the night. And keep it a secret from everyone.

You loneliest of men, living apart from the rest, how they have caught up with you in your fame! Not so long ago they were fundamentally opposed to you, and now they treat you as their equal. And they take your words with them, caged in their presumption, displaying them in public squares and baiting them a little, from a safe distance. All your terrible beasts of prey.

I first read you when they were breaking loose, out of me, and attacking me in my wilderness, these desperate creatures – desperate as you were too at the end; you whose course is wrongly charted on all the maps. Like a crack it crosses the heavens, the hopeless hyperbola of your path, which bends towards us only once and then draws away in horror. What difference did it make to you whether a woman stayed or left, whether this man was overcome with vertigo and that with insanity, and whether the dead are alive and the living seemingly dead – what difference did it make to you? All of these

things you took to be wholly natural; you passed through them as one might through an ante-room, without pausing. But on the far side you lingered, bowed over, where the events of our lives boil and precipitate and change colour, deep inside, deeper within than anyone had ever been; a door had opened for you, and now you were in amid the retorts, in the glare of the flames, in where you never took anyone with you, mistrustful man – there you sat, determining the points of change. And there, since to reveal was in your blood rather than to fashion or express, there you made the mighty decision to focus solely on the tiny things that you yourself had at first perceived only through the lens, and to magnify them so that they would be plainly visible, in all their enormity, to thousands. So your theatre came into being. You could not wait for this life virtually without spatial substance, condensed by the centuries into drops, to be discovered by the other arts and gradually rendered visible for those few who, little by little, would come together in their insight and at length demand to see these sublime whisperings confirmed in the parable of the scene unfolding before them. You could not wait for that. There you were, and you had to determine and note down things that could scarcely be measured: an increase of half a degree in a feeling; the angle, which you read at close quarters, at which a will almost unburdened reacts; the slight cloudiness in a drop of longing; and that infinitesimal change of colour in an atom of trust. For life was now to be found in such processes, our life that had slipped into us and had withdrawn so deep inside that it was hardly possible to conjecture about it any more.

With your disposition as one who revealed, a timelessly tragic writer, you were bound of necessity to transform that capillary action at a stroke into the most persuasive gestures, the most commonplace things. So you embarked upon that unprecedented act of violence, your work, which sought in the visible world, ever more impatiently and ever more desperately, for equivalents for what you had seen inside. Hence a rabbit, an attic, a room where a man paced to and fro; hence a tinkle of glass in the next room, hence a fire outside the windows, hence the sun; hence a church, and a rocky valley that was like a church. But that did not suffice: at length, towers had to be brought in, and whole mountain ranges; and the avalanches that bury

the countryside covered a stage piled high with tangible things, that the intangible might be grasped as well. And at that, your powers gave out. The two ends that you had bent together sprang apart; your mad strength fled the willowy wand, and it was as if your work had never existed.

What other explanation could there be for your refusing at the end, headstrong as you always were, to quit the window? You wanted to see the passers-by; for the thought had occurred to you that one day something might be made of them, if once one had resolved to make a start.

[27] It was then that it first struck me that one cannot say a thing about a woman; when they spoke of her, I noticed how they left her out, naming and describing other people, places, objects, up to a certain point where it all stopped, coming to a gentle and as it were wary stop on that light and never firmed-in outline that enclosed her. At such times, I would ask what she was like. ‘Blonde, much like yourself,’ they replied, and added all sorts of other details they knew; but in the process she again grew altogether indistinct, and I was quite unable to picture her. I was only properly able to *see* her when Maman told me the story, which I asked her to do time and again –.

– Every time she came to the scene with the dog, she would close her eyes and touch her hands cold against her temples and fervently hold them up over her rapt face, which everywhere could be seen shining through between her fingers. ‘I saw it, Malte,’ she would declare: ‘I saw it.’ It was in the last years of her life that I heard her say this – in those times when she no longer cared to see anyone and invariably, even when travelling, had with her that small, fine, silver strainer through which she would sieve all her drinks. She no longer ate any solid food, except for sponge cake or bread which, when she was alone, she would crumble and eat up morsel by morsel, as children eat crumbs. At that date, she was already entirely in the grip of her fear of needles. To others she would merely say, by way of apology: ‘I really cannot take anything any more, but you really mustn't let it worry you; I'm absolutely fine.’ To me, however, she might turn abruptly (for I was fairly grown up by then) and say with a smile that cost her a distinct effort: ‘What a lot of needles there are, Malte, lying around everywhere, and if you think how easily they fall

Malte, lying around everywhere, and if you think how easily they fall out…' She meant to say it in a jocular tone; but a tremor of horror went through her at the thought of all those poorly secured needles which might fall into something at any moment.

[28] When she spoke of Ingeborg, though, nothing could touch her; she didn't spare herself; she spoke louder, laughing as she remembered Ingeborg's laugh, wanting you to see how beautiful Ingeborg had been. 'She made us all happy,' she said, 'your father too, Malte – literally happy. But then, when they said she was going to die, although she seemed only slightly ill, and we all milled about her, keeping it from her, she sat up suddenly in bed and said out loud, as someone who wants to hear how something sounds might say it: "You needn't be so restrained; we all know what's what, and I can assure you that it will be well if it happens this way. I do not care to carry on." Just think: that was what she said – "I do not care to carry on" – she who made us all happy. I wonder whether you will understand that some day, Malte, when you are grown up? Think about it, later. Perhaps her words will come back to you. It would be a very good thing if there were someone who understood such matters.'

'Such matters' occupied Maman when she was alone; and she was always alone in those last years.

'It's quite beyond me, Malte,' she would say at times, with her peculiarly venturesome smile, which was not meant to be seen by anyone and served its purpose wholly in being smiled. 'But to think that no one feels the wish to get to the bottom of it. If I were a man, yes, if I were a *man*, I would give it careful thought, in due order and sequence, beginning at the beginning. After all, there must be a beginning, and if one could pinpoint that, it would at least be something. Oh, Malte, we simply pass away from the earth, and I feel that everyone is distracted and preoccupied and no one pays proper attention when we pass away. It is as if a shooting star went utterly unseen and no one made a wish. Never forget to make a wish, Malte. One should never stop making wishes. I do not believe that they come true, but there are wishes that keep, a whole life long, and one couldn't live long enough for them to come true anyway.'

Maman had had Ingeborg's little secretaire brought upstairs and

placed in her room, and I often found her sitting at it, for I had her permission to enter without knocking. The carpet completely absorbed my footfall, but she sensed my presence and reached out a hand to me across the other shoulder. This hand was altogether weightless, and kissing it was like kissing the ivory crucifix that was held out to me in the evenings before I went to sleep. At that low bureau, with the desk panel folded down before her, she sat as at a keyboard instrument. ‘There is so much sunlight in it,’ she said, and indeed the inside of it was remarkably bright, with its old yellow lacquer-work on which flowers were painted, a red one and a blue invariably coupled. And wherever there were three, a violet-coloured flower appeared between them, keeping the other two apart. These colours, and the green of the slender tendrils that ran in crosswise arabesques, had darkened quite as much as the ground, while not properly lucent, had remained radiant. The result was a curiously muted interplay of hues that stood in intimate relation without actually speaking to each other.

Maman pulled out the little drawers, all of which were empty.

‘Ah, roses,’ she said, and inclined slightly towards the scent, faded but not wholly spent. At such moments, she always imagined that something might suddenly still be found in a secret compartment which no one had hit upon and which would only open at the touch of a concealed spring-lock. ‘All at once it will shoot open, just you watch,’ she would say, solemn and anxious, hastily pulling at all the drawers. But such papers as had actually been left in the compartments she had carefully folded up and locked away unread. ‘I shouldn't understand it anyway, Malte. It would doubtless be too difficult for me.’ She was convinced that everything was too complicated for her. ‘There are no beginners' classes in life. What is required of you is always the hardest thing, right from the start.’ I was assured that she had become like this only after the terrible demise of her sister, Countess Öllegaard Skeel, who was burned to death when trying to rearrange the flowers in her hair at a candle-lit mirror before a ball. But of late it had been Ingeborg who seemed to her the most difficult of all to understand.

And now I shall write down the story as Maman told it whenever I asked her to.

It was in the middle of summer, on the Thursday after Ingeborg's

funeral. From the place on the terrace where we were having tea you could see the gable of the family vault amid the giant elms. The table had been set as though there had never been one more person at it, and we all sat around it taking up plenty of space as well. Every one of us had brought something, too – a book or a work basket – so that in fact we were even rather cramped. Abelone was pouring the tea, and we were all busy passing things round, except for your grandfather, who was looking from his armchair towards the house. At that time of day, the mail was usually expected, and generally it had been Ingeborg who brought it out, as she was kept longer inside, giving instructions for dinner. During the weeks of her illness, we had had ample time to get used to her not coming; after all, we knew very well that she could not come. But that afternoon, Malte, when she really could not come any more – she did come. Perhaps it was our fault; perhaps we called her. For I remember that suddenly I was sitting there trying hard to think what exactly it was that was different now. All at once I found it impossible to say what it was; I had completely forgotten. I looked up and saw that all the others were facing the house, not in any particular manner that might strike you, but perfectly placidly and with an everyday sort of expectancy. And I was just about to (I feel quite cold, Malte, to think of it), but, God help me, I was just about to say, 'Wherever is –?' when Cavalier shot out from under the table, as he always did, and ran towards her. He ran towards her, although she was not there; for him, she *was* there, coming. We grasped that he was running to meet her. Twice he looked round towards us, as if putting a question. Then he raced towards her, as he always did, Malte, just as he always did, and reached her – for he began to frisk right around, Malte, around something that wasn't there, and then jumped up at her to lick her, right up. We heard him whimpering for joy, and to see him jump right up like that, several times in rapid succession, you could really have thought he was concealing her from us by his jumping. But suddenly he howled out, and swung back in mid-air from his own momentum, and plunged to the ground with a remarkable clumsiness and lay there, curiously flat, not making a move. From the far side of the house, a servant emerged with the letters. He hesitated for a moment; evidently it was no entirely easy thing, to walk towards our faces. And besides, your

father gestured to him to stay where he was. Your father, Malte, was not fond of animals; but now he walked over, slowly, or so it seemed to me, and bent down over the dog. He said something to the servant, something curt, monosyllabic. I saw the man hurry over to pick up Cavalier. But your father took the creature himself, and, as if he knew exactly where he was going, went into the house.

[29] On one occasion, when it had grown almost dark as she told this story, I was on the brink of telling Maman about the ‘hand’: at that moment, I could have. I had already taken a deep breath to make a start, when I recollected how well I had understood the servant's inability to approach their faces. And, in spite of the dark, I was afraid of what Maman's face would be like, once it saw what I had seen. Hastily I drew another breath, to make it seem that that was all I had meant to do. A few years later, after that memorable evening in the dining hall at Urnekloster, I was on the point, for days on end, of confiding in little Erik. But following our nocturnal talk he had shut himself completely off from me once again: he was avoiding me; I believe he despised me. And for that very reason I wanted to tell him about the ‘hand’. I imagined I would rise in his esteem (which I desperately wanted, for some reason or other) if I could make him understand that it was something I had really experienced. Erik, however, was so good at eluding me that the moment never came. And then we made our departure, shortly after. This is therefore the first time, oddly enough, that I am telling (to myself alone, after all) of an occurrence that is now far back in my childhood.

How small I must still have been at the time I can see from the fact that I was kneeling on the armchair to be within easy reach of the table I was drawing on. It was evening, in winter, if I am not mistaken, in our town flat. The table was in my room, between the windows, and there was no other lamp in the room but the one that shone on my sheets of paper and on Mademoiselle's book; for Mademoiselle was sitting beside me, her chair pushed back a little, and was reading. She was far away when she was reading; I do not know if she was in her book – she could read for hours on end, seldom turning a page, and I had the impression that the pages kept steadily filling beneath her, as if by looking she were adding words, particular

words that she needed and which were not there. That is how it seemed to me while I went on drawing. I drew slowly, without any very definite intention, and whenever I did not know how to go on, I would consider the whole thing with my head inclined a little to the right; that way, I always realized fastest what was still missing. The drawing was of officers on horseback, riding into battle, or already in the thick of it, which was much simpler because then almost all you had to draw was the smoke that enveloped everything. It's true that Maman always maintained that what I drew were islands – islands with large trees and a castle and a flight of steps and flowers along the edge that were meant to be reflected in the water. But I think she is making that up, or else it was later.

One thing is certain: that on that evening I was drawing a knight, a solitary and quite unmistakable knight, mounted on a strangely caparisoned steed. He turned out so brightly coloured that I had to change crayons frequently; but it was the red one that I used most of all, and reached for time and again. Now I needed it once again; but it rolled (I still see it) right across the brightened page, to the edge, and fell down, past me, before I could stop it, and was gone. I really did need it urgently, and having to climb down after it was distinctly vexing. Awkward as I was, it was quite a business to get down; my legs seemed far too long, and I couldn't draw them out from under me: remaining too long in a kneeling position had numbed my limbs; I could not tell what was mine and what was the chair's. At length, rather at sixes and sevens, I did make it to the floor, and found myself on an animal fell that extended under the table to the wall. But at this point I was confronted with a fresh difficulty. My eyes, accustomed to the brightness above and still wholly entranced by the colours on the white paper, were unable to make out anything at all below the table, where the blackness seemed so dense that I was afraid of knocking against it; so I fell back on my sense of touch and, kneeling and supporting myself on my left hand, combed through the cool, longhaired, familiar-feeling fell with my other hand. But there was no sign of the crayon. I felt I was wasting a good deal of time, and was about to call Mademoiselle and ask her to hold the lamp for me when I realized that, as my eyes strained involuntarily, the dark was

gradually growing more penetrable. Already I could distinguish the wall at the back, at the foot of which a light-coloured skirting-board ran; I took my bearings from the table legs, and in particular made out my own outspread hand, moving all alone down below, a little like some aquatic animal exploring the seabed. I still recall that I watched it almost with curiosity; as it groped about down there with a mind of its own, moving in ways I had never seen it move, it seemed able to do things I had not taught it. I observed it as it pushed onwards; I was interested, and prepared for anything. But how could I have expected another hand suddenly to come towards it from the wall, a larger and unusually thin hand, such as I had never seen before? It was searching in similar fashion, from the other side, and the two outspread hands moved blindly towards each other. My curiosity was not yet satisfied, but all at once it was at an end, and all that remained in its place was horror. I sensed that one of the hands belonged to me and that it was about to enter into something that could never be righted again. Asserting all the rights I had over it, I stopped it and withdrew it, slowly and held flat, never taking my eyes off the other hand as it continued to search. I realized it would not abandon the search. I cannot say how I got up again; I sat back deep down in the armchair, my teeth chattering and so little blood in my face that I felt there could not be any blue left in my eyes. ‘Mademoiselle,’ I tried to say, and found myself unable to; she was alarmed without my alerting her, though, and, throwing aside her book, knelt beside the armchair, called out my name, and I think may have shaken me. But I was perfectly conscious. I swallowed a couple of times; for now I wanted to tell her.

But how? I made an indescribable effort to pull myself together, but it could not be expressed so that someone else would understand. If there were words for what had happened, I was too small to find them. And suddenly I was gripped by the fear that they might all at once be there, those words, in spite of my age, and the most terrible thing of all seemed to me that I would then have to utter them. To have to relive that reality down there once more, with a difference, transmuted, from the very beginning; to hear myself admitting it: I did not have the strength left for that.

It is of course imagination on my part if I now maintain that at the

time I already felt that something had come into my life, mine and none other, that I alone would have to bear with me henceforth, for ever and ever. I see myself lying in my little cot, not sleeping, somehow vaguely foreseeing that that was how life would be: full of special things that are intended for one person only and cannot be put into words. What is certain is that, little by little, a sad and weighty pride uprose within me. I pictured what it would be like to go through life filled with inner experience, in silence. I felt a passionate sympathy for adults; I admired them, and resolved to tell them so. I decided to tell Mademoiselle at the earliest opportunity.

[30] And then came one of those illnesses that had the effect of demonstrating to me that that was not the first experience that was wholly mine. The fever raged within me and dredged up from deep below experiences, images, facts I had known nothing of; I lay there, surfeited with myself, and waited for the moment when I would be commanded to layer it all back into me, in an orderly fashion, in proper sequence. I made a start, but it grew beneath my hands; it resisted; it was much too much. Then in a fit of fury I tossed it all inside me in a heap and crushed it together; but now I couldn't get myself to close up. And then I screamed, half open as I was, I screamed and screamed. And when I began to look out of myself once again, they had been standing about my bed for a long time and holding my hands, and there was a candle, and their great shadows moved behind them. And my father ordered me to say what the matter was. It was a friendly, muted order, but it was an order nonetheless. And he grew impatient when I made no answer.

Maman never came to me at night – or rather, she did come once. I had been screaming and screaming, and Mademoiselle had come, and Sieversen, the housekeeper, and Georg, the coachman; but it had been no use. And at length they had sent the carriage for my parents, who were at a great ball, given by the Crown Prince, I believe. And all at once, I heard it drive into the courtyard, and I fell silent, sat up, and fixed my eyes on the door. And then there was a faint rustling sound in the adjacent rooms, and Maman came in, in her magnificent court gown, not paying heed to it at all, almost running, and letting her white fur fall behind her, and taking me in her bare arms. And I, with

an astonishment and rapture I had never felt before, touched her hair and her small, immaculate face and the cold stones at her ears and the silk that fringed her bloom-fragrant shoulders. And thus we remained, weeping tenderly and kissing, until we sensed that Father was there and we had to separate. ‘He has a high temperature,’ I heard Maman say timidly, and Father reached for my hand and took my pulse. He was wearing the uniform of the Master of the Hunt, and the beautiful, broad, watered blue ribbon of the Order of the Elephant. ‘What nonsense, sending for us,’ he observed to the room without looking at me. They had promised to go back if it was nothing serious. And it was not serious. But on my counterpane I found Maman's dance card and white camellias, which I had never seen and which I laid on my eyes when I noticed how cool they were.

[31] But it was the afternoons that were long during such illnesses. In the morning after a bad night, you always fell asleep, and when you woke and supposed it was still early in the day, it was in fact afternoon, and continued to be afternoon, and did not cease to be afternoon. There you lay in your freshly made bed, perhaps growing a little at the joints, far too tired to conceive of anything at all. The taste of stewed apple stayed in your mouth, and that was all you were capable of: involuntarily to interpret that flavour, and savour the pure acidity in place of thoughts. Later, when your strength returned, the pillows were propped up behind you and you could sit up and play with soldiers; but they fell over so easily on the tilted bed-tray, and always the whole row of them at once; and you were not yet so fully back in life that you could start all over again time after time. Suddenly it was all too much, and you asked to have everything taken away quickly, and it was good to see only your two hands again, a little further off on the cleared counterpane.

At times, when Maman came for half an hour to read me fairy tales (proper reading, for longer times, was Sieversen's task), it was not for the sake of the stories. We were in agreement that we did not care for fairy tales. Our idea of what was wondrous was a different one. We felt that the most wondrous thing of all was when things happened perfectly naturally. We were unimpressed by flying through the air; fairies disappointed us; and when things were transformed into

something else, we had no expectation of anything but the most superficial of changes. But still we read a little, to appear occupied; we did not think it pleasant to have to explain what we were doing when someone came in, and towards Father in particular we made things exceedingly self-explanatory.

Only if we were quite certain that we would not be disturbed, and darkness was falling outside, did we sometimes revel in memories; memories that we shared, which seemed old to both of us and which we smiled at; for we had both grown up since then. We recalled that there was a time when Maman wished I had been a little girl and not the boy I in fact was. Somehow or other I had guessed this, and it had occurred to me sometimes to knock on Maman's door in the afternoon. When she asked who it was, I delighted in calling ‘Sophie’ from outside, making my little voice so dainty that it tickled my throat. And when I entered (in the small, girlish house-dress that I wore anyway, with the sleeves rolled right up) I was quite simply Sophie, Maman's little Sophie, busy about the house, and Maman had to plait her hair for her so that she could not be mistaken for that bad Malte, if he ever came back. This was not at all desirable; both Maman and Sophie were pleased that he was gone, and their talk (Sophie continuing in the same invariably high-pitched voice) consisted mainly in enumerating Malte's naughty doings and complaining about him. ‘Oh, that Malte,’ sighed Maman. And Sophie had a good deal to say about the wickedness of boys in general, as if she knew a great many of them.

‘I should dearly like to know what has become of Sophie,’ Maman would suddenly say while we shared our memories. On that score, of course, Malte could supply no information. But if Maman ventured that doubtless she was dead, he would contradict her wilfully and implore her not to believe it, however little evidence there might be to the contrary.

[32] If I think about it now, I am amazed that I was always able to make a complete return from the world of those fevers, and to find my way back into that altogether shared existence in which everyone sought reassurance that he was among familiar things and where people were careful not to stray from the realm of the comprehensible. If they had an expectation, it was either fulfilled or it was not; there was no third

an expectation, it was either fulfilled or it was not; there was no third option. There were things that were sad, and that was that; there were pleasant things; and there were a great many things of no consequence at all. But if a special treat was prepared for you, it was a special treat and you had to behave accordingly. Essentially it was all very straightforward, and, once you had the knack, things took care of themselves. Within the agreed boundaries, everything fitted in: those long, monotonous hours at school when it was summer outside; walks that you afterwards had to describe in French; visitors you were called in to meet, who declared you a droll child if you happened to be heavy-hearted and were as amused by you as they might be by the melancholy faces of certain birds that have no other faces to put on. And then of course the birthdays, to which children were invited whom you hardly knew, children who were ill at ease and made you awkward yourself, or forward children who scratched your face and broke your presents and were suddenly gone when everything had been pulled out of boxes and drawers and was piled up everywhere. If you were playing on your own, though, as usual, there were occasions when you inadvertently ventured beyond that agreed-on and largely innocuous world and found yourself in circumstances that were completely different and unforeseeable.

At times Mademoiselle had her migraine, which was exceptionally violent; and on those days I was hard to find. I know that the coachman would be sent to look in the park if Father chanced to ask after me and I wasn't there. From upstairs, from one of the guest rooms, I could see him walking out and calling for me from the start of the long avenue. These guest rooms were adjacent to each other under the gables of Ulsgaard, and at that period, since we very seldom had house guests, they were almost always unoccupied. Next to them, however, was the large corner room that held so powerful an attraction for me. There was nothing to be discovered in it apart from an old bust, of Admiral Juel,[21] I believe; but the walls were lined all around with deep wardrobes painted grey, such indeed that the window had had to be positioned in the bare, whitewashed wall above the wardrobes. I had found the key in one of the wardrobe doors, and it opened all the rest. So in a short time I had examined everything: the eighteenth-century chamberlains' frock-coats, quite cold from the

inwoven silver threads, and the beautifully embroidered waistcoats that were worn with them; the uniforms of the Orders of the Dannebrog and of the Elephant, so sumptuous and ceremonial and with lining so soft to the touch that at first one took them for ladies' gowns; and then real gowns, which, outspread on their frames, hung stiffly like puppets in some outsize show that was now so out of fashion that their heads had been put to some other use. Alongside these, however, there were wardrobes that were dark when opened, dark from the high-buttoned uniforms inside, which looked far more used than all the rest and really did not wish to be kept.

No one will find it surprising that I took all these things out to see them in the light; that I now held one against me, now wrapped another round me; that I hastily tried on a costume that might roughly fit and, curious and excited, ran into the first of the guest rooms to see myself in a slender pier-glass composed of sheets of glass in varying shades of green. Oh, how I trembled to be in the costume, and how thrilling it was when I actually wore it; when something emerged from the gloom, more slowly than oneself, for the mirror did not believe it, as it were, and, sleepy as it was, did not want promptly to repeat what it was told; though at length it had to, of course. And now I beheld something that took me very much by surprise, something unfamiliar, altogether different from what I had imagined, something that was suddenly there, with a life of its own, to which I gave a cursory glance, only to recognize myself the next moment, not without a certain irony that came within a hair's-breadth of spoiling all the fun. But if I began to talk right away, to bow, to wave to myself, to withdraw while constantly looking back and then to return in a resolute and agitated manner, I had imagination on my side as long as I pleased.

In those days, I came to recognize the very real power that a particular costume can exert. Scarcely had I put on one of these outfits than I had to concede that it had me in its thrall; it dictated my movements, my facial expression, even the thoughts that occurred to me. My hand, on which the lace cuff fell and fell again, was not at all my everyday hand; it moved like an actor – indeed, I might say it observed itself, exaggerated though that sounds. These disguises never

went so far as to make me feel a stranger to myself, though; on the contrary, the more my transformations varied, the more convinced I was of my own self. I grew more and more daring; I flung myself higher and higher – for my ability to catch myself was beyond all doubt. I was unaware of the temptation that lurked in this rapidly growing assurance. All that remained to complete my undoing was that one day the final wardrobe, which I had so far thought I could not open, yielded and offered me up, not particular costumes, but all manner of odd stuff for masquerades, the fantastic possibilities of which had the blood rushing to my cheeks. It is impossible to tell of all the things that were there. Apart from a *bautta*[22] I remember, there were dominoes of various colours, there were ladies' skirts that tinkled lightly with the coins sewn on to them, there were Pierrots I found silly, and there were pleated Turkish trousers, and Persian caps from which little sachets of camphor slipped out, and diadems with stupid, expressionless stones. All of these I rather despised; they were of so paltry an unreality, hanging there stripped of life and wretched, and collapsing, bereft of will, whenever they were dragged out into the light. But what transported me into raptures were the sweeping cloaks, the wraps, the shawls, the veils, all those yielding, magnificent, unused materials that were soft and caressing, or so sheer that I could hardly keep hold of them, or so light that they flew by me like a wind, or simply heavy with all their own weight. It was in them that I saw, for the first time, truly free and infinitely variable possibilities: to be a slave girl and sold off, or to be Joan of Arc, or an old king, or a sorcerer; all of these I now had in my hand, the more so since there were masks as well, large threatening ones or astonished faces with real beards and thick or arched eyebrows. I had never set eyes on masks before, but I understood why there had to be masks right away. I could not help laughing when it occurred to me that we had a dog that behaved as if it were wearing one. I pictured its affectionate eyes that always seemed to be gazing from behind into a hairy face. I was still laughing as I put on the clothes, and quite forgot what I had meant to dress up as. Still, it was novel and exciting to decide only with hindsight, when I was standing in front of the mirror. The face I had tied on had a curiously hollow smell; it was a tight fit over my own face, but I could see through it comfortably; and only when the

mask was properly on did I pick out a variety of scarves, which I bound about my head like a turban, so that the edge of the mask, which extended below into an immense yellow cloak, was almost entirely covered at the top and sides as well. At length, when there was no way to add anything else, I decided that I was sufficiently disguised. For good measure I picked up a big staff, which I took along with me at arm's length; and thus, not without difficulty but (I imagined) full of dignity, I trailed into the guest room and up to the mirror.

Now this really was superb. It exceeded all my expectations. The mirror instantly returned my image; it was too, too convincing. There really was no need to move much at all; this apparition was perfect, even if it did nothing. But the point was to find out what I actually was, and so I turned a little and finally raised both arms, in grand gestures as if I were casting a spell: that, I realized, was the only appropriate manner. At that very moment of solemn ceremony, however, I heard quite near me, muffled by my own disguise, a noise that came from a number of sources. Startled in the extreme, I looked away from that creature over there, and to my distinct annoyance found that I had knocked over a small, round table with heaven knew what objects on it, in all likelihood very fragile. I bent down as well as I could and found my worst fears confirmed: everything seemed to be in pieces. The two pointless green-and-violet porcelain parrots had of course been smashed, each in a different grievous way. A bonbonnière, from which sweets resembling insects in silken cocoons had rolled, had cast its lid far away, and I could see only the one half, the other having vanished. The most troubling sight of all, however, was a scent flacon that had been broken into a thousand tiny fragments; the remnant of some old essence or other had spilled out of it, and had now made a stain of most offensive physiognomy on the spotless parquet. I hastily dabbed it dry with something that was hanging down from me, but the stain only grew darker and more unpleasant. I was in utter despair. I got to my feet and looked for something I could use to put everything right. But there was nothing. In any case, my vision and movements were so restricted that anger surged up within me at my nonsensical state, which I no longer saw

the point of. I pulled at my garb, but it only wrapped tighter about me. The cords of the cloak were strangling me, and the stuff on my head was pressing on me as if more and more were being added. What was more, the air had grown thick, as if misted by the olden vapour of the spilled liquid.

Hot and furious, I rushed to the mirror and, with some difficulty, watched through the mask the working of my hands. But that was exactly what He had been waiting for. His moment of retribution had come. While I struggled, with a measurelessly mounting sense of trepidation, somehow or other to tear my way free of my disguise, He compelled me – I do not know by what means – to look up, and imposed on me an image, no, a reality, a strange, incomprehensible, monstrous reality, in which I was steeped against my will: for He was now the stronger, and I was the mirror. I stared at this great, terrible unknown figure before me and felt appalled to be alone with Him. But at the selfsame moment that I was thinking this, the very worst happened, and I lost all sense of myself: I simply ceased to exist. For a second I felt an indescribable, poignant and futile longing for myself, and then He was the only one who remained: there was nothing but Him.

I ran. But now He was the one who was running. He bumped into everything; He was unfamiliar with the house, and did not know which way to turn; He made it down a flight of stairs, and in the passage He stumbled over someone who disentangled herself and called out. A door opened, a number of people emerged from it: oh, oh, what a relief it was to recognize them. That was Sieversen, dear Sieversen, and the housemaid, and the butler: this was the decisive moment. But they did not dash over to the rescue; their cruelty was boundless. They stood and laughed: my God, they simply stood there and laughed. I was crying, but the mask prevented the tears from flowing out, and instead they ran down my face inside it, and dried, and ran and dried again. And at last I was kneeling before them as no one had ever knelt; I knelt, and raised my hands up to them, and implored them: ‘Take me out, if you still can, and keep me safe.’ But they did not hear me; I no longer had any voice.

To the end of her days, Sieversen would tell how I sank to the floor and how they went on laughing, supposing this was part of the game.

They were used to my getting up to that kind of thing. But I stayed there, she would say, lying on the floor, never making a word of answer. And how alarmed they were when they finally realized that I was unconscious and lay just like some lifeless piece of something or other amid all those wraps, just like any piece.

[33] Time passed with incalculable speed, and suddenly the moment for Dr Jespersen the preacher to be invited over had come once again. For all concerned, it was a tiresome and tedious breakfast. Accustomed to decidedly pious neighbours who were invariably at his feet, he was out of his element when he visited us, and lay there on dry land, as it were, gasping. He found it difficult to breathe through the gills he had evolved – he came out in blisters; the whole situation was not without its dangers. To be candid, there was nothing whatsoever to talk about; remnants were dragged out and disposed of at unbelievable prices – everything had to go. When he visited us, Dr Jespersen had to content himself with being some sort of private person; but that was precisely what he had never been. As long as he could remember, he had been in the souls department. The soul was a public institution, which he represented, and he contrived never to be off duty, not even in his relations with his wife, 'his modest, faithful Rebekka, beatified by the bearing of children', as Lavater[23] put it when writing of another case.

[*](As for my father, his attitude to God was perfectly correct and courteous beyond reproach. In church I sometimes felt that he was veritably God's Master of the Hunt when he stood there waiting, head bowed. To Maman, on the other hand, it seemed almost offensive that someone might have a polite relationship with God. If she had happened to belong to a religion with distinct and elaborate observances, she would have thought it bliss to kneel for hours on end and to prostrate herself and to make a sweeping sign of the cross in the proper fashion upon her breast and shoulders. She did not strictly speaking teach me to pray, but she found comfort in the pleasure I took in kneeling with my hands now clasped, now held palms together, whichever seemed the more expressive to me at the time. Left largely to my own devices, I early in life passed through a series of evolutionary stages which I related to God only much later, in a period of despair; and then with such vehemence that God took on

form and then shattered almost in the same instant. And during that beginning there were times when I felt I needed Maman, although of course the more proper way was to live through it alone. And besides, by then she had long been dead.)

Towards Dr Jespersen, Maman behaved almost with levity. She would begin conversations with him which he took seriously, and once he was holding forth she felt she had done quite enough and promptly forgot him, as if he were already gone. ‘However can he go around visiting people,’ she would sometimes remark, ‘just when they are dying?’

He came to visit her too, when her time had come, but she most certainly did not see him. Her senses were failing, one by one, and the first to go was her sight. It was in the autumn, and we were on the point of returning to town when she fell ill, or rather, she began to die, right away, the entire surface of her body dying off slowly and inconsolably. The doctors came, and on one particular day they were all there together, holding sway over the whole house. For a few hours it seemed to belong to the privy councillor and his assistants, and we no longer seemed to have any say in things. But in no time at all they had lost interest and came only one at a time, as if out of mere courtesy, for a cigar and a glass of port. And meanwhile Maman was dying.

Now the family were waiting for Maman's only brother, Count Christian Brahe, who it will be recalled had been in Turkish service for a time, where (it was always said) he had been decorated highly. One morning he arrived accompanied by a foreign servant, and I was surprised to see that he was taller than Father and apparently older as well. The two gentlemen exchanged a few swift words, which I assumed had to do with Maman. There was a pause. Then my father said: ‘She is badly disfigured.’ I did not understand the expression, but I shuddered when I heard it. I had the impression that it had cost my father an effort to utter it, too. But it was doubtless his pride that suffered most in admitting how things stood.

[34] It was several years before I again heard any mention of Count Christian. It was at Urnekloster, and it was Mathilde Brahe who was fond of talking about him. If I come to think about it, I am sure that

she took some liberty in elaborating the individual episodes, for the life of my uncle, of which only rumours were known to the public or indeed to the family, rumours that he never denied, afforded infinite possibilities for embellishment. Urnekloster is now in his possession. But no one knows whether he lives there. Perhaps he is still on his travels, according to his custom; perhaps news of his death is on its way from some remote part of the world, written by the foreign servant in poor English or some unfamiliar language. Or perhaps the man will send no word at all when one day he remains behind on his own. Perhaps both of them have long since disappeared and only exist on the passenger list of some lost ship, under assumed names.

In those days, at all events, whenever a carriage drove up to Urnekloster I always expected to see *him* make his entrance, and my heart pounded in a particular way. Mathilde Brahe declared that that was just how he would come. That was him all over – suddenly he would be there, just when one least thought it possible. He never did come, but for weeks he kept my imagination busy; I felt we owed each other some real contact, and I should have liked to have genuine information about him.

When my interest found a new object shortly afterwards, however, and, as a result of certain occurrences, shifted entirely to Christine Brahe, I curiously enough made no attempt to learn anything about the facts of her life. What did trouble me, though, was the speculation about whether there was a portrait of her in the gallery. And the wish to find out became so exclusive and so tormenting as it grew that I could not sleep for several nights, till quite unexpectedly the night came when, Lord knows why, I got up and went upstairs with my candle, which seemed to be afraid.

For myself, I had no thought of fear. I had no thoughts at all; I simply went. The lofty doors yielded so easily before and above me; the rooms I passed through kept quiet. And at length I could tell from the breath of depth upon me that I had entered the gallery. I sensed to my right the windows giving upon the night, and to the left the paintings had to be. I raised my candle as high as I could. Yes, there the paintings were.

At first I decided I would look only at the women; but then I recognized one, and then another, of whom a similar portrait hung at

Ulsgaard, and if my light fell on them from below they moved and wanted to come out into the light, and it seemed heartless not to allow them that much time at least. There was Christian IV, time and again, with his beautifully braided queue hanging down by his broad, gently rounded cheek. There were his wives, presumably, of whom I recognized only Kirstine Munk; and all at once Mistress Ellen Marsvin was looking at me, suspicious in her widow's weeds and with the same string of pearls on the brim of her high hat. There were King Christian's offspring, forever more of them, by different wives, the ‘incomparable’ Eleonore on a white palfrey, at her most dazzling, before the ordeal. The Gyldenløves: Hans Ulrik, who the ladies in Spain imagined painted his face, so full-blooded was he; and Ulrik Christian, whom no one ever forgot. And nearly all the Ulfelds. And that one there, with one eye overpainted in black, might well be Henrik Holck, who was a count of the empire and a field marshal at the age of thirty-three. The story was that on his way to the damsel Hilleborg Krafse, he dreamed that instead of a bride he was given a naked sword: and he took this to heart, and turned back, and embarked on his brief and audacious career, which the plague put an end to. I knew them all. At Ulsgaard we also had the ambassadors to the Congress of Nijmegen, who bore a slight resemblance to each other because they had all been painted at the same time, each with that narrow, close-trimmed moustache above the sensual, almost staring mouth. That I recognized Duke Ulrich goes without saying, and Otte Brahe and Claus Daa and Sten Rosen-sparre, the last of his line; or I had seen portraits of all of them in the dining hall at Ulsgaard, or I had come across copper engravings that depicted them, in old portfolios.[24]

But then there were a great many others I had never seen; few women, but there were children. My arm had long since grown tired and was trembling, but I held up the candle again and again to see the children. I understood them, these little girls who carried a bird on their hand and never gave it a thought. On occasion a little dog was at their feet, a ball lying near, and on the table beside them were fruits and flowers; and behind, on the pillar, small and provisional, hung the coat of arms of the Grubbes or the Billes or the Rosenkrantzes. Such a lot had been gathered about them, as if a great deal had to be made

up for. They, however, simply stood there in their dresses and waited; you could see that they were waiting. And that made me think of the women again, and Christine Brahe, and whether I would recognize her.

I was intending to walk swiftly to the far end of the gallery and then look as I walked back, but then I bumped into something. I turned around so abruptly that little Erik recoiled with a bound, whispering: 'Watch out with your candle.'

'Is that you?' I said, breathless, uncertain whether it was good or distinctly bad. He merely laughed, and I had no idea what to do next. My candle was flickering, and I could not easily make out the expression on his face. It could only be a bad thing, surely, that he was there. But then, as he drew closer, he said: 'Her picture isn't there. We're still looking for it upstairs.' With his low voice and his one movable eye, he made a kind of upward gesture, and I realized that he meant the attic. But suddenly an odd thought occurred to me.

'We?' I asked. 'Is she up there too?'

'Yes,' he nodded, standing very close to me.

'She is looking for it too?'

'Yes. We're looking.'

'So it has been removed, the picture?'

'Yes – just imagine!' he said indignantly. h

But I did not quite understand what she wanted with the picture.

'She wants to see herself,' he whispered, close to.

'Ah, yes,' I returned, as if I understood. At this he blew out my candle. I saw him stretch forward, into the patch of light, his eyebrows arched. Then it was dark. I took an involuntary step back.

'Whatever are you doing?' I exclaimed in a stifled voice, my throat quite dry. He leaped after me and caught hold of my arm and giggled.

'What is it?' I demanded brusquely, and I tried to shake him off, but he clung tight. I could not prevent him from putting his arm around my neck.

'Shall I tell you?' he hissed, and a little saliva flecked my ear.

'Yes, yes, quick.'

I did not know what I was saying. He was now holding me in a full embrace, stretching as he did so.

'I took her a mirror,' he said, and giggled again.

'A mirror?'

‘Yes, because the picture isn't there.’

‘No, no,’ I muttered. d

All at once, he pulled me a little further over to the window and pinched my upper arm so hard that I yelled.

‘She isn't *in*,’ he breathed into my ear.

Involuntarily I pushed him away from me; there was a cracking sound, and I wondered if I had broken him.

‘Get off with you!’ I said, and now I couldn't help laughing myself. ‘Isn't in? What do you mean, isn't in?’

‘You're stupid,’ he retorted maliciously, no longer whispering. His tone had changed, as if he were beginning to perform a new and as yet unfamiliar part. ‘You're either *in*,’ he pronounced with a precocious severity, ‘in which case you aren't here; or else, if you're here, you can't be *in*.’

‘Of course,’ I answered hastily, without thinking. I was afraid that otherwise he might go and leave me alone. I even reached out to him.

‘Let's be friends,’ I proposed. He wanted me to ask.

‘It's all the same to me,’ he said insolently.

I attempted to make a beginning of our friendship, but I did not dare embrace him. ‘Dear Erik,’ was all I could muster, and I touched him somewhere, lightly. Suddenly I was extremely tired. I looked around; I no longer had any idea how I had got there or why I had not been afraid. I did not rightly know where the windows were, or the pictures. And when we left, he had to lead me.

‘They won't do anything to you,’ he assured me magnanimously, and giggled again.

[35] My dear Erik, you were perhaps my one and only friend. The fact is, I never did have one. It is a shame you set no store by friendship. I should have liked to tell you so many things. Maybe we would have got on with each other. One can never know. I remember that your portrait was being painted at the time. Grandfather had hired someone to come and paint you. One hour every morning. I cannot recall what the painter looked like, and his name escapes me, although Mathilde Brahe used to repeat it all the time.

I wonder if he saw you as I see you? You wore a suit of heliotrope-

coloured velvet. Mathilde Brahe waxed rhapsodic about that suit. But that is neither here nor there now. I should merely like to know whether he saw you. Let us suppose he was a real painter. Let us suppose it never occurred to him that you might die before he had finished the portrait; that he did not see his subject in a sentimental light; that he simply did his work. That the dissimilarity of your two brown eyes delighted him; that he was not embarrassed for a single moment by the eye that did not move; that he had the tact not to place anything on the table by your hand, on which you were lightly supporting yourself –. Let us suppose whatever else would have been necessary, and let it stand: the upshot is a picture, your picture, the last portrait in the gallery at Urnekloster.

(And when people walk through it, and have seen them all, there is still a boy to come, at the end. Just a moment: who is that? A Brahe. Do you see the silver palisade on the sable field, and the peacock feathers? There is the name, too: Erik Brahe. Was it not an Erik Brahe who was executed?[25] Absolutely; it is a familiar enough story. But this cannot be the same person. This lad died when he was still a boy; it's of no consequence when. Can't you see?)

[36] Whenever there were visitors and Erik was called, Miss Mathilde Brahe would invariably aver that his resemblance to the old Countess Brahe, my grandmother, was truly astounding. They say she was a most imposing lady. I never knew her myself. I do have a very clear recollection of my father's mother, though – the real mistress of Ulsgaard. For the mistress she had remained, much as she resented Maman for entering the house as wife to the Master of the Hunt. From then on, she was forever affecting to behave in a self-effacing manner, and referring the servants to Maman for every trivial thing, while she herself placidly took the decisions on matters of importance, and carried them out, without accounting to anyone. Maman, I believe, was perfectly happy with this arrangement. She was so ill constituted to run a big establishment; she was wholly unable to distinguish secondary matters from what was of genuine importance. Whatever people spoke to her about became the one thing of overriding consequence, and she forgot the other matters that also needed attending to. She never complained about her mother-in-law. And to

whom should she have complained? Father was an extremely respectful son, and Grandfather had little say in anything.

Mistress Margarete Brigge had always been, as far back as I can remember, a tall, unapproachable old lady. I can only imagine that she must have been much older than the Chamberlain. In our very midst she lived her own life, without any consideration for anyone. She depended on none of us, and always had with her a sort of lady companion, the ageing Countess Oxe, whom she had placed under a limitless obligation by some favour or other. This must have been an exception, since good deeds were not normally in character. She was not fond of children, and did not suffer animals to come near her. I do not know whether she had an affection for anything else. The story went that as a very young girl she had been engaged to Prince Felix Lichnowski, that handsome man who so cruelly lost his life in Frankfurt.[26] And after her death a portrait of the Prince was indeed found among her belongings, and returned to his family, if I am not mistaken. I now think that perhaps, in leading that retired country existence which life at Ulsgaard increasingly became as the years went by, she failed to live another life, a radiant life that was by nature hers. It is hard to say whether she lamented it. She may have despised it for not coming her way, for missing the opportunity of being lived with such talent and panache. She had buried all of this deep within her, and had covered it with carapaces, a large number of brittle carapaces with a faintly metallic sheen, the uppermost of which would always seem new and cool. At times, it is true, she did give herself away, by a naïve impatience at not being paid sufficient attention; in my day, she would suddenly choke at table in some patent and complicated way that guaranteed her the sympathy of all present and, at least for a moment, made her appear as sensational and fascinating as she would have liked to appear on a larger stage. Looking back, I suspect that my father was the only one who took these much-too-frequent accidents seriously. He would watch her, courteously inclining his head, and you could tell that he was mentally offering her his own fully operative windpipe, as it were, and placing it entirely at her disposal. The Chamberlain had of course likewise stopped eating; he took a sip of wine and voiced no opinion

whatsoever.

At table he had only on one occasion asserted his own opinion in the teeth of his wife's. It was a long time ago, but the story was still repeated, maliciously, furtively; almost everywhere there was someone who hadn't yet heard it. It seemed there had been a time when the Chamberlain's wife would get quite worked up over wine stains clumsily made on the table linen; any such stain, however occasioned, would be noted by her and exposed, as it were, in tones of the harshest rebuke. This even happened once when a number of distinguished guests were present. A few innocent stains, which she made much of, afforded her a pretext for sarcastic accusations, and, try as Grandfather might to warn her, by means of subtle signals or jocular remarks, she would have persisted mulishly in her reproaches, had she not been compelled to break off mid-sentence. For something happened that was unprecedented and utterly incomprehensible. The Chamberlain had asked for the red wine, which had just been offered around the table, and was now most studiously filling his glass himself. But, strange to say, he did not cease pouring when the glass was long since full, but slowly and steadily, amid a deepening hush, continued to pour, till Maman, who could never contain herself, laughed out loud and thus made the whole incident acceptable by transforming it into a laughing matter. For everyone now joined in the laughter, relieved, and the Chamberlain looked up and handed the bottle back to the butler.

At a later time, another idiosyncrasy got the better of my grandmother. She could not bear it if anyone in the house fell ill. Once when the cook had cut herself, and my grandmother chanced to see her with her hand bandaged, she claimed the whole house reeked of iodoform, and it was difficult to convince her that the woman could not be dismissed for this reason. She did not want to be reminded of sickness. If anyone was so incautious as to mention a minor complaint in her presence, she took it as a personal affront, pure and simple, and long resented it.

In the autumn when Maman died, the Chamberlain's wife shut herself off completely in her rooms, with Sophie Oxe, and broke off all relations with us. Not even her son was admitted. It is true that the death came at a most inconvenient time. The rooms were cold, the

stoves smoked, and mice had got into the house; you were not safe from them anywhere. But it was more than all this. Mistress Margarete Brigge was outraged that Maman was dying; that there was an item on the agenda which she refused to speak of; that the young wife should presume to take precedence over her – she who intended to die some day herself, though she had not yet by any means decided when. For she did often reflect that she would have to die. She refused, however, to be hurried. She would die, certainly she would die, when it pleased her to do so, and then they could all go ahead and die as well, after her, if they were in such a hurry.

She never quite forgave us Maman's death. In any case, she herself aged swiftly during the winter that followed. She still bore herself tall when she walked, but in her armchair she slumped; and she grew ever harder of hearing. You could sit and stare straight at her for hours and she would be unaware of your scrutiny. She was somewhere within; she returned only at rare intervals, and for brief moments, to her vacated senses, which she no longer inhabited. Then she would say something to the Countess, as the latter was adjusting my grandmother's mantilla, and with her large and freshly washed hands she would gather her dress about her, as if water had been spilled, or we were not quite clean.

She died as spring was approaching, in town. It was in the night; Sophie Oxe, whose door was open, heard nothing; and when my grandmother was found the following morning, she was cold as glass.

It was immediately after this that the Chamberlain's great and terrible illness began. It was as if he had waited for her end, that he might die as unheedful a death as he must.

[37] It was in the year after Maman's death that I noticed Abelone for the first time. Abelone was always there. That militated against her. And then, Abelone was not likeable, as I had realized much earlier on some occasion or other, and I had never seriously reviewed that opinion. Hitherto, it would have struck me as almost ridiculous to wonder what Abelone's story was. Abelone was there, and one made use of her in whatever way one could. But all at once I wondered: Why is Abelone here? Every one of us had a particular reason to be there, even if it was by no means always as apparent as the practical utility, say, of Miss Oxe. But why was Abelone there? For a while

there had been talk of her needing some sort of diversion. But that was all forgotten. No one did anything for Abelone's diversion. Nor did she give the smallest impression of being diverted.

There was one good thing about Abelone, mind you: she sang. That is to say, there were times when she sang. There was a strong, unerring music in her. If it is true that angels are male, you might well say that there was something male in her voice: a radiant, celestial maleness. I, who even as a child had been so distrustful of music (not because it took me out of myself more powerfully than anything else, but because I had noticed that it did not put me back where it had found me, but left me deeper down, somewhere in the heart of things unfinished), I endured that music, on which you could rise upright higher and higher till you imagined that this must already have been pretty much heaven for some time. I had no suspicion that Abelone was to open still other heavens to me.

At first our relationship consisted in her telling me stories of Maman's girlhood. She was anxious to convince me how courageous and youthful Maman had been. In those days, she assured me, no one could compare with her in dancing or horse-riding. ‘She was the most daring of them all, and quite tireless. And then suddenly she got married,’ said Abelone, still astonished after so many years. ‘It was so unexpected; no one could really take it in.’

I was interested to know why Abelone had never married. She struck me as relatively old, and it did not occur to me that she still might.

‘There wasn't anyone,’ she answered simply, and as she said it she became really beautiful. Is Abelone beautiful, I wondered in surprise. Then I left home to go to the Academy for Sons of the Nobility, and an invidious, unpleasant time in my life began. But when I was at Sorö and stood at the window, apart from the others, and they left me in peace for a little, I would look out at the trees, and at such moments, and at night, the certainty grew upon me that Abelone was beautiful. And I started to write all those letters to her, long ones and short ones, a great many secret letters, in which I supposed I was talking about Ulsgaard, and my unhappiness. But I see now that they must in fact have been love letters. For at long last the holidays began, just when it seemed they never would, and it was as if we had arranged that we

would not meet again in the presence of others.

Nothing at all had been agreed between us, but when the carriage turned in to the park I could not help getting out, perhaps only because I did not want to drive up as any stranger might. Summer was already at its height. I turned down one of the paths and walked towards a laburnum tree. And there was Abelone. Beautiful, beautiful Abelone.

I hope I may never forget how it felt when you looked at me. How you wore your look, holding it on your back-tilted face as if it were not firmly attached.

Ah, has the climate not changed at all? Did it not grow milder around Ulsgaard, with all our warmth? Do not stray roses flower longer in the park nowadays, till right into December?

I shall not tell anything about you, Abelone. Not because we deceived each other – since even then there was one man you loved and never forgot, dear loving woman, and since I loved all women – but because only wrong is done in the telling.

[38] There are tapestries here,[27] Abelone, on the walls. I am imagining you are here; there are six tapestries – come, let us walk slowly past them. But first take a step back and look at them all together. Are they not peaceful? There is little variety in them. There is always that oval blue island, floating on a background of subdued red bedecked with flowers and inhabited by little animals busy about their own affairs. Only there, in the last tapestry, the island rises a little, as if it had grown lighter. There is always a figure on it, a woman, wearing various costumes but always the same person. Sometimes there is a smaller figure beside her, a maidservant, and the heraldic animals are always there too, present on the island and involved in the action. On the left a lion, and on the right, lightly coloured, the unicorn; they are bearing the same pennants, which display high above them three silver moons, rising, in a blue band on a red field. – Have you looked? Will you begin with the first?

She is feeding a falcon. How magnificent her garments are. Perched on her gloved hand, the bird stirs. She is watching it and at the same time reaching into the bowl that the maidservant has brought, to feed it something. At the bottom right, a little silken-haired dog is couched on the train of her dress, looking up and hoping it won't be forgotten

on the train of her dress, looking up and hoping it won't be forgotten. And did you notice the low rose trellis that marks the end of the island to the rear? The animals are up on their hind legs, in attitudes of heraldic hauteur. The coat of arms reappears in the cloak that enfolds them. The cloak is fastened by a handsome clasp, and is billowing out.

Do we not involuntarily approach the next tapestry more softly, once we have realized how absorbed she is, weaving a garland, a small circlet of flowers? In pensive mood, she selects the colour of the next carnation from the flat basin the maidservant is holding out to her, as she binds the last one she chose into the garland. To the rear on a bench, unused, is a basket full of roses, which a monkey has discovered. This time it has to be carnations. The lion no longer has any involvement; but the unicorn, to the right, understands.

Should music not enter into this silence? Is it not already there, softly? Wearing a grave and quiet adornment, she has walked (how slowly, do you see?) to that portable organ and now stands playing it, separated by the pipes from her maidservant, who is working the bellows on the other side. Never before has she been so beautiful. Her hair has been wondrously taken forward in two plaits and fastened over the head-dress in such a way that the ends rise out of the knot like a short helmet plume. Out of humour, the lion reluctantly endures the sounds, swallowing a howl. But the unicorn is beautiful, as if moving in waves.

The island opens out broadly. A tent has been put up. Of blue damask and flames of gold. The animals gather it up, and, almost achieving simplicity in her majestic raiment, she steps forward. What, after all, are her pearls compared with herself? The maidservant has opened a small casket, and now the lady lifts out a chain, a heavy, magnificent treasure that has always been locked away. The little dog sits beside her, on a high place prepared for it, watching. Did you see the motto on the upper edge of the tent? It reads: '*A mon seul désir*'.

What has happened, why is the little rabbit down there running, why can you see right away that it is running? Everything is awry. The lion has nothing to do. The lady is holding the pennant herself. Or is she holding on to it? With her other hand she has taken hold of the unicorn's horn. Is this mourning, can mourning stand up so straight, can a mourning dress be so muted as this green-black velvet with its faded patches?

But there is one more festivity to come. No one has been invited to it. What people might expect is neither here nor there. Everything is provided. Everything, for ever. The lion looks around, almost threatening: he won't tolerate anyone coming. We have never seen her tired; is she tired, or has she merely sat down because she is holding something heavy? You might take it for a monstrance. But she is inclining her other arm towards the unicorn, and the gratified animal rears and rises up and leans upon her lap. What she is holding is a mirror. Do you see? – She is showing the unicorn its own likeness.

Abelone, I am imagining you are here. Do you understand, Abelone? I think you must understand.

[39] Now even the tapestries of the *Dame à la licorne* are no longer in the old château of Boussac. The time has come when everything is being removed from the houses; they are not allowed to keep anything any more. Times of danger are safer now than times of safety. No member of the Delle Viste family walks at your side and has it all in his blood. They have all passed on. No one speaks your name, Pierre d'Aubusson, great grand master from an ancient house,[28] at whose behest it may have been that these images were woven that exalt all things and divulge none. (Ah, to think that poets should ever have written differently of women, more literally, or so they thought. It is certain that this was all we were meant to know.) Now one merely happens to stand before them, among others who merely happen to be there, and one is almost alarmed to be there uninvited. But there are others present, though never many, and they move on. Young people barely spare a moment, unless to have seen these things once, to have studied this or that characteristic they possess, is a requirement of their subject.

You do find young girls before them on occasion, though. In the museums there are a good many young girls who have left those houses, somewhere or other, those houses that can keep nothing any more. They find themselves before these tapestries and forget themselves for a while. They always had a feeling that it existed, this kind of soft life of slow and never wholly elucidated gestures, and they darkly remember that for a time they even imagined that life would be their own. But then they hurriedly take out a sketchbook and begin to draw, anything at all, one of the flowers or a small, contented animal. It does not matter what it is, someone has told them. And it really does not matter. The main thing is simply to draw; for that was why they left home one day, rather impetuously. They are of good family. But when they raise their arms as they are drawing, it turns out that their dress has not been buttoned up at the back, or not completely. There are one or two buttons that they cannot reach. For when the dress was made, there was not yet any talk of their going away, suddenly, on their own. At home in the family there is always someone who will help with such buttons. But here, dear God, who will bother with such things in such a big city? The thing would be to

have a girl friend; but girl friends are in the same situation, and they would end up fastening each other's dresses. That would be ridiculous, and would remind them of their families, which they do not want to be reminded of.

It is unavoidable that at times, while they are sketching, they wonder whether it would not have been possible to stay at home after all. If they could only have been religious, with all their heart, in step with the others. But it seemed so nonsensical to attempt it together. Somehow the path has grown straiter: families cannot get to God any more. So all that remained were various other things that could be shared, at a pinch. But if these were shared out fairly, each family member received so little that it was a crying shame. And if they cheated in the sharing, arguments ensued. No, it really is better to be drawing, anything at all. In time the likeness will become apparent. And art, gradually acquired in this way, is an enviable accomplishment, after all.

And in their intense absorption in the work they have undertaken, these young girls, they never have a moment to look up. They do not realize that all their drawing serves only to suppress within themselves the immutable life revealed before them, radiant and infinitely inexpressible, in these woven pictures. They refuse to believe it. Now that so many things are different, they too want to change. They are on the verge of giving themselves up, and of thinking about themselves as men might speak of them in their absence. This they take for progress they have made. They are already almost convinced that one seeks pleasure, and then more, and then an even more powerful pleasure: that this is what life consists in, if one is not to throw it away foolishly. They have already started looking round, seeking, they whose strength always lay in being found.

It comes, I believe, of their weariness. For centuries they have performed all of love; they have always played the entire dialogue, both parts. For man merely repeated what they said, and did it badly. And made it difficult for them to learn, with his inattention, his neglect, his jealousy, which was itself a form of neglect. And nonetheless they persevered day and night, and grew in love and misery. And from among them, under the pressure of endless privations, have come forth those powerful women in love, who were

greater than their man even as they called to him, who grew beyond him when he did not return, like Gaspara Stampa or the Portuguese woman,[29] who never ceased until their torment abruptly became an austere and icy and illimitable splendour. We know of these women from letters that have been preserved, as if by a miracle, or books containing poems of accusation or lament, or portraits in a gallery that look at us through a sort of weeping that the painter caught because he did not know what it was. But there were countless others: those who burned their letters, and others who no longer had the strength to write them. Ancient women who had hardened, with a kernel of exquisiteness which they kept concealed. Formless women who had grown strong, strong from sheer exhaustion, who let themselves grow to resemble their husbands but remained entirely different within, where their love had been working away in the dark. Childbearing women who never wanted to give birth and, when at last they died in bringing the eighth child into the world, had all the manner and lightness of girls looking forward to love. And those who stayed with bullies and drunks because they had discovered a way of being further away from them, inside themselves, than they could be anywhere else; and whenever they were among people, they could not disguise the fact, but were radiant, as if they spent their lives with the blessèd. Who knows how many there were, or who they were? It is as if they had destroyed beforehand the words into which they might be put.

[40] But now that so much is changing, is it not up to us to change? Could we not try to evolve just a little, and gradually take upon ourselves our share in the labour of love? We have been spared all of its toil, and so it has slipped in among our amusements, as a scrap of genuine lace will occasionally fall into a child's toy-box, and give pleasure, and cease to give pleasure, and at length lie there among broken and dismembered things, worse than all the rest. We have been spoiled by easy gratification, like all dilettantes, and are held to be masters. But what if we despised our successes? What if we began to learn, from the very start, the labour of love that has always been done for us? What if we were to go and become beginners, now that so much is changing?

[41] Now I know too what it meant when Maman unrolled the little pieces of lace. For she had started to use just one of the drawers in Ingeborg's secretaire.

‘Let us have a look at them, Malte,’ she would say, as thrilled as if she were about to be made a present of everything in the small, yellow-lacquered drawer. And then in sheer anticipation she couldn't unfold the tissue-paper. I had to do it every time. But I too was greatly excited when the pieces of lace appeared. They were wound on a wooden bobbin, which was quite invisible for lace. So we would unwind them slowly, watching the patterns as they unrolled, a little startled whenever one came to an end. They stopped so suddenly.

First came strips of Italian work, robust pieces with drawn threads, in which everything was repeated over and again, as obviously as in a peasant's garden. Then all at once our gaze was confined, time and again, by a latticework of Venetian needlepoint, as though we were in cloisters or dungeons. But presently we could see freely again, far out into gardens that grew more and more artificial, till all was dense and warm to the eyes, as in a hothouse: luxuriant plants unfamiliar to us spread out their immense leaves, tendrils reached for each other as if they were dizzy, and the great open blossoms of *points d'Alençon* misted everything with their pollen. Suddenly, all weary and bewildered, we stepped out on to the long bolt of Valenciennes, and it was early on a winter morning of hoarfrost. And we squeezed through the snowy thicket of Binche[30] and arrived at places where no one had been before; the branches hung down so strangely, there might well be a grave beneath them, but this thought we kept from each other. The cold affected us more and more closely, till at length, when we came to the tiny, exquisite pillow lace, Maman said: ‘Oh, now we shall get frost-flowers on our eyes’ – which indeed we did, for we were very warm inside.

Both of us sighed as we rolled up the lace again; it was a lengthy task, but we would not entrust it to anyone else.

‘Just imagine we had to make them,’ said Maman, looking properly alarmed. I could not imagine it at all. I caught myself picturing minute creatures incessantly spinning lace and rewarded for their efforts by being left in peace. No, of course it was women who made it.

‘The women who made this must surely have gone to heaven,’ I remarked with admiration. I remember it occurred to me that I had

remarked with admiration. I remember it occurred to me that I had not asked about heaven for a long time. Maman took a deep breath, now that the pieces of lace were rolled up again.

After a while, when I had already forgotten about it, she said, very slowly: ‘To heaven? I think they are absolutely in heaven. Just look at this… it could well mean one's eternal salvation. We know so little about it.’

[42] It was often said, when visitors came, that the Schulins were tightening their belts. The big old manor house had burned down some years before, and they now lived in the two cramped wings, tightening their belts. But entertaining guests was in their blood. They could not give it up. Whenever someone arrived at our house unexpectedly, he had probably come from the Schulins'; and if someone suddenly glanced at the clock, and made a startled departure, it was doubtless because they were expecting him at Lystager.

By that time, Maman did not really go anywhere any more, but this was not something the Schulins could understand; so there was nothing for it but to drive over one day. It was in December, after one or two early snowfalls; the sleigh had been ordered for three o'clock, and I was to go too. But we never left punctually. Maman, who did not care to have the carriage announced, generally went down much too early and, finding no one there, invariably remembered something that should have been attended to long since, and started searching or tidying somewhere upstairs, so that it was next to impossible to find her. At length we would all be standing around waiting. And once she was finally seated and tucked in, something would prove to have been forgotten, and Sieversen must needs be fetched; for only Sieversen knew where it was. But then we would abruptly drive off, before Sieversen returned.

That day, it had never really brightened up. The trees stood as if they had lost their way in the fog, and there was something presumptuous about driving into it. As we drove, the snow began to fall silently once more, and now it was as if all that remained had been erased and we were driving on to a blank page. The only sound was that of the sleigh-bells, and it was impossible to say where exactly it came from. One moment it ceased entirely, as if the very last jingle

had sounded; but then it gathered itself afresh, into a unison of sound, and scattered its fullness upon the air. The church tower to the left we might as well have imagined; but suddenly the shapes of the park were discernible, high up, almost above us, and we were in the long avenue. The sound of the sleigh-bells did not entirely cease again; it was as if it hung in clusters in the trees to our right and left. Then we swung in and drove around something and passed something else on the right and drew up in the middle.

Georg had completely forgotten that the house was not there, and for all of us it was there at that moment. We ascended the flight of steps that led up to the old terrace, and merely thought it odd that all was in darkness. All at once a door opened, below and behind us to the left, and someone called 'Over here!' and raised a dim lantern and swung it. My father laughed: 'Here we are, wandering about like ghosts'; and he helped us back down the steps.

'But there was a house there just now,' said Maman, finding it hard to adjust so quickly to Viera Schulin, who had come out, warm and laughing. Now of course we had to hurry indoors, and there was no more thinking about the house. We left our coats in a cramped vestibule, and anon we were right in amid the lamps, warming ourselves at the fire.

These Schulins were a redoubtable family of independent women. I do not know if there were any sons. I can only remember three sisters: the eldest had married a marchese in Naples and was now gradually divorcing him in a series of law-suits; then there was Zoë, who was said to know everything there was to know; and above all there was Viera, this warm Viera – God knows what has become of her. The Countess, a Narishkin, was really the fourth sister and in a sense the youngest. She knew nothing at all and was continuously in need of instruction by her children. And dear Count Schulin felt as if he were married to all of the ladies, and went about kissing whichever of them happened to be nearest.

He was laughing heartily as we entered and gave each of us a meticulous welcome. I was passed about the women, who felt me and put questions. I had firmly resolved, however, that once this was over I should slip out somehow and look for the house. I was convinced it would be there today. Getting away was not too difficult; I could crawl among all the dresses like a dog, and the door to the vestibule

crawl among all the dresses like a dog, and the door to the vestibule was ajar. But the outer door refused to open. There were various locks on it, chains and bolts, and I was all thumbs as I tried to undo them in a hurry. Suddenly the door did open after all, but it made a loud noise as it did so, and before I could get outside I was apprehended and pulled back.

'Just a moment. No playing truant here,' said Viera Schulin in an amused tone. She bent down to me and I decided I would tell this warm person nothing. But as I said nothing, she simply assumed that the call of nature had driven me to the door; she took me by the hand and set off, meaning in a manner part pally and part imperious to drag me away somewhere. This intimate misunderstanding mortified me beyond measure. I tore myself loose and gave her an angry look.

'I want to see the house,' I said proudly. She did not understand. 'The big house, out by the steps.'

'You silly,' she shot back, reaching out for me, 'there isn't any house there any more.' I insisted that there was. 'We'll go in the daylight sometime,' she suggested in a conciliatory tone. 'You can't go wandering about there now. There are holes, and right behind are Papa's fish ponds, which mustn't freeze. You'd fall in and turn into a fish.'

With that, she pushed me along in front of her, back to the brightly lit rooms. There they all sat, talking, and I looked at them one after another: of course they only go when the house isn't there, I thought contemptuously; if Maman and I lived here, it would always be there. They were all talking at once, and Maman had an absent look to her. No doubt she was thinking about the house.

Zoë sat down beside me and began to ask questions. She had an even-featured face, in which insight was forever burgeoning afresh, as if she were continually seeing this point or that. My father sat leaning a little to the right, listening to the marchesa, who was laughing. Count Schulin was standing between Maman and his wife and was telling a story. But the Countess, I noticed, interrupted him in mid-sentence.

'No, child, you're imagining that,' said the Count good-humouredly, but all at once his face wore the same troubled expression as hers as he inclined towards the two ladies. There was no convincing the Countess that what she asserted was, as he put it, imagination. She

made a distinctly strained impression, like someone who does not want to be disturbed. She made slight, dismissive gestures with her soft, beringed hands; somebody said ‘Psstt!’ and suddenly there was complete silence.

Behind the people in the room, the huge objects from the old house were thrusting upon the scene, far too close. The weighty family silver gleamed, looming as if seen through a magnifying glass. My father looked round, somewhat taken aback.

‘Mama can smell something,’ said Viera Schulin behind him. ‘We always have to be quiet. She smells with her ears.’ She herself stood attentively with her eyebrows raised, all nose.

Ever since the fire, the Schulins had been a little peculiar in this respect. In the cramped, overheated rooms, an odour might be in evidence at any moment, and would promptly be analysed, with everyone giving an opinion. Zoë, a practical and thorough person, busied herself at the stove. The Count went about, pausing in every corner and waiting. ‘It isn't here,’ he would announce. The Countess had got up without any idea where to look. My father turned slowly on his heel as if the odour were behind him. The marchesa, who had instantly assumed that it was an offensive smell, held her handkerchief over her mouth and looked at everyone in turn to ascertain if it was gone. ‘Here, here,’ Viera called from time to time, as if she had found it. And around each word was a curious silence. As for myself, I had been busily sniffing away along with the others. But all at once (was it the heat in the rooms, or the closeness of so many lights?) I was overcome, for the first time in my life, by something akin to a fear of ghosts. It dawned on me that all these assertive, grown-up people who had just been talking and laughing were going about bent over, occupied with something invisible; that they conceded something was there that they could not see. And the terrible thing was that it was stronger than all of them.

My fear grew apace. I imagined that what they were looking for might suddenly break forth from within me, like a rash; and then they would see it and would point at me. In utter desperation I looked across at Maman. She was sitting strangely erect, and I felt she was waiting for me. Scarcely was I beside her, scarcely did I feel how she trembled within, than I realized that only now was the house disappearing once more.

disappearing once more.

‘Malte, you coward,’ I heard someone laugh. The voice was Viera's. But we did not let go of each other, and endured it together; and so we remained, Maman and I, till the house had once again completely disappeared.

[43] It was birthdays, however, that afforded the greatest wealth of virtually inconceivable experience. Of course you already knew that Life took pleasure in making no distinctions; but on that day, you got up aware of a right to joy that was not to be doubted. Quite likely the awareness of this right was instilled very early in life, at that age when you reach out for everything and get it, all; and when, with the unerring power of the imagination, you invest those things you have in your grasp at a particular moment with all the primary-coloured intensity of whatever desire happens to be uppermost within you at the time.

But then suddenly those remarkable birthdays come along, when the awareness of your right is still completely secure within you and yet you see others becoming uncertain. You would like someone to dress you, as they used to, and then accept whatever else is given. But you are hardly awake when someone outside shouts that the cake hasn't come yet; or you hear something break as the presents are being arranged on the table in the next room; or someone comes in and leaves the door open, and you see everything before you were supposed to. At that moment, a kind of operation is conducted on you. It is a brief and horribly painful incision. But the hand that performs it is practised and steady. It is over in no time at all. And you have scarcely got over it than you are no longer thinking of yourself; what matters is to save the birthday, watch the others, anticipate their mistakes, confirm them in their notion that they are managing everything impeccably. They do not make it easy for you. They turn out to be of an unparalleled clumsiness, almost stupid. They contrive to come in with parcels of some sort that are intended for other people; you rush to meet them, and then have to pretend you were merely pacing about the room for a little exercise, with nothing particular in mind. They plan to surprise you, and, with the shallowest show of expectation, open the bottom-most layer of the toy-box, where there is nothing but wood shavings; you simply have to put

them out of their misery. Or if the present they're giving you is a mechanical toy, they over-wind it and break the spring the very first time. So it is no bad thing to practise beforehand, surreptitiously nudging along an over-wound mouse or some such with your foot: it can often be a good way of fooling them and helping them get over the embarrassment.

All of this you did, in the end, just as it was required of you. It took no particular talent; the only time any ability was really called for was when someone had taken some pains, and brought you, all importance and good nature, something delightful, and you could tell a long way off that it was something to delight someone else entirely, a delight you could never feel; you couldn't even think of anyone it would have been suitable for, so alien was it.

[44] The days of telling stories, really telling them, must have been before my time. I have never heard it done. When Abelone used to talk to me about Maman's youth, it was clear that she was not a storyteller. Old Count Brahe, she told me, was. I shall write down what she remembered.

There was a time in Abelone's early girlhood when she was possessed of a broad and idiosyncratic sensitivity. At that date, the Brahes lived in town, in Bredgade, and led an active social life. When she went up to her room late in the evening, she would think she was tired, like the others. But then all at once she became aware of the window and, if I understood her rightly, could stand for hours facing the night and thinking: this means something to me. ‘Like a prisoner I stood there,’ she said, ‘and the stars were freedom.’ At that time, she could go to sleep without making herself feel heavy. The expression ‘falling asleep’ would not have been apt to that year of her girlhood. Sleep was something that rose with you, and from time to time your eyes were open and you were lying on a new surface, one that was still far from being the topmost. And then you were up before daybreak; even in winter, when the others came sleepy and late to a late breakfast. In the evenings, when it grew dark, there were only lights for the whole household, of course, to be shared. But those two candles lit just as the darkness was fresh and everything began anew – those were yours alone. They stood in their low, two-branched

candlestick and shone placidly through the small, oval tulle shades painted with roses, which had to be lowered at intervals. There was nothing inconvenient in this; for once, there was no hurry at all; and at times you would look up, reflectively, from the letter you were writing or from the diary that had once been begun, long since, in a quite different hand, a timid and beautiful hand.

Count Brahe lived altogether separately from his daughters. If anyone claimed to be sharing his life with others, he took it for a delusion. ('Yes of course, sharing –' he would say.) But he had nothing against it when people talked to him of his daughters; he would listen closely, as though they were living in another town.

So it was quite extraordinary when one day after breakfast he beckoned Abelone over to him: 'It seems we have the same habits. I write at the crack of dawn as well. You can help me.' Abelone remembered it as if it were yesterday.

The very next morning, she was led into her father's study, which was always considered forbidden territory. She had no time to take the room in, for she was immediately seated opposite the Count at the writing table, which seemed to her like a vast plain dotted with villages of books and papers.

The Count dictated. Those who maintained that Count Brahe was writing his memoirs were not completely in error; they were not, however, the political or military recollections that were so eagerly anticipated. 'I forget,' the old gentleman would say curtly if asked about these matters. But what he did not want to forget was his childhood. It was important to him. And it was altogether proper, in his view, that that very remote time should be uppermost in him now, and that when he gazed within himself it lay before him as in a clear Nordic summer's night, highly charged and unsleeping.

At times he leaped to his feet and talked into the candles, making the flames flicker. Or whole sentences had to be struck out, at which times he would pace violently to and fro, his eau-de-Nil silk dressing-gown billowing. One other person was present throughout – Sten, the Count's aged valet from Jutland, whose task it was, when my grandfather sprang up, to lay swift hands upon the stray loose leaves covered with notes that lay all over the tabletop. His lordship had a notion that paper nowadays was no good: it was far too lightweight, and blew away on the slightest pretext. And Sten, of whom one saw

only the long upper half, shared this suspicion and held his hands forever at the ready, as it were, day-blind and earnest as a night-owl.

This Sten spent his Sunday afternoons reading Swedenborg, and none of the servants would ever have ventured to enter his room, believing he was summoning up the dead. Sten's family had always been familiar with spirits, and Sten was marked out by destiny for this kind of contact. His mother had seen an apparition on the night he was born. Sten had large, round eyes, and the far end of his gaze invariably rested somewhere behind the person he was looking at. Abelone's father frequently asked after the spirits as one might ask after someone's family: 'Are they coming, Sten?' he would say well-meaningly. 'It is good if they come.'

For a few days, all went well with the dictation. But then Abelone was unable to spell 'Eckernförde'. It was a proper noun, one she had never heard before. The Count, who for a long time had been casting about for a pretext to abandon his writing, which went too slowly for his recollections, affected exasperation.

'She can't spell it,' he said tetchily, 'and no one else will be able to read it. Will they even *see* what I'm saying?' he went on angrily, keeping his eyes fixed on Abelone. 'Will they see him, this Saint-Germain?' he shouted at her. 'Did we say Saint-Germain? Strike it out. Put: the Marquis of Belmare.'[31]

Abelone crossed it out and wrote. But the Count went on so rapidly that she could not keep up.

'He could not abide children, the excellent Belmare, but he did dandle me on his knee, small as I was, and something got into me and I bit his diamond buttons. That tickled him: he laughed and raised my head so that we were looking into each other's eyes. "You have excellent teeth," he said, "teeth that show enterprise…" – For my part, I noticed his eyes. In later life I got around, and I have seen all sorts of eyes, believe me, but never again eyes like his. For those eyes, things did not need to exist; they already contained everything within themselves. You have heard of Venice? Very well. I tell you that those eyes could have *looked* Venice right into this room, so that it would have been here as plain as the table. I once sat in the corner listening as he told my father about Persia; at times, I imagine my hands still smell of it. My father thought highly of him, and His Excellency the

Landgrave was something of a disciple. But of course there were enough people who thought ill of him because he only believed in the past when he bore it within himself. They could not grasp that the whole business is devoid of meaning unless you have been born to it.

'Books are vapid,' cried the Count, with an irate gesture towards the walls. 'The blood is what counts – that is what you have to be able to read. He had wondrous tales and amazing pictures in his, this Belmare; wherever he opened it, there was always an account of something; not a page of his blood had been left blank. And at those occasional times when he shut himself up and turned the pages in solitude, he would come to the passages about alchemical ways of making gold, or precious stones, or colours. Why should these things not have been written down in it? They have been somewhere or other, for sure.

'This man might easily have been able to live with a truth if he had been on his own. But it was no small matter to be alone with such a truth as his. Nor was he so lacking in taste as to invite people to see him when his truth was with him: he did not want her to be the subject of gossip; he was too much the oriental for that. "Adieu, Madame," he said to her, truthfully, "till we meet again. Perhaps in a thousand years we shall be somewhat stronger, and less disturbed. Your beauty is just beginning to blossom, Madame," he said, and it was no mere courtesy. With that he went off and established his zoo for the people, a kind of *jardin d'acclimatation* for the larger species of lies, which had never been seen hereabouts, and a palm-house of exaggerations, and a small, well-tended *figuerie* of bogus mysteries. People came from everywhere, and he went around with diamond buckles on his shoes, entirely at the disposal of his visitors.

'A superficial existence, no doubt. Yet at bottom it was a chivalrous gesture towards his lady, and moreover he kept himself well.'

For some time, the old gentleman had no longer been addressing Abelone; he had forgotten her. He was pacing back and forth like a madman, throwing challenging glances at Sten, as if at some given moment his valet were to be metamorphosed into the person he was thinking of. But Sten was not yet undergoing any metamorphosis.

'The thing would be to *see* him,' continued Count Brahe doggedly. 'There was a time when he was perfectly visible, although in some

towns the letters he received were not addressed to anyone; only the name of the town was written on them, nothing else. But I saw him.

'He was not a handsome man.' The Count gave a singularly hasty laugh. 'He was not even what people call important or distinguished in appearance: there were always others more distinguished around him. He was rich: but in his case wealth seemed a mere whim, not to be relied on. At that time, of course, I could not judge if he had real wit, or this or that quality that people set store by – but he *was*.'

The Count, trembling, stood there and made a gesture as if to place something in the space before him, something of abiding presence.

At that moment, he became aware of Abelone.

'Can you see him?' he demanded of her. And suddenly he snatched up one of the silver candlesticks and held it dazzlingly in her face.

Abelone recalled that she could indeed see him.

Over the next few days, Abelone was summoned regularly, and after this incident the dictation proceeded much more calmly. The Count, drawing on all kinds of documents, was putting together his earliest memories of the Bernstorff circle,[32] in which his father had played something of a part. Abelone was now so well prepared for the peculiarities of her work that anyone who saw the two of them might easily have taken their expedient togetherness for a true intimacy.

On one occasion, when Abelone was about to leave him, the old gentleman stepped towards her, with the air of one who is holding a surprise behind his back: 'Tomorrow we shall be writing about Julie Reventlow,' he said, savouring his words. 'She was a saint.'

In all probability, Abelone gave him a look of disbelief.

'Yes, yes, these things are still possible,' he insisted in a commanding tone. 'All things are possible, Countess Abel.'

He took Abelone's hands and opened them like a book.

'She had the stigmata,'[33] he said, 'here and here.' And he tapped his cold finger on both her palms, hard and sharp.

Abelone did not know what 'stigmata' meant. Wait and see, she thought; she was most impatient to hear about the saint her father had seen. But she was not brought in any more, neither the following morning nor on any later occasion. –

'Countess Reventlow has often been talked of in your family,' Abelone concluded tersely, when I asked her to go on. She looked

tired; and she claimed to have forgotten almost everything. ‘But there are times when I still feel it in those two places,’ she smiled and, irresistibly drawn to the thought, looked almost with curiosity at her unmarked hands.

[45] Even before my father's death, everything had changed. Ulsgaard no longer belonged to us. My father died in town, in an apartment that I felt to be hostile and alien. At that time, I was already living abroad, and was too late getting back.

He lay on a bier, between two rows of tall candles, in a room that gave on to a courtyard. The scent of flowers defied comprehension, like a number of voices all babbling at the same time. His handsome face, in which the eyes had been closed, wore an expression of courteous reminiscence. He was wearing the uniform of the Master of the Hunt, but for some reason with the white ribbon affixed, not the blue. His hands were not folded, but lay crossed, looking artificial and meaningless. Someone had rashly told me that he had suffered a great deal; but none of that was visible upon him. His features had been as neatly arranged as the furniture in a guest-house room when somebody has left. I felt as if I had often seen him dead already, so familiar did it all look.

The only thing that was new, unpleasantly so, was the setting. This oppressive room was new, and windows faced it opposite, quite likely other people's windows. It was new for Sieversen to come in from time to time and do nothing. Sieversen had grown old. Then I was asked to breakfast. Several times, breakfast was announced. I had absolutely no desire to breakfast that day. I did not realize that they wanted me out of the room; in the end, since I did not go, Sieversen somehow contrived to remark that the doctors had arrived. I did not grasp why they were there. There is something that still needs to be done, said Sieversen, looking at me intently with her reddened eyes. Then two gentlemen entered somewhat precipitately: these were the doctors. The first dropped his head abruptly, as if he had horns and meant to butt us, and looked at us over his glasses: first Sieversen, then me.

He bowed with the formality of a student. ‘The Master of the Hunt had one last request,’ he said, in the selfsame manner as that of his entrance; again I had a sense of his precipitate haste. Somehow I compelled him to look through his glasses. His colleague was a portly

compelled him to look through his glasses. His colleague was a portly, thin-skinned, blond man; I reflected that it would be easy to make him blush. A pause ensued. It was curious that the Master of the Hunt should still have wishes.

Involuntarily I looked once again at that handsome, regular countenance. And at that moment I grasped that what he wanted was certainty. Essentially that was what he had always wanted. Now he was to get it.

'You are here to pierce his heart.[34] Please go ahead.'

I bowed and stepped back. The two doctors returned my bow simultaneously, and began at once to confer about their work. Someone was already pushing the candles aside. But the elder of the two took another step or so towards me. When he was fairly close, he leaned forward to spare himself the remainder of the distance and gave me an angry look.

'It is not necessary,' he said, 'that is to say, I mean, it may be better if you…'

He made a worn and neglected impression, in his economy of movement and his hasty manner. I bowed once more; it was in the nature of the situation that I should already be bowing again.

'Thank you,' I said shortly. 'I shan't disturb you.'

I knew that I could endure the scene, and that there was no reason to avoid it. It was inevitable. Indeed, it was perhaps the meaning of it all. Nor had I ever witnessed anyone's breast being pierced. It seemed perfectly in order not to spurn so signal an experience when it was offered so freely and unconditionally. Even then I did not really believe in disappointments any more; so there was nothing to fear.

No, no, there is nothing in the world that we can imagine, not the least thing. In everything there are so many unique details which are impossible to predict. In imagination, we pass over them in our haste, not noticing that they are lacking. But realities are slow and indescribably detailed.

Who, for instance, would have dreamed of that resistance? Hardly had the broad, high chest been laid bare but the hasty little man had already located the right place. The instrument, however, speedily applied, did not penetrate. I felt all time had suddenly deserted the room. It was as if we were in a painting. But then time rushed in again, with a faint swish, and there was more of it than could be used.

All at once there was a knocking sound somewhere. I had never heard a knocking like it before: a warm, muffled, twofold knocking. My ear registered the sound, and at the same time I saw that the doctor had driven his instrument home. It was a little while, though, before the two impressions merged within me. Very well, I thought: they're through now. The knocking, so far as its speed was concerned, had an almost malicious sound to it.

I looked at the man I had now known for such a long time. No, he was in complete command of himself, a gentleman working away swiftly, with his attention on the matter in hand, about to leave for his next appointment. There was not a trace of pleasure or satisfaction in his manner. Only at his left temple, out of some ancient instinct, a few hairs were standing on end. He carefully withdrew the instrument, leaving something that resembled a mouth, from which blood issued twice in succession, as if it were uttering two syllables. The young, blond doctor quickly and elegantly dabbed it up with cotton wool. And now the wound remained at peace, like a closed eye.

In all likelihood I bowed once again, this time without really knowing what I was doing. At all events, I was astonished to find myself alone once more. Someone had tidied the uniform, and the white ribbon lay across it as before. But now the Master of the Hunt was dead, and not only he. Now the heart had been pierced, our heart, the heart of our family. Now it was over. This, then, was the breaking of the helmet: ‘Brigge today and nevermore,’ something said within me.

I was not thinking of my own heart. And later, when my thoughts did turn to it, I knew for the first time, with utter certainty, that it was not a heart suited to these purposes. It was an individual heart. It was already beginning afresh, from the beginning.

[46] I know I supposed that I could not depart right away. First, everything has to be set in order, I told myself repeatedly. *What* it was that needed to be set in order was not clear to me. Next to nothing needed to be done. I walked about the town and noted that it had changed. It was pleasant to step out of the hotel I was staying in and to see that it was now a city for adults, trying to look its best for me, almost as if I were a stranger. Everything had shrunk a little, and I

strolled down Langelinie and on, as far as the lighthouse, and back. When my walks took me to the Amaliengade neighbourhood, there might well be some presence I had been under the sway of for years and which tested its old power over me again. There were particular corner windows or archways or street lamps that knew a great deal about me, and used the knowledge threateningly. I looked them in the face so that they knew I was staying at the Phoenix Hotel and might be leaving at any moment. But I did so with an uneasy conscience. I had a growing suspicion that I had not yet put any of these influences or associations fully behind me. I had deserted them in secret one day, all unfinished as they were. My childhood, too, still lay ahead of me, in a sense, if I were not to give it up for good. And even as I was grasping that I was losing it, I sensed that I would never have anything else to which I could appeal.

Every day I spent a few hours in Dronningens Tværgade, in those small rooms that wore the affronted look of all rented apartments where someone has died. I paced to and fro between the desk and the big white-tiled stove, burning the Master of the Hunt's papers. I had made a start on consigning his correspondence to the flames in bundles, as I found them; but the little packages were tied too tight and merely charred around the edges. It cost me an effort to untie them. Most of them had a strong, penetrating scent that assailed me as if to stir up memories in me too. I had none. At times photographs slipped out, heavier than the rest; these photographs burned incredibly slowly. I do not know why, but presently I got it into my head that a picture of Ingeborg might be among them. But every woman I looked at was mature and superb, of manifest beauty, and put quite different thoughts into my head. It turned out that I was not altogether without memories after all. It was eyes exactly like these that sometimes gave me a sense of myself when, as a growing boy, I walked along the street with my father. Gazing at me from within a passing carriage, they could enfold me in a look from which there was hardly any escaping. Now I realized that in those days they had been comparing me with him, and that I had been found lacking. But that was to be expected: the Master of the Hunt had no need to fear comparisons.

It is possible that I now know something that he did fear. Let me say

how I arrived at this assumption. Well inside his wallet was a sheet of paper, folded long since, brittle and broken along the creases. I read it before I burned it. It was written in his finest hand, firmly and evenly; but I perceived right away that it was only a copy.

'Three hours before his death,' it began. It was about Christian IV. Naturally I cannot reproduce the content word for word. Three hours before his death, he desired to get up. The doctor and Wormius, the valet, assisted him to his feet. He stood rather unsteadily, but he stood, and they pulled on his quilted dressing-gown. Then he suddenly sat down at the foot of the bed and said something unintelligible. The doctor kept hold of his left hand so that the King would not sink back on the bed. There they sat, and from time to time the King made an effort and sluggishly repeated the unintelligible thing he had said. In due course, the doctor started talking to him in encouraging tones, hoping little by little to work out what the King was saying. After a while the King interrupted him, saying all at once, quite distinctly, 'Oh doctor, doctor, what is your name?' The doctor had some difficulty remembering.

'Sperling, most gracious Majesty.'

But this was really of no consequence at all. The moment the King found that they understood what he was saying, he opened wide his right eye, which he still had, and put the whole expression of his features into that one word his tongue had been forming for hours, the one thing that still existed: '*Döden*,' he said, '*döden*.'*

That was all that was written on the sheet of paper.[35] I read it several times before I burned it. And I recalled that my father had suffered greatly at the last. That was what they had told me.

[47] Since then I have thought a great deal about the fear of death, not without bearing in mind certain experiences of my own. I believe I can truly say that I have known it. It has beset me in busy cities, amid the crowd, often without any reason at all. Often, though, there were reasons aplenty: say, someone sitting on a bench suddenly passed away, and everyone stood around staring at him, and he was already far beyond fear – I would have his fear. Or that time in Naples, when the young girl sitting opposite me in the tram died. At first it looked as if she had fainted, and the tram moved on for a while. But then there

was no doubt that we had to stop. And the traffic halted behind us, stuck in a jam, as if nothing would ever be able to drive that way again. The pale, fat girl might easily have died peacefully like that, leaning against the woman beside her. But her mother was having none of it. She made it as tough for her as she could. She mussed her clothes and poured something into her mouth, which couldn't keep anything in any more. She rubbed some liquid that someone had brought on her forehead, and, when the girl's eyes rolled slightly, the mother began to shake her, to bring a straight gaze back into them. She screamed into those eyes, which heard nothing; she worried and tugged at the girl's body as if it were a doll; and in the end she drew back her arm and slapped the fat face as hard as she could, so the girl would not die. That time, I was afraid.

But I had already been afraid before. For example, when my dog died. The selfsame dog that laid the guilt upon me, for all time. It was very ill. I had been kneeling at its side all day long, when suddenly it barked, a brief, brusque bark such as it used to give when a stranger came into the room. That sort of bark was a signal we had agreed on, as it were, for this occasion, and I glanced up involuntarily at the door. But it was already in him. Unsettled, I tried to look into his eyes, and he tried to look into mine; but not to bid farewell. The look he gave me was hard and aggrieved. He was blaming me for letting it in. He was convinced I could have stopped it. It was apparent now that he had always thought too highly of me. And there was no time left to explain. He looked at me, aggrieved and lonely, till it was over.

And then I was afraid in autumn, after the first night frosts, when the flies came into the rooms to revive one last time in the warmth. They were strangely dried up, and were startled by their own buzzing; you could see they no longer quite knew what they were doing. For hours on end they sat there, dead to the world, till they realized they were still alive; then they would fling off blindly in any direction at all, with no notion what they were doing there, and you would hear them falling again, over there, then somewhere else. And at length they would be crawling around all over, their death steadily infecting the whole room.

But even when I was alone I could be afraid. Why should I pretend that they never happened, those nights when I sat up gripped by the

fear of death, clinging tight to a sense that the mere act of sitting signified life: the dead did not sit. It was always in one of those rooms I just happened to be living in, rooms that promptly abandoned me when things went wrong, as if they were afraid of being cross-examined and involved in my woeful affairs. There I sat, probably looking so frightful that nothing had the courage to take my side; not even the lamp, which I had just done the service of lighting, wanted anything to do with me, and burned away blithely as if in an empty room. At such times, my last hope was always the window. I imagined that outside there might yet be something that was mine, even now in this sudden destitution of dying. But scarcely had I looked than I wished the window had been barricaded shut, as closed up as the wall. For now I knew that out there, too, things took their indifferent course; that out there, too, there was nothing but my loneliness, the loneliness I had brought upon myself and which was of an enormity that my heart was no longer equal to. I recalled people I had once left, and it was simply beyond me that one could part from other human beings.

My God, my God, if any more such nights still lie before me, at least leave me one of those thoughts I have occasionally been able to think. What I am asking is not so unreasonable; I know, after all, that they were born of very fear, because my fear was so great. When I was a boy, they hit me in the face and told me I was a coward. That was because my fear was still of an unworthy kind. Since then, however, I have learned to be afraid with a genuine fear, which grows only as the force that engenders it grows. Of that force we have no conception, except in our fear. For it is so utterly inconceivable, so entirely opposed to us, that our brain fails us precisely when we strain to think upon it. Nonetheless, for some time now I have believed that that force is *ours*, it is all our own, and still it is too powerful for us. It is true that we do not know it; but do we not know the least about what is most our own? At times I reflect on how heaven came into being, and death: we put away what was most precious to us, because there was so much that had to be dealt with first, and because it was not safe with us, in our busy lives. And now ages have passed by, and we have grown accustomed to things of less consequence. We no longer recognize what is our own, and are appalled at its vasty greatness.

May it not be so?

[48] I now understand very well, by the way, that a man will carry, for many a year, deep inside his wallet, the account of a dying hour. It need not even be one especially chosen; they all have something well nigh distinctive about them. Can we not imagine someone copying out, let us say, the manner of Félix Arvers's death? He died in a hospital, at ease and in repose, and the nun perhaps supposed he was closer to death than in fact he was. She called out some instructions or other, in a very loud voice, detailing where this or that was to be found. This nun was quite uneducated; the word ‘corridor’, which she could not avoid using, she had never seen written down, so it happened that she said ‘collidor’, thinking that was how it was pronounced. This decided Arvers to postpone his death. He felt it was necessary to clear the matter up first. He became perfectly lucid, and explained to her that the word was ‘corridor’. Then he died.[36] He was a poet and hated the inexact; or perhaps he was simply concerned with the truth; or else it bothered him that his last impression of the world should be that it was carrying on in this careless fashion. There is no determining which it was. But let no one think it was pedantry. In that case, the same stricture might be brought against the saintly Jean de Dieu,[37] who leaped up from his deathbed and was just in time to cut down a man who had hanged himself in the garden, knowledge of whom had in some miraculous way penetrated the inward tension of the saint's agony. He too was concerned with the truth alone.

[49] There is a creature that is perfectly harmless if you set eyes on it; you hardly notice it and instantly forget it. Should it somehow get into your ears unseen, however, it begins to evolve, and hatches, as it were; there have been cases where it made its way into the brain and flourished there, with devastating effect, like the pneumococci in dogs that enter by the nose.

This creature is your neighbour.

Now since I have been living like this in various places, on my own, I have had countless neighbours, above me and below, to the right or to the left, at times all four at once. I could simply write the history of my neighbours; that would be a life's work. True, it would be more the

history of the symptoms they have caused in me; but that is something they share with all creatures of a similar sort – that their presence can only be demonstrated through the malfunctions they occasion in certain tissues.

I have had unpredictable neighbours, and others who were very regular in their habits. I have sat trying to work out the law that governed the former; for it was plain that they too had one. And if the punctual ones failed to return at the usual time one evening, I imagined what might have happened to them, and left my lamp burning, and was as anxious as a young wife. I have had neighbours filled with sheer hatred, and neighbours in the toils of a passionate love; and I have witnessed that moment when the one abruptly turned to the other, in the middle of the night, and then, of course, there could be no thinking of sleep. Indeed, I had every opportunity to observe that sleep is by no means as widespread as people suppose. My two St Petersburg neighbours, for instance, attached little importance to sleep. One of them would stand playing the violin, and I am sure that as he played he looked across to the too-wakeful houses that never ceased to be light in those improbable August nights. As to my other neighbour, to my right, I know that he lay in bed; in my time, he never got up at all. He even kept his eyes shut; but you could not say that he slept. He lay there reciting long poems, poems by Pushkin and Nekrassov, in that intonation children use when they are called upon to recite poems. And despite the music of my neighbour to the left, it was this man with his poems who spun a cocoon inside my head, and God knows what would have hatched had not the student who sometimes visited him knocked at the wrong door one day. He told me the story of his acquaintance, and in a way it proved a comforting one. At all events, it was literal and unambiguous, a story that defied the teeming maggots of my conjectures.

One Sunday, this petty functionary next door had got it into his head to solve a singular problem. He took it that he would live for a good many years, say another fifty. The generosity he thus showed himself put him in excellent spirits. Now, though, he meant to surpass himself. He reflected that those years could be expressed as days, as hours, as minutes, even (if you could be troubled) as seconds; and he did his sums, and did some more, and in the end had a total such as he

had never seen. It was dizzying; he had to rest a while. Time, he had always heard, was precious, and it baffled him that a man who possessed such a quantity of time was not accompanied by a guard. How easy it would be to rob him. But then his good, almost jolly spirits returned; he put on his fur coat, to look a little broader and more imposing, and made himself a present of the whole fabulous capital, addressing himself in a somewhat patronizing manner:

'Nikolai Kuzmich,' he said benevolently, picturing himself seated on the horsehair sofa, without the fur coat, skinny and wretched, 'I do hope, Nikolai Kuzmich,' he said, 'that you will not let your wealth go to your head. Never forget that it is not the main thing. There are poor people who are thoroughly respectable; there are even impoverished aristocrats and generals' daughters peddling things around the streets.' And the philanthropist adduced a whole number of other examples that were well known in town.

The other Nikolai Kuzmich, the one on the horsehair sofa, the recipient of the gift, did not look at all puffed up and purse-proud, not yet; it was a safe assumption that he would keep his feet on the ground. In point of fact, he made no change whatsoever in his modest, regular ways, and from now on he spent his Sundays setting his accounts in order. But after only a few weeks, he found that he was spending an incredible amount. I shall economize, he thought. He got up earlier, he washed less thoroughly, he drank his tea standing, he ran to the office and was there much too early. In everything he saved a little time. But when Sunday came, there weren't any savings to show for his efforts; and he realized he had been cheated. I should never have got small change, he told himself. How long a full, unbroken year would have lasted. But this blasted small change simply disappears, who knows where. And one disagreeable afternoon, there he sat on the sofa in the corner, waiting for the gentleman in the fur coat, from whom he meant to demand his time back. He would bolt the door and not let him leave until he had forked out. 'In notes,' he would say, 'ten-year notes, for all I care.' Four notes of ten and one of five, and he could keep the rest, in the devil's name. Yes, he was prepared to let him have the rest, simply to avoid difficulties. So there he sat on the horsehair sofa, irritable, waiting – but the gentleman never showed up. And he, Nikolai Kuzmich, who just a few weeks

before had seen himself sitting there so very much at his ease, he was unable, now that he was really sitting there, to picture the other Nikolai Kuzmich, that generous gentleman in the fur coat. Heaven only knew what had become of him; probably his frauds had been exposed, and he was already behind bars somewhere. No doubt he was not the only one he had ruined. These confidence tricksters always operate on a grand scale.

It occurred to him that there must be a public authority, some sort of Time Bank, where he could at least change part of his miserable seconds. After all, they were perfectly genuine. He had never heard of any such institution, but surely something of the kind would be in the directory, under ‘T’; or perhaps it was called the ‘Bank of Time’ – it would be easy to check under ‘B’. Conceivably it might be under ‘I’, since it was presumably an imperial institution, as befitted its importance.

Later, Nikolai Kuzmich would always insist that on that Sunday evening, though he was understandably quite dejected, he hadn't had a drop to drink. He was thus completely sober when the following incident occurred, so far as one can tell what did in fact happen. Perhaps he had briefly nodded off in his corner; one could easily imagine it. At first, this little snooze brought him a great sense of relief. I have been messing about with numbers, he admonished himself. Now, I don't know a thing about numbers. But it is obvious that one shouldn't attach too much importance to them; after all, they are only an arrangement made by the state in the interests of public order. No one has ever seen them anywhere but on paper. You couldn't possibly meet a seven, say, or a twenty-five, at a social gathering. They simply weren't there. And then there was this little confusion, occasioned by mere inadvertence, between time and money – as if the two could not be distinguished from each other! Nikolai Kuzmich very nearly laughed. It was definitely a good thing to have figured out what he himself was up to, and in good time, that was the important thing, in good time. Now things would be different. Time, there was no denying, was a delicate matter. But was he the only one affected? Did it not pass for others too, as he had worked out, in seconds, even if they were unaware of it?

Nikolai Kuzmich was not altogether innocent of rejoicing in the

misfortunes of others. Just let it – he was about to think, when something peculiar happened. A draught suddenly wafted on his face, and breezed past his ears; he could feel it on his hands. He opened his eyes wide. The window was firmly closed. And as he sat there in the dark room with his eyes wide open, he began to understand that what he was now feeling was real time, passing. He could actually recognize each one of them, all those seconds; they were all equally tepid, one exactly like the other, but how fast they were, how fast! Heaven only knew what they were up to. That it should happen to *him*, of all people, who took wind of any kind as an insult. Now he would sit there, and the draught would be never-ending, his whole life long. He foresaw all the attacks of neuralgia that would result; he was beside himself with rage. He leaped to his feet; but the surprises were not yet over. Under his feet, too, there was a sort of motion, not just one motion but several, interwoven in a curious reel. He stiffened with terror: could that be the earth? Most certainly it was the earth. The earth did move. They had said so at school, though it was passed over rather hastily, and later there was a tendency to keep quiet on the subject; it was not the done thing to talk about it. But now that he had grown sensitive he felt this too. Did others feel it? Perhaps, but they did not show it. In all likelihood it did not bother them, these sea-going folk. But Nikolai Kuzmich was somewhat delicate, in this of all respects; he even avoided taking the tram. He staggered about his room as if on the deck of a ship, and had to hold on with both hands. Unfortunately he further recalled something to the effect that the earth's axis was at an angle. No, he couldn't take all these motions. He felt wretched. Lie down and rest, he had once read somewhere. And ever since, Nikolai Kuzmich had been lying in bed.

He lay with his eyes closed. And there were times, the less turbulent days, so to speak, when life was quite tolerable. And that was when he thought up the business of the poems. It was scarcely credible that it should have helped so much. To recite a poem slowly, with an even emphasis on the end rhymes, was to have something stable, as it were, that you could keep your gaze fixed on – your inner gaze, of course. It was sheer good fortune that he knew all those poems by heart. But he had always taken a most particular interest in literature. He did not complain about the condition he was in, the student who had known

him a long time assured me. But in the course of time he had developed an inflated admiration for those such as the student who walked about and endured the earth's motion.

I remember this story so precisely because I found it inordinately reassuring. It is not too much to say that I have never again had so pleasant a neighbour as this Nikolai Kuzmich, who would doubtless have admired me too.

[50] After this experience, I resolved that in similar cases I would always go straight to the facts. I noticed how straightforward they were, and what relief they brought, compared with conjectures. As if I had not known that all our insights come after the fact; they draw a line under an account, and that is all. On the very next page a quite different account begins, with no balance carried forward. What use, in the present case, were the handful of facts that could easily be established? I shall name them in a moment, once I have said what concerns me right now: that the facts have tended rather to make my situation, which (I now concede) was quite difficult, more troublesome still.

To my own honour be it said that I have written a great deal in recent days; I have been writing compulsively. Even so, when I went out I did not look forward to returning home. I would even walk a little out of my way, losing half an hour in which I might have been writing. I confess that this was a weakness. Once I was in my room, however, I had nothing to reproach myself with. I was writing; I had *my* life, and the life next door was a completely different one, with which I had nothing in common – the life of a medical student studying for his finals. I had nothing comparable before me, and that in itself was a signal difference. In other ways, too, our circumstances were as different as they possibly could be. All of this made perfect sense to me, up to the moment when I knew that *it* would come; and then I forgot that we shared no common ground. I listened so hard that my heart pounded. I abandoned everything else and listened. And then it happened: I was never wrong.

Most people are familiar with the noise made when you drop a round metal object, say the lid of a tin. Generally, it is not very loud when it hits the floor: there is the brief impact, then it rolls on its rim

and only really becomes disagreeable when the momentum runs down and the lid reels down every which way till it finally comes to rest. Now, that is all there was to it: some metal object of this description fell next door, rolled, came to rest, and while this was happening someone stamped on the floor at intervals. Like all sounds that impress themselves upon us by repetition, this one too had its own internal structure; it changed, and was never exactly the same, but this very fact argued that it obeyed its own laws. It could be violent or soft or melancholy; it could run its course at a terrific rate, as it were, or it could glide along for an infinity before coming to rest. And the final reeling decline was invariably a surprise. The stamping that accompanied it, on the other hand, had an almost mechanical quality. But it always punctuated the noise in a different manner; that seemed to be its function. I have a much better grasp of all these details now; the room next to mine is unoccupied. He has gone home, back to the provinces. He needed a period of rest. I live on the top floor. To my right there is another building; no one has moved into the room below me; I have no neighbour.

In this condition, I am almost surprised that I did not take the matter more lightly. Though an intuition gave me advance warning every time. I should have profited from that. Do not be startled, I should have told myself, now *it* is coming; I knew I was never mistaken. But perhaps my state was due to the very facts I had ascertained; once I knew them, I was more susceptible to alarms than ever. There was something almost sinister in the thought that the cause of the noise was that small, slow, soundless movement with which his eyelid drooped over his right eye as he read, and closed against his will. This, a mere trifle, was the key thing in his story. He had already had to defer his finals a couple of times; his self-esteem had made him touchy, and quite likely his people at home put pressure on him whenever they wrote. So what alternative did he have but to pull himself together? But the problem was that a few months before he took his resolve, he had developed this weakness, this trivial and quite impossible tendency to fatigue; it was as absurd as a window blind that refuses to stay up. I am certain that for weeks he felt it should be possible to overcome the problem. Otherwise I should never have hit on the notion of offering him my own will. The fact

was that one day I grasped that his own willpower was exhausted; and ever since, whenever I felt *it* coming, I would stand there on my side of the wall urging him to use mine. And in due course I realized that he had accepted the offer. Maybe he should not have done so, especially if you consider that it did not really help. Even assuming we managed to win time, it is still a moot point whether he was truly in a position to make use of the moments we thus gained. As for my own outgoings, I was beginning to feel the pinch. I know I was wondering if things could go on like this on that very afternoon when someone came up to our floor. Since the staircase was so narrow, this always caused quite a commotion in the small guest-house. After a while I had the impression that someone entered my neighbour's room. Our doors were the last on the passage; his was right next to mine, at an angle. I did know that he occasionally had friends call on him, but, as I have said, I took no interest whatsoever in his affairs; it might be that his door was opened several more times, that people were coming and going out there, but it was really no business of mine.

That evening, though, it was worse than ever. It was not yet particularly late, but I was tired and had already gone to bed; I thought I would probably get some sleep. Suddenly I started as if someone had touched me. Immediately after, it began. It rebounded and rolled and knocked against something and teetered and came to a clattering stop. The stamping was fearful. While this was going on, someone on the floor below was banging distinctly and angrily on the ceiling. The new lodger was being disturbed as well, of course. Now: that had to be his door. I was so wide awake that I thought I heard his door despite the extraordinary care he took when opening it. I imagined he was coming closer. Doubtless he wanted to know which room the noise was coming from. What irritated me was his truly overdone show of consideration. After all, he had just been able to see just how little store was set by peace and quiet in that establishment. Why on earth was he treading so softly? For a moment I thought he was at my door; and then I heard him, beyond the shadow of a doubt, entering the next room. Without any ado, he walked right in.

And now (how shall I describe it?), now silence fell. It was as silent as in the aftermath of pain. The silence was strangely palpable and prickling, as if a wound were healing. I could have slept right away; I

could have taken a deep breath and fallen asleep. It was only my astonishment that kept me awake. Somebody was speaking next door, but that too was part of the silence. The nature of that silence had to be experienced; it cannot be described. Outside, too, it was as if everything were calm and composed. I sat up and listened, and it was like being in the country. Dear God, I thought, his mother is there. She was sitting with the lamp at her side, talking to him, and perhaps he was resting his head a little on her shoulder. Presently she would be putting him to bed. Now I knew what that soft tread out in the passage had been. Ah, to think that it was still possible. Such a creature, for whom doors open in such a way as they never do for us. Yes, now we could sleep.

[51] I have already almost forgotten my neighbour. I quite see that I took no genuinely sympathetic interest in him. At times I do ask downstairs, in passing, if there is any news of him, and what it might be. And I am pleased if there is good news. But I am overdoing it: I do not really need to know. If I sometimes feel a sudden temptation to go into the room next door, it is no longer to do with him. It is only a single pace from my door to the next, and the room is not locked. I should be interested to know what that room really looks like. It is easy to imagine any room, and often what you imagine is about right. It is only the room next to your own that is invariably quite different from how you picture it.

I tell myself that it is in this that the temptation lies for me. But I know full well that what awaits me in there is a certain metal object. I assume that it really is the lid of a can, though of course I may be wrong. That does not trouble me. It is in my nature to blame the whole business on a tin lid. Presumably he will not have taken it with him. Doubtless the room has been tidied and the lid replaced on the tin where it belongs. And now, the two together constitute the concept ‘tin’, a round tin, to be precise – a simple and perfectly familiar concept. I feel I can remember their being on the mantelpiece, these two things that constitute the tin. Yes, they are even in front of the mirror, so that behind them there is a second tin, an unsubstantial one that looks deceptively like the real one, a tin we attach no value to but which a monkey, say, would reach for – in fact, there would even be two monkeys reaching for it, because the monkey would be duplicated

two monkeys reaching for it, because the monkey would be duplicated too, once it was above the lintel of the mantel. At all events, it is the lid of this tin that has got it in for me.

Let us agree on one thing: the lid of a tin – of a sound tin, the rim of which has the same curvature as its own – this lid ought to have no other desire than to be on its tin; that ought to be the uttermost it could want, the ultimate satisfaction, the fulfilment of its every wish. There is something veritably ideal in being turned patiently and gently and resting evenly on the contraposed edge, feeling the grip of the rim, elastic and as sharp as your own rim is when you lie there alone. Ah, but how few lids there are that can still appreciate this. This nicely illustrates the confusion that contact with humankind has occasioned among things. Humankind, if we may very briefly compare them with these lids, fit on to their occupations most reluctantly, and with a bad grace. Partly because in their haste they have not hit upon the right one, partly because they have been put on crooked and in anger, partly because the corresponding rims are curved in different ways. Let's be honest about it: all they essentially think about is to jump down the moment they get the chance, roll and clatter about. Why else would we have all these so-called amusements, and the racket they make?

Things have by now been observing this for centuries. No wonder they are corrupted, if they lose the taste for their natural, silent functions and want to take advantage of existence just as they see it everywhere being taken advantage of. They try to get out of the uses to which they are properly put; they grow listless, neglect their duties, and people are not at all surprised to catch them on a jag. They know what it's like from their own experience. They are angered because they are the stronger ones, because they suppose they have more of a right to a change, because they feel they are being aped; but they let the matter go, just as they let themselves go. But wherever there is one who pulls himself together, some solitary who wants to rest roundly upon himself day and night, verily he provokes the opposition, the mockery and the hatred of the degenerate objects, whose bad consciences cannot tolerate the thought that anything might control itself and strive to achieve its own meaning. They join forces to trouble, scare and confound him, knowing that they can do it. Winking at one another, they set about that temptation that ramifies

infinitely, enlisting every creature under the sun, and even God Himself, against that solitary one who may perhaps endure: the saint.

[52] How well I now understand those wondrous pictures in which things intended for limited and regular uses stretch out and attempt each other, lascivious, inquisitive, quivering with the casual lewdness of dissipation. Those cauldrons that stroll about, boiling; those pistons that have got funny ideas into their heads; and those indolent funnels poking into holes for fun. And then those limbs and members, tossed up by the envious void, and faces pouring hot vomit upon them, and farting arses presented for a pleasuring.

And the saint writhes and flinches; yet in his eyes there lingers a look that concedes that these things are possible – he saw them. And already his senses are forming a precipitate in the clear solution of his soul. Already his prayer is losing its leaves and rises from his mouth like a dead tree. His heart has tipped over and spilled its contents into the murk. The lash of his scourge is as weak as a tail flicking off flies. His sex is once again in one place alone, and when a woman walks erect through the throng, her bared bosom full of breasts, it points to her like a finger.[38]

There were times when I thought these pictures obsolete. Not that I doubted them. I could imagine that in those days such things did happen to the saints, those over-hasty zealots who wanted to get straight to God from the very start, whatever the cost. We no longer feel equal to these trials. We sense that He is too difficult for us, that we must postpone Him so that we may slowly accomplish the long work that separates us from Him. Now, however, I know that that work is just as fraught as saintliness; that these tribulations beset anyone who is solitary for the sake of the work, just as they beset God's solitaries in their caves and bare shelters, in bygone times.

[53] When we speak of the solitaries, we invariably take too much for granted. We suppose people know what is meant. No, they do not. They have never set eyes on a solitary; they have merely hated him without knowing him. They have been his neighbours, using him up, and the voices in the next room, tempting him. They have incited things against him, to make a noise and drown him out. Children were in league against him when he was tender and a child himself, and his

in league against him when he was tender and a child himself, and his growth, as he grew, was all against the grown-ups. They tracked him to his hiding-place like a hunted animal, and through the long years of his youth there was never a closed season. And when they couldn't reduce him to exhaustion, and he escaped, they shrieked at what he had produced, and declared it ugly, and cast suspicion on it. And when he paid them no attention, they made their meaning plainer, and ate up his food and breathed up his air and spat on his poverty, to make it repugnant to him. They brought him ill repute, as if he had a contagious disease, and threw stones at him to drive him away all the faster. And in their ancient instinct they were right: for he was indeed their foe.

But then, when he did not look up, they paused to reflect. They sensed that in all they did they were doing his will; that they had been giving him strength in his solitude, and helping him to separate from them for ever. And at this they changed their approach, and adopted their final and ultimate tactic, that other means of spurning: fame. Whenever this clamour has been made, there has hardly been a man who has not looked up, and been distracted.

[54] Last night my thoughts turned to the little green book I must once have possessed as a boy; and I do not know why, but I imagine it to have been Mathilde Brahe's. It did not interest me when I got it, and it was several years before I read it – during my vacation at Ulsgaard, I believe. But from the very first moment, it meant a great deal to me. It was filled with resonant meaning from first to last, even in terms of externals. The green of the binding had a significance, and you recognized at once that the inside had to be as it was. As if by some prior arrangement, first there was the smooth endpaper, watered white upon white, and then the title page, which had an air of mystery. It looked as if there might well be illustrations within; but there were none, and you had to concede, almost in spite of yourself, that this too was as it should be. It made up somewhat for this when you found the thin bookmark at a particular place in the book. Brittle with age and left at a slight angle, touching in its confidence that it was still rose-coloured, it had lain between the same pages since God knows when. Perhaps it had never been used, and some conscientious

bookbinder had placed it, hurriedly, inattentively. But possibly the place it marked was no accident. It might be that someone who never read another line had stopped reading at that point; that fate had knocked on his door at that moment, occupying him, taking him far away from books, which after all are not life. It was impossible to tell whether any more of the book had been read. It might equally have been that a reader had wanted to read this passage over and over again, and had done so, though sometimes not until late at night. At all events, I felt reticent about those two pages, as you might before a mirror which someone else is looking into. I never read them. Indeed, I do not know whether I read the whole book. It was not very big, but there were a great many stories in it, especially of an afternoon; then there was always one you hadn't yet read.

I remember only two of them. Let me say which: ‘The End of Grisha Otrepyov’[39] and ‘The Fall of Charles the Bold’.[40]

God knows whether it made any impression on me at the time. But now, after so many years, I recall the account of how the body of the false Tsar was thrown to the mob, and lay for three days, stabbed and mutilated, a mask on its face. There is of course no likelihood at all that the little book will ever come into my hands again. But that passage must have been remarkable. I should also like to reread the description of his meeting with his mother. He will have felt very sure of himself, since he had her come to Moscow; I am even convinced that at that date he believed so powerfully in himself that he actually imagined he was summoning his own mother. And after all, this same Maria Nagoi, making the hurried days' journey from her wretched convent, had everything to gain by giving her assent. But would not his insecurity have begun precisely when she acknowledged him? I am not disinclined to think that the power of his transformation lay in no longer being the son of anyone.

(That, after all, is the power of all young people who have left home.)[*]

The fact that the people wanted him without having any clear conception of what they wanted merely made him freer and more unbridled in the possibilities before him. But his mother's avowal, even if it was a knowing deception, had the power to diminish him; it set him apart from the opulence of his invention; it limited him to

weary imitation; it reduced him to the individual he was not: it made him an impostor. And now, undermining him more subtly, there was this Marina Mniszech as well, who denied him in her own fashion, for, as it subsequently appeared, she believed not in him but in anyone. Of course I cannot vouch for how much of all this was dealt with in that story. These things, it seems to me, should have been included.

But leaving that aside, this incident is in no way out of date. We could imagine a writer of our own time who would labour meticulously over those last moments; nor would he be wrong to do so. A great deal happens in them: waking from a deep sleep, he leaps to the window, and out of the window into the courtyard, landing among the sentries. He cannot get to his feet unaided; they have to help him. Quite likely he has broken his foot. Leaning on two of the men, he senses that they believe in him. He looks around: the others believe in him too. He almost feels sorry for them, these gigantic *streltsy* – it must be quite a change: they knew Ivan Grozny, in all his reality, and they believe in *him*. He wouldn't mind enlightening them, but if he opened his mouth he'd simply scream. The pain in his foot is excruciating, and right now he thinks so little of himself that all he is aware of is the pain. And then there is no time. They come crowding round, he sees Shuisky, and behind him all the others. Presently it will be over. But his bodyguards close round him. They are not going to abandon him. And a miracle happens. The faith of these old men spreads; suddenly, no one will advance. Shuisky, right before him, calls up in desperation to an upper window. The impostor does not look round. He knows who is standing there; he realizes that silence has fallen, a sudden and total silence. Now there will be the voice, that voice he knows of old, that high, false voice that overstrains itself. And then he hears the Tsarina Mother disowning him.

Up to this moment, the story tells itself, but now, if you please, we need someone who can tell a story, we need a storyteller: because the few lines that remain to be told must be redolent of a force that would brook no opposition. Whether it is stated or not, you must feel utterly convinced that between the voice and the pistol shot, in that infinitesimal interim, the will and the power were once again in him to be everything. Otherwise there is no understanding how gloriously logical it was that they transfixed him through his nightshirt, and stabbed him through and through in search of the hard core of the

stabbed him through and through in search of the hard core of the man's being. And that in death he still wore the mask, for three whole days, which he had almost laid aside.

[55] When I think about it now, it strikes me as curious that the same book contained an account of the end of a man who for all his life was one and the same, hard and unchangeable as granite, a man who weighed ever more heavily on those who bore him up. There is a portrait of him in Dijon. But even without it, we know that he was brusque, contrary, headstrong and desperate. Only the hands are perhaps not what we should have expected. They are distinctly warm hands, continually wanting to cool themselves and involuntarily resting on anything cold, outspread, with air between the fingers. The blood might surge into those hands as it rushes to one's head, and when clenched they were really like the heads of madmen, raging with fantasies.

To live with that blood called for an incredible caution. The Duke was sealed up with it within himself, and at times he was afraid of it, when it moved around in him, furtive and dark. Even to him it could seem terribly alien, that fleet, half-Portuguese blood that he scarcely had any knowledge of. Often he feared it might attack him as he slept and tear him apart. He behaved as though he had it in his control, but in reality he always lived in terror of it. He never dared love a woman lest it be jealous, and so raging was it that he never let wine pass his lips; rather than drink, he appeased it with compote sweetened with rose-water. On one occasion, however, he did drink, in the camp before Lausanne, when Granson was lost; he was sick, and had no one, and he downed a great deal of wine, without water. But his blood was sleeping, then. During his last years, when he was out of his senses, it would sometimes fall into this heavy, bestial sleep. At such times, it was apparent just how very much he was in its power; when it slept, he was nothing. No one was allowed to enter his presence at those times; he did not understand what they were saying. He could not allow foreign envoys to see him, desolate as he was. He would sit there waiting for his blood to awaken. And mostly it would suddenly leap up and burst out from his heart and roar.

For the sake of that blood, he carried with him all the things he

cared not a farthing for. The three great diamonds and all the stones; the Flemish laces and the Arras tapestries, piles of them. His silken pavilion with its cords of braided gold, and four hundred tents for his retinue. And pictures painted on wood, and the twelve Apostles in pure silver. And the Prince of Taranto, and the Duke of Cleves, and Philip of Baden, and the seigneur of Château-Guyon. For he hoped to persuade his blood that he was emperor and nothing was above him – that it might fear him. But his blood did not believe him, despite these proofs; it was a distrustful blood. Possibly he kept it in doubt for a while. But the horns of Uri were his undoing. From that time on, his blood knew that it was lodged in a lost man – and it wanted to be out.

That is how I see it now, but at that time what impressed me most powerfully was the account of the Epiphany, when they were looking for him.

The young Duke of Lorraine, who the day before had ridden into his wretched town of Nancy after that remarkably precipitate battle, had wakened his entourage at a very early hour and asked after the Duke of Burgundy. One messenger after another was dispatched, and he himself appeared at the window from time to time, restless and anxious. He could not always make out who the men were that they were bringing in on their carts and litters; he saw only that none of them was the Duke. Nor was he among the wounded, and none of the prisoners they were continuously bringing in had set eyes on him. The fugitives, though, bore all manner of reports hither and thither, and were confused and frightened, as though they were afraid of running into him. As darkness fell there was still no news of him. The word that he had disappeared had time enough to spread on that long winter's evening. And wherever it spread, it produced in everyone an assertive, overstated certainty that he was still alive. Never before, it may be, was the Duke so real to every imagination as he was that night. There wasn't a house where they did not sit up watching and waiting and thinking they heard him knock. And if he did not come to their door, it was because he had already gone by.

It froze that night, and it was as if the idea that he still existed froze as well, so hardened did it become. And years and years were to pass before it melted away. All of those people, though they might not properly know it, were determined that he should still *be*. The fate he

had brought upon them was bearable only if he were there. It had been so hard for them to learn that he *was*; but now that they had learned the lesson, they found him easy to remember, and impossible to forget.

On the following morning, however, the seventh of January, a Tuesday, the search for him was resumed. And this time there was someone to lead the way, one of the Duke's pages, who had apparently seen his master fall, from a distance; now he was going to show them the place. He himself had said nothing; the Count of Campobasso had brought him in and had spoken for him. Now the page walked ahead, and the rest followed close behind. Those who saw him, muffled and oddly unsure of himself, found it hard to believe that this was in fact Gian-Battista Colonna, who had the beauty and slender limbs of a girl. The cold made him shiver; the air was stiff with night frost; the crunching underfoot was like the grinding of teeth. Every one of them was frozen, for that matter. Only the Duke's fool, whom they dubbed Louis-Onze, was constantly on the move. He played at being a dog, ran ahead, came back, and ambled along for a time on all fours beside the youth; but whenever he spied a corpse, he bounded over and bowed to it and urged it to pull itself together and be the man they were looking for. He gave it a while to think it over, but then returned to the rest, grouchy, uttering threats and curses, and bemoaning the mulishness and sloth of the dead. And on they went, and the search was never-ending. The town was almost lost to view; murky weather had settled in meanwhile, despite the cold, and it had turned grey, and visibility was poor. The country lay flat and indifferent, and the small, compact group looked more and more lost, the further they went. No one said a word; only an old woman who had walked along with them muttered something, shaking her head – perhaps she was praying.

Presently the leader of the group stopped and looked about him. Then he turned abruptly towards Lupi, the Duke's Portuguese physician, and pointed ahead. A few paces further on lay an expanse of ice, some sort of pool or pond, and in it, half immersed, lay ten or twelve bodies. They had been stripped almost completely bare, and robbed. Lupi went from one to the next, bowed and all attention. And now Olivier de la Marche and the chaplain were to be seen as well, walking about separately. The old woman, however, was already

kneeling in the snow, whimpering, bent over a large hand, the outspread fingers of which pointed stiffly towards her. Everyone ran to the spot. Lupi and some of the attendants attempted to turn the corpse over, which was lying on its belly. But the face was frozen fast, and, as they pulled it away from the ice, one cheek peeled off, thin and brittle, while the other proved to have been torn off by dogs or wolves; and the whole was cleft by a great wound, running from the ear, so that it could not be called a face at all.

One after another they looked round, each expecting to find the Roman behind him; but all they saw was the fool running towards them, angry and bleeding. He was holding a cloak at arm's length and shaking it, as if to dislodge something from it; but there was nothing in the cloak. So they cast about for marks of identity, and did indeed find a number. A fire had been started and they washed the body with warm water and wine. This revealed the scar on the throat, and the traces of the two large abscesses. The doctor no longer had any doubt. But other evidence was found as well. A few steps further on, Louis-Onze had discovered the cadaver of Moreau, the great black stallion the Duke had ridden in the battle of Nancy. He sat astride it, his short legs dangling. The blood still flowed from his nose into his mouth, and you could see that he was tasting it. One attendant some way off recalled that the Duke had had an ingrown toenail on his left foot; so now they all looked for this nail. But the fool wriggled as if he were being tickled, and called out, ‘Ah, Monseigneur, forgive them for revealing your gross defects, these dolts, and for failing to recognize you in my long face, wherein your virtues are written.’

*(The Duke's fool was also the first to enter when the corpse had been laid out. It was in the house of one Georges Marquis, for no reason anyone could account for. The pall had not yet been spread, and so he got the full impact. The white of the shroud and the crimson of the cloak stood in harsh and hostile contrast with the twofold black of the baldachin and bed. Scarlet long-boots stood before the bed, pointing towards him with their big, gilded spurs. And there could be no disputing that that thing up there was a head, once you saw the coronet. It was a large ducal coronet, set with precious stones of some description. Louis-Onze walked about, examining everything closely. He even felt the satin, although he knew little about such things. It

would presumably be good satin, albeit perhaps a trifle cheap for the House of Burgundy. He stepped back one last time to take it all in. In the light reflected off the snow, the colours seemed strangely unrelated to each other. He impressed each one separately upon his memory. ‘Well accoutred,’ he observed at length, with approval, ‘if a little too assertively.’ Death seemed to him like a puppet-master finding himself in urgent need of a duke.)

[56] One does well simply to acknowledge that certain things that will not change are as they are, without lamenting the facts or indeed pronouncing judgement on them. Thus, for instance, I have realized that I was never a proper reader. In childhood, I saw reading as a calling one would enter into at some later date, when all of the vocations came up for consideration, one after another. To be honest, I had no clear idea when that might be. I trusted that one would recognize a time when life turned around, as it were, and now came from the outside only, just as formerly it had come from within. I imagined this would be a clear and unambiguous matter which one could not possibly fail to grasp; not a simple business, by any means – on the contrary, a most demanding, complex and difficult thing, if you will – but at any rate a visible process. That strangely unbounded quality of childhood, the lack of proportion, that refusal of things ever to be quite foreseen, would all be behind one. Not that I could really see how. Essentially this was all still growing apace on me, closing in on every side, and the more I looked out, the more I stirred up what was within me: God knows where it came from. But probably it grew to its uttermost and then broke off abruptly. It was easy to see that grown-ups were very little troubled by all of this; they went about making their judgements and doing what they did, and, if ever they were in difficulties, it was external circumstances that were to blame.

I resolved that reading would be one of the things that ushered in changes of this order. When the time came, I would behave towards books as I would towards acquaintances; there would be time for them, a specific amount of time that would pass smoothly and pleasantly, just as much time as suited me. Naturally some of them would be closer to me than others, and I could not say for certain that I'd be proof against wasting the odd half hour with them now and

then, missing a walk, an appointment, the opening scene of a play, or a letter that urgently had to be written. But that my hair should be matted or tousled, as if I had been lying on it, or that my ears should burn and my hands be cold as metal, or that a tall candle beside me should burn right down to its holder – these things, thank God, would be utterly out of the question.

I mention these phenomena because they were quite strikingly part of my own experience during those holidays at Ulsgaard when I so suddenly took to reading. It promptly became apparent that I wasn't up to it. I had of course begun my reading before the period I had set aside for it. But that year in Sorö, among a lot of others about my own age, had left me wary of such plans. While I was there, a number of unanticipated experiences had swiftly stolen up on me, and quite clearly they took me to be a grown-up. They were large-as-life experiences, and bore upon me with all their actual weight. To the selfsame extent as I grasped their reality, though, my eyes were also opened to the infinite reality of my childish state. I knew that it would not come to an end now, any more than that other state was only just beginning now. I told myself that everyone was of course at liberty to partition experience, but the dividing lines they drew were mere fictions. And it turned out that I lacked the knack of devising such divisions myself. No matter how often I tried, life gave me to understand that it knew nothing of their existence. If I insisted, though, that my childhood was over, everything that lay ahead of me vanished at that precise moment as well, and all that remained to me was as much as a lead soldier has beneath his feet to stand on.

This discovery understandably isolated me even more. It kept me busy with myself and filled me with a species of conclusive blitheness which I took for affliction, since it was far in advance of my years. I was also disquieted, as I recall, by the thought that, as nothing was set for any particular period, one might miss out on some things altogether. And when I returned to Ulsgaard in this frame of mind, and beheld all the books, I fell upon them, in quite a hurry, and very nearly with a bad conscience. Somehow I had a premonition of what I so often felt at later times: that you did not have the right to open a single book unless you engaged to read them all. With every line you read, you were breaking off a portion of the world. Before books, the

world was intact, and afterwards it might be restored to wholeness once again. But how was I, who could not read, to take up the challenge laid down by all of them? There they stood, even in that modest study, in their hopelessly outnumbering ranks, shoulder to shoulder. In defiant desperation I pressed on from book to book, fighting my way through the pages like one called upon to perform a labour beyond his capacity. At that time, I read Schiller and Baggesen, Oehlen-schläger and Schack-Staffeldt,[41] and all there was of Walter Scott and Calderón. Some things came into my hands that I ought to have read already, as it were, while for other things it was far too early; next to nothing was suitable for the age I was then. And nonetheless I read.

In later years, I would occasionally wake at night to find the stars so very real, and so brimful of significance, that I could not understand how people could bear to miss out on so much world. It was a similar feeling, I believe, whenever I looked up from the books and out to where summer was, where Abelone was calling. That she must needs call, and that I did not even answer, was a turn neither of us anticipated at all. It came in the midst of our happiest time. But since I was now in the grip of reading, I clung on hard to the habit and hid away, wilful and self-important, from our daily holidays. Inept as I was at taking advantage of the many, often subtle opportunities afforded by natural happiness, I was not loth to see in our growing disharmony the promise of future reconciliations, which became the more appealing the longer they were postponed.

In the event, one day my reader's trance ended as abruptly as it had begun; and on that occasion we put each other in a royal rage. By now, Abelone was not sparing me any kind of ridicule or disdain, and if I joined her in the summerhouse she would claim to be reading. On that particular Sunday morning, the book was indeed beside her, albeit unopened; but she seemed more than fully employed in carefully stripping redcurrants from their little clusters with a fork.

It must have been one of those early mornings one gets in July, fresh and rested times when joyful and spontaneous things are happening all around. From a million tiny irrepressible impulses, a mosaic of the most compelling life is assembled; things vibrantly intermingle, and move out into the air, and their coolness makes the

shadows vivid and lends lightness and spirit to the radiance of the sun. No one thing in the garden stands out above the rest; all things are everywhere, and one would needs be a part of it all, if nothing were to be missed.

In Abelone's humble employment, moreover, the whole scene appeared afresh. It was such a happy notion, to be doing that very thing, and precisely as she did it. Her hands, bright in the shade, worked together so lightly and dextrously, and the round berries leaped mischievously from the fork into a bowl lined with dew-matted vine leaves, where others were already heaped, red and blond, gleaming, with the good seeds within the tart flesh. Seeing this, all I wanted was to watch; but, as I would probably be told off if I did, and in order to appear at ease, I picked up the book, sat down on the other side of the table, and, leafing through it only briefly, began to read somewhere or other.

‘You might at least read aloud, you bookworm,’ said Abelone after a while. This did not sound anywhere near as quarrelsome, and since I felt it was high time we made up, I instantly started reading out loud, and continued to the end of the chapter and the next heading, ‘To Bettina’.

‘No, not the replies,’ Abelone interrupted, and all at once she put down the little fork with an air of exhaustion, then promptly laughed at my expression as I sat looking at her.

‘My God, you really read that badly, Malte.’

I had to admit that my mind had not been on what I was reading for a single second. ‘I was only reading so that you would interrupt me,’ I confessed, and grew hot and turned back to the title page of the book. Only then did I know what it was. ‘And why not the replies?’ I asked, curious.

Abelone might as well not have heard me. There she sat in her bright dress, as if the darkness were deepening everywhere within her, just as it was in her eyes.

‘Give it to me,’ she said suddenly, as if in anger, and, taking the book out of my hand, she opened it at the page she wanted. And then she read one of Bettina's letters.[42]

I do not know how much I took in, but it was as if a solemn promise had been made to me that one day I should understand it all. And as her voice filled out, until at last it was almost the voice with which I

her voice filled out, until at last it was almost the voice with which I had heard her sing, I felt ashamed that I had had so petty an idea of our reconciliation. For I well understood that that was what this was. But now it was taking place somewhere in the vast open spaces high above me, out of my reach.

[57] That promise is still being kept. At some time or other, that same book found its way among my books, those very few books I shall never part with. Now it opens at the passages I happen to have in mind for me too, and when I read them I cannot be certain whether it is Bettina I am thinking of or Abelone. No, Bettina has become more real within me; Abelone, whom I actually knew, was like a preparation for her, and now, for me, she has completely merged into Bettina, as if she had been transmuted into her own absolute self. For that strange creature, Bettina, brought space into being with all of her letters, a world of spacious dimensions. From the very start she was present in everything, as if she already had her death behind her. Everywhere she entered into the profound depths of being, herself a part of it, and whatever happened to her was an eternal part of Nature; there she recognized herself, and pulled back with something akin to pain; she pieced herself together again, laboriously, as if inferring herself from the tales people tell, and conjured herself up like a spirit, and endured herself.

Just now you still *were*, Bettina; I sense your presence. Does not the earth still bear your warmth? And do not the birds still leave a space for your voice? The dew is different, but the stars are still the stars of your nights. Or isn't the whole world in fact yours? For how often you set it on fire with your love, and watched it burn and blaze, and secretly replaced it with another while everyone slept. You felt in such complete harmony with God when every morning you demanded a new world of Him, so that all the worlds He had made might have their turn. You thought it shabby to save them up or mend them; you used them up and held out your hands for more world, more. For your love was equal to anything.

How can it be that people are not still all talking about your love? What has happened since then that was more extraordinary? Whatever are they thinking of? You yourself were well aware of the value of

your love, and spoke it aloud to your greatest of poets,[43] that he might make it human; for as yet it was still elemental. But in writing to you, he persuaded people not to believe in it. Everyone has read those replies, and people place more credence in them, because the poet is more intelligible to them than Nature. But perhaps it will one day be seen that this marked the limit of his greatness. This woman in love was a challenge posed to him, and he was unequal to it. What does his inability to respond signify? Love of this order requires no response: it bears the mating call and the answer within itself; it hears its own prayer. But he should have humbled himself before her, in all his splendour, and written what she dictated, with both hands, like John on Patmos, kneeling. That voice, which 'performed the office of the angels', left him no choice; it was come to enfold him and bear him away to eternity. Here was the chariot of his fiery ascension.[44] Here was the dark myth he left void, prepared against his death.

[58] Fate loves to devise patterns and designs. Its difficulty lies in complexity. Life itself, however, is difficult because of its simplicity. It consists of a few things only, of a magnitude out of all proportion to our lives. The saint, rejecting fate, chooses these and confronts God. But the circumstance that woman, in accordance with her nature, must make the same choice with regard to man, governs the fated course of all love relationships: resolute and without a fate, like an eternal being, she stands beside him as he is transformed. The woman who loves always surpasses the man who is loved, because life is greater than fate. Her devotion aspires to be infinite: that is her happiness. But the nameless grief of her love has always been this: that she is required to limit that devotion.

No other lament has ever been raised by women: the first two letters of Héloïse contain only that, and five hundred years later it is raised by the letters of the Portuguese nun; one recognizes it as one does a bird-call. And suddenly, through the bright space of this insight, there passes that remotest of figures, Sappho,[45] whom the centuries failed to find because they sought her in fate.

[59] I have never dared buy a newspaper from him. I am not sure that he really does always have copies with him when he shuffles slowly to

and fro outside the Jardin du Luxembourg, all evening long. He turns his back to the railings and his hand grazes the stone coping from which the bars rise. He renders himself so flat that many people pass by every day without ever seeing him. He does still have something of a voice left, true, and uses it to draw attention; but it is no different from a noise in a lamp or a stove, or the odd irregular dripping of water in a cave. And the world is so ordered that there are people who are forever passing by, their whole lives long, in that interval when he moves on, making less of a sound than anything else that moves, like the hand of a clock, like the shadow of the hand of a clock, like time itself.

How wrong I was to be so disinclined to look. I am ashamed to record that often, when I was approaching him, I walked as the rest did, as if unaware of his very existence. At such moments, I'd hear something within him say '*La Presse*', and then again, and a third time, at rapid intervals. And the people near me would turn and look for the voice. I, though, made a greater show of haste than all the rest, as if I had noticed nothing, as if I were altogether preoccupied.

And so I was. I was preoccupied with picturing his life; I had embarked on the task of imagining him, and the effort had brought out a sweat on me. For I had to make him up as you would make up a dead man for whom no evidence and no remains exist, one who has to be constituted entirely within yourself. I now know that it helped me a little to think of all those Christs of striated ivory, unmounted from their crosses, that lie around in every antique shop. The thought of some pietà occurred, and passed again – all no doubt merely to call to my mind the particular angle at which his long face was bowed, and the desolate aftergrowth of stubble in the hollows of his cheeks, and the painful finality of the blindness in his closed-up expression, turned obliquely upwards. But there was so much besides that was very much his; for even then I grasped that nothing about him was unimportant: not the way that his jacket or coat, sitting too loosely at the back, exposed the whole of his collar, that low collar that enclosed in a wide curve his stretched-out, hollowed neck without ever touching it; not the greenish-black cravat fastened loosely about all of these; and most especially not his hat, an old, high-crowned, stiff felt hat which he wore as all blind men wear their hats, with no regard to the lines of their faces, and without the possibility of combining the accessory

their faces, and without the possibility of combining the accessory with their own selves to form a new unity for the outer world, but merely as some agreed extraneous item. In my cowardly refusal to look at him, I finally arrived at a point where the image of this man, often without any reason, would so powerfully and painfully distil into so harsh a misery within me that, upset by the experience, I decided to defy the growing resourcefulness of my imagination by confronting it with the external reality, and so setting it at nought. Evening was falling. I decided to walk past him attentively right away.

Now it is important to know that spring was in the air. The wind had fallen; the side streets were long and contented; where they met other streets, buildings gleamed as fresh as new fractures in some white metal. But it was a metal that surprised by its lightness. In the broad thoroughfares, crowds of people were out and about, with scarcely any fear of the infrequent carriages. It could only be a Sunday. The towers of Saint-Sulpice stood out bright and unexpectedly high in the still air, and down the narrow, almost Roman streets you had an unlooked-for prospect of the season. In the park and outside there were so many people on the move that I did not see him right away. Or was it that I did not recognize him at first among the crowd?

I knew at once that my image of him was valueless. The absoluteness of his misery, mitigated by no wariness and no role-playing whatsoever, was beyond the power of my imagination. I had understood neither the angle at which he was bowed nor the terror with which the insides of his eyelids seemed continually to fill him. I had never given a thought to his mouth, which was drawn in like the spout of a drain. Possibly he had his memories; but now nothing found its way into his soul any more, except every day the amorphous feel of the stone coping that his hand rubbed behind him. I had stood still, and as I took in all of this, almost in the same moment, it dawned on me that he was wearing a different hat, and a cravat that was undoubtedly kept for Sundays; it was diagonally checked in yellow and violet, and, as for the hat, it was a cheap new straw one with a green band. The colours are of no importance, of course, and it is petty of me to have remembered them. All I want to say is that, on him, they were like the softest down on a bird's breast. He himself got no pleasure from them, and who among all these people (I looked about me) could suppose that this finery was for him?

And a thought struck me abruptly: My God, You do *exist*, then. There are proofs of Your existence. I had forgotten them all, and never demanded any either, for what an overwhelming obligation would come with the certainty. And yet that is what is now being shown to me. This, then, is to Your liking; this is what pleases You. If only we could learn above all else to endure, and not to judge. What things are of moment? Which are filled with grace? You alone know.

When winter comes again, and I need a new coat – grant that I may wear it like *that*, while it is still new.

[60] It is not that I want to set myself apart from them if I wear better clothes that have always been mine, and insist on having a place to live. But I am not as far as they are. I don't have the courage to live as they do. If my arm were to wither, I think I would hide it. But she (apart from this, I know nothing about her), she appeared every day in front of the café terraces, and although it was very difficult for her to take off her coat and extricate herself from her undefined garments, and others beneath them, she did not flinch at the trouble, and took so long removing one item of clothing after another that the wait was almost more than you could bear. And then there she stood before us, modest, with her withered, wasted stump, and you saw that it was a rare thing.

No, it is not that I want to set myself apart from them; but it would be presumptuous in me to think myself their equal. I am not. I should have neither their strength nor their capability. I take my meals, and from one to the next I lead a life altogether without mystery; while they subsist almost like eternal beings. They stand at their street corners every day, even in November, and winter cannot make them cry out. The fogs come, rendering them indistinct and uncertain: there they still are. I made a journey, I fell ill, a good many things befell me: but they did not die.

*(I do not even know how it is possible for schoolchildren to get up in the mornings in bedrooms stiff with grey-smelling cold; who gives them strength, those helter-skelter little skeletons, to hurry out into the grown-up city, into the dull end of the night, into the never-ending school day, still small, always full of anticipation, invariably late. I

have no conception of the amount of support that is constantly being used up.)

This city is full of people who are slowly slipping down to their level. Most of them resist at first; but then there are those faded, ageing girls who are forever giving up without a struggle, strong girls who are unused in their inmost selves, girls who have never been loved.

Perhaps You intend me, O my God, to relinquish everything and love them. Why else do I find it so hard not to follow them when they pass me? Why do I suddenly think up the sweetest words of night, and why does my voice linger, all tenderness, between my throat and my heart? Why do I imagine how I would hold them close, right up to my breath, with an inexpressible caution, these dolls whom life has played with, flinging their arms open wide with every spring that comes, for no purpose whatsoever, till their shoulder joints grow loose? They have never fallen from a hope that was very high, and so they are not broken; but they are battered and already in too poor a state for life to have much use for them. Stray cats are the only ones that come to them in their rooms at evening, and scratch them secretly, and sleep upon them. At times I follow one down a couple of streets. They walk on past the houses, people continually screen them from my view, and they disappear beyond them as if they were merely nothing.

And yet I know that if a man were to try to love them, they would weigh upon him, like people who have been walking too long and simply stop. I believe only Jesus could endure them, who still has the resurrection in all His limbs; but what are they to Him? It is only women in love who can seduce Him, not those who wait with a small talent for being loved, as with a lamp grown cold.[46]

[61] I know that if I am destined for the very worst, it will be no help at all if I disguise myself in my best clothes. Did he not, in his own kingdom, sink to the lowest of humanity, to the very bottom, instead of rising? It is true that at times I have believed in the other kings, although their parks no longer prove a thing. But it is night, it is winter, I am freezing, I believe in him. For glory is a mere moment, and we have never seen anything longer lasting than wretchedness.

But the King[47] shall endure.

Was he not the only one who bore up under his madness, like wax flowers under a bell jar? People prayed in churches that the others might have long lives, but of him Chancellor Jean Charlier de Gerson required that he live the life everlasting, and this, moreover, at a time when he was already the neediest of the needy, wretched and in abject poverty, despite his crown.

This was in those days when men unknown to him, their faces blackened, would sometimes fall upon him in his bed, to rip off the bed-shirt that had rotted unto his very ulcers and which he had long since taken for part of himself. The room was darkened, and they tore away the foul rags from beneath his stiff arms, just as they came to hand. Then one of them brought a light, and only now did they discover the purulent sore on his chest, in which the iron amulet had become embedded because every night he pressed it to him with all the force of his ardour; now it lay deep within him, fearfully precious, in a pearly border of pus, like some miracle-working remnant bedded in a reliquary. These men had been chosen because they were tough, but they were not proof against nausea when the worms, disturbed, crawled out towards them from the Flemish fustian and, falling from the folds, crept up their sleeves somewhere or other. His condition was undoubtedly worse than in the days of the *parva regina*; for she had still been prepared to lie with him, young and radiant as she was. Then she had died. And since then, no one had dared bed another courtesan beside that carrion. She had not left behind the words or endearments that could bring the King relief; and so no one could penetrate the wilderness of his mind any more, no one could help him out of the abysses of his soul, and no one understood what it meant when, suddenly, there he was before them, staring the round-eyed gaze of an animal put to pasture. When he recognized the preoccupied face of Juvénal, his thoughts returned to the kingdom as it was when last he knew it. And he wanted to make good all his omissions.

It was in the nature of the events of those times, however, that they could not be told in a manner that spared the listener. Wherever something happened, it happened with its full weight, and when it was described it seemed to be all of a piece. For how could you soften the fact that his brother had been murdered, and that yesterday

Valentina Visconti, whom he had always called his dear sister, had knelt before him, lifting her black widow's weeds from a disfigured face that was all sorrow and accusation? And today a persistent, eloquent lawyer had stood there, proving that the Duke, who hired the assassin, was in the right, till it seemed the crime had become a translucent thing that would ascend, radiant, to heaven. To be just meant deciding in favour of all; for Valentina of Orléans died brokenhearted, although vengeance had been promised her. What good was it to pardon the Duke of Burgundy, and pardon him again? The dark passion of despair had him in its grip, and for weeks he had been living in a tent deep in the forest of Argilly, declaring that his one relief was to hear the stags belling in the night.

Once all these things had been thought upon, thought through time and again from beginning to end (though the time that had passed was short), the people demanded to see him. And see him they did, and beheld him completely at a loss. The people, however, rejoiced at the sight; they knew that this was the King, this silent, patient man whose sole reason for being was that God might take action over his head, in all his tardy impatience. In these lucid moments on the balcony of his Hôtel de Saint-Pol, the King perhaps had an intuition of the progress he had made in secret; he recalled the day of Roosbecke,[48] when his uncle de Berry had taken him by the hand and led him on to his first ready-made victory; there, on a November day that remained light for a remarkable time, he had surveyed the massed men of Ghent, choked off in their own tight formation when the cavalry attacked them from every side. Intertwined with one another, like some enormous brain, they lay there in the heaps they had themselves formed in order to present a solid front. His breath failed him at the sight of their smothered faces; he could not help imagining that the air had been driven out, far above these corpses (so tightly packed that they were still upright), by the sudden departure of so many despairing souls.

The scene had been impressed upon him as the very foundation of his glory. And it had stayed with him. But if that had been the triumph of death, then this, standing here upright and weak-kneed with all these eyes upon him, was the mystery of love. From the reactions of the others he had seen that that battlefield could be understood, monstrous though it was. This, however, resisted all

understanding; it was every bit as wondrous as the stag with the collar of gold in the forest of Senlis[49] years ago – only that now he himself was the vision, and the others were lost in the act of looking. Nor did he doubt that they were breathless and filled with the same immense expectation that had overcome him that day, hunting in the freshness of his youth, when that quiet face had emerged peering from the thicket. The mystery of his visible presence spread over all of his gentle form; he made not the smallest movement, for fear of vanishing; and the thin smile on his broad, simple countenance took on a natural permanence, as on the faces of saints carved of stone, costing him no effort. Thus he offered himself up, in one of those moments that are eternity, seen in foreshortened form. The crowd could hardly bear it. Fortified, nurtured by a solace inexhaustibly increased, it broke the silence with a cry of joy. But above, on the balcony, there remained only Juvénal des Ursins, who called out during the next ebb in the noise that the King would be coming to the Brotherhood of the Passion in the rue Saint-Denis, to witness the Mysteries.

On such days, the King was entirely benign and mild. If a painter of the period had wanted some idea of what life was like in paradise, he could not have found a more perfect image than the King's calmed figure as he stood beneath the sloping arches of one of the Louvre's high windows. He was turning the pages of Christine de Pisan's little book *The Road of Long Study*, which was dedicated to him.[50] He was not reading the learned polemics of her allegorical parliament, which had undertaken to establish what sort of prince might be worthy to rule over the whole world. Whenever he took it to hand, the book opened at the simplest of passages, where it spoke of the heart which, for thirteen years, like a retort on the burner of pain, had served no other purpose than to distil the water of bitterness for the eyes; he grasped that true consolation only began when happiness lay far enough in the past and was finished for good. Nothing meant more to him than that solace. And even as his gaze appeared to be fixed on the bridge beyond, he liked to see the world through Christine's heart, that heart schooled by the powerful Cumaean[51] to venturesome ways in the world – the world as it was back then, with its seas to be braved,

its cities with unfamiliar towers, all sealed up by vast and pressing spaces; the ecstatic loneliness of the assembled mountains; and the heavens, explored in fearful doubt, which were only now closing up like the skull of an infant.

But whenever anyone entered, the King started, and slowly his spirit misted over. They led him away from the window and gave him something to keep him occupied, and he let them do it. They had accustomed him to spending hours poring over illustrations, and he was glad to do so, although it did vex him that, in turning the pages, you could never have several pictures before you at the same time, and they were bound fast into the folios so that you could not rearrange them. Noticing this, someone recalled a game of cards that had been completely forgotten, and the King showed favour to the man who brought him the cards, for they were colourful and crowded with figures and could be moved about individually, and were very much to his liking. And while card-playing became the fashion among his courtiers, the King sat in his library and played alone. Just as he now turned up two kings in succession, so too God had recently brought him and the Emperor Wenceslaus[52] together; sometimes a queen would die, and then he would place an ace of hearts upon her, like a tombstone. He was unsurprised to find several popes in the pack; he placed Rome over there at the edge of the table, and here, below his right hand, was Avignon. Rome was of no interest to him; he imagined it to be round, for some reason or other, and left it at that. But he was familiar with Avignon.[53] And scarcely had he thought of it but his memory recapitulated the lofty, hermetic palace and overtaxed itself. He closed his eyes and had to take a deep breath. He was afraid he would have bad dreams that night.

All in all, though, it genuinely was a soothing way of occupying himself, and they were right to keep reminding him of it. Hours spent in this way confirmed him in the opinion that he was the King, King Charles the Sixth. This is not to say that he exaggerated his own importance; he was far from supposing himself anything more than one of those pasteboard cards – but the certainty grew in him that he too was one card in particular, perhaps a bad one, a card played in anger, one that always lost, yet nonetheless always the same card,

never any other. But still, when a week had passed in this way, in the regular confirmation of his own existence, he began to feel confined within himself. His skin grew taut across his forehead and at the nape of his neck, as if he were suddenly conscious of his own too-distinct contours. No one knew the temptation he was yielding to when he asked after the Mysteries and could hardly wait for them to begin. And when at last the time came, he was more to be found in the rue Saint-Denis than at his Saint-Pol palace.

The fateful thing about these dramatic poems was that they were forever amplifying and extending themselves, growing to tens of thousands of verses, so that at length the time represented in them was real time; much as if a globe were made on the scale of the earth. The concave stage – beneath which was hell and above which, representing the level of paradise, a balcony of unrailed scaffolding attached to a pillar – merely served to undermine the illusion. For the century had indeed made earthly things of heaven and hell: it lived by the powers of both in order to survive itself.

Those were the days of Avignon Christendom, which had gathered around John the Twenty-Second[54] a generation earlier, when so many had instinctively sought refuge there that at the place of his pontificate, immediately after he settled there, the mass of that palace had arisen, closed-off and ponderous, like a body serving in an emergency for the homeless soul of all. He himself, however, the small, slight, spiritual old man, still lived openly. While he embarked, barely arrived and without delay, on swift, brisk action in every quarter, the dishes laced with poison were already on his table; the first goblet had always to be poured away, since the piece of unicorn was discoloured[55] when the cup-bearer drew it out. In a quandary, not knowing where to hide them, the seventy-year-old carried with him the waxen effigies of himself that had been made to further his destruction; and he scratched himself on the long needles that had been driven through them. It was perfectly possible to melt them down. But the terror these secret simulacra instilled in him was such that, in the teeth of his strong will, the thought often came to him that, if he did so, he might prove his own undoing, and melt away himself like the wax in the fire. His shrunken body became even drier

with the fear, and more enduring. Now, however, they were threatening the body of his empire; from Granada, the Jews had been incited to wipe out every Christian, and this time they had bought more terrible hirelings to carry out the work. Nobody doubted, from the very first rumours, that the lepers were plotting; some had already seen them throwing bundles of their fearful decomposition into the wells. If people readily believed this possible, it was not out of mere credulity; quite the contrary – faith had grown so heavy that it fell from their trembling grasp to the very bottom of the wells. And once again the zealous old man must needs avert the poison from his blood. At the time when the fits of superstition were upon him, he had prescribed the angelus for himself and his entourage, to ward off the demons of the twilight; and now, throughout the whole agitated world, the bells were rung every evening for that calming prayer. With this exception, however, all the bulls and missives issued by him were more like spiced wine than a tisane. The empire had not put itself in his hands for treatment, but still he never wearied of heaping proofs of its sickness upon it; and already people were coming from the furthest East to consult this imperious physician.

But then the incredible happened. On All Saints' Day, he had preached longer and more fervently than was his wont; filled with a sudden need, as though to see it again himself, he had exhibited his faith; from out of the eighty-five-year-old tabernacle he had upraised it slowly and with all his strength and displayed it on the pulpit: and thereupon they had cried out against him. All Europe cried out: this was a pernicious faith.

It was at that time that the Pope disappeared. For days on end he remained inactive, prostrated on his knees in his oratory, probing the mystery of those who lead the life of action and, in so doing, harm their souls. At length he reappeared, exhausted by his weighty meditations, and recanted. Time and again he recanted. To recant became the passion of his senile spirit. At times he would even have the cardinals woken at night in order to talk with them about his repentance. And what finally extended his life beyond the usual span was perhaps merely the hope of abasing himself before Napoleone Orsini[56] too, who hated him and declined to come.

Jacques of Cahors had recanted. And one might have supposed that

God Himself had meant to show him the error of his ways, when so soon after He summoned to Him the son of the Count of Ligny, who thus seemed to have been awaiting his coming-of-age on earth only that he might relish heaven's sensuous delights of the soul as a mature man. Many were alive who remembered this radiant youth in the days of his cardinalate, and how, on the threshold of his adolescence, he had become a bishop and then died, barely eighteen, in an ecstasy of consummation.[57] The dead walked: for the air around his tomb, where life in its pure form lay in new-found freedom, had a long-lasting effect upon the corpses there. But was there not something of despair even in that precocious sanctity? Was it not an injustice to all, that the pure fabric of this soul should merely have been briefly immersed in life, to dye it luridly in the rich scarlet vat of the age? Was not something like the blow of a recoil felt when this young prince leaped clear of the earth to make his passionate ascension? Why did radiant spirits not remain among those who laboriously made the candles? Was it not this darkness that had led John the Twenty-Second to assert that *before* the Last Judgement there could be no perfect beatitude, nowhere at all, not even among the blessed? And indeed, how much stubborn tenacity was needed to imagine that, while here on earth all was confusion, elsewhere there were those who already had their faces turned to the Divine Light, reclining upon angels and soothed by their inexhaustible vision of God.

[62] Here I sit in the cold night, writing, knowing all of this. Perhaps I know it because I met that man when I was a little boy. He was very tall; I even think he must have attracted attention on account of his height.

Unlikely though it may seem, as evening approached I had somehow contrived to get out of the house alone; I was running, turned a corner, and ran right into him there and then. I do not understand how what happened next could have occurred within about five seconds. It will take much longer to tell, no matter how concise I may be. In colliding with him I had hurt myself; I was small, and to me it seemed quite something that I wasn't crying, and moreover, without really thinking about it, I was waiting to be comforted. Since he did no such thing, I assumed he was embarrassed;

presumably the right joke that would relieve the whole situation did not occur to him. I was perfectly happy to help him out, but to do so I needed to look him in the face. I have said he was tall. Now, he had not done the natural thing and bent down to me, which meant that he stood at a height for which I was unprepared. There was still nothing before me but the smell and the distinctive roughness of his suit, which I had felt. All of a sudden his face appeared. What was it like? I do not know, nor do I want to know. It was the face of an enemy. And beside that face, right beside it, on a level with those terrifying eyes, like a second head, was his fist. Even before I had time to lower my own gaze, I was running; I dodged past him to the left, and ran straight down a fearful, deserted back street, a street in an unfamiliar city, a city where there was no forgiveness.

In those moments, I experienced something that I understand now: that weighty, massive era of desperation. That era when the kiss of reconciliation between two men was merely the signal for the murderers standing close by. They drank from the same cup, they mounted the same horse before the eyes of all, and it was rumoured that they slept in the same bed at night; and the upshot of all this intimacy was that their mutual aversion grew so strong that whenever one of them beheld the pulsing veins of the other, the nausea surged within him, as at the sight of a toad. That era in which brother fell upon brother because of his larger share in their inheritance, and held him a prisoner. The King interceded on the illused brother's behalf, certainly, ensuring that his liberty and possessions were restored to him; and the elder brother, busy with other matters in faraway places, left him alone and in letters rued the injustice he had done; but the brother who had regained his freedom never recovered his peace of mind after all he had been through. The century shows him in pilgrim's apparel, going from church to church, devising vows that grew more and more peculiar. Hung about with amulets, he whispered his fears to the monks of Saint-Denis, and for a long time their inventories mentioned the hundred-pound wax candle which he thought good to dedicate to Saint Louis. He never had a life of his own; till the very end he sensed the woeful stars of his brother's envy and wrath governing over his heart.[58] And that Count de Foix, Gaston Phoebus, admired of all, had he not openly killed his cousin Ernault,

the English King's captain, at Lourdes? Yet what was this manifest murder compared to the horrible accident that occurred when, omitting to put down a sharp little knife that he held in his famously beautiful hand, he reached out in fitful accusation and grazed the bare throat of his son as he lay before him? The room was dark, and lights had to be brought, that the blood might be seen that had such remote origins and now was departing for ever from an exalted family, issuing secretly from the tiny wound in this exhausted boy.[59]

Who could be strong and refrain from murder? Who in those times was unaware that the worst was inevitable? Every so often a strange presentiment would beset a man whose gaze had encountered, that very same day, the savouring scrutiny of his killer. He would withdraw, lock the door behind him, and write his will, concluding with orders for the litter of osier twigs, the Celestine cowl and the strewing of ashes. Foreign minstrels would appear before his castle, and he gave them princely rewards for their song, which dovetailed with his vague premonitions. When his dogs gazed up at him, there was doubt in their eyes, and they grew less assured in responding to his commands. His motto, which had served for a lifetime, subtly acquired a new and palpable secondary meaning. This or that custom, long established, now seemed antiquated, though there appeared to be no alternatives to them. If projects came up, they were largely pursued without any real conviction; certain memories, on the other hand, took on an unexpected quality of finality. In the evenings, by the fire, he felt he might surrender entirely to them. But the night outside, which he was no longer familiar with, was suddenly very loud. His ear, schooled as it was on so many safe and perilous nights, could distinguish the separate elements of silence. But this time it was different. It was not the night that came between yesterday and today, any night – this was Night. Beau Sire Dieu, and then the resurrection. Even a paean hymning a beloved could scarcely reach him at such times: his women were all disguised in aubades and lyrics, unrecognizable under elaborate, lofty, convoluted forms of address, at best to be barely made out in the gloom, like the full and effeminate upward gaze of a bastard son.

And then, before a late supper, that pensive deliberation upon the hands in the silver wash-basin. His own hands. Could a coherence be

brought into their works – a sequence, continuity in what they reached for and what they left alone? No. All men sought at once the one thing and its opposite. They cancelled themselves out: there was no such thing as action.

There was no action except where the mission brothers were. Once he had seen their manner of conducting themselves, the King devised their charter himself. He addressed them as his ‘dear brothers’; never had anyone meant so much to him. They were granted express permission to go among the laity as the characters they played; for the King desired nothing more than that they might infect the many, and draw them into their powerful and ordered action. For himself, he longed to learn from them. Did he not wear upon his person, just as they did, the vestments and symbols of an inner meaning? When he watched them, he believed it must be possible to learn these things: how to come and go, how to speak out and how to break off so that there could be no doubt what was meant. Immense hopes flooded his heart. Every day he sat in the best seat, his seat, in that restlessly lighted, strangely indefinite hall of the Hospital of the Trinity, sometimes leaping to his feet in excitement and then controlling himself, like a schoolboy. Others wept; but he was filled up with gleaming tears within, and could only press his cold hands together in order to endure it. Occasionally at critical moments, when an actor who had said his piece suddenly walked out of his wide-eyed gaze, the King would uplift his face and would be startled – how long had He already been there, Monseigneur Saint Michel up there near the edge of the platform, in His silver armour that gave back bright reflections?

At moments such as that, he sat bolt upright. He looked around as if on the brink of a decision. He was very close to grasping the nature of that other action, the counterpart of this one on the stage, that great, anguished, profane passion in which he himself was playing a part. But all at once he lost it again. Their movements were devoid of meaning. Blazing torches were borne towards him, and formless shadows were cast into the vaulting above. People he did not know were tugging at him. He wanted to play his part: but from his mouth there came nothing, and his motions failed to make gestures. They crowded about him so strangely that he began to think he ought to be carrying the cross. And he wanted to wait for them to bring it. But they were stronger than he was, and slowly pushed him out.

they were stronger than he was, and slowly pushed him out.

[63] Outwardly, a great deal has changed. I do not know how. But within, and before You, Lord, within ourselves and before You who look on, are we not without action? We do discover that we do not know our part; we look for a mirror; we should like to remove our make-up and whatever is false and be real. But somewhere a forgotten piece of our disguise still adheres to us; some trace of exaggeration remains in our eyebrows; we do not realize that the corners of our mouths are twisted. And thus we go about, a laughing-stock and a demi-being, with neither a real existence nor a part to play-act.

[64] It was in the amphitheatre at Orange. Without properly looking up, aware only of that shattered, rustic quality that is now the hallmark of its façade, I had entered by the attendant's little glass door. I found myself among prone columns and low mallow shrubs; but it was only for a moment that they hid from me the open shell of the tiered auditorium, which lay there, divided up by the afternoon shadows, like an enormous concave sundial. I walked quickly towards it. Climbing through the ranks of seats, I felt how small I was becoming in this setting. At the top, some way above me, a few visitors were standing in unequal groupings, in attitudes of idle curiosity; their clothing made a disagreeably distinct impression, but they were on a negligible scale. For a while their eyes were upon me and they marvelled at how small I was. This made me turn around.

Oh, I was wholly unprepared. A play was being performed. An immense, indeed a superhuman drama was in progress, the drama of that awesome backdrop, the vertical tripartite structure of which was now visible, resonant with sheer magnitude, almost annihilating, and suddenly measured in its very immeasurability.

I was so overcome with joy that I sat down. What confronted me now, with the shadows arranged in what looked like a face, with the darkness gathered into the mouth at the centre, bounded at the top by the symmetrically curled, dressed hair of the cornice – this was the mighty antique mask, disguising everything, behind which the whole world was puckering into a face. Here, in this vast inward-turned circle of seats, there reigned an expectant, empty, absorbent existence: everything that could happen was right there, the gods and Fate. And

it was from there (if you looked up) that the heavens, lightly, over the perimeter of the walls, made their eternal entry.

That hour, I now realize, shut me out for ever from our theatres. What do they have to offer me? Why should I sit before a stage set where this one wall (the icon-screen of Russian churches) has been pulled down, since we no longer have the strength to press the gas-like action through its hardness till it comes out in full, heavy drops of oil. Nowadays plays fall in pieces through the holed coarse sieve of our stages, and pile up, and are tidied away once there are enough. This is the selfsame underdone reality that litters our streets and houses, except that more of it accumulates than can normally be managed in a single evening.

*(Let us be honest about it: we do not have a theatre, any more than we have a God. That would require true community, whereas each individual one of us has his own ideas and anxieties, and allows others to see as much of them as suits his purposes. We are forever watering down our understanding, stretching it to go round, instead of wailing at the wall of our common distress, behind which that which passeth understanding would have time to gather its forces.)

[65] If we did have a theatre, would you, tragic woman,[60] stand there time and again, so frail, so naked, so utterly without the pretext of a role, before those who satisfy their impatient curiosity with the spectacle of your grief? You inexpressibly moving woman, you foresaw the reality of your own suffering that time in Verona when, little more than a child, playing at theatre, you held the roses like a mask before you, the better to hide yourself.

It is true that you were the child of actors, and when your parents performed they wanted to be seen; but you did not take after them. For you, this calling was to be what the nun's vocation was for Mariana Alcoforado,[61] though she had no notion of it: a disguise, complete and durable enough for one to be unreservedly wretched behind it, with that ardour with which the invisibly blessed are blessed. In all the cities you visited, they described your manner; but they did not understand how, growing more hopeless from day to day, you would hold up a work of poetry before you, time and again, to see whether it offered concealment. You held your hair, your hands,

anything opaque, before the translucent places. You dimmed with your breath those that were transparent; you rendered yourself small; you hid as children hide, and then you gave that brief, happy cry, and only an angel should have had leave to seek you out. But if you looked warily up, there was no doubt that they had seen you all the time, all of the people in that ugly, hollow space filled with eyes: you, you, you, and nothing else.

And you wanted to hold out your crook'd arms towards them, making a sign with your fingers to ward off the evil eye. You wanted to claw back from them your vision, which they were preying upon. You wanted to be yourself. Your fellow-actors lost courage; as if they had been caged with a she-panther, they crept along the backdrops and said their lines, hoping not to anger you. But you drew them forward and placed them to the fore and treated them as if they were real beings. The loose doors, the make-believe drapes, the props that had no rearward side, brought out a spirit of contrariness in you. You felt how your heart grew capable of an immense reality, unstoppably, and in alarm you tried once more to remove their gazes from yourself, like gossamer threads – but already, in their fear of the very worst, they were breaking into applause: as if to avert, at the last moment, something that would oblige them to change their lives.

[66] A poor life they lead, women who are loved, and a dangerous one. Ah, that they might surpass themselves and become women who love. Women in love are hedged about with security. No one is suspicious of them any longer, and they are in no position to betray themselves. In them the mystery is consummate; they cry it out whole, like nightingales, and it is not fragmented. They lament for one man; but the whole of nature joins with them, in the lament for an eternal being. They hasten after the one they have lost, but with the very first steps they take they already overtake him, and *before* them is only God. Their legend is that of Byblis, who pursued Caunus as far as Lycia. Her heart urged her on, following him through many lands, until at length her strength was quite used up; but so powerful was the emotion deep within her that, when she sank, she reappeared beyond death as a spring, all swiftness, a swiftly flowing spring.[62]

What else was it that happened to the Portuguese woman, if not that she became a spring deep within? What became of you, Héloïse, or of you loving women whose laments have come down to us: Gaspara Stampa, the Countess of Die and Clara d'Anduze; Louise Labé, Marceline Desbordes, Elisa Mercœur? But you, poor fugitive Aïssé, you hesitated and gave in. Weary Julie de Lespinasse. The desolate history of a happy estate: Marie-Anne de Clermont.[63]

I well remember how, one day at home, a long time ago, I came across a jewellery case; it was two hand's-breadths deep, shaped like a fan, with a border of flowers impressed in the dark green morocco. I opened it: it was empty. Now, after all this time, I can say it; but then, having opened it, I saw only what its emptiness consisted of: velvet, a little heap of light-coloured velvet, no longer fresh, and the grooved depression left where a piece had lain, empty, and lighter by just a trace of melancholy, fading into the velvet. It was possible to bear it for just a moment. But when we are confronted with those that remain behind, loved, perhaps it is always thus.

[67] Leaf back through your diaries. Was there not always a time, sometime in spring, when the burgeoning of the year struck you all as a reproach? There was an appetite for high spirits in you, and yet, when you went out into the wide open, a sense of disconcertment was in the air, and your walk became unsteady, as on a ship. The garden was beginning; but you (that was it), you dragged in winter and the year that had passed; for you it was at best a continuation. While you waited for your souls to have their parts to play, you suddenly became aware of the weight of your limbs, and something like the possibility of illness pushed its way into your wide-open sense of what was to come. You blamed the too light dresses you were wearing, pulled your shawls about your shoulders, ran down the avenue to the very end: and there you stood, hearts pounding, in the wide-turning circle, resolved to be at one with all of it. But a bird sang out, and was alone, and disowned you. Ah, ought you to have been dead?

Maybe. Maybe what is new is that we survive it: the year, and love. The blossoms and the fruit are ripe when they fall; animals are aware of their own being, and find each other, and are content with that. But

we, who have embarked on the quest for God, we can never accomplish an ending. We keep postponing what our own nature prompts us to, needing even more time. What is one year to us? What are all the years? Even before we have embarked upon God, we are praying to Him: let us get through this night. And then illness. And then love.

That Clémence de Bourges[64] must needs die just as she was coming into bud – she who was without equal, she who was herself the loveliest of all the instruments she could play, finer than any other, unforgettable even in the merest sound of her voice. Her girlhood was of so high a resolve that a woman in love, in full flood, could dedicate to that growing heart a book of sonnets in which every line was unsated. Louise Labé was not fearful of scaring the child with the protracted sufferings of love. She revealed to her the nightly increase of longing; she promised her pain as if it were a larger world; and she sensed intuitively that she, with the griefs she herself had experienced, fell short of that obscure expectation that gave this young woman her beauty.

[68] Oh, you girls back home – may the loveliest of you, one summer afternoon in the darkened library, find that little book that Jean de Tournes[65] printed in 1556. May she take the cool, smooth-worn volume out into the murmurous orchard, or over beside the phlox, in the over-sweet fragrance of which there is a residue of pure sweetness. May she find it early. In those days when her eyes are beginning to relish gazing into themselves, while her mouth, younger, can still bite off much too large pieces of apple and be full.

And then, girls, when the time for more passionate friendships comes, may it be your secret to call one another Diké and Anaktoria, Gyrinno and Atthis.[66] May someone, perhaps a neighbour, an older man who travelled in his youth and has long been considered an eccentric, confide these names to you. May he sometimes invite you to his home, to taste his famous peaches or come up to the white passage to see his Ridinger engravings of equestrian subjects,[67] which everyone talks of and which you really have to have seen.

Maybe you can persuade him to tell stories. Maybe – who knows? –

there is one among you who can talk him into looking out the journals he once kept on his travels. The same girl who will one day manage to coax him into disclosing those fragments of Sappho's poetry that have come down to us,[68] and who will not rest until she has learned what is almost a secret: that this reclusive man was fond of occasionally using his leisure to translate these shards of verse. He has to confess that it has been a long time since he gave any thought to his translations, and what he did do, he assures her, is not worth mentioning. Nonetheless, if pressed by his ingenuous friends he will gladly recite a stanza to them. He even discovers the Greek text somewhere in his memory, and recites that too, because in his view the translation does not do it justice, and because he wants to acquaint these young people with this authentic and beautiful fragment of a massive, ornate language, wrought in so intense a fire.

In the process, he warms to his work once again. He has evenings of beauty, indeed almost of youth – autumn evenings, for instance, with a vastness of peaceful night time before them. At such times, the light burns late in his study. He does not remain bent over the pages always, but often leans back and closes his eyes to ponder a line he has reread, and its meaning spreads through his blood. Never before has he felt so sure of ancient times. He could almost smile at those generations that wept for antiquity as for a lost play they would have liked to have parts in. Now he readily grasps the dynamic significance of that early unity that was in the world, that new and simultaneous gathering-in of all that humankind laboured at, as it were. It does not trouble him that that civilization, which was all of a piece and had an almost total capacity to make manifest, has appeared to many in later ages to form a whole and to be wholly past. It is true that there the celestial half of life really was fitted to the semicircular bowl of earthly existence, as two full hemispheres fit together to make one perfect golden orb. But scarcely had this occurred than the spirits confined within it felt that this absolute reality was no more than a likeness; the massive heavenly body grew weightless and rose into space, and its golden sphere hesitantly reflected the sadness of all that could not yet be subdued.

As he thinks these things, the recluse in his night, thinking them and understanding them, he notices a bowl of fruit on the window sill.

Acting on an impulse, he takes an apple from the bowl and places it before him on the table. How my life centres upon this fruit, he thinks. Around all that has been perfected there is the unachieved, and it grows apace.

And, as he is contemplating what is unachieved, there arises before him, almost too quickly, that slight figure straining towards the infinite, whom everyone meant (according to Galen) when they said 'the poetess'.[69] For just as, after the labours of Hercules, all the destruction and reconstruction of the world cried out for fulfilment, so too, from the store of being, all the ecstasies and despairs which are the full, sole span of the ages crowded towards the deeds of her heart, to be lived.

Suddenly he knows that resolute heart, which was ready to offer the whole of love, to the very end. It does not surprise him that it was misunderstood – that in this woman in love, who was so entirely of the future, people saw only excess, not a new yardstick for love and the grief of the heart; that they interpreted the legend writ through her life in a way that suited what could then be given credence; that at length they ascribed to her the death of those women whom the deity incites, each one alone, to devote themselves unreservedly to a love that is unrequited. Perhaps even among the girls whom she brought to love there were those who did not understand – that at the height of her powers she lamented not some one man who had left her to lie alone but rather that other, no longer possible, who might be equal to her love.

At this point, the solitary thinker stands up and crosses to the window; his high-ceilinged room feels too confined; he would like to see the stars, if it is possible. He is not one to deceive himself. He knows that this emotion is filling him because among the young girls of the neighbourhood there is one who matters to him. He has wishes (not for himself, no, but for her); on her account he understands, in a passing hour of the night, the demands of love. He promises himself to tell her nothing about it. It seems to him that the very most he can do is to be alone and wakeful and for her sake to reflect how very right that loving woman had been when she grasped that the union of two lovers signifies nothing other than an increase in loneliness; when she cast aside the temporal purpose of sex for its final aim in infinity;

when in the darkness of embraces she sought not satisfaction but longing; when she disdained the thought that, of two, one must be the lover and one the beloved, taking weak, beloved women to her bed and kindling them into women in love, till they left her. Through such supreme farewells, her heart became Nature herself. Beyond fate, she sang the epithalamia of each seasoned lover, sounding their nuptials and magnifying the coming bridegroom, that they might prepare for him as for a god and might even survive his glory.

[69] One more time in recent years I felt your presence, Abelone, and understood you, unexpectedly, after I had long ceased thinking of you.

It was in Venice, in the autumn, in one of those salons where foreigners passing through gather about the lady of the house, who is as much a stranger there as they. These people stand around with their cups of tea and are delighted whenever a well-informed fellow-guest turns them deftly and discreetly towards the door, whispering a name that sounds Venetian. They are prepared to hear the most exalted of names: nothing can surprise them, for, limited though their experience may otherwise be, in this city they blithely surrender to the most extravagant of possibilities. In their usual lives they are forever confounding the extraordinary with the forbidden, so that the expectation of something wonderful, which they now permit themselves, is evident on their faces as an expression of coarse licentiousness. The feelings they experience only in occasional moments at home, whether in concerts or alone with a novel, they exhibit blatantly in this flattering setting, as if rightfully theirs. Just as, wholly unprepared, unconscious of any danger, they allow the well-nigh lethal confessions of music to stimulate them as physical indiscretions might, so too, without even remotely mastering the existence of Venice, they surrender to the rewarding impotence of the gondolas. Couples no longer newly wed, who throughout the entire journey have merely snapped back unpleasantly at each other, lapse into a peaceable silence; the husband yields to the pleasant weariness of his ideals, while she feels young and nods encouragingly to the indolent locals, smiling as though she had teeth of sugar that were forever dissolving. And if you listen, it turns out that they are leaving tomorrow or the day after or at the end of the week.

So there I stood among them, rejoicing that I was not leaving. Soon it would be cold. The soft, opiate Venice of their preconceptions and demands disappears with these somnolent foreigners when they go, and one morning the other Venice is there, the real one, wide awake, brittle to the breaking point, and in no way a figment of dreams: a Venice willed into being in the midst of nothingness, on sunken forests, a product of sheer force, and in the end so absolutely *there*. That toughened body, stripped to the bare essentials, through which the sleepless arsenal pumped the blood of its toil; and the body's importunate and forever expanding spirit, more pungent than the perfume of aromatic lands. That resourceful state, bartering the salt and glass of its poverty for the treasures of the nations. That fine counterweight of all the world, full – right down to its smallest ornament – of latent energies running ever more finely along the circuitry of nerves: O Venice!

The consciousness of knowing the city filled me, among all those self-deluding people, with so strong a gainsaying spirit that I looked up, hoping to confide in someone. Was it conceivable that in those rooms there was not a single person who was unknowingly waiting to be enlightened as to the nature of the place? Some young person who would immediately understand that what was being offered here was not enjoyment but a display of willpower more exacting and severe than was to be met with in any other place? I walked about, made restless by the truth within me. Since it had seized hold of me here, among so many people, it was accompanied by the wish to be expressed, defended, proven. I had the grotesque notion that the very next moment I should clap my hands out of sheer hatred of all their chattering misunderstanding.

It was in this ridiculous frame of mind that I saw her. She was standing by herself before a window filled with light, watching me; not exactly with her eyes, which were earnest and contemplative, but with her mouth, or so it seemed, which was ironically imitating the evidently annoyed expression on my face. At once I became aware of the impatient tension in my features and assumed an equable expression, whereupon her mouth resumed its natural haughtiness. Then, after a moment's reflection, we smiled at each other simultaneously.

She recalled, if you will, a certain portrait of the young Benedicte von Qualen, the beautiful woman who played a part in Baggesen's life.[70] It was impossible to behold the dark tranquillity of her eyes without surmising the clear darkness of her voice. The braiding of her hair and the neckline of her light-coloured dress were moreover so very much in the style of Copenhagen that I was resolved to speak to her in Danish.

But before I was close enough, a stream of people thrust towards her from the other side; our warm, rhapsodic, absent-minded Countess, who took such pleasure in guests, pounced upon her with a posse at her back, meaning to spirit her off on the instant to sing. I was certain the young girl would excuse herself on the grounds that no one in that company could be interested in hearing songs in Danish. And so she did, as soon as she could get a word in. The throng around this radiant figure pressed her all the more; one of them knew that she sang in German too. ‘And in Italian,’ added a laughing voice, with mischievous assurance. No excuse that I might have wished her to offer occurred to me, but I had no doubt that she would resist them. Already an expression of dry mortification was appearing on the faces of her petitioners, wearied from prolonged smiling, and already the good Countess, so as not to lose face, was stepping back with an air of pity and dignity, when suddenly, at a moment when it was no longer remotely necessary, the girl yielded. I felt myself grow pale with disappointment; my gaze filled with reproach, but I turned away, since there was no point in letting her see that. She, however, broke loose from the others and was suddenly at my side. Her dress shone upon me, the flowery fragrance of her warmth enveloped me.

‘I really am going to sing,’ she said in Danish, close by my cheek, ‘not because they want me to, or for the sake of appearances, but because I must sing now.’

In her words there sounded the selfsame spiteful intolerance as she had just delivered me from.

Slowly I followed the group of people with whom she moved away. But I remained behind by a high door, allowing the rest to mill about and find their places. I leaned against the black, reflecting inner side of the door and waited. Someone asked me what was happening, whether there was going to be singing. I pretended not to know. Even

as I told the lie, the girl had already started to sing.

I could not see her. Gradually the space around her was defined as she sang one of those Italian songs that foreigners suppose to be particularly authentic because they are so manifestly conventional. She did not believe what she sang. It cost her an effort to present it; she made too heavy going of it. One knew from the applause at the front when the song was over. I was downcast and embarrassed. People began to move about, and I decided that as soon as someone left I would join them.

But all at once there was silence. It was a silence which, a moment before, no one would have imagined possible; it lasted, it grew tense, and now the voice rose from within it. (Abelone, I thought. Abelone.) This time it was strong, full and yet not heavy; it was of a piece, without a break, seamless. It was an unknown German song. She sang it with remarkable simplicity, as if it were inevitable. This was what she sang:

> You whom I do not tell that at night
> I lie and weep,
> whose nature leaves me ready to sleep
> as a cradle might –
> you who say nought when you lie awake
> for my sake,
> how would it be if we bore

this glory and more
in our heart?

(A brief pause, and then, hesitantly):

Consider the lovers: see, when they start
confessing what they have done,
what liars they become!

The silence once again. God knows who made it. Then people stirred, jostled each other and apologized, coughed. They were on the point of lapsing into a universal murmur that would wipe everything away when suddenly the voice burst forth, resolute, broad and intense:

You render me lonely. I find you in other things.
For a while it is you, and then it is the wings
of the breeze, or a fragrance that comes to me whole.
In their arms I lost them, body and soul,
but you, you only, are born ever anew:
because I never held you, now I hold you.

No one had expected this. They all stood as if bowed beneath that voice. And in the end there was so great an assurance in her, it was as if she had known for years that she would be called upon at that moment.

[70] At times I had wondered why Abelone did not direct towards God the calorific energy of her magnificent emotion. I know she longed to strip her love of all that was transitive; but could her truthful heart fail to recognize that God is only a direction love takes, and not an object of love? Did she not know she need not fear that He would love her in return? Was she not aware of the restraint practised by this superior lover, who quietly holds back His own pleasure so that we, slow as we are, may come to all our hearts are capable of? Or was she trying to avoid Christ? Was she afraid that He would detain her halfway and make her His beloved? Was that why she did not like to think of Julie Reventlow?

I almost believe it, when I consider how loving women as simple as Mechthild, as passionate as Teresa of Avila, as wounded as the Blessed

Rose of Lima,[71] could lie back, compliant, and loved, into God's succour. Ah, He who was a helper for the weak does these strong souls an injustice; when they were anticipating nothing but the never-ending road, once again a palpable form appears before them in that tense place at the gates of heaven, and spoils them with shelter, and troubles them with manhood. His heart's powerful lens concentrates the parallel rays of their hearts once more, and they, whom the angels were hoping to preserve for God intact, go up in a blaze in the drought of their desire.

[*](To be loved means to be consumed by fire. To love is to glow bright with an inexhaustible oil. To be loved is to pass away; to love is to endure.)

Even so, it is possible that in later years Abelone tried to think with her heart, to achieve an unostentatious and direct communion with God. I could imagine there might be letters from her recalling the attentive inward contemplation of Princess Amalie Galitzin;[72] but if those letters were addressed to someone she had been close to for years, how must he have suffered because of the change in her. And as for herself, I suspect she feared nothing other than that uncanny transformation that goes unnoticed because all of the evidence for it seems entirely alien to us, and we put it aside.

[71] It would be difficult to persuade me that the story of the Prodigal Son[73] is not the legend of one who did not want to be loved. When he was a child, everyone in the house loved him. He grew up not knowing anything else, and, being a child, grew accustomed to their tenderness of heart.

But once he was a youth, his aim was to shed his habitual ways. He could not have put it into words, but when he went out roaming all day long, and did not even want the dogs for company, it was because they too loved him; because in their eyes there was attentiveness and sympathy, expectation and concern; and because in their presence, too, he could not do anything without giving pleasure or pain. What he wanted in those days, however, was that deeply felt indifference of heart which at times, out in the fields of an early morning, would overcome him in so unalloyed a form that he broke into a run, that he

might have neither time nor breath to be more than a weightless moment when the morning becomes conscious of itself.

The mystery of his life, which had never yet been, lay outspread before him. Without knowing what he was doing, he quit the footpath and walked on across the fields, his arms out wide, as if by that encompassing reach he could be master of several directions at once. And then he flung himself down behind a hedge, and no one cared what became of him. He stripped a branch to make a flute, he threw a stone at some small beast of prey, he stooped to the ground and obliged a beetle to turn around: none of this added up to Fate, and the heavens passed over as if merely passing over Nature. At length the afternoon arrived, bringing its fancies – that he was a buccaneer on the island of Tortuga, but with no obligation to pursue that life; that he besieged Campêche, or took Vera Cruz; that he was indeed an entire army, or a leader on horseback, or a ship at sea – it all depended on his whim. But if it entered his head to kneel, he was promptly Deodatus of Gozon[74] and had slain the dragon and, in the heat of it, was given to understand that this heroism was arrogant, performed in disobedience. For he spared himself nothing that was crucial to what he was imagining. But no matter how much he fantasized, there were always intervals when he could merely be a bird, albeit without being sure which kind. Then, though, it was time to go home.

Dear God, how much there was to cast off and forget – for what was needed now was really to forget; otherwise he would give himself away when they pressed him for answers. No matter how much he lingered and looked about, in the end the gable of the house did come into view. The topmost window kept an eye on him; no doubt someone was up there. The dogs, in whom the expectation had been rising all day, rushed through the bushes and drove him together into the one man they had in their heads. And the house did the rest. He had only to enter into the fullness of its odour and almost everything was settled. The odd detail might yet be altered, but all in all he was already the one they took him for; the one for whom they had long since made up a life, out of his little past and their own wishful thinking; that creature known to them all who was under the influence of their love day and night, the object of their hope and their distrust,

their disapproval or applause.

It is useless for such a man to mount the steps with inexpressible caution – they will all be in the sitting room, and the door has only to open for them to see him. He remains in the dark, biding their questions. But then the worst happens. They take him by the hands, lead him to the table, and all of them, every last one of them, line up in front of the lamp, all curiosity. It's all very well for them – they keep in the shadow, while on him alone falls the light, all the disgrace of having a face.

Will he stay and avow with lies that more-or-less life they declare to be his, and grow to resemble them with the whole of his face? Will he divide himself between the delicate truthfulness of his will and the crude deceit that spoils it for him? Will he abandon the attempt to become what the weak of heart in his family might not be able to take?

No, he will go away. For example, when they are all busy setting out on his birthday table those ill-chosen gifts that are meant yet again to make up for everything. He will go away for good. Not until long after will he realize how very determined he was at the time never to love, that he might never place anyone in that terrible position of being loved. Years later he will remember, and this resolution, like all the others, will have proved impossible to keep. For in his loneliness he has loved time and again, on every occasion giving his whole nature in spendthrift fashion and fearing inexpressibly for the other one's freedom. Little by little, he has learned to shine the rays of his emotion through the loved one, rather than consuming her. And what lavish delight it gave him to recognize, through the ever more transparent form of the beloved, the vast expanses that she opened up to his boundless desire to possess.

How he could weep for whole nights, longing to be so shone through himself! But a loved woman who yields is by no means a woman who loves. Oh, those nights of desolation, when the gifts that had flowed from him were returned to him in pieces, heavy with transience. How often he thought then of the troubadours, who feared nothing more than to have their wishes granted. All the money he had earned and increased he gave away, so that he should not experience that on top of everything else. He hurt the women with the coarseness

of his payment, wary with every day that came that they might try to return his love. For he no longer had any hope of meeting the lover who would break him apart.

Even during the time when poverty was alarming him with new hardships daily, when his head was the favourite plaything of misery and quite worn out, when ulcers were opening all over his body like emergency eyes against the blackness of tribulation, when he was horrified by the filth in which he had been abandoned as a thing just as filthy – even then, if he thought about it, his greatest horror was that his love might have been returned. What were all the dark hours he had been through since, compared to the deep sadness of those embraces in which all was lost? Did he not wake with a sense that he had no future? Did he not go about meaninglessly, with no right to the slightest of dangers? Had he not had to promise a hundred times not to die? Perhaps it was the obduracy of that bitter memory, which returned to him again and again and insisted on its place, that kept him alive amid the refuse. In the end, he was found again. And not until then, not until his years as a shepherd, did his teeming past come to rest.

Who can describe what happened to him then? What writer has the persuasive powers to reconcile the length of his days at that time with the brevity of life? What art has a large enough compass to evoke both his slender, cloaked form and the vast space of his immense nights?

That was the time that began with him feeling a general thing, anonymous, like a convalescent making a slow recovery. He did not love, except in so far as he loved existing. The lowly love of his sheep did not burden him; like light falling through clouds, it was shed all about him and gleamed softly on the meadows. Following the blameless trail of their hunger, he strode in silence across the pastures of the world. Strangers saw him on the Acropolis; and perhaps he was for a long time one of the shepherds at Les Baux, and witnessed the petrified ages outlasting a noble dynasty which, for all its acquisitions in multiples of seven and three, was unable to subdue the sixteen rays of its own star. Or should I imagine him at Orange, leaning against the rustic triumphal arch? Should I picture him in the soul-haunted shade of Alyscamps, among the tombs open as the tombs of the resurrected,[75] his gaze following a dragonfly?

It does not matter. What I see is more than him. I see his entire being, which was then embarking on the long, silent, aimless labour of loving God. For he who had wanted to hold himself back for ever was overwhelmed once again by his heart's growing compulsion. And this time he did hope that his wish might be granted. His whole nature, which during his long solitude was grown prescient and unerring, promised him that He to whom his thinking now tended was capable of loving, with a penetrating, radiant love. But even as he longed to be loved at last with such mastery, his sensibility, accustomed to distances, apprehended the great remoteness of God. There were nights when he imagined he hurled himself into space, and to God; hours filled with discovery, when he felt strong enough to dive for the earth, and pull it up on the storm tide of his heart. He was like a man who hears a magnificent language and feverishly resolves to write in it. The dismay of realizing how difficult the language was still lay before him; at first he was reluctant to believe that a whole life might be spent constructing the first short sentences of pointless exercises. He threw himself into the learning like a runner starting a race; but the density of what had to be mastered slowed his pace. Nothing more humiliating was imaginable than being a beginner in this way. He had found the philosopher's stone, and now he was being compelled ceaselessly to transmute the quickly made gold of his happiness into the crude lead of patience. He, who had made himself at home in infinite space, now wriggled his tortuous way like a worm, with neither direction nor exit. Now that he was learning to love, with such effort and such pain, he was shown how unthinking and unworthy all the love he had thought he had given had been; how nothing could have come of that love, because he had not even started to work upon it and give it a reality.

During those years, great changes occurred within him. Through the hard work of approaching God, he well nigh forgot Him, and all that he hoped to achieve from Him, in time, was '*sa patience de supporter une âme*'.[76] The accidents of fate, which humankind sets such store by, had long since fallen away from him, but now even the essentials of pleasure and pain lost their spicy savour, and he found them pure and nourishing. From the roots of his being grew the sturdy, evergreen plant of a fertile joy. He was altogether engrossed in mastering what

constituted his inner life; he wanted to leave nothing out, for he had no doubt that his love was in all of this, and throve there. Indeed, his inner composure was so great that he decided to take up once again the most important of those things that he had been unable to accomplish in earlier days, those things he had simply sat out. In particular he thought of his childhood: the more calmly he pondered it, the less fulfilled it seemed to him; all his memories of it had the vagueness of premonitions, and the fact that they were considered past gave them almost a quality of the future. To take up all of that once more, and to do it genuinely, was the reason why this man who was grown a stranger returned to his home. We do not know whether he stayed; we know only that he returned.

Those who have told the story try at this point to recall to our minds the house as it then was; for only a little time has passed there, a short spell of reckoned time: everyone in the house knows exactly how much. The dogs have grown old, but they are still alive. Report has it that one of them howled. All the day's tasks are interrupted. Faces appear at the windows, faces grown older or grown up but bearing a touching resemblance to the faces remembered. And in one ancient face, suddenly pale, recognition shows through. Really recognition? No more than recognition? – Forgiveness. Forgiveness for what? – Love. My God: love.

He, the man who had been recognized, was no longer thinking, preoccupied as he was, that love might still exist. It is understandable that, of all that happened then, the only thing that was handed down to later times was his gesture, that unprecedented gesture that no one had ever seen before, that gesture of supplication with which he threw himself at their feet, imploring them not to show love. Reeling with shock, they raised him up. They interpreted his outburst in their own way, and forgave. It must have been indescribably liberating to find they all misunderstood him despite the desperate unambiguity of his attitude. In all likelihood he found it possible to stay. For he realized, more clearly with every day that passed, that the love they were so vain of, which they privily encouraged in each other, was not meant for him. He almost had to smile at the lengths they went to; and it became apparent just how little they could have him in mind.

What notion could they have of who he was? He was fearfully

difficult to love now, and he sensed that there was only One who was capable of it. But He was not yet willing.

*End of the notebooks*

# Notes

These notes do not gloss individuals such as Charles Baudelaire, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Friedrich Schiller, Walter Scott or Emanuel Swedenborg, who are assumed to be either familiar or easily identified. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of quoted passages are by the translator of this book.

1. *rue Toullier… Asyle de nuit*: The rue Toullier was Rilke's own address when he first stayed in Paris in 1902. The maternity hospital (Maison d'Accouchement), the Val-de-Grâce military hospital and a night shelter (*asyle de nuit*) were all nearby. Much of the detail in the early pages of the novel was first recorded by Rilke in letters to his wife, Clara, which he later consulted as he wrote.
2. *the cathedral of Paris*: *i.e.* Notre-Dame.
3. *King Clovis*: Malte exaggerates, though only a little. Clovis, founder of the Frankish Empire, died in 511; the Hôtel-Dieu was originally established in 660. Malte and Rilke would have seen a modern building dating from 1868 to 1878.
4. *Anna Sophie… hundred and fifty years*: Anna Sophie Reventlow (1693–1743) was married in 1721, after the death of his first queen, to Frederick IV (1671–1730), King of Denmark and Norway from 1699 until his death. Members of the Danish royal family were interred in the cathedral of Roskilde.
5. *a poet*: The poet Malte is reading in these pages is Francis Jammes (1868–1938).
6. *untouchables*: Rilke writes of '*die Fortgeworfenen*' (literally, 'those who have been thrown away'), *i.e.* the *clochards* of Paris, the city poor. His anxiety to feel different from them, despite his own poverty, is eloquently expressed in his letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé of 18 July 1903 (see Introduction), a letter which preserved many of his impressions and feelings during his earliest acquaintance with Paris.
7. *Will anyone believe that there are buildings… it is at home in me*: This paragraph was famously quoted in its entirety by Martin Heidegger in

Part One, Section 15, of *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975; translated into English by Albert Hofstadter as *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). As Heidegger observes: 'Poetry, creative literature, is nothing but the elementary emergence into words, the becoming-uncovered, of existence as being-in-the-world. For the others who before it were blind, the world first becomes visible by what is thus spoken.' After quoting Rilke's paragraph, Heidegger comments:

> Notice here in how elemental a way the world, being-in-the-world – Rilke calls it life – leaps toward us from the things. What Rilke reads here in his sentences from the exposed wall is not imagined into the wall, but, quite to the contrary, the description is possible only as an interpretation and elucidation of what is 'actually' in this wall, which leaps forth from it in our natural comportmental relationship to it. Not only is the writer able to see this original world, even though it has been unconsidered and not at all theoretically discovered, but Rilke also understands the philosophical content of the concept of life […]

While it is true that a demolished building such as that described by Malte might have been seen in any city, it is worth pointing out that the famous paragraph does in fact refer to a Parisian scene, since it has not been unknown for Heidegger scholars to cite 'Rilke's evocation of the world of the urban squalor of late nineteenth-century Prague' (Julian Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

8. *têtes-de-moineau*: A cheap coal burned in stoves (literally, 'sparrow-heads').
9. *Duval*: This restaurant chain of Rilke's day existed until the middle of the twentieth century.
10. *not one word will be left upon another*: Compare Mark 13: 2: 'there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down'.
11. *Mécontent de tous… méprise*: The passage is from Charles Baudelaire's Poèmes en prose (1869; also known as *Le Spleen de Paris*), a favourite with Rilke:

> Dissatisfied with everyone and dissatisfied with myself, I should like to redeem myself and take some pride in myself, in the silence and solitude of the night. Souls of those I have loved, souls of those I have sung, fortify me, lend me support, keep far from me the lying and the corrupting vapours of the world; and you, my Lord God! grant me the

the lying and the corrupting vapours of the world, and you, my Lord God, grant me the grace to produce some beautiful verses that will prove to me that I am not the least of men, that I am not inferior to those whom I despise.

12. *They were children of fools… weep*: Job 30: 8–9, 12–13, 16–18, 27, 31. In his letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé of 18 July 1903 (see Introduction), Rilke described himself as often reading the thirtieth chapter of Job before sleeping, in his darkest early days in Paris, and finding every word of it true of himself.

13. *a tall, lean man in a dark greatcoat*: Rilke first set down his observation of the man with St Vitus's dance in the same letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé of 18 July 1903 (see Introduction).

14. *the saint in the Panthéon*: Rilke was an admirer of Puvis de Chavannes's mural of Ste Geneviève, patron saint of Paris, in the Panthéon, where many great figures of the French nation are buried.

15. *Do you remember… come of such an action*: The poem 'Une Charogne' (A Carcass) is in *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil, 1857) and describes a putrefying, maggot-infested carcass beside a path. In a letter Rilke wrote to his wife, Clara, on 19 October 1907, he took the poem to be the key to 'the whole evolution towards objectivity in expression' which he saw as having come to fruition in the art of Paul Cézanne (who, Rilke noted with satisfaction, could still recite 'Une Charogne' word perfect at the end of his life). Those who are creative must consider all things that exist equally, even the seemingly repellent, and allow them an equal validity. The ability to do this, he felt, was the secret of Gustave Flaubert's success in 'The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaller', one of his *Trois Contes* (Three Tales) of 1877. Rilke went on to write that it was now, for the first time, that he grasped the fate of Malte Laurids Brigge, who understood the necessity for this totality of scrutiny but was himself unequal to its demands when he confronted reality, and failed the test. 'Or did he perhaps pass it,' added Rilke, 'for he described the death of the Chamberlain; like a Raskolnikov, however, he remained behind, used up by what he had done, unable to go on at the very moment when action had to begin, with the result that his newly won freedom turned against him and tore him apart, defenceless as he was.'

16. *mouleur*: *A mouleur* is a moulder of masks. Malte refers in this passage to a well-known death mask of a woman who had drowned

herself in the Seine, and then to the death mask of Beethoven, who became deaf later in life.

17. *Hammerklavier*: In this passage addressed to Beethoven, this word points not only to the instrument (the piano) but also to the composer's *Grosse Sonate für das Hammerklavier* (Great Hammerklavier Sonata), his Piano Sonata no. 29 in B flat major, opus 106 (1817–18). The Theban desert is the location to which early Christian hermits in Egypt retreated, most especially St Paul the Hermit (died *c*.347), and, by extension, the seclusion to which the early 'desert fathers' of the church, including Antony and Athanasius, withdrew. Rilke's unusual juxtaposition of courtesans and anchorites later in the sentence may suggest he had been reading Anatole France's *Thaïs* (1890), in which St Paphnutius emerges from a hermit life in the desert to convert the courtesan Thaïs to Christian living.

18. *the seed of Onan*: See Genesis 38: 9.

19. *like ships' figureheads in small gardens back home*: In a letter of 1925 to his Polish translator, Witold von Hulewicz, Rilke explained that he had seen painted figureheads set up in precisely this way in the gardens of Danish sea-captains.

20. *headstrong man*: Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906). Incidents and details in several of Ibsen's plays are referred to in this section. The refusal to quit the window, in the final paragraph of the passage, was characteristic of Ibsen in the last days of his life.

21. *Admiral Juel*: Nils Juel (1629–97), a Danish national hero, celebrated for a naval victory over the Swedes in 1677.

22. *bautta*: A Venetian carnival mask.

23. *his modest, faithful Rebekka… Lavater*: Rebekka was the wife of the poet and journalist Matthias Claudius (1740–1815). Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801) was a Swiss writer and theologian. The quoted words are from his diary of a journey through Denmark in 1792.

24. *There was Christian IV… in old portfolios*: Christian IV was King of Denmark and Norway for sixty years, from his accession at the age of eleven in 1588 till his death in 1648. Others in this formidable portrait gallery of the Danish seventeenth century were close to the King. Kirstine Munk was his second, morganatic wife; Ellen Marsvin was

Kirstine Munk's mother; ‘the “incomparable” Eleonore’ was Christian IV's daughter Leonora Christina, one of the monarch's twelve children by Kirstine Munk (her ‘ordeal’ was imprisonment for more than twenty years in the royal castle at Copenhagen). These are followed in this paragraph by the Gyldenløves (Golden Lions), illegitimate offspring of Christian IV; the Ulfelds were the children of Leonora Christina. Others named in this paragraph (Holck, Brahe, Daa, Rosensparre) were officers in the Danish army and navy. The Grubbes, Billes and Rosenkrantzes in the following paragraph were Danish aristocratic families. Rilke took an apparently random selection of names from a compendious study of Danish historical portraits, E. F. S. Lund's *Danske Malede Portræter* (1895–1903).

25. *an Erik Brahe who was executed*: An army officer executed in 1756 for his part in a monarchist plot aimed at increasing royal power.

26. *Prince Felix Lichnowski… cruelly lost his life in Frankfurt*: A conservative member of the National Assembly in Frankfurt in 1848, Lichnowski (1814–48) was killed by the mob during one of the uprisings that took place that year throughout the German states.

27. *There are tapestries here*: Rilke became interested in the celebrated *Dame à la licorne* (Lady with the Unicorn) tapestries, which he saw in the Musée de Cluny in Paris in 1906. The tapestries were woven in Flanders in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, and bear the arms of a nobleman, Jean le Viste; they were perhaps commissioned as an engagement gift to his fiancée, Claude. There are six in all, five illustrating the five senses and the sixth, which bears the motto Rilke quotes, ‘*A mon seul désir*’ (To my sole desire), the understanding of the heart. Rilke's description does not follow the order in which they are conventionally arranged: after the sixth, bearing the motto, he continues with the fourth (the sense of touch) before concluding with the first (the sense of sight). Rediscovered at Boussac (see the following note) in 1841 by Prosper Mérimée, the tapestries have held an unbroken fascination for writers since then, from George Sand to Cees Nooteboom and Tracy Chevalier.

28. *château of Boussac… Pierre d'Aubusson, great grand master from an ancient house*: Pierre d'Aubusson (1423–1503), grand master of the Order of St John (i.e. the Knights of Malta), owned the château of

Boussac where the tapestries were kept until their purchase by the Musée de Cluny in 1882.

29. *Gaspara Stampa or the Portuguese woman*: The Italian Gaspara Stampa (1523–54), sometimes described as a courtesan, was one of a number of women who stood in Rilke's mind for the sublime purity of love which endured in unreciprocated adversity; she is mentioned in the first of the *Duino Elegies* (see Introduction). Stampa had recorded her unhappy love for a Venetian count, Collaltino di Collato, in a cycle of more than two hundred sonnets. Rilke frequently wrote in letters of Stampa's enforced renunciation; to Mimi Romanelli, for example, who fell in love with him when they met in Venice in November 1907 and whom he kept at arm's length for several years, he offered the suggestion, in a letter of August 1908, that they might study Gaspara Stampa's works together one day, while to another of his unattached women correspondents, the Bohemian aristocrat Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin, he wrote in October 1908 of Stampa's 'heroic and angelic' early death, describing her fate as 'clear and crystalline'. The 'Portuguese woman' (Rilke's word '*Portugiesin*', often translated as 'Portuguese nun', means only that) was Mariana Alcoforado (1640–1723), who at the age of twelve entered a nunnery, where she met her lover, the Marquis de Chamilly. The letters attributed to her, now generally considered fiction, served Rilke as another example of the sublimity of love in renunciation; he wrote an article on them in 1908, and published a translation in 1913.

30. *Maman unrolled the little pieces of lace… snowy thicket of Binche*: Rilke took a real interest in lace, and would have watched women making it in Bruges and Venice. A poem on the subject in the first volume of the *New Poems* (see Introduction) emphasizes the self-abnegation in the women's work, a quality which associates them with the self-denying great lovers of whom he has just been writing. William Small's *Rilke-Kommentar zu den 'Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge'* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983) contains illustrations (pp. 129–30) which reveal the stylistic characteristics of Alençon, Valenciennes and Binche lace.

31. *Saint-Germain… the Marquis of Belmare*: Both names were used by the same man, an eighteenth-century adventurer who engaged in court

intrigues and diplomatic missions for the French, Russians and Germans, was musically gifted and claimed alchemical powers. He died at Eckernförde, the place in Schleswig-Holstein that Abelone has just had difficulty spelling (though the Count's reason for mentioning the place may have been that it was the scene of a naval battle in 1849, in which the Prussians defeated the Danes).

32. *the Bernstorff circle*: Count Johann Hartwig Ernst von Bernstorff (1712–72) and his nephew Count Andreas Peter von Bernstorff (1735–97), originally from a Hanoverian family, were in the service of the Danish crown, and at the centre of an influential intellectual and political circle.

33. *Julie Reventlow… She had the stigmata*: Friederike Juliane, Countess von Reventlow (1762–1816), daughter of a Danish privy councillor, was the moving spirit of a circle of writers and intellectuals. Rilke read about her in Lavater's diary (see note 23 above); the notion that she was a 'saint' and bore the 'stigmata' was Rilke's elaboration of a passage in Lavater that was not intended literally, according to Small's *Rilke-Kommentar*, cited in note 30.

34. *to pierce his heart*: Rilke told his French translator, Maurice Betz, that he had witnessed the same procedure performed on his own father. Perforation of the heart was not infrequently undertaken, in much of Europe, apparently as a guarantee against being buried alive.

35. *It was about Christian IV… all that was written on the sheet of paper*: Rilke took the account of the death of Christian IV (see note 24 above) almost verbatim from the memoirs of the King's doctor, Otto Sperling (1602–73).

36. *Félix Arvers… Then he died*: The anecdote about the death of the French poet Félix Arvers (1806–50) has often been told; while in Paris in 1906, Rilke would have had ample opportunity to come across it in publications marking the centenary of Arvers's birth.

37. *Jean de Dieu*: Portuguese-born saint (1495–1550) who founded a hospital in Granada and in 1886 was denominated patron saint of hospitals by Pope Leo XIII. An order bearing his name was founded shortly after his death.

38. *those wondrous pictures… points to her like a finger*: Malte is thinking

of Flemish paintings, such as *The Temptation of St Anthony* (*c.*1500) by Hieronymus Bosch, which present vice and sin in a style of grotesque exaggeration.

39. *Grisha Otrepyov*: A pretender to the Russian tsarist throne, Otrepyov claimed to be Ivan the Terrible's (Ivan Grozny's) youngest son, Dmitri, who had died in mysterious circumstances in 1591. At the head of a mixed Polish and Cossack army, he was made tsar in 1605 after the death of Boris Godunov, but was killed in an uprising in the following year (led by Prince Vasily Ivanovich Shuisky, who succeeded him as tsar). Maria Nagoi, seventh wife of Ivan the Terrible and mother of the dead Dmitri, had entered a nunnery after her son's death. Marina Mniszech, daughter of a Polish nobleman, married Otrepyov and was crowned Tsarina. Rilke took the story, and details of his phrasing, from an encyclopedia published in 1835.

40. *Charles the Bold*: Rilke follows the story of Otrepyov with that of Charles, Duke of Burgundy (1433–77), who conquered Lorraine in 1475 but suffered a defeat at Granson in the following year. In an attempt to retake Nancy, the capital of Lorraine, Charles lost his life on 5 January 1477 in a battle against conjoined forces of Lorraine and Switzerland (Uri, whose horns are referred to in Malte's account, is a Swiss canton); the search for his body was made on the feast of the Epiphany (6 January), and the corpse was found on 7 January. Gian-Battista Colonna, one of Charles's pages, came from Rome and was known as ‘the Roman’; King Louis XI of France was the implacable enemy of Charles, and in Malte's telling (this appears to be Rilke's invention) it amused Charles's retinue to give his name (‘Louis-Onze’) to the Duke's ‘fool’.

41. *Baggesen, Oehlenschläger and Schack-Staffeldt*: Jens Baggesen (1764–1826), celebrated Danish satirical poet; Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger (1779–1859), pre-eminent Danish Romantic poet and dramatist; Adolf Wilhelm Schack von Staffeldt (1769–826), Danish poet. In his *Rilke-Kommentar* (see note 30 above), William Small observes that Schack von Staffeldt, who failed to achieve a national reputation on a par with that of his fellow Danes, is conspicuously the obscure odd man out in a list which also includes internationally famous names of the order of Friedrich Schiller, Walter Scott and Pedro Calderón de la

Barca; the explanation seems to be that Rilke knew of his work only at second hand, from the critic Georg Brandes.

42. *Bettina's letters*: Bettina von Arnim (1785–1859), wife of one German Romantic poet, Ludwig Achim von Arnim (1781–1831), and sister of another, Clemens Brentano (1778–1842), met Johann Wolfgang von Goethe when she was twenty-two, exchanged letters with the much older writer, and in 1835, three years after his death, published the somewhat fictionalized *Briefwechsel Goethes mit einem Kind* (Goethe's Correspondence with a Child). Rilke read this book in 1908 and wrote to his wife, Clara, on 4 September that year: 'I am reading *Goethe's Correspondence with a Child*, this most powerful and pressing of testimonies against him.' Abelone's aversion to Goethe's side of the correspondence ('No, not the replies') was plainly shared by Rilke: in a letter to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin of the following day, 5 September, he wrote:

> I am reading […] the letters of Bettina Arnim to Goethe; I mention only hers; for his woeful, embarrassed answers worry and trouble me greatly. How constrained he must have been as a man, how unfocused and conventional as a lover, to have responded to this magnificent fire with such loth and paltry scraps! […] There was his sea: it surged and pounded at him and he hesitated, and was circumspect, and did not pour himself forth into it. Not even on reflection did he see that he had nothing to fear from a love that was growing so heroically over and above him, and that one nighttime smile would have showed her the way onward to where, without knowing it, she wanted to go: beyond herself.

43. *your greatest of poets*: That is, Goethe (see previous note).

44. *the chariot of his fiery ascension*: cf. the 'chariot of fire' in 2 Kings 2: 11.

45. *Héloïse… Sappho*: The twelfth-century lovers Abelard and Héloïse, teacher and abbess respectively, have had a special place for centuries among the great lovers in Western literature. For the Portuguese nun, see note 29 above. The great Greek poet Sappho, of the seventh to sixth centuries BC, similarly has her secure place in the pantheon of love.

46. *as with a lamp grown cold*: Malte's thought is probably of the foolish virgins, who declare, at Matthew 25: 8, 'our lamps are gone out'.

47. *the King*: Malte's account in this part of the notebooks is of King Charles VI (1368–1422) of France, who reigned from 1380 and was

afflicted with severe mental disorders. Theologian Jean Charlier de Gerson (1363–1429) was Chancellor of the University of Paris. The *parva regina* (little queen) was Odette de Champdivers, for some time the King's concubine. Others referred to in the following paragraphs include Jean Juvénal des Ursins, one of Charles's most able and loyal administrators; the King's brother, Louis, Duke of Orléans (1372–1407), whose murder by the Duke of Burgundy's assassin precipitated civil war; and Louis' widow Valentina, daughter of the Duke of Milan. Malte also mentions the Brotherhood of the Passion, an association of 'mission brothers' founded in 1402 under a charter drawn up by the King himself, for the purpose of performing mystery plays.

48. *Roosbecke*: In this battle (1382), Charles won a bloody victory over a Flemish uprising.

49. *the stag with the collar of gold in the forest of Senlis*: This dream or vision of Charles's is reported by Jean Froissart (*c*.1337–*c*.1405), from whose *Chroniques* Rilke derived some of the material in this section, and by Juvénal's son, Jean Juvénal des Ursins (1388–1473), later archbishop of Reims, who wrote a history of Charles VI's reign, to which Rilke adheres more closely in this paragraph. Another source on which he drew heavily was the *Chroniques* of Charles VI's reign by the nameless monk known as Le Religieux de Saint-Denis.

50. *Christine de Pisan's little book… dedicated to him*: Christine de Pisan was the prolific writer, born about 1363 and dying at an unknown date in the 1430s, who is widely regarded as the first French *femme savante*, and quite possibly the first woman to earn a living by writing. She dedicated *The Road of Long Study* to Charles VI and presented it to the Duc de Berry in March 1403.

51. *Cumaean*: The Cumaean sibyl – guardian of the shrine of Apollo at Cumae in southern Italy – who guides Aeneas into the Underworld in Virgil's *Aeneid*.

52. *Emperor Wenceslaus*: Wenceslaus (1361–1419) was Holy Roman Emperor, and King of Bohemia. He and Charles VI had met in 1397.

53. *several popes… familiar with Avignon*: There were 'several popes' (at the time of the Papal Schism that took place between 1378 and 1417) because the election of Urban VI had been declared void by the College of Cardinals, and Clement VII elected in his place. Clement

resided in the papal palace at Avignon, which had been the residence of the popes since 1309; Urban resided in Rome. (Both popes were deposed by the Council of Pisa in 1409; a satisfactory resolution of the situation was not achieved until 1417.) Rilke spent over a fortnight in Avignon in the early autumn of 1909. (He visited Orange and Les Baux, important in later pages of the novel, during the same sojourn in Provence.)

54. *John the Twenty-Second*: Pope John XXII, Jacques Duèse (of Cahors; 1245–1334), was the second pope to reside at Avignon. In the sermon he is described as preaching in the following paragraph, on All Saints' Day 1331, he pronounced that the souls of the blessed did not enter paradise immediately after death but had to wait until the Last Judgement; he enlarged upon this new doctrine in further sermons on 15 December and 5 January 1332. Replying on 10 November 1925 to questions put by his Polish translator, Witold von Hulewicz, Rilke wrote: 'Imagine just *what* it meant to Christendom at that time, to learn that *nobody* in the afterlife had yet entered into a state of salvation, that this would not occur until the Last Judgement, that there, as here, it was all a matter of standing waiting in trepidation!' John XXII recanted his doctrine on 3 December 1334.

55. *the piece of unicorn was discoloured*: In the same responses to Witold von Hulewicz (see previous note), Rilke reported: 'From the dishes that were set before great lords, a piece of the horn of a unicorn often hung by a chain, to be dipped into food before eating or drink before drinking; it was believed that the horn would become discoloured if the food or drink had been poisoned.'

56. *Napoleone Orsini*: Cardinal Orsini (1263–1342), a bitter opponent of John XXII (see note 54 above).

57. *the son of the Count of Ligny… in an ecstasy of consummation*: The story of this young Luxembourg prince's death, who was made a cardinal at eleven and died at eighteen, is told by both Froissart and the monk of Saint-Denis (see note 49 above).

58. *brother fell upon brother… wrath governing over his heart*: The Comte de Vendôme and the Comte de la Marche, whose fifteenth-century story Rilke found in the monk of Saint-Denis' chronicles (see note 49).

59. *Count de Foix, Gaston Phoebus… this exhausted boy*: Gaston (1331–91)

accidentally killed his own son; Rilke found the story in Froissart (see note 49 above).

60. *tragic woman*: Eleonora Duse (1859–1924), the great Italian actress. Rilke saw her perform, and met her on several occasions.

61. *Mariana Alcoforado*: See note 29.

62. *Byblis… swiftly flowing spring*: The story of Byblis, who loved her twin brother, Caunus, is told in Book IX of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

63. *Portuguese woman… Marie-Anne de Clermont*: This paragraph includes some names of great women lovers in Rilke's pantheon that have already been mentioned in the novel (for the 'Portuguese woman' and Gaspara Stampa, see note 29 above; for Héloïse, see note 45 above), and adds the Countess of Die, a twelfth-century Provençal poet; the thirteenth-century Provençal poet Clara d'Anduze; Louise Labé (1526–66), a French Renaissance poet, some of whose sonnets Rilke translated; Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786–1859; Rilke gives only her maiden name), actress, singer and writer, and subject of a 1927 novel by Stefan Zweig; French poet Elisa Mercœur (1809–35); Aïssé (1694–1733), who was bought at the age of four, in the slave market at Constantinople, by the French ambassador, and brought by him to Paris, where she became an attraction in fashionable society; Julie de Lespinasse (1723–76), salon hostess close to d'Alembert and other French Enlightenment intellectuals; and Marie-Anne de Bourbon-Condé, Princesse de Clermont (1697–1741), who was heartbroken when the Duke she had secretly married was killed in a hunting accident.

64. *Clémence de Bourges*: De Bourges (1535–61) was the friend and correspondent of Louise Labé (see previous note); in 1556, the poet dedicated her complete works to her. De Bourges reportedly died of a broken heart following the death of her fiancé.

65. *Jean de Tournes*: Printer in sixteenth-century Lyons. The 'little book' would be the works of Louise Labé (see previous note).

66. *Diké and Anaktoria, Gyrinno and Atthis*: Companions of Sappho (see note 45 above), named or addressed in her poems.

67. *Ridinger engravings of equestrian subjects*: Johann Elias Ridinger (1698–1769) was a prolific German artist whose work consisted

mainly of animal and hunting scenes.

68. *those fragments of Sappho's poetry that have come down to us*: Only two poems by Sappho (see note 45 above) survive in full; the remainder consists of fragments.

69. *Galen… 'the poetess'*: Galen is the great Greek physician of the second century AD. The 'poetess' is Sappho (see note 45 above).

70. *Benedicte von Qualen… Baggesen's life*: Jens Baggesen, the Danish poet to whom Malte has already referred (see note 41), proposed to von Qualen (1774–1813) after the death of his wife. She turned him down.

71. *Mechthild… Blessed Rose of Lima*: These 'loving women' are: the thirteenth-century German mystic Mechthild von Magdeburg; Teresa of Avila (1515–82), the great Spanish mystic and reformer of the Carmelite order; and Rose of Lima (1586–1617), the first native of the Americas to be canonized.

72. *Princess Amalie Galitzin*: Galitzin (1748–1806) was – with her husband, Prince Dmitri Alexeievich Galitzin, Catherine II's ambassador to France – close to Voltaire and other French Enlightenment writers, and later celebrated as a salon hostess in Westphalia.

73. *the Prodigal Son*: See Luke 15: 11–32.

74. *Deodatus of Gozon*: Fourteenth-century knight of the Order of St John, who was said to have killed a dragon on Rhodes.

75. *Les Baux… tombs of the resurrected*: During his visit to Provence in the autumn of 1909, Rilke spent a single day at the extraordinary ruined castle and village of Les Baux in a rocky, remote part of the region. It made a powerful impression on him, and on 23 October he wrote a detailed account to Lou Andreas-Salomé (see Introduction), giving a history of the dynasty which had ruled there as well as a striking description of the location and of himself, strolling about in near-silence with a shepherd, amid grazing sheep and the scent of thyme. The dynasty, Rilke noted, traced its origins back to a descendant of Balthasar, one of the three biblical magi (which led the lords of Baux to use the sixteen-pointed Star of Bethlehem on their coat of arms); they also appear to have had a superstition about the numbers seven and three. Les Alyscamps, where Malte also pictures the prodigal, is an ancient burial ground at Arles, with numerous

sarcophagi. Rilke would have seen the site for himself, but may also have been familiar with the paintings Vincent van Gogh did of it in November 1888. To his wife, Clara, Rilke wrote on 4 October 1907: 'in his most fearful times [van Gogh] painted the most fearful of things. How else could he have survived?'

76. *'sa patience de supporter une âme'*: Rilke told his Polish translator, Witold von Hulewicz, that he thought the words (which mean 'his patience in enduring a soul') were from St Teresa of Avila (see note 71).

*The draft of a letter.

*Written in the margin of the manuscript.

*Death, death.

*Written in the margin of the manuscript.

*Written in the margin of the manuscript.

*Written in the margin of the manuscript.

*Written in the margin of the manuscript.

*Written in the margin of the manuscript.