

Translated from the French by Richard Howard
Introduction by Charles Newman

E. M. Cioran

The Fall into Time



| *The Fall into Time* |

BOOKS BY E. M. CIORAN

Précis de Décomposition

Syllogismes de l'Amertume

La Tentation d'Exister

*Joseph de Maistre (Introduction et choix
de textes)*

Histoire et Utopie

La Chute dans le Temps

Le Mauvais Démon

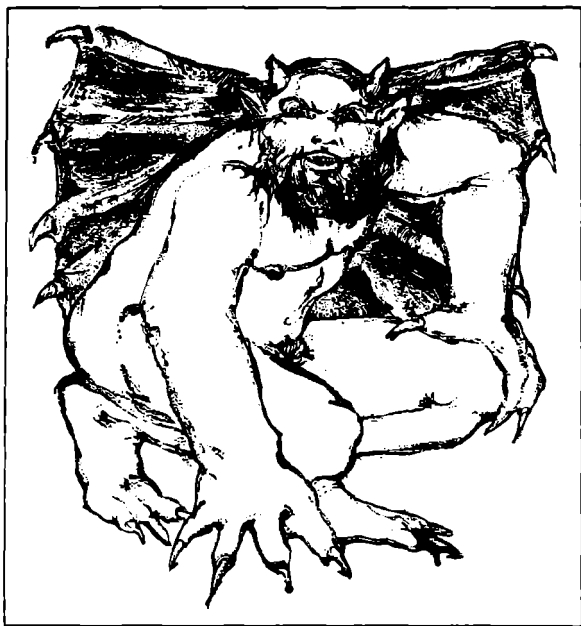
IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

BY RICHARD HOWARD

The Temptation to Exist

The Fall into Time

E. M. Cioran:



The Fall into Time

TRANSLATED FROM
THE FRENCH BY
RICHARD HOWARD
INTRODUCTION BY
CHARLES NEWMAN
QUADRANGLE BOOKS
CHICAGO | 1970

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 79-116072
SBN 8129-0146-0

Illustration on title page: "The Devil" by Ron Villani.

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INTRODUCTION

“And there, sir, lies the entire problem, to have within oneself the inseparable reality and the material clarity of feeling, to have it in such a degree that the feeling cannot but express itself, to have a wealth of words and of formal constructions which can join in the dance, serve one’s purpose—and at the very moment when the soul is about to organize its wealth, its discoveries, this revelation, at the unconscious moment when the thing is about to emanate, a higher and evil will attacks the soul like vitriol, attacks the word and image mass, attacks the mass of feeling and leaves me panting at the very door of life.”

—ANTONIN ARTAUD

A Fanatic Without Convictions

To say that Cioran is a paradox would be only a half-truth. He is ambivalent even about the possibility of being self-contradictory, profoundly skeptical of irony itself. Nevertheless, he is, crabwise, on the attack. The obsessive theme of these interrelated essays—his fifth of six such collections, and the second to appear in English—is his revulsion against fashionable despair, that democratic access to bathos and absurdity which serves as the intellectual superstructure of our time.

Stop anyone over twelve on the street today and on a moment’s notice he can provide a Spenglerian theory of our decline; any housewife can chart her loneliness in the grand tradition of Kafka and Kierke-

gaard. We have become proud of our pessimism, elevated our melancholy to the status of a metaphysic. Cioran's diagnosis is that while contemporary man has managed to begin "dying on his own," his pride is such that he cannot even sense the humiliation of the enterprise. Man is the only animal who can endure any metamorphosis by putatively *explaining* it, justify any loss without understanding its implications. This would be an incredible spectacle were there anyone else to watch it. As it stands, the Apocalypse becomes only another occasion for self-congratulation and theorizing; the *Angst* of our time, only the newest form of hubris.

It is the clichés of despair, the banality of the abyss which fuel Cioran's withering indifference. The progressive disrealization of the world which began in the Renaissance is for him an unutterable tragedy, a matter to be savored by an elitist of suffering, not popularized as the latest accessory to bourgeois idealism. The split between sensation and thinking is not a "frame of reference," a problem to be solved by "interdisciplinary studies," but an insomniacal agony, the very articulation of which only redoubles and regenerates our pain. In those few instances in which Cioran drops his lofty detachment, becomes an active complainer, he echoes Artaud: "All I ask is to feel my brain."

Style as Risk

One can best understand Cioran as a phenomenon of

the French language, as distinct from French culture, and French literary culture in particular. While he may be sloppily assigned to those long if thinning ranks of Pascalian skeptics or contemporary "existential" thinkers, his achievement lies in the repudiation of such influences—or, more precisely, in carrying the premises of their relativism to a logical if outrageous conclusion. Since Cioran does not engage in specific polemic nor acknowledge by name any other living writer, one can only imagine the extent of his contempt for the "committed" literature of a Sartre, for the systematic and relentless attempt to *justify* the duality of being and nonbeing, for the entire enterprise of attempting to resolve the ambiguities of literature and life. Similarly, one can see him jeering at the plight of Camus' Sisyphus, or for that matter at any other of those humorless existential trade unionists who compound their incompetence with stoicism, pit their solipsism against determinism and call it dignity. These "heroic" poses represent for Cioran only the latest revenge of the intellect against itself and confirm the loss of our best instincts. "To be human is no solution," as he says, "any more than ceasing to be so."

For Cioran, ontology itself is a specious problem, even an "ontology of nothingness," to use Michel Foucault's phrase, since reports of "the void" tend to be just as unverifiable as those about what we "know." There is nothing particularly affirmative about acknowledging the negative. Just because we hate ourselves, he observes apropos of Tolstoy, does

not mean we still are not living a lie. The realization of “nothingness” is one thing—like going into a room and reporting that “nothing was there”—but one cannot begin at the beginning of nothingness any more than one can start at the beginning of any learning process; one cannot make assertions about language or nature from a hypothetical vantage point outside them. Anomie is our condition, anomia our curse, anomaly our profession. Or to put it another way: our scabrous individuality consists of trying to *name* our condition. Man loses his primordial grace in literally trying to “make a name” for himself.

The central concern of *The Temptation to Exist*, Cioran’s first book to appear in English, was to confirm the total disjunction between language and reality. That work represents a kind of final assault on the typology which has formed the basis of Western thought—the notion that the physical world embodies signs of metaphysical reality; and, more, that if human intelligence is pure, it can define these correspondences through language. “The works of God” as Jonathan Edwards had it, “are but a kind of voice or language to instruct beings in things pertaining to himself . . . wherever we are, and whatever we are about, we may see divine things excellently represented . . . *and* it will abundantly tend to confirm the Scriptures, for there is an excellent agreement between these things and the Scripture.”

But for Cioran, language is a sticky symbolic net, an infinite regression from things cutting men off from the world, as they once cut themselves off from

God; and so, to scramble the metaphor, humans are no more than shadows who project their images upon the mirror of infinity. (“A shadow grappling with images, a somnambulist who *sees himself* walking . . .”) What Edwards called the “images or shadows of divine things,” Cioran would rearrange as ‘divined images by shadows of no things.’ This conclusion of *The Temptation to Exist* becomes the working hypothesis of *The Fall into Time*. Nothing divine, only the divined: language, insofar as it can reorient our behavior, perhaps slows the death of the species; but at the same time, in increasing our endless analogies for experience, it prevents us from being fully alive to ourselves. Neutralized by our uniqueness, we become incapable of capitalizing even on what sets us apart from the animals—our capacity for indifference. Style is the man—unfortunately for us. As Cioran puts it: “Consciousness is not lucidity. Lucidity, man’s monopoly, represents the severance process between the mind and the world; it is necessarily consciousness of consciousness, and if we are to distinguish ourselves from the animals, it is lucidity alone which must receive the credit or the blame.”

Language as a vicious circle literally signifying nothing except itself becomes the exaggeration *pro forma* of man’s condition—all speech hyperbole, all prose rhetorical, all poetry prosedemic, all thought proleptic. It is not a new idea. Nietzsche elaborated it better than anyone. Wittgenstein confirmed it with positivist precision: “Philosophy is a battle against bewitchment of our intelligence by the means of language.”

Cioran would be appalled if anyone accused him of originality in thought, which would not be necessarily desirable even if it were possible. What is original is his personalization of these ideas through his style: "Every idolatry of style starts from the belief that reality is even more hollow than its verbal figuration, that the accent of an idea is worth more than the idea, a well-turned excuse more than a conviction, a skillful image more than an unconsidered explosion. . . . A well-proportioned sentence, satisfied with its equilibrium or swollen with its sonority, all too often conceals the *malaise* of a mind incapable of acceding by *sensation* to an original universe. What is surprising if style should be simultaneously a mask and an admission?"

French, that pluperfect language, is the perfect vehicle for Cioran, whose thought is circuitous without being tautological, whose circumvolved syntax can gather a point and discharge it in the same phrase. His style is so sonorous that even the reader who could not understand the *French* of the following could delight in saying it aloud to himself: "*Je rêve d'une langue dont les mots, comme des poings, fracasseraient les mâchoires. . . .*" Cioran's sentences lie about his culture like clean shards struck from an unfinished, blocked-out torso.

While nothing in *The Fall into Time* offers as much of a lyrical *tour de force* as the essays "A People of Solitaries" or "Beyond the Novel" in *The Temptation to Exist*, *The Fall* represents an even more advanced process of compression, one might

even say asphyxiation. The more Cioran attacks rationality, the more pellucid he becomes. There are no transitions, no breathing spaces between these paragraphs, no hiatus in these gnomic sentences, so classic in their density, yet touched with baroque recapitulations which heighten not the harmony but the irony. The book should end with a blank signature to hold the air that has been extruded from the text.

It is not difficult to translate Cioran's ideas, for their apothegmatic arrangement lends itself to facile reconstruction. The temptation is to *cease* his momentum, grasp him by the aphorism, make him into a kind of Gallic Oscar Wilde. The problem is to capture his complexity as well as his precision, both the acceleration and aphasia of his cyclic cadences, and this is the particular triumph of Richard Howard's translation. It is the decisiveness of Cioran's style which both accentuates and gives the lie to the ambivalence of his message; it is a style which does not embody his thoughts as much as it exemplifies the consequences of his thought. As Edward Said has pointed out, Cioran is to the essay what Borges is to fiction.*

His Friends, the Enemy

For Cioran, sterility itself becomes a strategy. His

* Edward W. Said, "Amateur of the Insoluble," *Hudson Review*, XXI, No. 4 (Winter 1968-1969). This is the best consideration of *The Temptation to Exist* to appear in either English or French.

method is calculated to defy introduction, his individual works serve to undermine his *oeuvre*. The parts are always more than the whole. But at the same time he infects us with what he insists is man's worst impulse—to append, explain, refute, to *add* to—to take language as seriously as we might take life were we abler. Other writers cry out for attention; one reads Cioran to be rid of him. One writes in order to ignore him. One is “fair” to him at one's peril. For his attenuation and asceticism demand that we justify those impure energies which activate our willingness to account for him, to put him *in context*—for in doing so, we confess our inability to take him at his word, becoming one of that “throng of readers, those omnipresent and invisible murderers.” Not unlike certain great ladies, he possesses you in order to disdain your interest.

In this respect, he asks to be demolished, but only *totally*, and so maintains a certain invulnerability. For what he says of Sextus Empiricus applies to himself: “Too subtle and too methodical to compete with the new superstitions, [his treatises] were the expression of a world already consummated, futureless, doomed. Yet skepticism, whose theses they had codified, managed to survive a while on lost positions.”

It is easy to quote Cioran against himself; indeed, he demands it. But the strategy requires that *you* have the last word. No one who has written on him to date has been able to resist it. I first came across him—or rather his essay on the novel—nine years ago, and that essay was later to serve as a departure point for a

self-conscious piece * I wrote to refute those who similarly, if rather belatedly, rehearsed their versions of “the death of the novel.” In the end, I found myself quoting *him* in defense of *my* positions, which were presumably refutations of his. What’s more, it worked. A self-contradiction which Cioran would applaud for its own sake.

Likewise, in the first sustained appreciation of his work to appear in English, Claude Mauriac, after praising Cioran highly and admitting his central point —“*meaning begins to be dated . . . we know nothing that essentially distinguishes us . . . as a result, we all write the same books*”—Mauriac suddenly cries out at the end of his essay: “I shall not give up the idea of seeing and knowing more than what we already see and know. Therefore, we reaffirm that even for *alittérateurs*, everything ends in literature. . . .” † Which is of course the point that Cioran is making ten years later in *The Fall into Time*. It is important to notice how Cioran forces Mauriac, forces all of us, to admit that the urge to fictionalize, to *see and know more*, is basically irrational, if not evil. ‡

* “Beyond Omniscience: Notes Towards a Future for the Novel,” in *The New American Writers*, edited by Charles Newman and William Henkin, Bloomington, Ind., 1969.

† Claude Mauriac, *The New Literature*, New York, 1957.

‡ This idea is elaborated in Cioran’s most recent book. *The Evil Demiurge* (1969), in which he primarily addresses himself to what Camus called the only philosophical question—that of suicide—and dismisses it characteristically: “*L’obsession du suicide est le propre de celui qui ne peut ni vivre ni mourir et dont l’attention ne s’écarte jamais de cette double impossibilité.*”

Nevertheless, one should not view him as an *alittérateur* in Mauriac's tradition, for indeed his indictment of fiction applies most strongly to the "new" or anti-novel: "These days, no one escapes the exacerbation of the intellect . . . the monumental no longer possible . . . the *interesting* is raised to the level of a genre. . . . Page after page, the accumulation of inconsequence . . . the advent of a novel without a subject . . . no more plot, characters, complications, causality . . . psychology cancels itself out . . . only a self survives, recalling that it once existed . . . the novelist knows only the periphery, the boundaries of being; that is why he is a writer. . . ." And in any case, Cioran sees himself less a negator than a doubter, because "to live without a goal is more difficult than to live for a bad cause."

Finally, Cioran knows he has an advantage and admits it. "Criticism is of the ages," he says, ". . . religious inspirations [and, we presume, other art] a privilege of certain eminently rare periods. It requires a great deal of thoughtlessness and intoxication to engender a god, to kill one requires only a little attention." Cioran reaffirms Thomas Mann's pronouncement that every modern artist must become his own critic—but for Cioran this is hardly a salutary event, just the necessity of the artist to explain what he *might* have done.

In another vein, William Gass makes use of a vitriolic and lengthy attack upon Cioran* to append

* William H. Gass, "The Evil Demiurge," *New York Review of Books*, August 22, 1968.

some epistolary paragraphs on the possibilities of love and growth as an antidote to Cioran's "incurable pessimism": "To feel at home in our body, to sense the true *nostos* of it, is to have it move to our will so smoothly we seem will-less altogether." Actually, what Cioran is saying in *The Temptation to Exist* is that it is our penchant for diagnosis which is our sickness, and that is precisely why it is incurable. It is our relentless attempt *to be well* that distracts us and finishes us off in the end. Again, Cioran has provoked the reader-who-is-also-a-writer into the kind of self-justificatory and sentimental outburst which he defines as the seat of our hopelessness. And to the analogy of the will-less body with which Gass attacks his *Temptation to Exist*, Cioran would seem to offer an oblique rejoinder in *The Fall into Time*: "True, most men breathe without realizing, without thinking about it; should their breath fail them someday, they will discover how air, suddenly converted into a problem, haunts them every instant. Woe unto those who know they are breathing. . . ."

Similarly, or at least more topically, Susan Sontag, after much praise and brilliant analysis, ends up by placing Cioran against John Cage, which is precisely the sort of ludicrous juxtaposition and oblation that Cioran asks for—but again, the critic is finally reduced to telling us about herself, finishing the story Cioran drops so engagingly.* ("We attribute reality to others," Cioran says, "only insofar as we discover it in ourselves.")

* "On Cioran," *TriQuarterly* 11 (Winter 1968). Introduction to *The Temptation to Exist* (Chicago, 1968).

There is, however, one aspect of Miss Sontag's program for Cioran which I think would baffle him, for while he would heartily approve of her habit of putting concepts such as *The West* in quotes and *now* in parentheses, her characterization of his political sensibility as "right-wing Catholic" is a bit shallow, even if one acknowledges the old cliché about how much French Catholics secretly desire to be Communists and vice versa. It is important to note that, having survived the major political cataclysms of this century, Cioran's indifference to politics, his taking his *alien* status seriously (which is to say, metaphorically), results in an attitude which cannot be described in conventional ideological terms. It is manifestly to his credit that, unlike most intellectuals, émigrés in particular, he does not offer his aesthetics as a surrogate politics, nor confuse his personal experience with the intellectual history of our time. The East/West conflict for Cioran is that between the beatific Buddha and grimacing Saviour, not Nicolae Ceausescu and Georges Pompidou. His "letter" to a fellow intellectual in Rumania is worth quoting at some length in this respect:

Freedom in the West, in order to manifest itself, requires a void—and succumbs to it. The condition which determines it is the very one which annihilates it. This freedom lacks foundation; the more complete it is, the more it overhangs an abyss, for everything threatens it, down to the principles from which it derives. Man is so little made to endure or deserve it, that the very benefits he receives from it crush him, and freedom ultimately brings him to

the point where he prefers, to its excesses, those of terror. To these disadvantages are added others: a liberal society, eliminating mystery, the absolute, order, and possessing the true metaphysic no more than a true police, cast the individual back upon himself, while dividing him from what he is, from his own depths. . . . Imagine a society overpopulated with doubt, in which, with the exception of a few strays, no one adheres utterly to anything; in which unscathed by superstition, certainties, everyone pays lip service to freedom and no one respects the form of government which defends and incarnates it. . . . You are disappointed after promises which could not be kept; we, by a lack of any promises at all. . . .*

Cioran should be required reading for those liberals who cannot understand the revolt of their children against their benevolent pragmatism, but neither the new radical nor the Establishmentarian will find much comfort with him: "At any price we must keep those who have too clear a conscience from living and dying in peace. . . ."

Moreover, one should note the most oblique but crucial of the essays in this volume, "Skeptic and Barbarian," perhaps the distillation of Cioran's thought with regard to culture and society, where he says: "Civilizations . . . begin by myth and end in doubt; a theoretical doubt which, once it turns against itself become quite practical. . . . For the various beliefs it had engendered and which now break adrift, it substitutes a system of uncertainties, it *organizes* its

* Letter to a Distant Friend," *TriQuarterly* 11 (Winter 1968).

metaphysical shipwreck . . . [it] exists in a kind of furious stupor.”

In such an age, two kinds of skeptics appear; the first, *true* skeptics: those who “frequently, even inevitably, call [doubt] itself into question, [for doubt] prefers to abolish itself rather than see its perplexities degenerate into articles of faith.” Against these elitists, however, there appears another sort of skeptic, the Barbarian: “He too will know the suspension of judgment and the abolition of sensations, but only within a *crisis* . . . leaping outside the aporias in which his mind has vegetated, he shifts from inertia to exultation . . . these are the traitors to skepticism . . . a depth of barbarism which the majority, which virtually the totality of men have the good fortune to preserve.”

If the “true” skeptic cannot succeed by his own means, he will seek the help of the Barbarian, “whose role is not to solve but to suppress problems, and with them, the hyperacute consciousness which torments the weak man even when he has renounced all speculative activity . . . and so he will urge his enemy to come and deliver him from his final agony.”

It is clear that Cioran’s literary elitism becomes more complex when extended to politics. Indeed, he sees himself as a potential “traitor to skepticism”; he would *like* to side with the barbarians, and he becomes (as always, in spite of himself) their witting accomplice. The “relevance” of his analogy to our present situation hardly needs elaboration.

It is instructive, nevertheless, to note how defensive

we become in the face of such passionate uncertainty. The philosopher, the critic, the artist, all find it necessary to justify their activity in the face of such subtle undermining, the casual glancing blows of dubiety. Otherwise we are in danger of seeming mere addenda to Cioran's argument, proof-text for his self-ridicule, just one more word in the world. Cioran's favorite trick, after all, is to dig a disguised pit for the man of pride, literary pride in particular, and then to leap into it himself before you fall, depriving you of even the delectation of being fooled. So the victim falls, if not out of time precisely, at least *onto* Cioran. Make no mistake about it, he loves it. It is easy to miss his humor—that grin which from a distance is impossible to read as anguish or ecstasy, that silent laugh of the gargoyle, the jester/fiend, the *jongleur*.

Impassivity and Imposture

What can you do with a man who attacks you for *his* mistakes, and then insists those very errors are most worth having? What can you do with a writer who *writes off* writing with writing, who would not give up an instant of fear for an admirer? How to locate a mind which seemingly speaks out of nowhere, and then only against itself? To what use could we Americans have put this delicate, perilous tongue had he chosen *it*, what would we have done to a man who urges us “to throw ourselves on the ground and cry every time we feel like it?” A great entertainer, perhaps? A teen-age murderer? Must we end up dismissing him as a *unique*?

It is easy to understand why Cioran has been so uniformly ignored—his possibilist vocabulary, his library of books which no one else has read, the cold elegance of his aphoristic syntax, his hatred for the present which makes liberals think he is a reactionary, the insistent *isolato* voice which makes conservatives think he is an anarchist, the effortless erudition which gains him the suspicion of scholars, the astringent elitism which can only put the wider audience he deserves hopelessly on the defensive. Too tough-minded to be considered tragic, too funny to be a true terrorist, the barbarian appears on the rim of the Carpathians to preside at the death of a civilization, only to be “civilized” in spite of himself, a redundant eremite, a specialist in the last gasp.

Given Cioran’s enormous efforts to repudiate writing as a career, the contemporary reader may tend to underestimate what is most striking about his accomplishment. For the most difficult task for the writer is not how to “make a living,” to ignore both insult and loneliness, but how to survive one’s “circle,” one’s own supportive contemporaries. While most of the intelligentsia of Cioran’s Sixth Arrondissement in the late ’30’s and ’40’s have long since repaired to their respective ministries of culture and/or ceased writing altogether, we still receive terse messages from one who has *stayed put*, made a profession of not being for sale, had the strength to let his talent mature at its own pace. (Cioran was thirty-six before he even decided to write in French.) As Edward Dahl-

berg, the only living writer I know of who has affinities with Cioran, says: "I don't think we write for anybody, just like we die for nobody . . . every time we compose a good line, a forest springs up in our hearts." Cioran could only concur with an imperceptible nod. Neither of them can forgive a society in which hermeticism is the only possible honesty.

There is really only one problem for writers, how to keep working—and one for other humans, how to endure lucidity without bitterness. Here is an exemplar, one who has survived both the vacuity of contemporary life and claustrophobic *dédoublage* of Europe, living off his own reserve of strangulated fury, "perpetually irritated at the heart of inanity." He remains a strangely endearing reaffirmation of *consciousness*, of sleeplessness, in an era of sleepwalkers:

Our contemporaries, those indiscreet, frustrated creatures who by deifying confession, appetite and effort are guilty of having turned us into lyrical puppets, are insatiable as we are exhausted? The only excuse for their fury is that it derives not from a fresh instinct or a sincere impulse, but from panic in the face of a clogged horizon. So many of our philosophers who brood, flabbergasted, over the future are really no more than interpreters of a humanity which, realizing that the moments are escaping, struggles not to think about it—and thinks about it continually. Their systems generally offer the image and in a sense the discursive development of the obsession. Similarly, History could solicit their attention only at a moment when man has every reason to doubt that it still belongs to him, that he continues to be its agent. Indeed, everything suggests that since History

too escapes him, man is beginning a non-historical career, brief, convulsive, which relegates to the ranks of insipidity the disasters with which it was hitherto so smitten.

It is doubtful whether any American literary sensibility can fully comprehend Cioran's strategy. We have made the void our myth, and our traditional technique has been that of appropriating the world—engorgement. Placeless autodidacts, we have congratulated ourselves on creating a few legends where there were none, erected an immense peopleless mythology which we find now, rather sullenly, somewhat less comprehensive than we expected.

Cioran could sympathize: "Man emerges from anonymity by a series of repudiations which make him the great deserter of being." But his own response is to move subtly from defiance and despair to *relinquishment*. Victim of the accumulation of legends rather than their lack, it falls to him to execute whatever myth remains, and so he calls for the final blow to the old world's pieties; distills, divagates the remains until his consciousness relapses from itself—

The self, triumphing over its functions, shrinks to a point of consciousness projected into the infinite, outside of time.

He knows he could have become a great mystic—a connoisseur of that last frontier for Western will—for then his disdain of attention could have been given the texture of a tradition. But as much as he admires

the vegetable, he knows we are incapable of surfeiting ourselves, even with pain. Western man is de-natured, and can only work himself back, not to *his* God, but His condition: "Amid his seamless hebetude, a single thought still agonizes [man]. . . . What did God do when he did nothing? How did He spend, before the Creation, His terrible leisure? . . . I was, I am, I will be, me is a question of grammar and not of existence."

Perhaps Cioran adopts the pose of a man without influence, since his own writing seems so totally without influences. Certainly, he can be best defined in terms of what he has *bypassed*. What other twentieth-century thinker is so untouched by either Marx or Freud? Partially, this is due to his assault on determinism—economic, erotic, or existential. It would be clearly preferable, he would say, to deny our freedom, that ugly knowledge that our paralysis is self-inflicted, or to adopt some utopian view of the past or an apocalyptic future. Then we could exist by either renouncing ourselves or denouncing our enemies. But the trick, in every sense, is to will "just enough to live," since our choice is between "impassivity and imposture," and though the finest thing about us is our rage, direct repudiation implies a "complicity with certainty," and as such denies our condition.

Reformist critiques of society, then, degenerate into equally profane analyses, instances only of our genius for turning back on ourselves—Marxism merely an involuted example of what capitalist societies have done to "backward" cultures. "The civilized man . . . in order to push them there . . . will inoculate them

with the poison of anxiety and release them only when he has observed in them the same symptoms of haste as in himself." Cast by knowledge into time, it becomes doubly impossible for us to imagine a present; the future becomes only something to be remembered, "the past that is to come." No system, more than any man, is immune to the deceptions of technology, and our inhuman means of production are the consequence, not the cause, of our condition.

As for psychoanalysis, that "sadistic therapeutics . . . singularly expert in the art of substituting, for our naive discomforts, an intricate variety," why should we expect any more from health than from history since our will ejects us from both? If man is the unhappy animal because he asks himself too many questions, then of what use is that most interrogative of sciences? The promise of less anxiety is as dubious as that of more leisure. Our sickness, after all, is our only common bond; suffering, the created consciousness of the race. If we are defined by fear, then neither Marx or Freud can allay it, since the one offers a fall back into history to "encounter oneself"; the other, a retreat into the self to divine history. Our organism cannot be adapted to either, for in an "explained universe, nothing would still have a meaning but madness itself."

The problem is dictated neither by culture nor personality but by language. . . . Language, that which "outlives itself," is what prevents us from going beyond the boundaries of the self. This is Cioran's chant of shame. The poison of individualism has been

with us from the beginning, and we must acknowledge our pain and sickness since they are the very preconditions of our consciousness. There is no going back to a pre-linguistic paradise, to a supremacy over time based upon some primordial stupidity, any more than we can decay into a future McLuhanite garden of undifferentiated consciousness, an apotheosis of silence where we can treat our wordlessness as innocence. And the writer's only dignity is that he should know this better than anyone, that in his banishment he stands for all men. Small consolation. "Our opinions are tumors which destroy the integrity of our nature and nature itself."

And yet if words are nets which buffer us from life, they also *slow* our fall toward death. They make it possible to reflect upon our dissent, descent, make it "methodical." There can be no audience for this enterprise, inasmuch as a public will invariably confuse its ability to react with the artist's ability to explore, reduce such endless interrogations to "pessimism." For it is we, that unknown and invisible public, whose existence becomes problematic in the face of Cioran's uncompromising insecurity.

The Dream, the Lie, of Diversity

Cioran is clearly a self-styled straddler of the modern and post-modern eras. In his rigor, his erudition, his hatred of the dissolution of language, his formalism which constitutes its own morality, he is a legitimate heir to the great European modernists. But whereas the modernists never doubted their capacity to construct imaginary edifices against a world which re-

volted them, the post-modern era is characterized by a revulsion against our very means and materials, a hatred of our minds coextensive with our hatred for what passes for the world. Cioran stands for us, then, as that rarest of thinkers—a crucial transitional figure who occupies not a place so much as a synapse in the devolution of Western thought. As Wilde, another more frivolous son of Nietzsche has elaborated, some critics might prefer to *explain* ideas, but the task is really to “deepen their mystery,” combat one’s doubts and certitudes with equal energy.

Cioran would agree with the Structuralists that language can be reduced to formal models which have no universal or synthetic consequences. Further, he would agree that words cut us off from our origins and have no direct instrumental relation to the world. But Cioran would also insist that professional detachment, literary or otherwise, is no cure for alienation. Exposing one’s ignorance and limitations cannot be justified as either scientific or therapeutic. The absurd is not the amusing theater we have made it. If we insist on converting even our terror into constructive entertainment, then we shall have truly lost everything, consigned ourselves to that “wrong eternity.”

The only thing, it would seem, that Cioran does not comprehend, or at least has not yet bothered to articulate, is his own delight in language in spite of himself, his obsession to *become* what he writes, the necessity to write “in order,” as Le Clezio says, “to conquer the silence of other languages.” For while he has perhaps succeeded in “falling out of time,” he has

failed to reach that Archimedean point, that privileged position outside of language “external to the world and to himself.”

It is here that we must either confess with Pascal and Rousseau that we are trapped within language and dignify silence as the only nobility, or reassert our faith in the very plasticity of life, in its metalinguistic possibilities, as did Nietzsche and William James. In Cioran’s words: “To realize oneself is to dedicate oneself to the intoxication of multiplicity.” This is the duality which Cioran offers, and while he explicitly argues for Rousseau’s penultimate silence, his conduct is contradictory, and marvelously so. For in the same gesture by which he denies himself existence, he affirms the power of speech, and this is the paradox which is, even for him, finally unassimilable.

It is true that we “live” in a circle of language, but it is simply a matter of rhetoric (which is to say free choice) whether we choose to describe that circle as vicious or magical. To assert either at the expense of the other, Cioran would pronounce absurd, but he is subtle enough to know that “To produce, to create . . . is to have the courage or the luck not to perceive the lie of diversity, the deceptive character of the multiple . . . to produce a work is to espouse all those incompatibilities, all those fictive oppositions so dear to restless minds. More than anyone, the writer knows what he owes to these semblances, these deceptions, and should be aware of becoming indifferent to them. If he neglects or denounces them, he cuts the ground from his own feet . . . if he turns to the absolute,

what he finds there will be, at best, a delectation in stupor. . . .”

That point at which we cease thinking *about* language and willfully make best use of it—“anyone who is carried away by his reasoning *forgets* that he is using reason, and this forgetting is the condition of all creative thought . . .”—that is the point at which the critic becomes the artist, and Cioran has had both the “courage” and the “luck” to do so.

Paralysis, perhaps, but paralysis on our own terms, and while certainly not much comfort in words, still, life. Still-life. The methodical fall.

“I can truly say that I am not in the world, and this is not a mere mental attitude. . . . Moreover it matters little. I prefer to show myself as I am, in my inexistence and uprootedness . . . [but] the reader must believe that it is a matter of an *actual* sickness and not a phenomenon of the age, of a sickness which is related to the essence of the human being and his central possibility of expression. . . .”

—ARTAUD

CHARLES NEWMAN

THE TREE OF LIFE

IT is not good for man to keep reminding himself that he is man. To brood over oneself is bad enough; to brood over the species, with all the zeal of a fanatic, is worse still—it affords an objective basis, a philosophical alibi for the arbitrary woes of introspection. As long as we masticate our own ego, we have the excuse of indulging a whim; when *all* egos become the center of an endless rumination, we merely generalize the disadvantages of our own condition, transform our accident into a norm, a universal case.

We perceive first the anomaly of sheer existence, and only afterward that of our specific situation: the surprise of *being* precedes the surprise of being *human*. Yet the strange character of our state should constitute the primordial datum of our perplexities: it is less *natural* to be man than, simply, to be. We

feel this instinctively; it is the source of our delight each time we manage to sidestep ourselves and participate in the blissful sleep of objects. We are truly ourselves only when we coincide with nothing, not even with our own singularity. The curse upon us already tormented our first ancestor, long before he turned to the Tree of Knowledge. Dissatisfied as he may have been with himself, he was even more so with God, Whom he envied without realizing it; the realization came thanks to the good offices of the Tempter, auxiliary rather than author of the Fall. Hitherto Adam had lived in the presentiment of knowledge, a knowledge unconscious of itself, a *false* innocence ministering to jealousy, that vice generated by trafficking with those more fortunate than ourselves; and Adam trafficked with God, spying on and spied on by Him. Nothing good could come of that.

Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. The warning from on high turned out to be less effective than the whispers from below: a better psychologist, the Serpent carried the day. Man, moreover, had nothing against dying; determined to equal his Creator by knowledge, not by immortality, he showed no desire to approach the Tree of Life, took no interest in it; as Yahweh seemed to realize, since he did not even forbid access to it—why fear the immortality of an *ignorant man*? But once the ignorant man turned to *both* trees, once he entered into possession of eternity *and* knowledge,

everything changed. No sooner had Adam tasted the forbidden fruit than God, understanding at last whom He was dealing with, lost His head. By putting the Tree of Knowledge in the middle of the Garden, by boasting of its merits and especially of its dangers, He had committed a grave imprudence, had anticipated His creature's innermost desire. To forbid Adam the *other* tree would have been better policy. If He did not, it was doubtless because He knew that man, secretly aspiring to the dignity of a monster, would not be seduced by the prospect of immortality *as such*—too accessible, too banal: was it not the law, the statute of the place? Much more picturesque, death, endued with all the glamor of novelty, was more likely to intrigue an adventurer ready to risk peace and security in its behalf. Peace and security being relative terms, of course, for the story of the Fall hints that even in Eden our first father must have felt a certain *malaise*—how else explain the facility with which he yielded to temptation. Yielded? Insisted! Already Adam showed signs of that inaptitude for happiness, that incapacity to endure it which we have all inherited. Happiness was within his grasp, he could have appropriated it forever, and he cast it from him. Ever since, we have pursued it in vain; yet suppose our pursuit were *not* vain—we should accommodate ourselves to success no better. What else is to be expected of a career that began by an infringement of wisdom, by an infidelity to the *gift of ignorance* our Creator had bestowed upon us? Cast by knowledge into time, we were thereby endowed with

a destiny. For destiny exists only outside Paradise.

Had we fallen from a total, a *true* innocence, nothing could withstand the vehemence of our desire to regain it; but the poison was in us already, right from the start, vague at first, increasingly distinct until it left its mark upon us, individualizing us forever. Those moments when an essential negativity presides over our acts and our thoughts, when the future has expired before it is born, when a devastated blood inflicts upon us the certitude of a sagging, anemic universe, and when everything is dissolved into a spectral sigh answering to millennia of futile ordeals—such moments are the extension, the aggravation of that initial malaise without which history would not have been possible or even conceivable, since (just like history) it consists of an aversion to any form of stationary beatitude. That aversion, that horror of happiness, by keeping us from finding *in ourselves* our reason to exist, forces us outside our identity, in a sense outside our nature. Sundered from ourselves, it remained to be sundered from God: such an ambition, conceived already in our old “innocence,” was irresistible once we had no further obligations to Him. Indeed, all our efforts and all our attainments tend to diminish Him, to jeopardize Him, to encroach upon His integrity. The more we yield to the desire to know, stamped as it is with perversity and corruption, the more incapable we become of remaining *inside* some reality, any reality. Possessed by that desire, we become profaners, traitors, agents of dissolution; always external or marginal to things, if we *do*

manage to insinuate ourselves within them, it is in the fashion of the worm in the fruit. Had man had any vocation for eternity, instead of rushing into the unknown, into the new, into the ravages brought on by the thirst for analysis, he would have contented himself with God, in Whose intimacy he had prospered. But man aspired to free himself from God, to wrest himself away, and has succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Once he had shattered the unity of Paradise, he dedicated himself to shattering that of earth by introducing a principle of partition which would destroy its order and its anonymity. Hitherto man had died, of course, but death, a fulfillment in the primordial indistinction, did not have the meaning it subsequently acquired, nor was it burdened with the attributes of the irreparable. Once man, separated from Creator and creation alike, became *individual*—in other words, fracture and fissure in Being—and once he learned, assuming his name to the point of provocation, that he was *mortal*, his pride was thereby magnified, no less than his confusion. At last he was dying in his own way—he was proud of that; but he *was* dying, dying altogether—and that was humiliating. No longer reconciled to a dénouement once fiercely desired, he turns at last, and longingly, to the animals, his former companions: all, vile and noble alike, accept their fate, enjoy it or resign themselves to it; none has followed his example or imitated his rebellion. The plants, more than the beasts, rejoice to have been created: the very nettle still flourishes within God; only man suffocates there, and is it not

this choking sensation which led him to stand apart from the rest of creation, a consenting outcast, a voluntary reject? All other living beings, by the very fact that they are identical with their condition, have a certain superiority to him. And it is when he envies them, when he longs for their impersonal glory, that man understands the gravity of his case. Life, which he fled in his curiosity about death, he vainly attempts to overtake: never on terms of equality, he is always pulling ahead or falling behind. Yet the more life eludes him, the more ardently he longs to seize and subjugate it; failing, he mobilizes all the resources of his anxious and tormented will, his sole support: an exhausted yet indefatigable misfit, rootless, victorious precisely because he is *déraciné*, a nomad both crushed and unconquered, eager to make good his inadequacies and, in the face of failure, doing violence to all that is around him, a devastator piling misdeed upon misdeed in his rage at seeing the worm obtain without effort what he, after such struggles, cannot acquire. Having lost the secret of life, having made too wide a detour to rediscover and relearn it, man draws a little farther, every day, from his old innocence, ceaselessly declines from eternity. Perhaps he might still be saved if he deigned to compete with God only in subtlety, in nuance, in discernment; but no, he aspires to the same degree of power. So much pride could be produced only in the mind of a degenerate armed with a limited charge of existence, constrained by reason of his deficiencies to augment his means of action arti-

ficially and to replace his compromised instincts by instruments capable of making him terrible. And if man has indeed become terrible, it is because his capacity to degenerate is limitless. Whereas he should have confined himself to the flint and, by way of technical refinements, the wheelbarrow, he has invented and wields with demonic dexterity tools which proclaim the strange supremacy of a defective, a biologically *déclassé* specimen no one could have guessed would achieve so ingenious a malignity. The lion or the tiger, not man, should have the place he occupies in the scale of creatures. But it is never the strong, it is the weak who crave and who gain power, by the combined effect of cunning and madness. Because the beast feels no need to increase its strength, which is genuine, it does not lower itself to tools. But because man was in all things an *abnormal* animal, ill endowed to subsist and to assert himself, violent by debility and not by vigor, intractable from a position of weakness, aggressive on account of his very inadaptability, it became his role to seek out the means of a success he could not have achieved or even imagined if his constitution had corresponded to the imperatives of the struggle for existence. If he exaggerates everything, if hyperbole is his vital necessity, it is because, unbalanced and unbridled from the first, he cannot fasten upon what is, cannot acknowledge or accede to reality without trying to transform and exhaust it. Bereft of tact, that *innate* knowledge of life, maladroit, further, at discerning the absolute in the immediate, man appears, in the harmony

of nature, as an episode, a digression, a heresy, as a killjoy, a wastrel, a miscreant who has complicated everything, even his fear which, growing, has become fear of himself, terror in the face of his doom: that of a weakling seduced by the vast, exposed to a fatality which would intimidate a god. With the tragic as his privilege, man cannot help feeling he has more *destiny* than his Creator; whence his pride, and his fear, and that need to flee himself and to produce in order to conjure away his panic, in order to avoid the encounter with himself. He prefers abandoning himself to actions, but by so doing merely obeys the injunctions of a fear which both relieves and torments him, and which would paralyze him if he tried to reflect upon it, to become conscious of it. When, pacified, he seems to approach the inert, it is this fear which reappears and destroys his equilibrium. The very malaise he suffered in Paradise was perhaps no more than a *virtual* fear, a rough sketch, a draft of the "soul." No way of living in both innocence and fear, especially when the latter is a thirst for torments, an appeal to the catastrophic, a lust for the unknown. We cultivate the *frisson* for its own sake, we bank on the baleful, pure danger, unlike the animals which *deliberately* tremble only in the face of a specific danger, the one moment moreover when, letting themselves sink toward the human, they resemble us; for fear—a kind of psychic current which suddenly traverses matter as much to vivify as to disorganize it—appears as a prefiguration, a possibility of consciousness, let us call it the consciousness of

beings devoid of it . . . Fear defines us to such a degree that we no longer notice its presence, except when it withdraws or relents, those serene intervals which it nevertheless impregnates and which reduce happiness to a mild, an agreeable anxiety. Auxiliary of the future, fear stimulates us and, by keeping us from living in unison with ourselves, obliges us to assert ourselves *by running away*. No one can forgo fear if he wants to act; only the man delivered from it can celebrate a double triumph: over fear and over himself, for he has abdicated both his quality and his task as a man, and no longer participates in that terror-swollen duration, that gallop through the centuries which a form of dread has imposed upon us, a fear of which we are, in short, the object and the cause.

If God once announced that He was “that which is,” man, on the other hand, might define himself as “that which is not.” And it is precisely this lack, this deficit of existence which, wakening his pride by reaction, incites man to defiance or to ferocity. Having abandoned his origins, traded eternity for becoming, mistreated life by projecting his early aberration upon it, he emerges from anonymity by a series of repudiations which make him the great *deserter of being*. Example of anti-nature, man’s isolation is equaled only by its precariousness. The inorganic is sufficient unto itself; the organic is dependent, threatened, unstable; the conscious is the quintessence of decrepitude. Once we enjoyed everything, except consciousness; now that we possess consciousness, now

that we are tormented by it, now that it figures in our eyes as the converse of primal innocence, we manage neither to assume nor to abjure it. To find elsewhere more reality than in oneself is to confess that we have taken the wrong road and that we deserve our downfall.

A dilettante in Paradise, man stopped being one as soon as he was expelled, undertaking the conquest of earth with a seriousness, an application which seemed quite beyond him. Yet he bears within and upon himself something unreal, something unearthly, which is revealed in the pauses of his febrility. By dint of the vague, the equivocal, he is of this world, and he is not of this world. Consider his absences, those moments when he slows down or comes to a halt: do we not see in his eyes exasperation or remorse for having spoiled not only his first home but even this exile for which he was so impatient, so greedy? A shadow grappling with images, a somnambulist who *sees himself* walking, who contemplates his movements without discerning either their direction or their cause. The form of knowledge he has chosen is an offense, a sin if you like, a criminal misdemeanor against the creation, which he has reduced to a mass of objects before which he stands as their self-proclaimed destructor, a dignity he sustains by bravado rather than by bravery, as is proved by his embarrassment as long ago as the business of the apple; at the time he felt lonely in Eden—he was to feel more so on earth where, as a consequence of the special curse laid upon him, he would constitute “an empire within an em-

pire." Clear-sighted and quite mad, man has no peer: a true outrage to the laws of nature, nothing suggested his advent. Was he *necessary*, this being ethically more misshapen than any dinosaur physically? Scrutinizing him objectively it becomes apparent why he is not made the subject of reflection with impunity. One monster pondering another becomes doubly monstrous: *forgetting man*, as well as the idea he incarnates, should form the preamble to any therapeutics. Salvation comes from Being, not from beings, whose diseases, on contact, cure no one.

If humanity clung for so long to the absolute, it was because it could not find *in itself* a principle of health. Transcendence possesses certain curative powers: whatever disguise he assumes, a god signifies a step toward recovery. Even the Devil represents for us a more effective recourse than our own kind. We were *healthier* when, imploring or execrating a power beyond ourselves, we could make use of prayer and blasphemy without irony. Once we were doomed to ourselves, our disequilibrium grew more marked. To be freed from self-obsession—no imperative more urgent. But can a cripple abstract himself from his handicap, from the very vice of his essence? Promoted to the rank of incurables, we are matter in pain, shrieking flesh, bones pierced by cries, and our very silences are no more than a strangled lamentation. We suffer, ourselves alone, much more than the rest of creation, and our torment, encroaching upon reality, substitutes for it, so that a man who suffered absolutely would be absolutely conscious, hence alto-

gether culpable with regard to the *immediate* and the *real*, terms as correlative as *suffering* and *consciousness*.

And it is because our diseases exceed in number and virulence those of every other creature combined that our wise men are determined to teach us impassivity, a lesson they have learned no better than we. Who can boast of having encountered even one sage who was perfect, whereas we come across every kind of extreme in good and evil: the exalted, the tormented, prophets, even saints . . . Born of an act of insubordination and refusal, we were ill prepared for indifference. Then came knowledge to complete our unsuitability. Traditionally our chief grievance against knowledge is that it has not helped us to live. But was that really its function? Have we not turned to knowledge so that it might confirm us in our pernicious plans, might favor our dreams of power and negation? The lowest animal *lives*, in a sense, better than we do. Without going so far as to seek prescriptions for wisdom in the sewers, how can we fail to recognize the advantages a rat has over us, precisely because it is a rat and nothing else? Forever different, we are ourselves only insofar as we depart from our definition, man in Nietzsche's phrase being *das noch nicht festgestellte Tier*, the animal whose type is not yet determined, fixed. Obscured by metamorphosis, by possibility, by the imminent grimace of ourselves, we accumulate unreality and dilate ourselves in *the false*, for once we know ourselves, once we feel ourselves to be men, we tend to gigantism, we want to

seem *larger than life*. The rational animal is the only distracted animal, the one that instead of persisting in its primal condition insists on forging another, in defiance of its interests and as though in disrespect to its own image. Not so much apprehensive as discontent (apprehension requires an outcome, leads to resignation), man subsides into a dissatisfaction which borders on dizziness. Never quite identified with himself or with the world, it is in that part of his being which refuses to coincide with what he feels or undertakes, it is in that zone of absence, in that hiatus between man and himself, between himself and the universe, that his originality is revealed, and exercise given to his faculty of noncoincidence which keeps him in a state of *insincerity* not only toward beings, which is legitimate, but even and especially toward things, which is less so. Double at the root, tense and intense, man's duplicity, like his tension and intensity, derives from his lack of existence, from his deficiency in substance which condemns him to all the excesses of the will. What flings us into action is the nonbeing in ourselves, our debility and our inadaptability. And man, the weak and inadaptable animal *par excellence*, finds his prerogative and his catastrophe in undertaking tasks incommensurable with his powers, falling a victim to will, stigma of his imperfection, the sure means of affirming himself and of coming to nothing . . .

Instead of trying to recover himself, to re-encounter himself and his timeless depths, man has trained his faculties on the external, on history. If only he had

internalized them, had modified their exercise and direction, his salvation would be assured. What might he not have achieved by an effort contrary to the one required by an adherence to time! It takes as much energy to save as to lose oneself. By losing himself, man proves that, predisposed to failure, he had the strength necessary to escape it, provided he avoided the snares of Becoming. But once he had experienced their seductions, he abandoned himself to them, he was beguiled by them: a state of grace based on intoxication, which only an assent to unreality can afford. All that man has subsequently undertaken participates in this inurement to the insubstantial, in acquired illusions, in the habit of envisaging what does not exist as what does. Specializing in appearances, practiced in futility (by what else could he satisfy his thirst for domination?), he amasses the knowledge which is its reflection, but he has no real knowledge: his false learning, consequence of his false innocence, having diverted him from the absolute, all that he knows is not worth knowing. The antinomy is complete between thinking and meditating, between leaping from one problem to the next and delving ever deeper into one and the same problem. By meditation we perceive the inanity of the diverse and the accidental, of the past and the future, only to be engulfed more readily in the limitless moment. A thousand times better to take a vow of madness or to destroy oneself in God, than to prosper by means of simulacra! One articulate prayer, repeated inwardly to the point of hebetude or orgasm, carries more

weight than any idea, than all ideas. To prospect any world but this one, to sink into a silent hymn to vacuity, to indenture oneself to *elsewhere* . . .

To know is to know the *essential*, to engage in it by sight and not by analysis or speech. This garrulous, brawling, blustering animal who exults in racket (*noise* is the direct consequence of Original Sin) must be silenced, for he will never approach life's inviolate sources if he still has dealings with words. And so long as he is not delivered from metaphysically *superficial* knowledge, he will persevere in that counterfeit existence in which he lacks any standing, where everything in him is beside the point. Dilapidating his being, he employs his will beyond his means; he wills with despair, with rage, and when he has exhausted the semblance of reality he possesses, he wills more passionately still—to the point of annihilation or absurdity. Inept at living, he fakes life; that is why, his cult of the imminent verging on ecstasy, he swoons in the presence of the unknown he pursues and dreads, the moment he anticipates, in which he hopes to exist and in which he will exist as little as in the moment before. There is no future for those who live in the idolatry of tomorrow. Having despoiled the present of its eternal dimension, all they have left is Will, their great recourse—and their great punishment.

Man is under incompatible, contradictory orders, and our race, insofar as it is unique, takes a place outside the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms. Although outwardly we have everything of the beast

and nothing of the divinity, theology accounts better for our state than zoology. God is an anomaly; the animal is not; now, like God, we derogate from the type, we exist by our irreducibilities. The more marginal to things we are, the better we understand One who is marginal to all. Perhaps He is the only One we really understand . . . His case pleases, fascinates us, and His anomaly, which is *supreme*, seems to be the fulfillment, the ideal expression of our own. Yet our relations with Him are intricate: unable to love Him unequivocally, without ulterior motives, we question Him, overwhelm Him with our interrogations. Knowledge, raised on the ruin of contemplation, has estranged us from essential union, from the transcendent gaze which abolishes astonishment and problematics alike.

Marginal to God, marginal to the world, and to ourselves—always in the margin! The more human we are, the better we realize this paradox, dwell upon it, and perceive the character of nonevidence which is attached to our fate; for it is *incredible* that one can be a man . . . , that one possesses a thousand faces and none; that one keeps changing identity without departing from one's downfall. Divided from reality, divided from ourselves, how to rely on ourselves or on others? If the pure and the naive resemble us so little, it is because, having failed to *develop*, to let themselves loose upon themselves, they have remained half-way between Paradise and History.

Work of a virtuoso in fiasco, man has doubtless been spoiled, but masterfully spoiled. He is extraor-

dinary even in his mediocrity, marvelous even when abominated. The more we reflect upon him, we conceive nonetheless that the Creator should be "pained at heart" to have created him. Let us share His disappointment without improving upon it, without falling into disgust, a sentiment which reveals only the externals of the creature, not what is profound, suprahistorical, *positively* unreal and unearthly, refractory to the fictions of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Fictions indeed, for once we envisage an act as good or bad, it no longer belongs to our substance but to that superadded being which knowledge has bestowed upon us, cause of our sliding outside the immediate, outside the experienced. To describe, to *name* acts is to yield to the madness of expressing opinions; as a wise man has said, opinions are "tumors" which destroy the integrity of our nature and nature itself. If we could abstain from opinions, we should enter into the true innocence and, moving backward by leaps and bounds in a salutary regression, be reborn under the Tree of Life. Ensnared in our evaluations and more disposed to go without bread and water than good and evil, how recuperate our origins, how sustain direct links with Being? We have sinned against it, and history, the result of our transgression, can be understood only if we consider it as a long expiation, a panting repentance, a race in which we excel *without believing our steps*. Swifter than time, we outstrip it even while imitating its impostures, its manners. Similarly, competing with God, we ape His dubious aspect, His

demiurgic aspect, that part of Him which led Him to create, to conceive a work which was to impoverish Him, to diminish Him, to cast Him into a *fall*, the prefiguration of our own. Once the enterprise was under way, He left us the bother of completing it and withdrew into Himself, into His eternal apathy from which He should never have emerged. Since He judged otherwise, what can be expected of us? The impossibility of abstaining, the obsession of praxis denotes, on every level, the presence of a demonic principle. Carried away to excess, to outrage, to *action*, we are following more or less consciously the One Who, rushing upon nonbeing in order to extract being from it, in order to hand it over to us, made Himself the instigator of our future usurpations. There must exist in Him a catastrophic light which matches our shadows. History, temporal reflection of that accursed glow, History manifests and extends the nondivine dimension of divinity.

Related to God, it would be indecorous to treat Him as a stranger, especially since our solitude, on a more modest scale, evokes His own. But however modest it may be, it nonetheless overwhelms, and when it falls upon us like a penalty, when it demands, to be endured, supernatural talents, where else might we take refuge except with Him Who, aside from the episode of Creation, was always apart from everything? What is sole tends to the Solitary, to the One whose negative aspects remain, since the adventure of knowledge, the one thing we share. It would not have been the same had we inclined toward Life.

Then we should have known another face of divinity and perhaps, today, haloed with a pure light, not sullied with shadows nor with any diabolic element, we should be as incurious and as exempt from death as the Angels are.

For not having been, at the start, up to the mark, we run, we flee into the future. What are our greed and our frenzy but the remorse for having *sidestepped* true innocence, whose memory cannot fail to torment us? Despite our haste and our competition with time, we cannot drown out the appeals rising from the depths of our memory scarred by the image of Paradise, the genuine one which is not that of the Tree of Knowledge but of the Tree of Life, access to which, in reprisal for Adam's sin, was to be forbidden by "Cherubims with flaming swords which turned every way." Only that Tree deserves to be regained, that Tree alone merits the effort of our regrets. And it is still that Tree which *Revelations* mentions (II, 7), promising it "to him that overcometh," to those whose faith has never wavered. Thus it figures only in the first and last books of the Bible, a symbol of both the beginning and the end of time.

If man is not ready to abdicate or to reconsider his case, it is because he has not yet drawn the final consequences of knowledge and of power. Convinced that his moment will come, that he will catch up with God and pass Him by, he clings—envious as he is—to the notion of evolution, as if the fact of *advancing* must necessarily bring him to the highest degree of perfection. Having sought to be other, he will end

by being nothing; he is already nothing. Doubtless he is evolving, but *against* himself, to his cost, and toward a complexity which is ruining him. Becoming, progress: notions apparently tangential, actually divergent. True, everything changes, but rarely, if ever, for the better. Euphoric inflection of the original disease, of that false innocence which awakened in Adam a desire for the new, our faith in evolution, in the identity of becoming and progress, will collapse only when man, having reached the extremity of his distraction, having turned at last to the knowledge which leads to deliverance and not to power, will be in a position to offer an irrevocable *no* to his exploits and to his work. If he continues to clutch at them, he will doubtless enter upon the career of a ludicrous god or an obsolete animal, a solution as convenient as it is degrading, the ultimate stage of his infidelity to himself. Whatever choice he makes, and though he has not exhausted all the virtues of his failure, he has nonetheless fallen so low that it is hard to understand why he does not pray unceasingly, until his very voice and reason are extinguished.

Since all that has been conceived and undertaken since Adam is either suspect or dangerous or futile, what is to be done? Resign from the race? That would be to forget that one is never so much man as when one regrets being so. And such regret, once it seizes one, offers no means of escape: it becomes as inevitable and as heavy as air . . . True, most men breathe without realizing it, without thinking about it; should their breath fail them some day, they will

discover how air, suddenly converted into a problem, haunts them every instant. Woe unto those who *know* they are breathing, woe still more unto those who know they are men. Incapable of thinking about anything else, they will brood over it all their lives, obsessed, oppressed. But they deserve their torment, greedy for the insoluble, having sought a tormenting subject, a subject without end. *Man* will not give them one moment's respite, man still has his road to travel . . . And since he advances by virtue of an acquired illusion, he cannot stop until the illusion disintegrates, disappears; but it is indestructible as long as man remains an accomplice of time.

CIVILIZED MAN: A PORTRAIT

OUR determination to banish the irregular, the unexpected, and the misshapen from the human landscape verges on indecency: that certain tribesmen still choose to devour their surplus elders is doubtless deplorable, but I cannot conclude that such picturesque sybarites must be exterminated; after all, cannibalism is a model *closed economy*, as well as a practice likely to appeal, some day, to an overpopulated planet. However, it is not my intention to bemoan the lot of the man-eaters, though they are mercilessly oppressed, though they live in terror, the great losers of today's world. I grant the fact: their case is not necessarily an excellent one. Moreover they are dying out: a hard-pressed minority, bereft of self-confidence, incapable of pleading their own cause. Quite different is the situation of illiterates, a considerable group

attached to their traditions and privileges, tyrannized with a virulence which is quite unjustified. For after all, is it an evil not to know how to read or write? In all honesty I cannot think so. As a matter of fact, I believe that when the last illiterate has vanished from the earth, we can go into mourning for man.

The interest civilized man takes in the so-called backward peoples is highly suspect. Unable to bear himself any longer, he busily unloads on them the excess evils which overwhelm him, urges them to sample his miseries, begs them to confront a destiny he can no longer face alone. Brooding over their good luck in not having "developed," he envies them with all the resentment of a failed desperado. What right have they to hold themselves apart, outside the process of degradation he himself has endured so long and from which he cannot manage to extricate himself? Civilization, his fabrication and his folly, seems a punishment he has inflicted on himself—now it is his turn to inflict it on those who have hitherto escaped. "Come share its calamities, be partners in my hell"—that is the meaning of his solicitude, that is the basis of his indiscretion and his zeal. Oppressed by its discontents and even more by its "benefits," he will not rest until he has imposed them on those fortunately exempt. This was his behavior even in the days when, not yet "enlightened" nor tired of himself, he indulged his greed, his thirst for adventure and infamy. At the height of their power, the Spaniards must have felt oppressed as much by the de-

mands of their faith as by the rigors of the Church. The Conquest was their revenge.

If you try to convert someone, it will never be to effect his salvation but to make him suffer *like yourself*, to be sure he is exposed to the same ordeals and endures them with the same impatience. You keep watch, you pray, you agonize—provided he does too, sighing, groaning, beset by the same tortures that are racking you. Intolerance is the work of ravaged souls whose faith comes down to a more or less deliberate torment they would like to see generalized, instituted. The happiness of others never having been a motive or principle of action, it is invoked only to appease conscience or to parade noble excuses: whenever we determine upon an action, the impulse leading to it and forcing us to complete it is almost always inadmissible. No one saves anyone; for we save only ourselves, and do so all the better if we disguise as convictions the misery we want to share, to lavish on others. However glamorous its appearances, proselytism nonetheless derives from a suspect generosity, worse in its effects than a patent aggression. No one is willing to endure alone the discipline he may even have assented to, nor the yoke he has shouldered. Vindication reverberates beneath the missionary's bonhomie, the apostle's joy. We convert not to liberate but to enchain.

Once someone is shackled by a certainty, he envies your vague opinions, your resistance to dogmas or slogans, your blissful incapacity to commit yourself.

Blushing in secret for belonging to a sect or a party, ashamed of possessing a truth and of being enslaved by it, it is not his acknowledged enemies he resents, those who profess another, but *you*, the Indifferent, guilty of pursuing none. And if, in order to escape the servitude into which he has fallen, you seek refuge in vagueness or caprice, he will do everything in his power to forestall you, to hold you in a thrall analogous and, if possible, identical to his own. The phenomenon is so universal that it exceeds the realm of convictions to encompass that of renown. Literature, as we might expect, will afford a painful example. What writer enjoying a certain fame does not ultimately suffer from it, enduring the discomfort of being known or understood, of having a public, however limited it may be? Envious of his friends who loll in the comforts of obscurity, he will do his best to pull them out of it, to trouble their peaceful pride, in order that they too may be subjected to the mortifications and the anxieties of success. To achieve his ends, any tactic will seem fair. Henceforth, their life will become a nightmare: he nags them, urges them to produce, to exhibit themselves, he thwarts their aspiration to a clandestine glory, that supreme dream of the sensitive and the abulic. Write! Publish! he keeps urging furiously, shamelessly. The wretches obey, without suspecting what is in store for them. He alone knows. He lies in wait, parading their timid divagations with violence, with extravagance, with a desperate warmth, and, in order to cast them into the abyss of actuality, finds or invents for them enthusi-

asts, disciples, surrounding them with a throng of readers, those omnipresent and invisible murderers. The crime committed, he subsides, withdraws, gratified by the spectacle of his protégés at grips with his own shames and torments, the shames and torments well accounted for by the remark of some Russian writer: "You can go mad at the mere thought of being read."

Just as the author stricken and tainted by fame tries to spread it to those not yet infected, so the civilized man, victim of an exacerbated consciousness, strives to communicate its pangs to peoples refractory to his fragmentation. That alienation from himself which harasses and saps him—how could he permit them to reject it, to be unconcerned, to turn away? Utilizing every possible device to corrupt them, to make them resemble him and traverse the same Calvary, he will lure them by his civilization whose wonders, triumphantly dazzling, will keep them from distinguishing its possible benefits from its actual drawbacks. And they will imitate only its harmful aspects, everything that has made it a concerted and systematic scourge. Were they up to now innocuous and carefree? Henceforth they will seek to be strong and dangerous, to the great satisfaction of their benefactor, conscious that as a matter of fact they will be, following his own example, strong and endangered. He will be interested in them, then, and will "help" them. What a relief to watch them get entangled in the same problems, entombed in the same destiny! All he asked was to make them complicated, ob-

essed, demoralized. Their neophyte enthusiasm for luxury and machines, for the deceptions of technology, comfort and reassure him: they swell the numbers of the condemned, add unhoped-for fellow-sufferers who can help him in their turn, taking upon themselves a part of the burden that is crushing him or, at least, bearing one that is as heavy as his own. This is what he calls "advancement," a word well chosen to camouflage both his treachery and his wounds.

Vestiges of humanity are still to be found only among the peoples who, outdistanced by history, are in no hurry to catch up. In the rear-guard of nations, untempted by enterprise, they cultivate their outmoded virtues, they make it a duty to "date." Certainly they are *backward*, and would gladly persevere in their stagnation if they had the means to do so. But this they are not allowed. The conspiracy which the "advanced" have mounted against them is too cunningly articulated to be upset. Once the process of degradation is under way, their rage at having been unable to oppose it will lead them, with the brashness of beginners, to accelerate its course, to espouse and exaggerate its horror, according to the law by which a new evil invariably prevails over an old good. And they will try to bring themselves up to the moment, if only to show the others that they too know how to decline, that in questions of downfall they can even surpass their instructors. What use is our surprise, our regret? Do we not see counterfeits everywhere victorious over essence, agitation over repose?

Do we not appear to be witnessing the death-agonies of the indestructible? Every step forward, every form of dynamism, entails something satanic: "progress" is the modern equivalent of the Fall, the profane version of damnation. And those who believe in it are its promoters—in other words, all of us, for what are we but an army of the damned, predestined to the foul, to these machines, to these cities of which only an exhaustive catastrophe could rid us? Then, once and for all, our inventions would have occasion to prove their usefulness and to rehabilitate themselves in our eyes.

If "progress" is so great an evil, how is it that we do nothing to free ourselves from it without further delay? But do we really want to? Is it not rather our fate *not* to want to? In our perversity, the "best" is what we want, what we pursue: a deadly pursuit, at every point contrary to our happiness. One does not "perfect" oneself, nor does one "advance" without paying for it. Movement, we know, is a heresy; and that is precisely why it tempts us, why we fling ourselves into it, and why, irremediably depraved, we prefer it to the orthodoxy of quietude. We were created to vegetate, to prosper in inertia, and not to destroy ourselves by speed, and by hygiene, the cause of the proliferation of these bodiless and aseptic beings, of this swarm of specters where everything fidgets and nothing lives. A certain proportion of dirt being indispensable to the organism (physiology and filth are interchangeable terms), the prospect of a worldwide cleanliness inspires a legitimate qualm.

We would be better off, verminous and serene, if we had kept company with the animals, wallowing beside them for millennia to come, breathing the smell of the stable rather than that of the laboratories, dying of our diseases and not of our remedies, circling round our Void and gradually sinking into it. For *absence*, which should have been a duty and an obsession, we have substituted the *event*; and every event encroaches upon us, devours us, since it occurs at the cost of our equilibrium, our duration. The more our future shrivels, the more we let ourselves sink into what is destroying us. Our drug civilization has so intoxicated us that our attachment to it offers all the characteristics of an addiction, a mixture of ecstasy and execration. In its present form, it will finish us off, no doubt about that; as for renouncing it, freeing ourselves from it, we can do no such thing—today less than ever. Who would fly to our aid and deliver us? An Anthisthenes, an Epicurus, a Chrysippus found their own times too complicated—what would they think of ours, and which of them, transplanted to Paris, London, New York, would have character enough to preserve his serenity there? In every respect healthier and better balanced than we, the ancients might have managed without wisdom; they elaborated it nonetheless; what disqualifies us forever is that we have neither concern nor capacity for it. Is it not significant that the first modern man to have denounced, out of his idolatry of nature, the misdeeds of civilization should have been the contrary of a sage? We owe the diagnosis of our disease

to a lunatic, more contaminated and scarred than any of us, to an avowed maniac, precursor and model of our own delirium. No less significant is the more recent advent of psychoanalysis, a sadistic therapeutics committed to the irritation rather than the relief of our sufferings, and singularly expert in the art of substituting, for our naive discomforts, an intricate variety.

Every need, by orienting us toward the surface of life in order to disguise its depths, confers value on what has none, on what cannot have value. Civilization, with all its panoply, is based on our propensity to the unreal, to the useless. If we agreed to reduce our needs, to satisfy only necessities, civilization would crumble forthwith. Therefore, in order to endure, it seeks to create ever new needs for us, to multiply them without end, for the generalized practice of ataraxia would involve much graver consequences for civilization than a war of total destruction. By adding to the fatal disadvantages of nature certain gratuitous ones, it obliges us to suffer doubly, it diversifies our torments, reinforces our infirmities. No need to remind us again and again that it has cured us of fear. As a matter of fact, the correlation is obvious between the multiplication of our needs and the growth of our terrors. Our desires, sources of our needs, provoke in us a constant anxiety, much more unbearable than the shudder inspired, in the state of nature, by some fugitive danger. We no longer tremble by fits and starts; we tremble without respite. What have we gained by trading fear for anxiety?

And who would hesitate between an instantaneous panic and one that is permanent and diffused? Our vaunted security conceals an uninterrupted agitation which poisons every moment, those of the present as well as those to come, rendering the former null and void, the latter inconceivable. Our desires and our terrors are inextricable—lucky the man who manages to avoid either! Desires—no sooner do we experience one than it engenders another, in a series as lamentable as it is unhealthy. Let us rather apply ourselves to submitting to the world, to considering each impression we receive from it as an impression that has been *imposed*, that does not concern us, that we endure as if it were not our own. “Nothing is mine that happens to me,” says the self when it is convinced that it is not of this world, that it is in the wrong universe, and that it has only one choice: between impassivity and imposture.

Committed to appearances, each desire, by forcing us outside our essence, rivets us to a new object and limits our horizon. Yet, to the degree that it grows more intense, it permits us to discover that morbid thirst of which it is the emanation. Have our desires ceased to be “natural,” do they derive from our condition as civilized men? Fundamentally impure, they perturb and contaminate our very substance. Everything which adds itself to our profound imperatives is a vice, everything which distorts and confuses us without necessity. Laughter and even our smiles are vices. On the other hand, everything is a virtue

that induces us to live against the grain of our civilization, everything which urges us to compromise and sabotage its course. As for happiness, if this word has a meaning, it consists in the aspiration to the minimum and the ineffectual, in the notion of *limitation* hypostatized. Our sole recourse: to renounce not only the fruit of action, but action itself, to make a rule of nonproduction, to leave a good share of our energies and opportunities unrealized. Guilty of trying to exploit ourselves beyond our means or our deserts, failures by *overexertion*, unfit for true fulfillment, reduced by tension to zero and enlarged only by exhaustion, by the dilapidation of our resources, we expend ourselves without taking into account either our possibilities or our limits. Whence our lassitude, aggravated by the very efforts we have made to habituate ourselves to civilization, to all it implies by way of eventual corruption. That nature, too, is corrupted one cannot deny; but such dateless corruption is an immemorial and inevitable evil to which we accommodate ourselves automatically, whereas the corruption of civilization, product of our creations or our caprices, the more overwhelming in that it seems accidental, bears the stamp of a choice or a fantasy, of a premeditated or arbitrary doom; right or wrong, we believe it might not have occurred, that we could have kept it from happening at all. Which only makes it even more odious for us than it is. We are inconsolable, having to endure it and to confront the subtle miseries which proceed

from it, when we might have been content with those crude and, after all, endurable ones with which nature has so generously endowed us.

If we were fit to wrest ourselves from our desires, we should thereby wrest ourselves from destiny; superior to beings, to things, and to ourselves, reluctant to amalgamate ourselves further with the world, by the sacrifice of our identity we would accede to freedom, inseparable from a training in anonymity and abdication. "I am *no one*, I have conquered my name!" exclaims the man who, rejecting the degradation of leaving tracks, tries to conform to Epicurus's command: "Hide your life." These ancients are always the ones we return to when it is a matter of the art of living, whose secret two thousand years of supernature and convulsive charity have stolen from us. We return to them, to their poise and their amenity, provided we are free of that frenzy Christianity has inculcated in us; the curiosity they waken corresponds to a lowering of our fever, a retreat toward health. And we also return to them because the interval which separates them from the universe being vaster than the universe itself, they offer us a form of detachment we should seek in vain among the saints.

By making us frenetics, Christianity prepared us in spite of itself to create a civilization of which it is now the victim: did this religion not create too many needs, too many demands? Initially inward, these needs and demands were gradually corrupted and externalized, just as the fervor generating so

many suddenly interrupted prayers, unable to subside or to remain unemployed, was to apprentice itself to makeshift gods and to forge symbols befitting their vacuity. Thus we were handed over to counterfeits of infinity, to an absolute without metaphysical dimensions, submerged in speed since we were not plunged into ecstasy. This panting contraption, the answer to our fidgets, and these specters that work it, this procession of automata, this parade of hallucinated zombies—where are they going, what are they seeking? What wind of madness bears them onward? Each time I tend to absolve them, each time I entertain doubts as to the legitimacy of the aversion or terror they inspire in me, I need only think of the country roads, on a Sunday, for the image of that motorized vermin to confirm me in my disgust and my dread. Use of the legs being abolished, the walker, among these paralytics behind the wheel, seems an eccentric or an outlaw; soon he will appear to be a monster. No more contact with the ground: all that sinks into it has become alien and incomprehensible to us. Cut off from every root, unfit, moreover, to mix with dust or mud, we have achieved the feat of breaking not only with the depths of things, but with their very surface. Civilization, at this stage, would seem to be a bargain with the Devil, if man still had a soul to sell.

Was it really to “save time” that these engines were invented? More deprived, more disinherited than the troglodyte, civilized man has not one moment to himself; his very leisure is feverish, oppres-

sive: a convict on leave, succumbing to the ennui of the *dolce far niente* and the nightmare of beaches. When you have frequented regions where idleness is the rule, where everyone is good at it, you find it hard to adjust to a world where no one recognizes or knows how to enjoy it, where no one breathes. Is the being tied to time still human? Is he entitled to call himself *free*, when we know that he has shaken off every servitude but the essential one? At the mercy of the hours he feeds and fattens on his substance, he wastes and weakens himself to assure the prosperity of a parasite or a tyrant. Cunning despite his madness, he supposes that his trials and tribulations would be less if, in the form of a "program," he managed to bestow them on the "underdeveloped" peoples, whom he reproaches for not being "in the swim," by which he means drowning. In order to push them there, he will inoculate them with the toxin of anxiety and release them only when he has observed in them the same symptoms of haste as in himself. In order to realize his dream of a breathless humanity, bewildered and time-bound, he will cross continents, ever in search of new victims on whom to vent the overflow of his feverishness, his darkness. Contemplating him we glimpse the true nature of hell: is that not the place where one is condemned to time for all eternity?

Though we have conquered the universe and taken possession of it, so long as we have not triumphed over time, we remain slaves. Such victory is won by renunciation, a virtue to which our conquests make

us particularly unsuited, so that the greater their number, the more obvious our subjection. Civilization instructs us how to take hold of things, whereas it is the art of letting them go that it should teach us, for there is no freedom, no "real life" without an apprenticeship to dispossession. I seize an object, I consider myself its master; as a matter of fact I am its slave, as I am the slave of the instrument I make, the tool I use. Every new acquisition signifies a new chain, every power factor a cause of impotence. Even our talents contribute to our bondage; the man who raises himself above others is less free than they are: inseparable from his faculties and his ambitions, a prisoner of his gifts, he asserts them at the cost of his salvation. No one liberates himself if he insists upon becoming someone or something. All that we possess or produce, all that is superimposed upon our being or proceeds from it denatures us, smothers us. And our very being—what a mistake, what an injury to have adjoined it to existence, when we might have persevered, intact, in the virtual, the invulnerable! No one recovers from the disease of being born, a deadly wound if ever there was one. Yet it is with the hope of being cured of it some day that we accept life and endure its ordeals. The years pass, the wound remains.

The more complicated and differentiated civilization becomes, the more we curse the links which bind us to it. According to Soloviev, it will come to an end (which the Russian philosopher called the end of all things) in the middle of the "most re-

finer century." This much is certain, civilization was never so threatened or detested as at the moments when it seemed best established; witness the attacks made, at the height of the Age of Reason, against its practices and prowess, against every conquest it prided itself upon. "In cultivated periods, men make it a kind of religion to admire what was admired in primitive times," notes Voltaire, hardly one, let us admit, to understand the rationale of so correct an enthusiasm. It was, in any case, during the period of the salons that the "return to nature" became a rule, just as ataraxia could be conceived only in a time when, weary of divagations and systems, minds preferred the delights of a garden to the controversies of the agora. The appeal to wisdom always issues from a civilization out of patience with itself. Oddly enough, it is difficult for us to imagine the process which brought to satiety that ancient world which, compared with ours, seems to us in all its phases the ideal object of our regrets. Moreover, compared to an unnamable present, any other age seems blessed to us. By straying from our true destination, we shall enter, if we are not there already, the century of the end, that "refined century" *par excellence* (though *complicated* would have been the better adjective) which will necessarily be the one in which, on every level, we shall find ourselves at the antipodes of what we should have been.

The evils implicit in our condition prevail over what is good; even if they were balanced, our problems would not be solved. We are here to do battle

with life and death, not to dodge them as we are urged to do by civilization, an enterprise of dissimulation, glossing over the insoluble. Because it contains no principle of duration within itself, its advantages—so many impasses—help us neither to live nor to die. Were it to succeed, seconded by a useless science, in ridding us of all our afflictions or, to entice us, in bestowing the other planets as a reward, civilization would manage only to increase our mistrust, our exasperation. The more it struts and struggles, the more we envy the ages which possessed the privilege of knowing nothing of the conveniences and the wonders it keeps showering upon us. “With bread and a little water, a man can be as happy as Jupiter,” kept repeating that sage who advised us to hide our lives. Is it nonsense to keep quoting him? But to whom are we to turn, whom are we to ask for advice? Our contemporaries, those indiscreet, frustrated creatures who by deifying confession, appetite, and effort are guilty of having turned us into lyrical puppets, as insatiable as we are exhausted? The only excuse for their fury is that it derives not from a fresh instinct or a sincere impulse but from panic in the face of a sealed horizon. So many of our philosophers who brood, flabbergasted, over the future are really no more than the interpreters of a humanity which, realizing that the moments are escaping, struggles not to think about it—and thinks about it continually. Their systems generally offer the image and in a sense the discursive development of that obsession. Similarly, History could solicit their attention only

at a moment when man has every reason to doubt that it still belongs to him, that he continues to be its agent. Indeed everything suggests that since History too escapes him, man is beginning a nonhistorical career, brief, convulsive, which relegates to the rank of insipidity the disasters with which he was hitherto so smitten. His degree of Being shrinks with each step forward he takes. We exist only by retreat, by the distance we keep with regard to things and to ourselves. To bestir ourselves is to give ourselves up to the false, the fictive, to practice an abusive discrimination between the possible and the funereal. Given our present degree of mobility, we are no longer in control of our gestures nor of our fate. Over it presides, no doubt about it, a negative providence whose intentions, as we approach our goal, become less and less impenetrable, since they would be revealed without difficulty to the first comer, if he merely deigned to stop and step out of his role in order to contemplate, were it only a moment, the spectacle of this winded and tragic horde to which he belongs.

All things considered, the century of the end will not be the most refined or even the most complicated, but the most hurried, the century in which, its Being dissolved in movement, civilization, in a supreme impulse toward the worst, will fall to pieces in the whirlwind it has raised. Now that nothing can keep it from being engulfed, let us give up practicing our virtues upon it, let us even manage to discern, in the excesses it delights in, something exalting,

something which invites us to moderate our outrage and reconsider our scorn. In this fashion, these specters, these automata, these zombies are less detestable if we reflect upon the unconscious motives, the deeper reasons for their frenzy: do they not feel that the interval granted them is shrinking day by day and that the dénouement is taking form? and is it not to ward off this notion that they immerse themselves in speed? If they were sure of *another* future, they would have no motive to flee nor to flee themselves, they would slow down their cadence and take up residence, fearlessly, within an indefinite expectation. But for them there is not even a question of one future or another, for they quite simply have none whatever; that is the dim, unformulated certainty, rising out of the very panic of the blood, which they dread considering, which they seek to forget by hurrying, by moving ever faster, by refusing to have the slightest moment to themselves. Yet the Ineluctable which that moment masks is what they meet by the very speed which, in their minds, should save them from it. Of so much haste, of so much impatience, our machines are the consequence and not the cause. It is not they who are driving civilized man to his doom; rather he has invented them because he was already on his way there; he sought means, auxiliaries to attain it faster and more effectively. Not content to run, he preferred to *ride* to perdition. In this sense, and in this sense alone, we may say that his machines allow him to "save time." He distributes them, he imposes them on the backward, the late-comers who

may then follow him, even outstrip him in the race to disaster, in the founding of a universal and mechanical amok. And it is in order to assure its advent that he strives so desperately to level off, to standardize the human landscape, to efface its irregularities and banish its surprises; what he wants to establish here is not anomalies but *Anomaly*, monotonous and routine anomaly converted into a rule of conduct, an imperative. Those who avoid it he accuses of obscurantism or extravagance, and he will not lay down his weapons until he has brought them into the straight and narrow path—into his own errors. Illiterates, first and foremost, are reluctant to fall in with him; then he will force them to learn to read and write, so that, ensnared in knowledge, none may escape the common doom a moment longer. So benighted is civilized man that he does not even conceive the possibility of choosing another confusion besides his own. Divested of the respite necessary to the exercise of irony, to which a simple glimpse of his fate should lead him, he thereby deprives himself of all recourse against himself. He merely becomes more deadly to others. Aggressive and pitiable both, there is a certain pathos about him: we understand why, seeing him inextricably distracted, we feel a certain embarrassment about denouncing and attacking him, not to mention the fact that it is always bad taste to abuse an incurable, however odious he may be. But if we were deterred by bad taste, could we make the slightest judgment on anything whatever?

SKEPTIC

& BARBARIAN

IF it is not hard to imagine all humanity in the grip of convulsions or, at least, of fear, it would be an overestimate of the race to suppose it can ever raise itself as a whole to the level of doubt, generally reserved for a few elite outcasts. Yet humanity accedes to doubt *in part* during those rare moments when it changes gods and when men's minds, subject to contradictory solicitations, no longer know which cause to defend, which truth to adopt. When Christianity burst upon Rome, the slaves appropriated it without hesitation; the patricians resisted, needing time to shift from aversion to curiosity, from curiosity to fervor. Imagine a reader of the *Pyrrhonian Hypotyposes* faced with the Gospels! What artifice could reconcile not two doctrines but two universes? How greet ingenuous parables when one is grappling with the ulti-

mate perplexities of the intellect? The treatises in which Sextus Empiricus, early in the third century A.D., reckoned up all the ancient world's doubts are an exhaustive compilation of the Unbreathable, the most dizzying pages ever written and, it must be said, the most boring. Too subtle and too methodical to compete with the new superstitions, they were the expression of a world already consummated, futureless, doomed. Yet skepticism, whose theses they had codified, managed to survive a while on lost positions, until the day when Christians and barbarians joined forces to reduce and abolish it.

A civilization begins by myth and ends in doubt; a theoretical doubt which, once it turns against itself, becomes quite practical. No civilization can begin by questioning values it has not yet created; once produced, it wearies of them and weans itself away, examines and weighs them with a devastating *detachment*. For the various beliefs it had engendered and which now break adrift, it substitutes a system of uncertainties, it *organizes* its metaphysical shipwreck—with amazing success when a Sextus is on hand to help. In the twilight of Antiquity skepticism possessed a dignity it was not to regain in the Renaissance, despite a Montaigne, nor even in the eighteenth century, despite a Hume. Pascal alone, had he so desired, might have saved, might have rehabilitated it; but he turned away, leaving skepticism to straggle in the margin of modern philosophy. Today, when we too are about to change gods, will there be sufficient respite for us to cultivate it? Will it find itself back in

favor or, on the contrary, banned outright, will it be smothered by the tumult of dogmas? The important thing, though, is not to ascertain whether it is threatened from without, but if we can genuinely cultivate it, if our powers permit us to confront without succumbing to it. For before being the problem of civilization, skepticism is an individual case, and as such concerns us without respect to the historical expression it assumes.

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In order to live, in order merely to breathe, we must make the extravagant effort to believe that the world or our concepts contain a basis of truth. As soon as the effort fails, for one reason or another, we relapse into that state of pure indetermination where, since any certainty whatever seems to us a deviation, every resolution, all that the mind advances or proclaims, assumes the aspect of a divagation. Every affirmation appears risky or degrading, as does every negation. It is incontestably strange no less than pitiable to reach this point, when, for years, we have applied ourselves with some success to surmounting doubt, to recovering from it. But it is a disease no one is ever cured of altogether, if he has really contracted it. And indeed it is a relapse that is in question here.

First of all, it was a mistake to put affirmation and negation on the same plane. To deny, granted, is to affirm in reverse. Yet there is something more in nega-

tion, an additional anxiety, a determination to be singular and, in a sense, an anti-natural element. Nature, supposing it knew itself and could attain to formulation, would elaborate an endless series of existential judgments. Only the mind possesses the faculty of refusing what exists, of thriving on what does not; only the mind fabricates absence. I become aware of myself, indeed *I am* only when I deny. As soon as I affirm I become interchangeable and behave as an object. The *no* having presided over the partition of primordial Unity, an inveterate and unwholesome pleasure attaches to any form of negation, essential or frivolous. We rack our brains to demolish reputations, God's first of all; but it must be said to our credit that we strive even harder to destroy our own, by putting our truths in question and discrediting them, by effecting in ourselves the shift from negation to doubt.

Whereas we always negate in the name of something—something external to our negation—doubt, without availing itself of anything which transcends it, draws on its own conflicts, on that war reason declares against itself when, exasperated beyond endurance, it attacks and overthrows its own foundations in order to escape the absurdity of having to affirm or deny anything at all. While reason is thus opposing itself, we make ourselves into judges, we imagine we may examine or counter reason in the name of a *self* on which it has no hold or of which it is merely an accident, without realizing that it is logically impossible for us to set ourselves above rea-

son in order to acknowledge or contest its validity, for there is no proceeding superior to reason, no pronouncement which does not emanate from it. Yet in practice it seems as if, by a subterfuge or a miracle, we manage to free ourselves from its categories and its shackles. Is the exploit so unheard of? It comes down to an extremely simple phenomenon: anyone who is carried away by his reasoning *forgets* that he is using reason, and this forgetting is the condition of all creative thought, indeed of thought itself. As long as we follow the mind's spontaneous movement, as long as, by reflection, we put ourselves *on the level of life itself*, we cannot think that we are thinking; once we do so, our ideas oppose each other, neutralize each other within an empty consciousness. This state of sterility in which we neither advance nor retreat, this exceptional form of *marking time* is precisely where doubt leads us, a state which in many respects is related to the *acidie* of the mystics. We had expected to realize the definitive, to establish ourselves in the ineffable; instead we are cast into the uncertain, devoured by the insipid. Everything frays in the intellect's self-torsion, a kind of furious stupor. Doubt crashes down upon us like a calamity; far from choosing it, we fall into it. And try as we will to wrest ourselves from it, to conjure it away, doubt never loses sight of us, for it is not even true that doubt crashes down upon us—doubt was within us, and we were foredoomed to it. No one chooses the lack of choice, nor strives to opt for the absence of option, for nothing that affects us deeply is *willed*. We are free to

invent torments for ourselves, but they are no more than posture, attitude; only those torments count which emerge from us in spite of ourselves. Only the inevitable counts, which proceeds from our weaknesses and our ordeals, in short from our impossibilities. True doubt will never be deliberate; even in its elaborated form, it is merely the speculative disguise assumed by our intolerance for Being. Hence when it seizes us and we suffer its pangs, there is nothing whose nonexistence we cannot conceive.

We must posit a self-destructive principle of *conceptual* essence if we would understand the process by which reason manages to undermine its foundations, to devour itself. Not content to declare certainty impossible, it excludes even the notion of certainty, it will go further still and reject any form of evidence, for evidence originates in Being, from which reason has severed itself; and this severance engenders, defines, and consolidates doubt. Every judgment, even a negative one, is rooted in the immediate or implies a self-imposed blindness—without which reason finds nothing manifest to hold on to. The more resistant reason is to obscuring itself, the more it considers any one proposition as gratuitous and void as the next. Since the least adherence—assent in any form—seems to reason inexplicable, unheard of, supernatural, it will cultivate the uncertain and extend its range with a zeal which includes a touch of vice and, curiously, of vitality. This delights the skeptic, for without this panting quest of the improbable (which betrays, after all, a certain complicity with life), he would be no

more than a ghost. Though he is quite prepared to espouse the spectral state, since he must doubt till there is no longer any *matter* for doubt, till everything fades and crumbles, and till, identifying even vertigo with a vestige of evidence, with a simulacrum of certainty, he will perceive with murderous acuity the bankruptcy of the inanimate as of the organic, and singularly of our faculties which, through him, will betray their own pretensions and inadequacies.

Anyone who cherishes the equilibrium of his mind will avoid attacking certain essential superstitions. This is a vital necessity for thinking, despised only by the skeptic who, having nothing to preserve, respects neither the secrets nor the tabus indispensable to the duration of certitudes. Certitudes indeed! The function he claims is to forage in them to reveal their origin and to compromise them, to identify the datum on which they are based and which, upon inspection, turns out to be inseparable from illusion or hypothesis. Nor will he be more sparing of mystery, in which he discerns only a limit which men, out of timidity or sloth, have assigned to their interrogations and their anxieties. Here, as in all things, what this anti-fanatic pursues with intolerance is the *ruin of the inviolable*.

Because negation is an aggressive, impure doubt, an inverted dogmatism, it rarely denies *itself*, rarely frees itself from its frenzies. Doubt, on the other hand, frequently, even inevitably, calls itself in question, prefers to abolish itself rather than see its perplexities degenerate into articles of faith. Since all

things are indeed equal, how would these perplexities merit escaping that universal equivalence which necessarily renders them null and void? If the skeptic made an exception for them, he would condemn himself, jeopardize his theses. Determined to remain faithful to them, and to suffer the consequences, he will arrive at the abandonment of all investigation, the discipline of abstention, the suspension of judgment. He will no longer bother to classify or to grade the truths whose principle he had envisaged and so pitilessly analyzed. To which of them, moreover, could he accord preference, when the point, for him, is in fact to prefer nothing, never again to convert an opinion into a conviction? As for *opinions* themselves, he may indulge them only capriciously, only from the need to belittle himself in his own eyes. "Why this rather than that?"—he will adopt this ancient ever-corrosive refrain of the doubters, a motto which spares nothing, not even death which is too decisive, too assured for his taste, stamped with "elementalism," a flaw it has inherited from life. Suspension of judgment represents the philosophical counterpart of irresolution, the recipe borrowed in order to express itself by a will incapable of choosing anything but an absence which excludes every scale of values and every obligatory criterion. One step more and this absence is joined by another: the absence of sensations. Once the mind's activity is suspended, why not suspend that of the senses, even that of the blood? No object, no obstacle or choice to evade or to confront; preserved both from the servitude of perception and from ac-

tion, the self, triumphing over its functions, shrinks to a point of consciousness projected into the infinite, outside of time.

Since every form of expansion implies a thirst for the irrevocable, we can scarcely conceive of a conqueror who would suspend his judgment. Doubt does not cross the Rubicon, doubt never crosses anything; its logical conclusion is an absolute inaction—an extremity conceivable in theory, inaccessible in fact. Of all the skeptics, only a Pyrrho has really approached it; the rest have made more or less happy stabs in its direction. This is because skepticism has against it our reflexes, our appetites, our instincts. For all its declarations that *being* is a prejudice, this prejudice, older than ourselves, outdates man and life, resists our attacks, withstands reasoning and proof, since it is also true that whatever exists and manifests itself in duration is based on the undemonstrable and the unverifiable. One must either adopt Keats's remark—"the truth is, there is something real in the world"—or be exiled from action forever. However, the certainty expressed here is not imperious enough to possess dynamic virtues. In order to act effectively, one must also believe in the reality of good and evil, in their distinct and autonomous existence. If we identify them both with conventions, their individualizing contours blur: no good or evil action, hence no action at all, so that things, like the judgments we bring to bear upon them, cancel each other out in a bleak identity. A value we know to be arbitrary ceases to be a value and sinks to a fiction. With fictions there

is no way of instituting a morality, still less rules of behavior in the present; whence, in order to escape confusion, the duty incumbent upon us to restore good and evil to their rights, to save them and save ourselves—at the price of our clear-sightedness. It is the *doubter* in us who keeps us from showing our capacity, it is the doubter who, by imposing upon us the burden of lucidity, overtaxes us, exhausts us, and abandons us to our disappointments, after having abused our capacities for questioning and for rejection. In a sense, *any* doubt is disproportionate to our powers. To ours alone? A suffering god, as has been seen, is normal enough; a doubting god is as wretched as we are. Hence, for all their merits, their exemplary legitimacy, we never consider our doubts without a certain dread, even when we have taken a certain pleasure in conceiving them. The intractable skeptic, barricaded within his system, seems to us a man unbalanced *by an excess of rigor*, a lunatic crazed by an incapacity to divagate. On the philosophic level, no one more honest; but his very honesty has something monstrous about it. Nothing finds favor in his eyes, everything seems to him an approximation and an appearance—our graphs as well as our groans. His drama is to be unable to condescend to imposture, as we all do when we assert or deny, when we have the impudence to produce any opinion whatever. And because he is incurably honest, he discovers a lie wherever an opinion attacks indifference and triumphs over it. To live is equivalent to the impossibility of abstaining; to conquer this impossibility is the exces-

sive task he imposes on himself, the task he faces *in solitary*, for mutual abstention, the *collective* suspension of judgment, is unfeasible. If it were not, what an opportunity for humanity to make an *honorable* end! But what has scarcely fallen to the individual lot will in no way do so to the general, the crowd being barely capable of reaching the threshold of negation.

Since doubt turns out to be incompatible with life, the consistent, persistent skeptic, that living dead man, crowns his career by a defeat unparalleled in any other intellectual adventure. Furious to have sought singularity and to have delighted in doing so, he will aspire to effacement, to anonymity, and this, O paradox! precisely when he no longer feels an affinity with anything, anyone. To model himself upon the commonplace is all he hopes for at this point of his collapse, where he reduces wisdom to conformism and salvation to conscious illusion, to postulated illusion—in other words, to the acceptance of appearances as such. But he forgets that appearances are a recourse only if one is sufficiently benighted to assimilate them to realities, only if one benefits from naive illusion, illusion unaware of itself, precisely the kind which is the prerogative of others and of which he alone lacks the secret. Instead of accepting the fact, he, the enemy of imposture in philosophy, will undertake to cheat *in life*, convinced that by dint of dissimulations and frauds he will manage not to distinguish himself from the rest of humanity, whom he will vainly try to imitate—vainly since every act requires

him to combat the thousand motives he has for not performing it. The least of his gestures will be concerted, the result of a tension and of a strategy, as if he had to take every moment by assault, unable to plunge into it naturally. Having dislocated Being, he struggles desperately to restore it. Like Macbeth's, his conscience is ravaged; he too has murdered sleep, the sleep in which certainties took their rest. They waken and come to haunt him, to disturb him; and they disturb him indeed, but since he does not stoop to remorse, he contemplates the procession of his victims with a discomfort assuaged by irony. What do these ghostly recriminations matter to him now? Detached from his enterprises and from his crimes, he has reached deliverance, but a deliverance *without salvation*, prelude to the integral experience of vacuity, which he approaches when, having doubted his doubts, he ends by doubting himself, by depreciating and hating himself, by no longer believing in his destroyer's mission. Once the last link is broken, the one which attached him to himself, and without which even self-destruction is impossible, he will seek refuge in primordial vacancy, in the most intimate of origins, before that friction between seed and substance which extends through the entire series of beings, from the insect to the most tormented of mammals. Since neither life nor death any longer excites his mind, he is less real than those shades to whose reproaches he has just been subjected. Not one subject any longer intrigues him which he would raise to the dignity of a problem, a scourge. His incuri-

osity attains to such breadth that it borders on total relinquishment, a nothingness more denuded than that on which the mystics pride themselves or lament after their peregrinations across the “desert” of divinity. Amid his seamless hebetude, a single thought still agonizes him, a single question—stupid, laughable, obsessive: “What did God do when He did nothing? how did He spend, before the Creation, His terrible leisure?” If he speaks to God as an equal, it is because they are both at the same degree of stagnation and futility. When his senses wither for lack of objects that might solicit them, and his reason ceases to function from the horror of passing judgment, he has reached the point where he can address himself only to the *Non-Creator*, Whom he resembles, with Whom he identifies himself, and Whose All, indiscernible from Nothing, is the space where, sterile and exhausted, he fulfills himself, he rests.

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Beside the rigorous or, one might say, orthodox skeptic, whose lamentable and in certain respects grandiose end we have just seen, there exists another—heretical, capricious, who while suffering doubt only intermittently is capable of *conceiving* it to the last and of drawing its ultimate consequences. He too will know the suspension of judgment and the abolition of sensations, *but only within a crisis*, which he will surmount by projecting into the indetermination in which he sees himself cast a content and a

frisson it seemed incapable of affording. Leaping outside the aporias in which his mind vegetated, he shifts from inertia to exultation, he raises himself to a hallucinated enthusiasm which would turn even the mineral itself lyrical, if there were still minerals in his world. No consistency anywhere—everything is transfigured, everything vanishes; he alone remains, confronting a triumphal void. Free of the world's shackles and of understanding's as well, he too compares himself to God, this time a God Who will be brimming, excessive, intoxicated, plunged into the ecstasies of Creation and Whose privileges he will adopt, stricken with a sudden omniscience, a miraculous moment when the possible, deserting the Future, will dissolve into the moment, enlarging it, dilating it to the bursting point.

Whereupon this skeptic *sui generis* fears nothing so much as to fall back into another crisis. At least it will be permissible for him to consider from outside the doubt over which he has momentarily triumphed, contrary to the other kind who has hooked himself upon it forever. Further he possesses another advantage, that of being able to open himself to experiences of another order, to those of religious minds especially, which utilize and exploit doubt, make it a stage, a provisional but indispensable hell in order to embark upon the absolute and take anchor there. These are the traitors to skepticism, whose example he would like to follow: insofar as he succeeds, he glimpses that the abolition of sensations can lead to something besides an impasse. When Sariputta, one of

Buddha's disciples, exclaims: "Nirvana is bliss!" and when the objection is raised that there can be no bliss where there are no sensations, Sariputta answers: "Bliss is precisely that there is no sensation."—This paradox is no longer one for the man who, despite his tribulations and his attrition, still has enough resources to join Being on the borders of the Void, and to vanquish, even if only for brief intervals, that appetite for unreality out of which appears the irrefragable clarity of doubt, which can be opposed only by extrarational evidence, conceived by another appetite, the appetite for what is real. Yet, taking advantage of the slightest weakness, the refrain "why this rather than that?" returns, and its insistence and its repetition cast consciousness into an accursed timelessness, into a frozen Becoming, whereas any *yes* and even a *no* make that consciousness participate in the substance of Time, from which they emanate and which they proclaim.

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Every affirmation and, with all the more reason, every belief proceeds from a depth of barbarism which the majority, which virtually the totality of men have the good fortune to preserve, and which only the Skeptic—once again, the true Skeptic, the consistent one—has lost or liquidated, so that he retains only vague vestiges of it, too weak to influence his behavior or the conduct of his ideas. Hence, if there exist isolated skeptics in each period, skepticism, as a his-

torical phenomenon, is to be met with only at the moments when a civilization no longer has a "soul" in the sense Plato gives the word: "what moves of itself." In the absence of any principle of movement, how could it still have a present, how especially a future? And just as the skeptic, at the end of his sapper's labor, reached a downfall like the one he had reserved for certitudes, so a civilization, after having undermined its values, collapses with them, and falls into a deliquescence in which barbarism appears the only remedy, as is evidenced by the apostrophe flung at the Romans by Salvianus early in the fifth century: "There is not one of your cities which is pure, unless it is those in which the barbarians dwell."—In this case, it was perhaps less a matter of licentiousness than of perplexity. Licentiousness, even debauchery, is becoming to a civilization, or at least a civilization adapts itself to them. But perplexity, once it spreads, terrorizes a civilization, which will turn to those who escape it, who are immune to it. And it is then that the barbarian begins to seduce, to fascinate delicate minds, minds in conflict who envy and admire him, sometimes openly, more often in secret, and crave—without always admitting it to themselves—to become his slaves. That they also fear him is undeniable; but this fear, in no way salutary, contributes rather to their future subjection, weakens them, paralyzes them, and drives them deeper into their scruples, their impasses. For them, abdication, their sole solution, involves less a suspension of judgment than a suspension of will, not so much the de-

feat of reason as the defeat of the organs. At this stage, skepticism is inseparable from physiological infirmity. A robust organism rejects and shuns it; a debile constitution yields to it, rushes upon it. And if that constitution should then try to free itself, since it cannot succeed by its own means, it will seek the help of the barbarian, whose role is not to solve but to suppress problems and, with them, the hyperacute consciousness inherent in them which torments the weak man even when he has renounced all speculative activity. For within this consciousness is perpetuated a morbid and irrepressible need anterior to any theoretical perplexity, the weak man's need to multiply himself in laceration, suffering, and frustration, the need to be cruel not to others but to himself. Reason, instead of serving him as a means of release, becomes an instrument of self-torture: it affords him arguments against himself, it justifies his will to fail, it flatters him, exhausts itself in making his existence intolerable. And it is indeed in a desperate effort against himself that he urges his enemy to come and deliver him from his final agony.

The barbarian phenomenon, which ineluctably appears at certain historical junctures, is perhaps an evil, but a necessary evil; further, the methods employed to combat it precipitate its advent, since, in order to be effective, they must be ferocious: which is what a civilization is unwilling to lend itself to; should it be willing, it would not succeed, for lack of vigor. The best thing for it, once on the decline, is to grovel before the barbarian; moreover, no civilization is re-

luctant to do this, knowing too well that the barbarian represents—that he already incarnates—the future. Once the Empire was invaded, its literary men (one thinks of an Apollinaris Sidonius, an Ennodius, a Cassiodorus) quite naturally became the panegyrists of the Gothic kings. The rest, the great mass of the conquered, took refuge in administration or agriculture, for they had gone too soft to be permitted a career of arms. Converted to Christianity out of lassitude, they were incapable of insuring its triumph by themselves: the conquerors gave them a hand. A religion is nothing by itself; its fate depends on those who adopt it. The new gods demand new men, capable, in any circumstance, of decision, of choice, of saying firmly yes or no, instead of floundering in quibbles or becoming anemic by abuse of nuance. Since the *virtues* of barbarians consist precisely in the power of taking sides, of affirming or denying, they will always be celebrated by declining periods. The nostalgia for barbarism is the last word of a civilization; and thereby of skepticism.

At the expiration of a cycle, what else can a disenchanted mind dream of but the impulse of brutes to count on the possible, to wallow in it? Unsited to defend the doubts it no longer practices or to subscribe to the dawning dogmas it despises, such a mind applauds—supreme secession of the intellect—the irrefutable demonstrations of instinct: the Greek mind bows before the Roman, which in its turn will bow before the Goth, according to an inexorable rhythm, a law which history eagerly illustrates, today even

more than at the beginning of the Christian era. The combat is unequal between the peoples who argue and the peoples who keep still, all the more in that the former, having eroded their vitality in cavilling, feel drawn to the latter's coarseness and silence. If this is true of a collectivity, what can we say of an individual, especially of the skeptic? Indeed, we must not be surprised to find him, specialist in subtlety though he is, at the heart of the ultimate solitude to which he has come, turning himself into a friend and accomplice of the hordes.

IS THE DEVIL A SKEPTIC?

THE most odious exploits attributed to the Devil turn out, in their effects, to be less harmful than the themes of skepticism when they cease being a game and become an obsession. To destroy is to act, to create backward, to manifest—in a very special way—one's solidarity with what exists. As the agent of nonbeing, Evil takes its place in the economy of being; it is therefore necessary, it performs an important, even a vital function.

But what function is to be assigned to doubt? What demand does it answer? Who needs it, besides the Doubter? Gratuitous woe, despondency in the pure state, it corresponds to none of the positive requirements of the living. Without rhyme or reason

to keep putting everything in question, to doubt even in dreams!

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To achieve his ends, the Devil, being dogmatically minded, sometimes employs the strategy of borrowing the procedures of skepticism; he wants to suggest that he adheres to nothing, he simulates doubt and on occasion makes it his collaborator. Nonetheless, though he knows it well, the Devil never enjoys doubt, indeed he fears it so much that we cannot be certain he actually wants to suggest it, to inflict it upon his victims.

The drama of the doubter is greater than that of the negator, because to live without a goal is more difficult than to live for a bad cause. Now as for a goal, the skeptic knows none: all being equally fragile or void, which is preferable? Negation on the other hand is equivalent to a program; it can occupy, it can even gratify the most exigent existence, not to mention the fact that it is *beautiful* to deny, particularly when God suffers for it: negation is not vacuity, it is plenitude, an anxious and aggressive plenitude. If we postulate salvation in action, to negate is to save oneself—to escape, to pursue a plan, to play a role. We understand why the skeptic, when he regrets having followed a perilous path, envies the Devil; it is because negation, despite the reservations it inspires, cannot help being a source of action or cer-

tainty: when one denies, one knows what one wants; when one doubts, one ends by no longer knowing.

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A major obstacle to our equilibrium, melancholy is a state of diffuse inadhesion, a passive break with being, a negation *unsure of itself*, unsuited, moreover, to turn into affirmation or into doubt. It matches our infirmities, it would match still better those of a Devil who, weary of denying, would suddenly find himself out of work. No longer believing in evil, not inclined to come to terms with good, he would find himself—he, the most ardent of all the fallen angels!—deprived of his mission, of his faith in himself, unable to work harm, exhausted by chaos, condemned without the consolations of sarcasm. If melancholy suggests a secularized hell, it is because it has something in it of a wickedness on the point of abdicating, blunted and meditative, reluctant to exert itself against anything, if not against itself. Melancholy *dispassions* becoming, obliges it to withdraw its frenzy, to devour itself, to subside by *destroying itself*.

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Affirmation and negation being no different *qualitatively*, the transition from one to the other is natural and easy. But once we have espoused doubt, it is neither easy nor natural to return to the certitudes

they represent. We then find ourselves paralyzed, prevented from militating for any cause whatever; better still, we reject them all and, if need be, ruin them *without descending into the arena*. The skeptic, to the Devil's despair, is the unusable man *par excellence*. He "takes" to nothing, attaches himself to nothing; the breach between him and the world widens with each event and with each problem he must face. He has been labeled a dilettante because he prefers to minimize everything; in fact, he minimizes nothing, he simply restores things to their place. Our pleasures like our pains come from the undue importance we attribute to our experiences. The skeptic will therefore strive to set in order not only his judgments, which is easy, but his sensations as well, which is more difficult. Thereby he betrays his limits and his nonfulfillment (one dare not say his frivolity), for only the pleasures of suffering convert existence into destiny. Where are we to classify him if his place is neither among the serious minds nor among the trivial? Doubtless between the two, in that condition of the forever anxious passerby who stops nowhere because no object, no being, affords him the slightest impression of reality. What he lacks, what he knows nothing of, is piety, the sole sentiment capable of saving at once appearances and the absolute. Since piety analyzes nothing, it can minimize nothing; it perceives *value* everywhere, it "takes" to things, attaches itself to them. Has the skeptic experienced piety in his past? He will never recover it, not if he prays night and day. He will have faith,

he will believe in his own way, he will disavow his jeers and blasphemies, but as for knowing piety—he will not succeed in this at any cost: where doubt has passed there remains no place for piety. The space it requires cannot be offered by the skeptic, who has ransacked everything in and around himself. Pity this sinister meddler, pity this *accursed amateur!*

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If certitude were established on earth, if it suppressed all trace of curiosity and anxiety from men's minds, nothing would be changed for the predestined skeptic. Even when his arguments are demolished one by one, he is not shaken from his positions. To dislodge him, to disturb him deeply, he must be attacked on his greed for vacillations, his thirst for perplexities: what he seeks is not truth, it is endless insecurity, endless interrogation. Hesitation, which is his passion, his risk, his discount martyrdom, will dominate all his thoughts and all his undertakings. And though he vacillates as much by method as by necessity, he will nonetheless react like a fanatic: he cannot leave off his obsessions or, *a fortiori*, himself. Infinite doubt will make him, paradoxically, the prisoner of a closed world. Since he will not be conscious of this, he will persist in believing that his course collides with no barrier and that it is neither inflected nor altered by the slightest weakness. His exasperated need of uncertainty will become a disease for which he will seek no remedy, since no evidence, however

irresistible and definitive, will induce him to *suspend* his doubts. If the very ground gave way beneath his feet he would not be alarmed, would continue, calm and despairing. If the ultimate truth were known, the answer to the riddle divulged, all difficulties solved and all mysteries elucidated—nothing would trouble him, nothing would turn him from his path. Everything which flatters his appetite for irresolution, everything which helps him live and at the same time hampers his life is sacred to him. And if Indifference fills him to overflowing, if he makes it into a reality as vast as the universe itself, it is because Indifference is the practical equivalent of doubt, and in his eyes does doubt not have the prestige of the Unconditioned?

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To pledge allegiance, to engage oneself—that is everyone's great concern. And it is precisely what the skeptic refuses to do. Yet he knows that once we *serve* we are saved, since we have chosen; and every choice is a defiance of the vague, of the curse, of infinity. Men need fulcrums, they want certainty at any price, even at the expense of truth. Since it is restorative, and since they cannot do without it, even when they know it lies, no scruple will restrain them in their efforts to obtain certainty.

The pursuit of doubt on the other hand is debilitating and unhealthy; no vital necessity, no *interest* directs it. If we commit ourselves to it, it is very

likely that a destructive power determines our doing so. Does it not seem that the Devil, who forgets nothing, is revenging himself upon us for our refusal to cooperate in his enterprise? Furious at seeing us working in our own behalf, he benights us, he arranges matters so that we pursue the Insoluble with an attention to detail which blinds us to every illusion and every reality alike. Hence this pursuit to which he dooms us comes down to a *methodical* fall into the abyss.

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Before Lucifer, the first to have assaulted the original unconsciousness, the world rested in God. Not that there were no conflicts, but these, implying neither rupture nor rebellion, still occurred within the primordial unity which a new and fearful power was to explode. That assault, inseparable from the fall of the angels, remains the capital event occurring before the other fall, that of man. Once man rebelled, once man fell, the second stage in the history of consciousness had arrived, the second blow struck at God's order and work, the order and work which the skeptic in his turn was to broach—the skeptic, that product of fatigue and dissolution, that limit of the mind's advance, that belated and perhaps final version of man. Contrary to the first two protesters, the skeptic disdains rebellion and is determined not to lower himself to it; having worn out his indignations as well as his ambitions, he has left behind the cycle of in-

surrections provoked by the double fall. And he moves away from man whom he finds old-fashioned, as man had moved away from the Devil, his master, whom he blamed for retaining vestiges of naiveté and illusion. We perceive the gradation in the experience of solitude, and the consequences of the disjunction from primordial unity.

Lucifer's act, like Adam's—one preceding History, the other inaugurating it—represent the essential moments of the battle to isolate God and to disqualify His universe. That universe was one of unconscious happiness in a state of undivided possession. We aspire to it each time we are weary of bearing the burden of duality.

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The great practical value of certainties must not conceal from us their theoretical fragility. They wither, they age, while doubts retain an unalterable freshness . . . A belief is linked to a period; the arguments we oppose it by, and which make it impossible for us to adhere to it, defy time, so that this belief lasts only as a result of the objections which have undermined it. It is difficult for us to imagine the formation of the Greek gods, the exact process by which men conceived fear or veneration toward them; on the other hand we understand perfectly how they came to lose interest in those gods, and then to contest their utility or their existence. Criticism is of the

ages; religious inspiration, a privilege of certain eminently rare periods. If it requires a great deal of thoughtlessness and intoxication to engender a god, to kill him requires only a little *attention*. Europe has made this minor effort since the Renaissance. It is scarcely surprising if we have come to the point of envying those grandiose moments when one could be present at the childbirth of the absolute.

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After a long intimacy with doubt, you come to a particular form of pride: you do not believe that you are more gifted than others, you merely believe you are *less naive*. Even if you know that so-and-so is endowed with faculties or attainments beside which your own are inconsiderable, it makes no difference—you will take him for someone who, unsuited to the essential, has been mired in futility. Even if he has passed through nameless and numberless ordeals, to you he will seem nonetheless to have failed to encounter the unique, the capital experience which you have had of beings, of things, of life. A child, children all, incapable of seeing what you alone have seen, you, the most disabused of mortals, without illusions as to others and as to yourself. But you will keep one illusion nonetheless: the tenacious, ineradicable one of believing you have none. No one will be in a position to rid you of it, for none will have in your eyes the merit of being as disenchanted as you. Confronting

a universe of dupes, you will regard yourself as a solitary, with the consequence that you can do nothing for anyone, as no one can do anything for you.

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The more intensely we feel our insignificance, the more we scorn others, and they even cease to exist for us when we are illuminated by the evidence of our nothingness. We attribute reality to others only insofar as we discover it in ourselves. When it is impossible for us to deceive ourselves further on our own account, we become incapable of that minimum dose of blindness and generosity which alone might *save* the existence of our fellow-men. At this degree of clear-sightedness, no longer entertaining any scruples in their regard, we turn them into puppets, incapable of raising themselves to the vision of their own nullity. Therefore why should we bother with what they say, and what they do?

Beyond men, the gods themselves are under attack: they exist only insofar as we find in ourselves a principle of existence. If this principle dries up, there is no longer any exchange possible with them: they have nothing to give us, we nothing to offer them. After having frequented and gratified them so long, we draw away, we forget them and remain, confronting them, eternally empty-handed. They too are puppets, like our fellow-men, like ourselves.

Contempt, which supposes a complicity with certainty, a taking up of a position in any case—this the

skeptic should renounce. Unfortunately he yields to it, and condescends to anyone who fails to do so. He who claimed to have conquered everything has not been able to conquer pride nor the disadvantages which proceed from it. What is the use of having amassed doubt upon doubt, rejection upon rejection, to reach, at the end, a special genre of servitude and discomfort? The clear-sightedness on which he plumes himself is his own enemy: it wakens him to nonbeing, it makes him conscious of it, only to weld him to it. And he can never again release himself, he will be enslaved to it, a prisoner on the very threshold of his emancipation, forever lashed to unreality.

F A M E : H O P E S A N D H O R R O R S

IF each of us were to confess his most secret desire, the one that inspires all his plans, all his actions, he would say: "I want to be praised." No one will make such a confession, for it is less shameful to commit an abomination than to proclaim so pitiable and so humiliating a weakness, looming out of a feeling of solitude and insecurity from which both the fortunate and the rejected suffer with equal intensity. No one is *sure* of what he is, nor of what he does. However imbued we may be with our merits, we are gnawed by anxiety and ask, in order to surmount it, only to be deceived, only to receive approbation from anywhere, from anyone. The observer detects a suppliant nuance in the expression of anyone who has finished an enterprise or a work, or performs, quite simply, any activity whatever. The weakness is a universal one; and if God

appears immune from it, it is because, once the creation was completed, He could not, lacking witnesses, count on commendations. He bestowed them upon Himself, it is true, and at the end of each day!

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Just as each of us, in order to “make a name for himself,” strives to outstrip the others, similarly in the beginning man must have known the vague desire to eclipse the animals, to affirm himself at their expense, to *shine* at any price. A breakdown of equilibrium, source of ambition if not of energy, having occurred in his vital economy, he found himself thereby projected into a competition with all living things, waiting to enter into competition with himself by that craving to transcend which, in its aggravated form, was to define him in his own right. Man alone, in the state of nature, wanted to be *important*, man alone, among the animals, hated anonymity and did his utmost to escape from it. To put himself forward, such was and such remains his dream. It is difficult to believe he has sacrificed Paradise out of a simple desire to know good and evil; on the other hand, it is easy to imagine him risking everything to be Someone. Let us correct Genesis: if he spoiled his initial felicity, it was less from a thirst for knowledge than from an appetite for fame. Once he yielded to its attraction, he went over to the Devil. And indeed fame is diabolic, in its principle as in its manifestations. On its account, the most gifted of the angels ended as an

adventurer and more than one saint as a charlatan. Those who have known or merely approached fame can no longer turn away and, to remain in its vicinity, will shrink from no degradation, no villainy. When one cannot save one's soul, one hopes at least to save one's name. The usurper who was to assure himself a privileged position in the universe—would he have achieved his purpose without the desire to be talked about, without the obsession, the mania of reputation? If this mania were to seize any animal in its grip, however "retarded" that animal might be, it would press forward and catch up with man.

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And if the desire for fame should leave you? With it will go those torments which goaded you on, which impelled you to produce, to realize yourself, and to leave yourself behind. Once they are gone, you will be satisfied with what you are, you will subside within your boundaries, your will to supremacy and excess conquered and abolished. Free of the Serpent's kingdom, you will not retain a trace of the old temptation, of the stigma which distinguished you from the other creatures. Is it even certain that you are still *man*? At the most a *conscious* plant.

The theologians, by identifying God with pure mind, have revealed that they possess no sense of the process of creation, of *physis* in general. The mind as such is unsuited to produce; it projects but, in order to carry out its plans, an impure energy is required to

set it in action. It is the mind, and not the flesh, which is weak, and it becomes strong only when stimulated by a suspect thirst, by some blameworthy impulse. The more dubious a passion, the more its victim is spared the danger of creating false or fleshless works. Is a man ruled by cupidity, jealousy, vanity? Far from being blamed, he should be praised for these sins: what would he be without them? Almost nothing—that is, pure mind, or more precisely, an angel; now, the angel is by definition sterile and ineffectual, like the light in which he vegetates, which engenders nothing, deprived as it is of that obscure, underground principle which resides in every manifestation of life. God seems much more favored, since He is molded out of shadows: without their dynamic imperfection, He would have remained in a state of paralysis or absence, incapable of playing the part we all know so well. He owes them everything, including His *being*. Nothing of the fecund and the true is altogether luminous, nor altogether honorable. To say of a poet, apropos of this or that weakness, that it is a “flaw in his genius” is to fail to recognize the source and the secret if not of his talents, certainly of his “output.” Every work, however high its level, proceeds from the immediate and bears its mark: no one creates in the absolute nor in the void. Imprisoned in a *human* universe, once we manage to escape it, why produce and for whom? The more *man* claims us, the more *men* cease to interest us; yet it is on account of them and of the opinion they have of us that we bestir ourselves, as evidenced by the incredible hold

flattery has over every mind, crude and delicate alike. It is a mistake to believe that it has no effect upon the solitary, who is in fact more sensitive to it than is supposed, for not often having to suffer its charm or its venom, he cannot protect himself against it. However blasé he is about everything, he is not blasé about compliments. As he does not receive many, he is not accustomed to them; should the occasion arise to lavish them upon him, he will swallow them with a childish and disgusting greed. Versed in so many things, he is a novice in this one. Also to his liabilities must be added the fact that every compliment functions physically and provokes a delicious *frisson* which no one can stamp out or even master without a discipline, a self-control which is acquired only by the practice of society, by a long frequentation of knaves and fools alike. In truth, nothing, neither scorn nor mistrust, immunizes us against the effects of flattery: if we suspect or disparage someone, we shall be nonetheless attentive to the favorable judgments he makes upon us, and we shall even change our minds about him if they are sufficiently lyrical, sufficiently exaggerated to seem to us spontaneous, involuntary. In appearance, everyone is self-satisfied; in actuality, no one. Should we then, out of a spirit of charity, burn our incense before friends and enemies both, before all mortals without exception, and say amen to each of their extravagances? So deeply does self-doubt work in us that, to remedy it, we have invented love, a tacit agreement between two unhappy parties to overestimate each other, to praise each other shamelessly.

Madmen aside, there is no one who is indifferent to commendation or blame; as long as we remain somewhat normal, we are sensitive to the one and the other; if we become refractory to them, what else can we look for among our fellow-men? It is incontestably humiliating to react as they do; on the other hand, it is hard to raise oneself above all these miseries which harass and overwhelm them. To be human is no solution, any more than ceasing to be so.

The least venture outside the world constrains our desire to realize ourselves, to surpass and crush the others. The angel's misfortune is a consequence of the fact that he has no need to struggle in order to accede to glory: he is born in it, takes his ease there, glory is consubstantial with him. What can he aspire to thereafter? He lacks the very resource of inventing desires for himself. If to produce and to exist are coincident, there is no condition more unreal, more disheartening than his.

To play at detachment, when one is not predestined to it, is dangerous: thereby one loses more than one enriching defect, necessary to the achievement of a work. To shed the Old Adam is to deprive ourselves of our own depths, it is to thrust ourselves of our own accord into the impasse of purity. Without the contribution of our past, of our mud, of our corruption—recent as well as original—the spirit is out of a job. Woe to the man who does not sacrifice his salvation!

Since everything done that is great, important, unheard of emanates from the hope of fame, what hap-

pens when it weakens or fades, when we suffer shame for having aspired to count in other men's eyes? To understand how we can reach this point, let us turn back to those moments when a veritable neutralization of our instincts is brought about. We are still alive, but that scarcely matters to us any longer: a fact of no interest; truth, lie—mere words, one worth no more than the other, signifying nothing. What is, what is not—how know such a thing when we have gone past that stage where one still takes the trouble to grade appearances? Our needs, our desires are parallel to ourselves, and as for our dreams, it is not we who dream them now, someone else dreams them inside us. Our very fear is no longer our own. Not that it diminishes, rather it grows, but it ceases to concern us; drawing on its own resources, it leads, liberated and lofty, an autonomous life; we merely serve it as a prop, a domicile, an address: we lodge our fear. It lives apart, develops and flourishes, and makes its own connections without ever consulting us. Undeterred, we abandon it to its whims, disturb it as little as it disturbs us, and attend—disabused and impassive—the spectacle it affords us.

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Just as we may imaginatively follow in reverse the course of the individual as he comes into life and thereby retrace the various species, so by following the course of history in reverse we may come to its

beginnings and even proceed beyond them. This retrogression becomes a necessity in the man who, wrested from the tyranny of opinion, no longer belongs to any period. To aspire to consideration is defensible, in a pinch; but when there is *no one* on whom to make a good impression, why exhaust oneself being someone, why even exhaust oneself being?

After longing to see our name written around the sun, we lapse to the other extreme and pray that it will be erased everywhere and forever. If our impatience to affirm ourselves knew no limits, our impatience to efface ourselves will know none either. Carrying our desire for renunciation to the point of heroism, we employ our energies in the increase of our obscurity, in the destruction of every vestige of our passage, of the least memory of our breath. We hate anyone who attaches himself to us, counts on us, or expects something from us. The only concession we can still make to others is to disappoint them. In any case, they could not understand our longing to escape the overwork of the self, to stop on the threshold of consciousness and never walk inside, to huddle in the depths of primordial silence, in inarticulate beatitude, in the sweet stupor where all creation once lay, before the din of the Word. This need to hide, to give light the slip, to be last in everything, these transports of modesty in which, competing with the moles, we accuse them of ostentation, this nostalgia for the unrealized and the unnamed—so many modalities of liquidating evolution's attainments in order to regain,

by a leap backward, the moment which preceded the agitation of Becoming.

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When one forms a high opinion of effacement and considers with contempt the remark of the least *effaced* of modern men: "All my life I have sacrificed everything, peace, interest, happiness, to my destiny"—it is not without satisfaction that one imagines, at the antipodes, the relentlessness of the disabused creature who, in order to leave no tracks, orients his undertakings toward a single goal: the suppression of his identity, the volatilization of his ego. So vehement is his desire to pass unperceived that he erects Insignificance into a system, into a divinity, and kneels before it. No longer to exist for anyone, to live as if one had never lived, to banish the event, no longer to take advantage of any moment, any place, to be released forever! To be free is to emancipate oneself from the pursuit of a destiny, to give up belonging to either the chosen or the outcast; to be free is to practice being nothing.

The man who has given all he could give affords a more distressing spectacle than he who, having been unable or unwilling to single himself out, dies with all his gifts, real or supposed, with his capacities unexploited and his merits unrecognized: the career he might have had, lending itself to variant versions, flatters the play of our imagination; which is to say

that he is still alive, whereas the former, frozen in his success, fulfilled and hideous, evokes . . . a corpse. In every domain, only those intrigue us who, whether out of incapacity or scruple, indefinitely postponed the moment when they had to decide to excel. Their advantage over others is to have understood that we do not realize ourselves with impunity, that we must pay for every gesture which is added to the pure fact of being alive. Nature abhors the talents we have acquired at her expense, she abhors even those which she has granted us and which we have cultivated unduly, she punishes zeal, that road to perdition, and warns us that it is always to our detriment that we seek to make ourselves illustrious. Is there anything more deadly than a superabundance of qualities, than a clutter of merits? Let us maintain our deficiencies and not forget that we perish more readily by the excesses of a virtue than by those of a vice.

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To presume one is *known* by God, to seek out His complicity and His adulation, to scorn all suffrage but His—what presumption and what power! Only religion can utterly satisfy our good as well as our bad inclinations.

Between a man whom no “kingdom” ignores, and the disinherited creature who has only his faith, which of the two, in the absolute, attains a greater effulgence? One cannot balance the notion God deigns to have of us against the notion our fellow-men arrive

at. Without the desire to be *appreciated* on high, without the certainty of enjoying there a certain renown, there would be no such thing as prayer. The mortal who has prayed sincerely, were it but once in his life, has touched upon the supreme form of glory. What other success will he count on henceforth? Having reached the summit of his career, his mission here on earth fulfilled, he can rest in peace for the remainder of his days.

The privilege of being known to God may appear insufficient to some. Thus in any case judged our first ancestor who, weary of a passive celebrity, took it into his head to impose it upon the creatures, and upon the Creator Himself Whose omniscience he envied less than His pomp, His circumstantial aspect, His *frippery*. Dissatisfied with a secondary role, he flung himself, out of spite and histrionics, into a series of exhausting performances, into history, that enterprise not so much to supplant as to *dazzle* the divinity.

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If we want to advance into self-knowledge, no one can help us so much as the braggart: he behaves as we would do if we were not restrained by vestiges of timidity and shame; he says aloud what he thinks of himself, he proclaims his merits while, lacking boldness, we are doomed to murmur or to stifle ours. Hearing him go into raptures for hours on end over his deeds, his doings, we shudder at the notion that

it would take only a trifle for each of us to do as much.

Since the boaster prefers himself to the universe quite openly, and not in secret like the rest of us, he has no reason to play the part of the misunderstood hero, or the outcast. Since no one is willing to bother with what he is nor with what he is worth, he will attend to the matter himself. In the judgments he passes on himself, no restriction, no insinuation, no nuance. He is satisfied, replete, he has found what all pursue and what few discover.

How pitiable, on the other hand, the man who dares not celebrate his advantages and his talents! He execrates anyone who does not notice them and he execrates himself for not being able to exalt or at the very least to exhibit them. Once the barrier of prejudices was down, once bragging was at last tolerated and even obligatory, what a deliverance for men's minds! Psychiatry would have no further purpose if we were permitted to divulge the immense good we thought of ourselves or if we had, at any hour of the day, a flatterer within reach. Yet happy though the braggart is, his felicity is not flawless: he does not always find someone disposed to listen to him; and what he may suffer when he is reduced to silence it is better not to think of.

However full of ourselves we may be, we live in an anxious rancor, from which we can escape only if the stones themselves, in an impulse of pity, decided to praise us. So long as they persist in their silence, noth-

ing remains for us but to flounder in torment, to gorge on our own bile.

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If the aspiration to fame assumes an increasingly breathless form, it is because fame has replaced the belief in immortality. The disappearance of a chimera as inveterate as it was legitimate necessarily left a confusion in men's minds, as well as an expectation mixed with frenzy. A facsimile of everlastingness, no one can do without it, still less keep from seeking it everywhere, in any form of reputation, literary first of all. Since death appears to each man as an absolute term, *everyone writes*. Whence the idolatry of success, and consequently the subservience to the *public*, that pernicious and blind power, scourge of the century, foul version of Fatality.

With eternity in the background, fame could have a meaning; it no longer has one in a world where time rules, where—to make matters worse—time itself is *threatened*. We accept that universal fragility, which so affected the Ancients, as something obvious which neither startles nor pains us, and it is with a high heart that we cling to the certitudes of a precarious, a worthless celebrity. Let us add further that if, in the ages when man was rare, there might have been some interest in being Someone, the same is no longer true today, now that man is devalued. On a planet invaded by the flesh, whose consideration

matters still, when the idea of one's *neighbor* is drained of all content and we cannot love humanity in detail or *en masse*? Merely to aspire to distinguish oneself from it is already a symptom of spiritual death. The horror of fame proceeds from the horror of men: interchangeable, they justify by their number the aversion they inspire. The time is not far off when we shall have to be in a state of grace to be able, not to love them—which is impossible—but simply to endure the sight of them. In the days when providential plagues swept the cities clean, the individual, in his capacity as survivor, inspired with some reason a certain respect: he was still a *being*. There are no more beings, there is only this swarm of dying creatures stricken with longevity, all the more hateful in that they are so good at organizing their agony. To them we prefer almost any animal, if only because it is hunted down by them, despoilers and profaners of a landscape once ennobled by the presence of beasts. Paradise is the absence of man. The more aware of this we become, the less we forgive Adam's act: surrounded by animals, what more could he desire? and how could he fail to recognize the bliss of not having to confront, at every moment, that vile curse inscribed upon our faces? Serenity being conceivable only with the eclipse of our race, let us meanwhile leave off martyring each other for trifles, let us look elsewhere—to that part of ourselves over which no one has any hold. We change perspectives on things when, in a confrontation with our most secret solitude, we discover that there is a reality only

in the deepest part of ourselves, and that all the rest is a delusion. Once a man is steeped in this truth, what can others bestow upon him which he does not have already, and what can be taken from him which might sadden or humiliate him? There is no emancipation without a victory over shame and over the fear of shame. The conqueror of appearances, forever released from their seductions, must make himself superior not only to honors, but to honor itself. Without paying the slightest attention to the scorn of his fellows, he will display, among them, the pride of a discredited god.

What relief we feel when we suppose ourselves inaccessible to praise or blame, when we no longer care about cutting a good or bad figure in the eyes of others! A strange relief, punctuated by moments of oppression, a deliverance shadowed by a discomfort.

Far as we may have pursued the apprenticeship to detachment, we cannot yet say where the desire for fame has taken us: do we still feel it or are we quite numb to it? Most likely we have cached it away and it continues to torment us without our knowing it. We triumph over it only at those moments of sovereign dejection when neither the living nor the dead could recognize themselves in us . . . In the remainder of our experiences, things are less simple, for so long as one desires at all, one implicitly desires fame. Disenchanted as we may be, we long for it still, since our appetite for it survives the disappearance of all the rest. He who has drunk deep of fame, has wallowed in it, can never do without it, and, unless he

knows it always, will lapse into acrimony, insolence, or torpor. The more emphatic our deficiencies, the more fame gains by contrast and engages us; the void within us calls to it; and when it fails to answer, we accept its ersatz: notoriety. Insofar as we aspire to fame, we struggle within the insoluble: we want to conquer time with the means of time, to endure within the ephemeral, to attain to the indestructible through history, and—supreme mockery—to be applauded by precisely those whom we despise. Our misfortune is to have found, as a cure for the loss of eternity, only this deception, only this lamentable obsession, from which no one except a man implanted within Being could free himself. But who is capable of implanting himself within Being, when one is *human* only because one can do no such thing?

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To believe in history is to lust for the possible, to postulate the qualitative superiority of the imminent over the immediate, to imagine that Becoming is rich enough in and of itself to make eternity superfluous. Once we cease believing this, no event preserves the slightest significance. We are then interested only in the extremities of Time, less in its beginnings than in its conclusion, its consummation, in what will come after, when the exhaustion of the thirst for fame will involve the exhaustion of all appetites, and when, free of the impulse that drove him onward, unburdened

of his adventure, man will see opening before him an *era without desire*.

If we are forbidden to regain our primordial innocence, at least we can conceive another one, and can try to accede to it by means of a knowledge stripped of perversity, purified of its flaws, transformed in its depths, "reclaimed." Such a metamorphosis would be equivalent to the conquest of a second innocence, which, appearing after ages of doubt and lucidity, would have the advantage over the first one of no longer being deluded by the (now exhausted) prestige of the Serpent. The disjunction between knowledge and the Fall effected, the act of knowing no longer flattering anyone's vanity, no demoniac pleasure would still accompany the mind's necessarily aggressive indiscretion. We would behave as if we had violated no mystery, and would envisage all our exploits with detachment, if not with contempt. It would be a question of neither more nor less than *beginning Knowledge all over again*, that is, of constructing another history, a history released from the ancient curse, and in which it would be our task to rediscover that divine mark we bore before the break with the rest of Creation. We cannot live with the sentiment of a total sin, nor with the seal of infamy on each of our undertakings. Since it is our corruption which takes us out of ourselves, which makes us effective and fruitful, the eagerness to produce gives us away, accuses us. If our works bear witness against us, is this not because they emanate from the need

to camouflage our collapse, to deceive others, and still more, to deceive ourselves? *Doing* is tainted with an original vice from which *Being* seems exempt. And since all we accomplish proceeds from the loss of innocence, it is only by the disavowal of our actions and the distaste for ourselves that we can be redeemed.

ON SICKNESS

WHATEVER his merits, a man in good health is always disappointing. Impossible to grant any credence to what he says, to regard his phrases as anything but excuses, acrobatics. The experience of the terrible—which alone confers a certain density upon our words—is what he lacks, as he lacks, too, the imagination of disaster, without which no one can communicate with those *separate* beings, the sick. It is true that if he possessed that experience he would no longer be in good health. Having nothing to transmit, neutral to the point of abdication, he collapses into' well-being, an insignificant state of perfection, of impermeability to death as well as of inattention to oneself and to the world. As long as he remains there, he is like the objects around him; once torn from it, he

opens himself to everything, knows everything: the omniscience of terror.

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Flesh freeing itself, rebelling, no longer willing to serve, sickness is the *apostasy of the organs*; each insists on going its own way, each, suddenly or gradually, refusing to play the game, to collaborate with the rest, hurls itself into adventure and caprice. For consciousness to attain a certain intensity, the organism must suffer and even disintegrate: consciousness, initially, is consciousness of the organs. In good health, we are unaware of them; it is sickness which reveals them to us, which makes us understand their importance and their fragility, as well as our dependence upon them. The insistence with which sickness reminds us of their reality has something inexorable about it; no matter how much we want to forget them, sickness will not permit us to; this impossibility of forgetting, which is the drama of having a body, fills the space of our waking nights. In sleep, we participate in the universal anonymity, we are *every being*; once pain rouses us, there is no one but ourselves, alone with our disease, with the thousand thoughts it provokes in us and against us. "Woe to this flesh which is at the mercy of the soul, and woe to this soul, at the mercy of the flesh!"—it is in the dead of certain nights that we grasp the entire significance of these words from the *Gospel according to Thomas*. The flesh boycotts the soul, the soul boy-

cotts the flesh; deadly to each other, they are incapable of cohabiting, of elaborating in common a salutary lie, a tonic fiction.

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The more consciousness increases as a consequence of our diseases, the more liberated we should feel. It is the converse which is true. As our infirmities accumulate, we fall victim to our body, whose whims are equivalent to so many decrees. It is our body that commands and controls us, it is our body that dictates our moods; it supervises us, spies on us, keeps us under its thumb; and, while we submit to its will and accept so humiliating a servitude, we understand why, in good health, we shrink from the notion of fatality: when our body scarcely troubles to make itself known, we do not perceive its existence in any practical sense. If, in health, the organs are discreet, in sickness, impatient to call attention to themselves, they enter into competition with each other; the one which most attracts our attention retains this advantage only by a real show of zeal; but it exhausts itself in the performance, whereupon another, more enterprising and more vigorous, takes over its role. The irritating thing about this rivalry is that we are obliged to be both its object and its witness.

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Like every factor of disequilibrium, sickness arouses

—whips up and encourages an element of tension and of conflict. Life is an uprising within the inorganic, a tragic leap out of the inert—life is matter animated and, it must be said, spoiled by pain. From so much agitation, so much dynamism and ado, we escape only by aspiring to the repose of the inorganic, the peace at the heart of the elements. The will to return to matter constitutes the very core of the desire to die. On the other hand, to be afraid of death is to fear this return, is to flee silence and the equilibrium of the inert, equilibrium especially. Nothing more normal: it is a question of a vital reaction, and everything which participates in life is, in the strict as well as the figurative sense, *unbalanced*.

Each of us is the product of his past ailments and, *if he is anxious*, of those to come. The vague, indeterminate disease of being human is joined by others, various and specific, all of which appear in order to inform us that life is a state of absolute insecurity, that it is in essence provisional, that it represents an accidental mode of existence. But if life is an accident, the individual is the accident of an accident.

There is no cure, or rather we carry inside us all the diseases we have been “cured of,” and they never leave us. Incurable or not, they are there to keep pain from turning into a diffuse sensation: they stiffen it, organize it, regulate it . . . They have been called the “*idées fixes*” of our organs. Indeed, they suggest organs subject to haunting, unable to escape, subject to oriented, foreseeable confusions, enslaved by a methodical nightmare as monotonous as an obsession.

Such is the automatism of disease that it can conceive of nothing outside itself. Enriched by its initial manifestations, it then repeats itself necessarily, without becoming, however, like boredom, the symbol of invariability and sterility. We must also add that after a certain period it no longer grants the sufferer anything but daily confirmation of the impossibility of not suffering.

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So long as we feel well, we do not exist. More exactly: we do not know that we exist. The sick man longs for the nothingness of health, the ignorance of being: he is exasperated to know at every moment that he faces the *entire* universe, with no means of belonging to it, of losing himself within it. His ideal would be to forget everything and, relieved of his past to wake up one fine day naked before the future. "I can no longer undertake anything, *starting* from myself. Better to explode or dissolve than to continue like this," he tells himself. He envies, scorns, or detests all other mortals, the healthy most of all. Inevitable pain, far from purifying, brings out whatever is *bad* in the individual, physically and morally alike. A rule of conduct: mistrust the sickly, fear anyone who has been bedridden. The invalid's secret desire is that everyone should be sick, and the dying man longs to see everyone on his deathbed. What we desire in our ordeals is that the others should be as unhappy as we: not more, merely as much. For we must make no

mistake: the only equality which matters to us, and also the only one of which we are capable, is an equality in hell.

One can dispossess man, one can take everything away from him, he will manage somehow. One thing, however, must not be touched, for if he is deprived of that he will be unremittingly lost: the faculty, or better still the ecstasy, of complaining. If you strip him of this, he will no longer take any interest or any pleasure in his ills. He adjusts to them as long as he can talk about them and display them; particularly as long as he can narrate them to those around him in order to punish them for not suffering from them, for being momentarily exempt from them. And when he complains, what he is saying is: "Just wait a little, your turn will come too, you will not escape." All sick men are sadists; but their sadism is *acquired*; that is their only excuse.

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To yield, amidst all our diseases, to the temptation of believing that they will have been of no use to us, that without them we should be infinitely better off, is to forget the double aspect of sickness: *annihilation* and *revelation*; sickness cuts us off from our appearances and destroys them only the better to open us to our ultimate reality, and sometimes to the invisible. In another sense, one cannot deny that each invalid is a cheat in his own way. If he broods over his infirmities and concerns himself with them so scrupu-

lously, it is in order not to think about death; he conjures it away *by taking care of himself*. Death is looked in the face only by those, and indeed they are rare, who, having understood the "disadvantages of health," disdain to take measures to preserve or reconquer it. They let themselves die, gently enough, contrary to the rest, who struggle and bustle and suppose they are escaping death because they *haven't time* to succumb to it.

In the equilibrium of our faculties, it is impossible for us to perceive other worlds; upon the slightest disorder, we raise ourselves to them, we *feel* them. It is as if a crevice had appeared in reality, through which we glimpse a mode of existence at the antipodes of our own. This opening, however improbable it may be objectively, we yet hesitate to reduce to a mere accident of our mind. Everything we perceive has a reality value, once the object perceived, even if it is imaginary, is incorporated into our life. Angels, for the man who cannot avoid thinking about them, certainly exist. But when he sees them, when he imagines that they visit him, what a revolution in his being, what a crisis! A man in good health could never feel their presence, nor arrive at an exact notion of them. To imagine them is to race to one's destruction; to see them, to touch them is to be destroyed. In certain tribes, a man suffering from convulsions is said *to have the gods*. "He has the angels," we should say of the man who is devoured by secret terrors.

To be given over to angels or gods, well and good; worse is to consider oneself, for long periods, the most

normal man who ever lived, exempt from the flaws which afflict the others, immune from the consequences of the Fall, inaccessible to divine malediction, a healthy man in every respect, constantly dominated at every moment by the impression of having strayed into a mob of maniacs and plague-victims. How recover from the obsession of absolute "normality," how manage to be an *ordinary man*, saved or fallen? Nullity, abjection, anything rather than this baleful perfection!

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If man has been able to leave the animals behind, it is doubtless because he was more exposed and more receptive to diseases than they. And if he manages to maintain himself in his present state, it is because diseases unceasingly help him to do so; they surround him more than ever and multiply, so that he should believe himself neither alone nor disinherited; they make sure he prospers, so that he should never have the sentiment that he is not provided with tribulations.

Without pain, as the author of *Notes from Underground* saw so well, there would not be consciousness. And pain, which affects all the living, is the sole indication which permits us to suppose that consciousness is not the privilege of man. Inflict some torture upon an animal, consider the expression of his eyes, and you will perceive a *flash* which projects the creature, for an instant, above his condition. Whatever animal

it is, once it suffers it takes a step toward us, it strives to join us. And it is impossible, while its affliction lasts, to deny it a degree, however minimal, of consciousness.

Consciousness is not lucidity. Lucidity, man's monopoly, represents the conclusion of the severance-process between the mind and the world; it is necessarily consciousness of consciousness, and if we distinguish ourselves from the animals, it is lucidity alone which must receive the credit or the blame.

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There is no such thing as an *unreal* pain: pain would exist even if the world did not. If it were proved that pain has no use, we could still find one for it: that of projecting some substance into the fictions which surround us. Without pain, we should all be puppets—without pain, no content in the world; by its mere presence it transfigures anything, even a concept. Everything it touches is promoted to the rank of a memory; it leaves traces in the recollection which pleasure merely grazes: a man who has suffered is a *marked man* (as we say that a debauchee is marked, with reason, for debauchery is suffering). Pain gives a coherence to our sensations and a unity to our ego, and remains, once our certitudes are abolished, the only hope of escaping the metaphysical shipwreck. Must we now go further still and, by conferring upon it an impersonal status, assert with Buddhism that pain alone exists, that there is no one who

suffers it? If pain possesses the privilege of subsisting in and of itself, and if the ego comes down to an illusion, then we wonder *who* suffers and what meaning this mechanical development to which it is reduced can have. It seems that Buddhism discovers pain everywhere only to belittle it all the more. But we, even when we admit that pain exists independently of ourselves, cannot conceive of ourselves without it nor separate it from ourselves, from our *being*, of which it is the substance, even the cause. How conceive of a sensation *as such*, without the support of the "I," how imagine a suffering which is not "ours"? To suffer it is the substance, even the cause. How conceive of noncoincidence with the world, for suffering is the *generator of intervals*; and, when it seizes us, we no longer identify ourselves with anything, not even with suffering: it is then that, doubly conscious, we keep vigil over our vigils.

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Beyond the evils we endure, which strike us down and to which we adjust ourselves more or less, there are others which we desire as much by instinct as by calculation: an insistent thirst summons them, as if we were afraid that, ceasing to suffer, there would be nothing to hold on to. We need a reassuring datum, we wait to be given proof that we are touching something solid, that we are not divagating, *wide of the mark*. Pain, any pain, fills this role, and, when we have it within reach, we know with certainty that

something exists. We can counter the world's flagrant unreality only by *sensations*; which explains why, when we are convinced that nothing affords any foundation, we cling to all that offers a positive content, to all that makes us suffer. The man who has passed through the Void will see in each painful sensation a providential succor, and what he most fears is to devour it, to exhaust it too quickly, and to relapse into the state of dispossession and absence from which it had rescued him. Since he lives in a sterile laceration, he knows to satiety the disaster of tormenting himself without torments, of suffering without pain; and therefore he dreams of a series of precise, determined ordeals which free him from that intolerable vagueness, from that crucifying vacancy in which nothing is profitable, in which he advances to no purpose, following the rhythm of a long and insubstantial agony. The Void, *infinite* impasse, longs to set limits to itself, and it is out of hunger for boundaries that it flings itself upon the first pain to appear, upon any sensation likely to wrest it from the pangs of the indefinite. This is because pain, circumscribed and hostile to the vague, is always charged with a meaning, even a negative one, whereas the Void is too vast to be able to contain any at all.

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The evils which overwhelm us, the involuntary ones, are much more frequent and more real than the others; they are also the evils before which we are

most helpless: accept them? escape them? we do not know how to react, and yet it is the one thing that matters. Pascal was right not to dwell upon diseases but upon the *use* they were to be put to. Yet it is impossible to follow him when he assures us that "the ills of the body are merely the punishment for and the entire representation of the ills of the soul." The assertion is so gratuitous that, to contradict it, we need merely look around us: obviously, disease strikes innocent and guilty alike, it even shows a visible predilection for the innocent; which is moreover to be expected, innocence, internal purity, almost always supposing a weak constitution. No doubt about it, Providence takes no particular pains with the delicate. Causes rather than reflections of our spiritual ills, our physical ills determine our vision of things and decide the direction our ideas will take. Pascal's formula is true, provided we reverse it.

No trace of moral necessity nor of equity in the distribution of health and disease. Should this annoy us, must we fall into the exaggerations of a Job? It is futile to rebel against pain. On the other hand, resignation is no longer in fashion: does it not refuse to flatter, to embellish our miseries? One does not deprecate hell with impunity. Resignation is not only out of date, it is even doomed: a virtue which corresponds to none of our weaknesses.

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Once we commit ourselves to a passion, noble or sordid, it is of no importance, we are certain to pro-

ceed from torment to torment. The very aptitude to endure them shows that we are predestined to suffer. We love only because unconsciously we have renounced happiness. The Brahmanic adage is irrefutable: "Each time you create a new tie, you drive another pain, like a nail, into your heart."—Everything that fires our blood, everything that gives us the impression of living, of being a part of being, inevitably turns to suffering. A passion is in and of itself a punishment. The man who surrenders to it, even if he supposes himself the happiest man in the world, expiates by anxiety his real or imagined happiness. Passion attributes dimensions to what has none, makes an idol or a monster out of a shadow, being a sin against the true weight of beings, of things. Passion is also cruelty toward others and toward oneself, for one cannot experience it without torturing, without torturing oneself. Outside of insensibility and, perhaps, of scorn, everything is pain, even pleasure, pleasure especially, whose function does not consist in dispelling pain but in *preparing* it. Even admitting that it does not aim so high and that it merely leads to disappointment, what better proof of its inadequacies, of its lack of intensity, its lack of *existence!* Around pleasure, indeed, there is an atmosphere of imposture we never find in the vicinity of pain; pleasure promises everything and offers nothing, it is of the same stuff as desire. Now, unsatisfied desire is suffering; there is *pleasure* only during satisfaction; and it is disappointment, once satisfied.

Since it is by sensation that disaster has crept into the world, the best thing would be to annihilate our

senses, and to let ourselves fall into a divine abulia. What plenitude, what expansion, when we count on the disappearance of our appetites! The quietude which endlessly dwells upon itself turns away from every horizon hostile to this rumination, from all that might tear it from the delight of feeling nothing. When we abhor equally pleasures and pains, when we are weary of them to the point of disgust, it is not of happiness, it is not of *another* sensation that we dream, but of a life in slow motion, consisting of impressions so imperceptible that they appear to be non-existent. The least emotion then becomes a symptom of insanity, and once we experience one, we are alarmed by it to the point of calling for help.

Everything which affects us in one way or another being potentially suffering, are we to conclude from this the superiority of the mineral over the organic? In that case, the sole recourse would be to reinstate as soon as possible the imperturbability of the elements. Though we would still have to be *able* to do this. Let us not forget that for an animal which has always suffered, it is incomparably easier to suffer than not to suffer. And if the saint's condition is more agreeable than the sage's, the reason for this is because it costs less to wallow in pain than to triumph over it by reflection or by pride.

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Since we are incapable of conquering our ills, it remains for us to cultivate them and to enjoy them.

Such complacence would have seemed an aberration to the Ancients, who admitted no pleasure higher than that of not suffering. Less reasonable, we judge differently, after twenty centuries in which *convulsion* was regarded as a sign of spiritual advancement. Accustomed to a racked, ruined, grimacing Savior, we are unsuited to enjoy the *sprezzatura* of the ancient gods, or the inexhaustible smile of a Buddha plunged into a vegetable beatitude. Nirvana, come to think of it—does it not seem to have borrowed from the plants their essential secret? We accede to deliverance only by taking as our model a form of being opposed to our own.

To love suffering is to love oneself unduly, it is to want to lose nothing of what one is, it is to savor one's weaknesses. The more we brood over our kind, the more we enjoy dwelling on the question: "How has man been possible?" In the inventory of the factors responsible for his appearance, sickness leads the list. But for man not only to appear but to rise to the surface, evils from elsewhere had to be added to his own, consciousness being the consummation of a dizzying number of retarded and repressed impulses, of vexations and ordeals undergone by our species, by every species. And man, after having profited by this infinity of ordeals, strives to justify them, to give them a meaning. "They will not have been futile, they have prepared and announced *mine*, more various and more intolerable than yours," he says to all other living beings in order to console them for not achieving torments as exceptional as his.

THE OLDEST FEAR: APROPOS OF TOLSTOY

NATURE has been generous to none but those she has dispensed from thinking about death. The others she has condemned to the oldest fear and the most corrosive one, without offering or even suggesting a means of recovery. If it is normal to die, it is not so to dally over death nor to think about it at every turn. The man who never takes his mind off it betrays his vanity; since he lives in terms of the image others form of him, he cannot accept the notion that one day he will be nothing; *oblivion* being his continual nightmare, he is aggressive and bilious, and misses no opportunity to display his temper, his bad manners. Is there not a certain inelegance in fearing death? This fear which preys on the ambitious leaves the pure untouched; it grazes them without taking hold. The rest suffer it testily and resent all those who simply

do not experience it. A Tolstoy will not forgive their luck, and will punish them by inflicting it upon them, by describing it with an exactitude which renders it both repugnant and contagious. His art will consist in making every agony *the* agony and in obliging the reader to tell himself, horrified and fascinated: "That is how you die."

Into the interchangeable decor, the conventional world in which Ivan Ilyich lives, bursts sickness. At first he supposes it is no more than a passing discomfort, an inconsequential infirmity; then, under the effect of increasingly explicit suffering which soon grows intolerable, finally understanding the gravity of his case, he loses courage. "At certain moments after prolonged suffering he wished most of all (though he would have been ashamed to confess it) for someone to pity him as a sick child is pitied. He longed to be petted and comforted. He knew he was an important functionary, that he had a beard turning gray, and that therefore what he longed for was impossible, but still he longed for it."—Cruelty, in literature at least, is a sign of election. The more gifted the writer, the more he devotes himself to confining his characters in hopeless situations; he pursues them, tyrannizes them, forces them to confront every detail of the impasse or the agony into which he has thrust them. More than cruelty, it is ferocity which is required in order to insist on the eruption of the incurable amid the insignificant, on the last nuance of horror allotted to a commonplace individual under the scourge. "Suddenly Ivan Ilyich felt the old, familiar, dull, gnawing

pain, stubborn and mysterious." Tolstoy, so parsimonious with his adjectives, finds six to characterize a sensation—one of pain, it is true. The flesh appearing to him as a fragile and yet terrifying reality, as the great provider of scares, it is correctly that he envisages the phenomenon of death as starting from *there*. No dénouement in the absolute, independent of our organs and our ills. How does one die inside a system? How does one rot? Metaphysics leaves no room for the corpse. Nor, moreover, for the living being. The more abstract and impersonal one becomes, whether this is the result of concepts or of prejudices (philosophers and ordinary minds both move in the unreal), the more inconceivable seems an imminent, immediate death. Without disease, Ivan Ilyich—an ordinary mind, certainly—would have no modeling, no consistency. It is sickness which, in destroying him, confers upon him a dimension of being. Soon he will be nothing more; before the disease, he was nothing as well; he is only in the interval which extends between the void of health and that of death, he exists only as long as he is dying. Then what was he previously? A puppet fascinated by images, a magistrate who believed in his profession and his family. Disabused of the false and the illusory, he understands now that until the appearance of his sickness he had wasted his time in trivialities. What will remain of so many years are the few weeks in which he will have suffered and in which sickness will have revealed to him realities unsuspected before. *Real life begins and ends with agony*, such is the lesson to

be learned from the ordeal of Ivan Ilyich, no less than from that of Brekhunov in *Master & Man*. Since it is our destruction which saves us, let us keep vivid in ourselves the superstition of our last moments: they alone, in Tolstoy's eyes, will liberate us from the old fear, by them alone we shall triumph over it. It poisons us, it is our wound; if we would be cured, let us have patience, let us *wait*. This conclusion is one that few sages will ratify; for to aspire to wisdom is to seek to conquer that particular fear *without delay*.

If Tolstoy was always preoccupied by death, it became a besetting problem for him only after the crisis he passed through during his fiftieth year or thereabouts, when he began, in a panic, to question himself as to the "meaning" of life. But life, as soon as one is obsessed by what it may signify—life disintegrates, crumbles: which sheds a light on what it is, on what it is worth, on its wretched and improbable substance. Must one assert with Goethe that the meaning of life resides in life itself? A man haunted by such a problem will find this difficult, for the good reason that his obsession begins precisely with the revelation of the *meaninglessness* of life.

Some have tried to explain Tolstoy's crisis and his "conversion" by the exhaustion of his gifts. The explanation does not hold up. Certain works of the final period, like *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *Master & Man*, *Father Sergius*, *The Devil*, have a depth and a density no exhausted genius could have displayed. Tolstoy did not dry up, but he shifted his center of interest. Reluctant to brood further upon the external life of

men, he chose to consider them only from the moment when, subject to a crisis too, they were led to break with the fictions in which they had lived heretofore. Under these conditions, it was no longer possible for him to write great novels. The pact with appearances which he had signed as a novelist he now denounced and tore up, to turn toward the *other* side of things. The crisis he entered, however, was neither so unexpected nor so radical as he thought when he wrote: "My life stopped." Far from being unforeseen, it actually represented the outcome, the exasperation of an anguish from which he had always suffered. (If *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* dates from 1886, all the themes it deals with are to be found in *Three Deaths*, from 1859.) But his early, "natural" anguish, being devoid of intensity, was tolerable, whereas the anguish he experienced later was scarcely so. The idea of death, to which Tolstoy was sensitive from childhood, has nothing morbid about it in itself; the same is not true of the obsession, the unwarranted development of this idea which then becomes fatal to the practice of life. This is doubtless the case if one accepts the viewpoint of life . . . But may one not conceive of a need for truth which, faced with the ubiquity of death, rejects every concession, as well as every distinction between normal and pathological? If only the fact of dying counts, one must draw the consequences without bothering about any other considerations. This is not a position to be adopted by those who unceasingly bemoan their "crisis," a state aspired to, on the contrary, by the true solitary who

would never sink to saying "my life stopped," for that is precisely what he wants, what he pursues. But a Tolstoy, rich and famous, gratified by all that the world can bestow, stares bewildered at the collapse of his old certainties and strives in vain to banish from his mind the recent revelation of meaninglessness which invades, which overwhelms him. What amazes and baffles him in his case is that for all his vitality (he worked, he tells us, eight hours a day without feeling tired, and reaped in the fields as well as any peasant), he had to resort to various subterfuges to keep from killing himself. Vitality constitutes no obstacle to suicide: everything depends on the direction it takes or is given. Tolstoy himself observes, moreover, that the power which impelled him to self-destruction was similar to the one which had previously attached him to life—with this difference, he adds, that it now exerted itself *in the opposite direction*.

To search for the gaps in Being, to rush headlong to destruction in an excess of lucidity, to undermine and destroy oneself is not the privilege of the anemic; powerful natures, once they enter into conflict with themselves, are much more susceptible to this process; to it they bring all their passion, all their frenzy; indeed, it is such natures who suffer "crises" which we must regard as a punishment, for it is not normal that they should devote their energy to devouring themselves. Once they have attained the zenith of their career, they will asphyxiate under the weight of insoluble problems or collapse into a vertigo apparently

stupid but actually legitimate and essential, the kind that seized Tolstoy when, in utter confusion, he kept murmuring to himself: "What's the use?" or "And then what?"

A man who has had an experience analogous to that of Ecclesiastes will remember it forever; the truths he will have gained from it are as irrefutable as they are impracticable: banalities ruinous to balance, *maddening* commonplaces. In the modern world, no one has had the intuition of inanity which so gratifyingly counters the hopes crammed into the Old Testament so distinctly as Tolstoy. Even when he sets himself up, later on, as a reformer, he cannot *answer* Solomon, the being with whom he has most points in common: were they not both great sensualists struggling with a universal disgust? This is a conflict with no outcome, a contradiction of temperaments, from which derives perhaps the vision of Vanity. The more inclined we are to take pleasure in everything, the more disgust persists in keeping us from doing so, and its interventions will be vigorous in direct proportion to the impatience of our thirst for pleasure. "Thou shalt not enjoy!"—such is the command it utters at each encounter, upon every forgetful occasion. Existence has a flavor only if we keep ourselves in a gratuitous intoxication, in that state of inebriation without which the self possesses nothing positive. When Tolstoy assures us that before his crisis he was "drunk with life," he means that he was simply *alive*, in other words, that he was drunk as is every living being *as such*. Then comes the sobering up, which

assumes the image of fatality. What is to be done? One has the means to be drunk, but one cannot be so; in full vigor, yet one is not *in* life, one does not belong to it any longer; one breaks through it, discerns its unreality, for the sobering up is clear-sightedness and awakening. And to what does one awaken, if not to death?

Ivan Ilyich wanted to be petted and comforted; more miserable than his hero, Tolstoy compares himself to a fledgling fallen from the nest! His drama compels sympathy, though we cannot subscribe to the reasons he alleges in order to explain it. The "negative" part is, in him, far more interesting than the other. If his questions rise from the deepest part of his being, the same is not true of his answers. That the perplexities he suffered during his crisis verged on the intolerable is a fact; instead of trying to rid himself of them for this motive alone, he chooses to tell us that, being the characteristic of the rich and the idle and never of the *moujiks*, they are devoid of any intrinsic significance. Obviously he underestimates the advantages of satiety, which permits certain discoveries forbidden to indigence. The surfeited, the blasé are a party to certain truths mistakenly labeled false or temerarious, truths whose value subsists even when the kind of life which has brought them into being is condemned. What entitles us to reject those of Ecclesiastes? If we put ourselves on the level of actions, it will be difficult, obviously, to assent to his disenchantment. But Ecclesiastes does not consider

action to be a criterion. Hence he remains in his position, as the others do in theirs.

In order to justify his cult of the *moujiks* Tolstoy invokes their detachment, their readiness to depart from this life without bothering about futile problems. Does he appreciate them, does he really love them? Rather he envies them, believing them less complicated than they are. He supposes they glide into death, that for them death is a comfort, that in the middle of a snowstorm they surrender like Nikita, while Brekhunov resists, struggles. "What is the easiest way to die?"—that is the question which has dominated his maturity and tormented his old age. The simplicity he has ceaselessly sought he has found nowhere, except in his style. He was too ravaged to achieve it. Like every tormented spirit, exhausted and subjugated by his sufferings, he could love only trees and animals, and only those men who by some characteristic were akin to the elements. From their contact he expected—no doubt about it—to wrest himself from his habitual pangs and to proceed toward an endurable, even a serene agony. To reassure himself, to encounter peace at any cost is all that mattered to him. We see now why Ivan Ilyich could not be allowed to die in disgust or in dread. "He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. 'Where is it? What death?' There was no fear because there was no death. In place of death there was light. 'So that's what it is!' he suddenly exclaimed aloud. 'What joy!'"

Neither this joy nor this light carry conviction; they are extrinsic, they are imposed. We are reluctant to admit that they can alleviate the darkness in which the dying man is struggling: nothing moreover prepared him for this jubilation, which has no relation to his mediocrity, nor to the solitude to which he is reduced. On the other hand, the description of his agony is so oppressive in its exactitude that it would have been almost impossible to end it without changing its tone and level. "‘Death is finished,’ he said to himself. ‘It is no more.’" Prince André wanted to be convinced of the same thing. "Love is God, and to die means that I, a particle of love, shall return to the general and eternal source." More skeptical about Prince André’s final divagations than he was to be later on about those of Ivan Ilyich, Tolstoy adds: "These thoughts seemed to him comforting. But they were only thoughts. Something was lacking in them, they were not clear, they were too one-sidedly personal and rationalizing; they lacked reality." Unfortunately those of poor Ivan Ilyich lacked it quite as much. But Tolstoy has come a long way since *War & Peace*: he has reached a stage where at all costs he must elaborate a formula for salvation and abide by it. That imposed light and joy—how can we help feeling that he dreamed of them for himself and that, quite as much as simplicity, they were forbidden to him? No less *dreamed of* are the last words he makes his hero speak about the end of death. Let us compare with this end which is not an end, with this conventional and arbitrary triumph, the genuine and authen-

tic hatred which this same hero feels toward his family:

“In the morning when he saw first his footman, then his wife, then his daughter, and then the doctor, their every word and movement confirmed to him the awful truth that had been revealed to him during the night. In them he saw himself—all that for which he had lived—and saw clearly that it was not real at all, but a terrible and huge deception which had hidden both life and death. This consciousness intensified his physical suffering tenfold. He groaned and tossed about, and pulled at his clothing which choked and stifled him. And he hated them all on that account.”

Hatred does not lead to deliverance, nor is it clear how one leaps from abomination of the world and self-loathing into that zone of purity where death is transcended, “finished.” To hate oneself and the world is to give both too much credit, and disqualifies one for emancipation from either. Self-hatred, above all, testifies to a capital illusion. Because he hated himself, Tolstoy believed he was no longer living a lie. Now, unless one devotes oneself to renunciation (of which he was incapable), one can live only by lying and by lying to oneself. Which is what Tolstoy did, moreover: is it not a lie to assert, *trembling*, that one has conquered death and the fear of death? This sensualist who incriminated the senses, who always opposed himself, who enjoyed persecuting his inclinations, applied himself with perverse ardor to taking a path opposed to what he was. A voluptuous need to

torment himself drove him toward the insoluble. He was a writer, the first of his time; instead of deriving some satisfaction from the fact, he *invented* a vocation for himself, that of the Good Man, at every point alien to his tastes. He began to interest himself in the poor, to help them, to bemoan their condition, but his pity—alternately despairing and indiscreet—was merely a form of his horror of the world. Sullenness, his dominant characteristic, occurs in those who, convinced they have taken the wrong turn and missed their true destination, regret having remained *beneath* themselves. Despite his considerable *oeuvre*, Tolstoy had this feeling; let us not forget that he had come to regard his works as frivolous, even harmful; he had created them, but he had not created himself. His sullenness resulted from the interval separating his literary success from his spiritual frustration.

Sakyamuni, Solomon, Schopenhauer—of these three melancholics he so often quotes, the first went furthest and is doubtless the one Tolstoy would have preferred to resemble: he might have managed it, if disgust for the world and oneself sufficed to grant access to Nirvana. But then, Buddha left his family when he was very young (one cannot imagine him trapped in conjugal dramas, surrounded by his household, irresolute and moody, cursing everyone for keeping him from carrying out his grand design), while Tolstoy would wait for decrepitude to make his escape—that spectacular and painful episode. If the discrepancy between his doctrine and his life bothered him, he nonetheless lacked the strength to do any-

thing about it. How would he have gone about it, given the incompatibility between his concerted aspirations and his deepest instincts? In order to measure the scope of his torments (as they are revealed, notably, in *Father Sergius*), we should recall that he strove in secret to *imitate* the saints and that of all his ambitions this one was the most imprudent. By proposing a model so disproportionate to his means, he inevitably inflicted further disappointments upon himself. If only he had meditated upon the verse of the Bhagavad-Gita, according to which it is better to perish by one's own law than to obey another's! And it is precisely because he sought salvation elsewhere than on his own path that in his so-called "regeneration" period he was even more miserable than before. With a pride like Tolstoy's, the pursuit of charity was a mistake: the more he aspired to it, the more grim he became. His radical incapacity to love, combined with an icy clearheadedness, explains why he cast upon all things, singularly upon his characters, a gaze without complicity. "Reading his works, one never has an impulse to laugh or even smile," noted one Russian critic toward the end of the last century. Conversely, we have quite failed to understand Dostoevsky if we do not realize that humor is his chief quality. He is carried away, he forgets himself, and since he is never cold, he reaches that temperature, that degree of fever where, reality being transfigured, the fear of death is meaningless, since one has risen above it. He has transcended it, triumphed over it, as suits a visionary, and he would have been quite in-

capable of describing a deathbed with that clinical precision in which a Tolstoy excels. We may add that the latter is, moreover, a clinician *sui generis*: he never studies anything but his own ills and, when he treats them, brings to the work all the acuity and all the vigilance of his terrors.

It has often been remarked that Dostoevsky, sick and impoverished, ended his career with an apotheosis (the speech on Pushkin!), whereas Tolstoy, fortune's darling, was to conclude his in despair. Upon reflection, the contrast in their dénouements is quite in order. Dostoevsky, after the rebellions and ordeals of his youth, thought of nothing but *servicing*; he reconciled himself if not with the universe at least with his country whose abuses he accepted and justified; he believed it was Russia's destiny to play a great role, he believed she was even to save humanity. The former conspirator, now established and pacified, could without imposture defend the Church and the State; in any case, he was no longer *alone*. Tolstoy, on the other hand, was to become more and more so. He plunged into desolation, and if he spoke so much of a "new life," it was because life itself escaped him. The religion he believed he was rejuvenating he was in fact undermining. Combating injustice, he went further than the anarchists, and the formulas he advanced were of a demoniac or laughable excess. What accounts for so much extravagance, so much negation is the revenge of a mind which could never bring itself to accept the humiliation of dying.

THE DANGERS OF WISDOM

WHEN we see the importance which appearances assume in the normal consciousness, we cannot subscribe to the Vedantic thesis according to which “non-distinction is the soul’s natural state.” What is meant here by natural state is the waking state, precisely the one which is in no way natural. The living man perceives existence everywhere; once awakened, once he is no longer *nature*, he begins to discern the false in the apparent, the apparent in the real, and ends by suspecting the very idea of reality. No distinctions—which means no tension and no drama. Contemplated from too great a height, the realm of diversity and multiplicity vanishes. At a certain level of knowledge, nonbeing alone survives.

We live only by lack of knowledge. Once we *know*, we are at odds with everything. As long as we are in

ignorance, appearances prosper and preserve a flavor of inviolability which permits us to love and to hate them, to come to grips with them. How match ourselves against ghosts? That is what appearances become when, disabused, we can no longer promote them to the rank of essences. Knowledge, or rather the waking state, produces between them and ourselves a hiatus which is not, unfortunately, a conflict; if it were, all would be well; no, this hiatus is the suppression of all conflicts, it is the deadly abolition of the tragic.

Contrary to the Vedantic assertion, the soul is naturally inclined to multiplicity and to differentiation: it flourishes only among semblances and wastes away once it unmasks them and turns away from them. Awakened, it forfeits its powers and can neither generate nor sustain any creative process whatever. Deliverance being the converse of inspiration, for a writer to dedicate himself to deliverance is tantamount to secession, even to suicide. If he wants to produce, he must follow his inclinations, good and bad alike; if he liberates himself from them, he departs from himself: his misfortunes are his opportunities. His surest means of spoiling his gifts is to set himself above success and failure, pleasure and pain, life and death. Seeking emancipation from them, he will one day find himself external to the world and to himself, still capable, perhaps, of conceiving some project or other but panic-stricken at the idea of executing it. Beyond the writer, the phenomenon has a general

significance: anyone aspiring to effectiveness must make a total disjunction between living and dying, must aggravate the pairs of contraries, improperly multiply irreducibles, wallow in antinomies, remain, in other words, on the surface of things. To produce, to "create," is to deny oneself lucidity, is to have the courage or the luck not to perceive the lie of diversity, the deceptive character of the multiple. A work is possible only if we blind ourselves with regard to appearances; once we cease to attribute a metaphysical dimension to them, we lose all our resources.

Nothing stimulates so much as enlarging trifles, maintaining false antitheses, picking fights where none are to be had. If we refused to do this, a universal sterility would ensue. Illusion alone is fertile, illusion alone *originates*. It is by means of illusion that we give birth, that we *engender* (in both senses of the word), that we participate in the dream of diversity. Unreal though the interval separating us from the absolute may be, yet our existence is that unreality itself, and the interval in question never appears illusory to fanatics of action. The deeper we take root in appearances, the more productive we are: to produce a work is to espouse all those incompatibilities, all those fictive oppositions so dear to restless minds. More than anyone, the writer should know what he owes to these semblances, these deceptions, and should beware of becoming indifferent to them: if he neglects or denounces them, he cuts the ground from under his own feet, he suppresses his materials, he

has nothing left on which to work. And if he then turns to the absolute, what he finds there will be, at best, a delectation in stupor.

Only a God greedy for imperfection in and outside Himself, only a ravaged God could imagine and achieve the Creation; only a being similarly unappeased can lay claim to an undertaking of the same kind. If, among the factors of sterility, wisdom heads the list, that is because wisdom is concerned to reconcile us with the world and with ourselves; it is the greatest disaster which can befall our ambitions and our talents, it *settles* them, in other words it slaughters them, it aims a blow at our depths, at our secrets, persecuting those of our qualities which are fortunately sinister; wisdom saps us, it submerges us, it compromises all our defects.

If we have laid violent hands on our desires, persecuted and smothered our attachments and our passions, we shall curse those who have encouraged us to do so, first of all the sage within ourselves, our most redoubtable enemy, guilty of having cured us of everything without having rid us of the regret for anything. Limitless is the confusion of the man who longs for his old enthusiasms and who, uncomforted for having triumphed over them, sees himself succumb to the venom of quietude. Once we have perceived the nullity of all desires, it requires an effort of superhuman obnubilation, *it requires sanctity*, in order to be able to experience them again and to give ourselves up to them without reservation. The detractor of wisdom, if he were a believer as well, would

never stop repeating: "Lord, help me to fall, to wallow in every error and every crime, inspire me with words that scorch You and devour me, which reduce us *both* to ashes." We cannot know what the nostalgia for failure is if we have not experienced that of purity to the point of disgust. When we have dreamed too much of Paradise and been a familiar of the Beyond, we reach the point of irritation and lassitude. The disgust for the other world leads to the amorous obsession with hell. Without this obsession, religions, in what is truly *subterranean* about them, would be incomprehensible. Aversion to the elect, attraction to the damned—a double movement of all those who dream of their former follies and who would commit any sin if they no longer had to mount "the path of perfection." Their despair is to acknowledge the progress they have made in detachment, whereas their inclinations did not destine them to excel in it. In *The Questions of Milinda*, King Menander asks the ascetic Nagasena what distinguishes the man without passion from the passionate man: "The passionate man, O king! when he eats, enjoys the flavor and the passion of flavor; the man without passion enjoys the flavor, but not the passion of the flavor."—The entire secret of life and of art, the whole of *here-on-earth* abides in that "passion of the flavor." When we no longer experience it, there remains for us, in our destitution, only the resource of an exterminating smile.

To advance into detachment is to strip ourselves of all our reasons for action, and by losing the benefit of our defects and our vices, to founder in that *de-*

pression which is the absence following upon the disappearance of our appetites, an anxiety which has degenerated into indifference, submersion in neutrality. If, in wisdom, we set ourselves above life and death, in depression (as the *failure* of wisdom) we fall below them. It is there that appearances are leveled, that diversity is invalidated. The consequences are dreadful for the writer especially, for if all the aspects of the world are worth the same thing, he cannot incline toward one rather than another; whence his impossibility of choosing a *subject*: which to prefer, if the objects themselves are interchangeable and indistinct? Being itself is banished from this perfect desert as too picturesque. We are at the heart of the undifferentiated, of the dim and seamless One, where, in place of illusion, spreads a *prostrate* illumination, in which all is revealed to us, yet this revelation is so contrary to our nature that we long only to forget it. On the basis of what he knows, of what he knows about, no one can move forward, the man of depression less than any other; he lives in the center of a *heavy* unreality: the nonexistence of things weighs upon him. To fulfill himself, merely to breathe, he must emancipate himself from *his* knowledge. And thus he conceives of salvation by non-knowledge. He will accede to it only by striving against the spirit of disinterestedness and objectivity. An ill-founded, partial, "subjective" judgment constitutes a source of dynamism: on the level of action, only the false is charged with reality—but when we are doomed to an *exact* view of ourselves and the

world, what can we adhere to, what can we still speak of?

There was once a madman in us; the sage has driven him out. With him has gone our most precious possession, which made us accept appearances without having to practice at every turn that discrimination between the real and the illusory which is so detrimental to them. So long as our madman was there, we had nothing to fear, nor did appearances, which—an uninterrupted miracle—were transformed into things before our eyes. Once the madman was gone, appearances came down in the world, relapsed into their first indigence. He had given a flavor to existence, he was existence. Now, no interest, no vantage point. The real vertigo is the absence of madness.

To realize oneself is to dedicate oneself to the intoxication of multiplicity. In the One, nothing counts but the One itself. Let us fracture it then, if we seek to escape the sorcery of indifference, if we want the monotony within and around us to come to an end. All that shimmers on the surface of the world, all that we call *interesting*, is the fruit of inebriation and ignorance. No sooner have we sobered up than we distinguish everywhere merely repetition and desolation.

The consequence of blindness, diversity collapses upon contact with depression, which is a *knowledge blasted*, a perverse taste for identity, and a dread of the new. When this dread grips us, when there is no event which fails to seem to us both impenetrable and ridiculous, when there is no change, of any order, which does not proceed from mystery and farce, it is

not of God that we dream, it is of the deity, of the immutable essence which does not deign to create or even to exist, and which, by its absence of determinations, prefigures that indefinite and insubstantial moment, symbol of our inconclusiveness. If, from the evidence of Antiquity, destiny chooses to pull down all that is raised up, depression would be the price man must pay for his elevation. But depression, beyond man, doubtless affects to a lesser degree every living being which in one way or another diverges from its origins. Life itself is exposed to depression once it slows down its course and calms the frenzy which sustains and animates it. For what is life, in the last resort, but a *phenomenon of fury*? A blessed fury, to which it behooves us to submit. Once it seizes us, our unsatisfied impulses awaken: the more repressed they were, the more violently they break loose. Despite its painful aspects, the spectacle we then afford proves that we are reinstating our true condition, our nature, however contemptible and even odious it may be. Better to be effortlessly abject than "noble" by imitation or persuasion. An innate vice being preferable to an acquired virtue, we necessarily feel awkward in the presence of those who do not accept themselves, the monk, the prophet, the philanthropist, the miser who drives himself to expenditure, the ambitious man who forces himself into resignation, the arrogant man who affects consideration for others—in the presence of all who keep watch upon themselves, not excepting the wise man, the sage, the man who controls and constrains himself, who is

never *himself*. Acquired virtue forms a foreign body; we like it neither in others nor in ourselves: it is a victory over the self which pursues us, a success that overwhelms us and makes us suffer even when we pride ourselves upon it. Let each man be satisfied with what he is: is not the desire to improve oneself the same as a taste for torture and misfortune?

There is no edifying nor even cynical book which fails to insist on the misdeeds of wrath, that performance, that bravado of rage. When blood rushes to the brain and we begin to tremble, in one second the effect of days and days of meditation is wiped out. Nothing more absurd and more degrading than such an outburst, inevitably disproportionate to the cause which has produced it; yet once the outburst is past, we forget its pretext, whereas a repressed fury works within us till our dying breath. The same is true of the humiliations which have been inflicted upon us and which we have endured "nobly." If, once we have been affronted, we ponder our reprisal, wavering between a slap and the *coup-de-grâce*, this oscillation, by making us waste precious time, will have thereby consecrated our cowardice. It is an indecision with grave consequences, a fault which oppresses us, whereas an explosion, however grotesque its conclusion, would have relieved us. As painful as it is necessary, anger keeps us from falling victim to obsessions and spares us the risk of serious complications: it is a fit of madness which saves us from madness. As long as we can count on it, on its regular appearance, our equilibrium remains assured, as does our

shame. It is easy enough to grant that it is an obstacle to spiritual advancement; but for the writer (since it is his case as well that we are considering here) it is not good, it is even dangerous to control his outbursts of temper. Let him encourage them as much as he can, or risk literary death.

In anger, we feel we are alive; since unfortunately it does not last long, we must resign ourselves to its by-products, which range from slander to calumny and which, in any case, offer more resources than scorn, too weak, too abstract, lacking heat and energy and unlikely to afford any sense of well-being whatsoever; once we leave it behind, we discover with amazement the pleasures of vilifying others. At last we are on an equal footing with them, at grips—we are no longer *alone*. Before, we examined them for the theoretical pleasure of finding their weak point; now, it is to strike them. Perhaps we should be concerned only with ourselves: it is shameful, ignoble to judge others; yet that is what everyone does: to abstain would come down to exiling ourselves from humanity. Man being a rancorous animal, every opinion he utters on his kind participates in denigration. Not that he cannot speak well of them; but in doing so he experiences a sensation of pleasure and power noticeably less than when he speaks badly. If he deprecates and chides them, it is not so much to harm them as to safeguard his own vestiges of wrath, his vestiges of vitality, to escape the debilitating effects of a long practice of scorn.

The calumniator is not the only one to gain by

calumny; it serves his victim as much if not more, provided he suffers from it intensely. It then gives him an unsuspected vigor, as profitable to his ideas as to his muscles: it incites him to hate; now hatred is not a sentiment but a power, a factor of diversity, which makes beings flourish at the expense of . . . Being. Anyone who cherishes his status as an *individual* should seek out all the occasions when he is obliged to hate; calumny being the best, to regard oneself as its *victim* is to use an improper expression and to misjudge the advantages which can be derived from it. The evil that is said of us, like the evil that is done to us, has value only if it wounds us, if it lashes us on and wakes us up. Are we so unlucky as to be insensitive to it? Then we fall into a state of disastrous invulnerability, we lose the privileges inherent in the blows of men and even in those of fate (he who rises above calumny will rise without difficulty above death). If what is said about us in no way touches us, why exhaust ourselves in a task inseparable from external approbation? Can we conceive of a work which might be the product of an absolute autonomy? To make ourselves invulnerable is to close ourselves to almost every sensation we feel in the common life. The more we initiate ourselves into solitude, the more we long to lay down our pen. What and whom are we to talk about if others no longer count, if no one deserves the dignity of enmity? No longer to react to public opinion is an alarming symptom, a fatal superiority, acquired to the detriment of our reflexes and one which puts us in the attitude of

an atrophied divinity, enchanted to move no longer because it finds nothing which deserves a gesture. Quite the contrary, to feel we exist is to be infatuated with what is manifestly mortal, to worship insignificance, to be perpetually irritated at the heart of inanity, to fly into tantrums in the Void.

Those who yield to their emotions or to their whims, those who get carried away at any hour of the day or night are immune from serious difficulties. (Psychoanalysis counts only among certain peoples of the North, who have the misfortune to believe in *tendue*, and is of no interest to the Latin peoples.) To be normal, to keep ourselves in good health, we should model ourselves not on the sage but on the child, we should throw ourselves on the ground and cry every time we feel like it. What is more lamentable than to feel like crying and not to dare? Having unlearned tears, we are without resource—uselessly welded to our eyes. In Antiquity, men wept; and in the Middle Ages or during the Grand Siècle (the Sun-King was easily moved to tears, according to Saint-Simon). Since then, aside from the Romantic interlude, discredit has been cast upon one of the most effective remedies man has ever possessed. Is this a passing disfavor or a new conception of honor? What seems certain is that a whole realm of the infirmities which torment us, all those diffuse, insidious unlocalizable ills come from our obligation not to externalize our furies or our afflictions. And not to indulge our oldest instincts.

We should have the faculty of screaming at least

a quarter of an hour every day; screaming-rooms should even be created for this purpose. "Speech," it will be objected, "ought to suffice—why return to such old-fashioned methods?" Conventional by definition, alien to our imperious needs, speech is empty, extenuated, devoid of contact with our depths: not one word emanates from or ventures into them. If, at the beginning, at the moment when speech first appeared, it could serve, things are different now: not one word, not even those which were transfigured into swear-words, contains the slightest tonic virtue. Language outlives itself: a long and pitiable desuetude. The principle of anemia it conceals is one whose baleful influence we nonetheless still suffer from today. The blood's mode of expression, screaming, on the other hand arouses us, fortifies us, and sometimes cures us. When we are lucky enough to give ourselves up to it, we immediately feel close to our distant ancestors who must have howled incessantly in their caves, including those who daubed the walls. At the antipodes of those happy days, we are reduced to living in a society so badly organized that the only place where we can scream with impunity is the lunatic asylum. Thus is forbidden to us the sole method we have of ridding ourselves of the horror of others and of the horror of ourselves. If there were at least books of consolation! Very few exist, for the good reason that there is no consolation and can be none, so long as we do not shake off the chains of lucidity and decorum. The man who contains himself, who masters himself on every occasion, the "distinguished" man,

as we call him, is virtually a nervous wreck. The same is true of anyone who "suffers in silence." If we seek a minimum of equilibrium, let us return to the scream, let us lose no opportunity to throw ourselves upon it, or into it, and to proclaim its urgency. Rage will help us, moreover, rage which proceeds from the very core of life. Hence we shall not be surprised to find it particularly active in periods when health is identified with convulsion and chaos, in periods of religious innovation. No compatibility between religion and wisdom: religion is swaggering, aggressive, unscrupulous, it advances and is embarrassed by nothing. The admirable thing about it is that it condescends to favor our lowest sentiments; otherwise, it would not have so profound a hold upon us. With religion, we can go, so to speak, as far as we like, in any direction. Impure because it is integral with our vitality, it invites us to every excess and sets no limit to our euphoria nor to our downfall in God.

It is because wisdom possesses none of these advantages that it is so deadly to the man who seeks to manifest himself, to exercise his gifts. Wisdom is that continual asceticism we approach only by sabotaging whatever irreplaceable stocks of good and evil we possess; wisdom leads nowhere, it is an impasse made into a discipline. Instead of ecstasy, which excuses and redeems all religions, what does it offer? A system of capitulations: restraint, abstention, withdrawal not only from this but from all worlds, a mineral serenity, a preference for petrification—out of fear of both pleasure and pain. Next to Epictetus, any saint,

Christian or otherwise, looks like a madman. Saints are feverish and histrionic temperaments who seduce and involve us: they flatter our weaknesses by the very violence with which they denounce them. Moreover, they give us the impression that we can reach some *understanding* with them: a minimum of extravagance or cunning would do the trick. With the sages, on the contrary, neither compromise nor risk is possible: they find rage odious, reject all its forms, and identify it with the source of aberrations. A source of energy rather, thinks the man of depression, who clings to rage because he knows it is positive, dynamic, even if it turns against him.

It is not in inertia that we commit suicide, it is in a fit of rage against ourselves (Ajax remains the typical suicide), in the exasperation of a sentiment which might be defined as follows: "I can no longer bear to be *disappointed* by myself." This supreme spasm of disappointment, even if we anticipated it only at rare intervals, is one whose obsession would never leave us, had we *decided* once and for all not to kill ourselves. If, for many years, a "voice" assured us we would not raise a hand against ourselves, that voice, with age, becomes less and less audible. The longer we live, the more we are at the mercy of some *explosive* silence.

The man who kills himself proves thereby that he might have killed others as well, that he even felt such an impulse but turned it against himself. And if he seems *underhanded* in doing so, it is because he follows the meanders of self-hatred and meditates

with perfidious cruelty the blow to which he will succumb, not without having first reconsidered his birth, which he will forthwith lay under a curse. It is our birth, in fact, that we must attend to if we want to extirpate the evil at its source. To abominate our birth is reasonable yet difficult and unwonted. We take a stand against death, against what must come; birth, a much more irreparable event, we leave to one side, pay little or no attention to it: to each man it appears as far in the past as the world's first moment. Only a man who plans to suppress himself reaches back that far; it seems he cannot *forget* the unnamable mechanism of procreation and that he tries, by a retrospective horror, to annihilate the very seed from which he has sprung.

Inventive and enterprising, the rage for self-destruction does not confine itself to wresting only individuals from torpor; it seizes upon entire nations as well and lets them renew themselves by compelling them to act in flagrant contradiction to their traditions. A nation which seemed to be proceeding toward sclerosis was actually heading for catastrophe, and helped itself to do so by means of the very mission it had undertaken. To doubt the necessity of disaster is to resign oneself to consternation, is to make it impossible for oneself to understand the vogue fatality assumes at certain moments. The key to all that is inexplicable in history may well be found in such rage against oneself, in the terror of satiety and repetition, in the fact that man will always prefer the unheard of to routine. The phenomenon is also conceivable on

the scale of whole species. How could so many have disappeared by the mere caprice of climate? Is it not likely that after millions and millions of years the great mammals finally wearied of wandering the globe, that they reached that degree of explosive lassitude where instinct, competing with consciousness, sides against itself? Whatever lives asserts and denies itself in frenzy. To let oneself die is a sign of weakness; to annihilate oneself, of strength. Worst of all is the collapse into that condition where we cannot even imagine the desire to destroy ourselves.

It is paradoxical and perhaps improper to prosecute Indifference, after having implored it so long for the peace and the incuriosity of the corpse. Why draw back when at last it begins to oblige, and when it still preserves the same prestige for us? Is it not a betrayal to turn against the idol we have venerated most of all?

Certainly there is an element of happiness in any reversal; any about-face affords an increase in vigor: denial *rejuvenates*. Our strength being measured by the sum of beliefs we have abjured, each of us should end his career as a deserter from every cause. If, despite the enthusiasm with which it has inspired us, Indifference ends by alarming us, by seeming intolerable, this is precisely because by suspending the course of our desertions it attacks the very principle of our being and prevents its expansion. Perhaps it has a negative essence we failed to guard against in time. By adopting it without reservation, we could not avoid those pangs of radical incuriosity, an abyss into which

no one plunges without emerging unrecognizable. The man who has merely glimpsed those depths no longer aspires to resemble the dead nor to gaze, as they do, elsewhere, at something else, anything else, except appearance. What he wants is to return to the living and to recover among them his old miseries which he has trodden underfoot in his progress toward detachment.

We lose our way following in the footsteps of a sage, if we are not one ourselves. Sooner or later we weary, we turn aside, we break with him, if only out of the passion for breaking, we declare war on him as we do on everything, beginning with the ideal we have not been able to realize. Having invoked Pyrrho or Lao-tse for years, is it admissible to betray them when we are more imbued with their teaching than ever? But are we really betraying them, can we presume to regard ourselves as their victim when we can blame them for nothing but being right? It is not comfortable, the condition of a man who, having asked wisdom to free him from himself and the world, comes to the point of detesting it, of finding it merely one shackle more.

THE FALL OUT OF TIME

CLUTCH at the moments as I may, they elude my grasp: each is my enemy, rejects me, signifying a refusal to become involved. Unapproachable all, they proclaim, one after the next, my isolation and my defeat.

We can act only if we feel they convey and protect us. When they abandon us, we lack the resources indispensable to the production of an act, whether crucial or quotidian. Defenseless, with no hold on things, we then face a peculiar misfortune: that of not being entitled to time.

*

I accumulate the past, constantly making out of it

and casting into it the present, without giving it a chance to exhaust its own duration. To live is to suffer the sorcery of the possible; but when I see in the possible itself the past that is *to come*, then everything turns into potential by-gones, and there is no longer any present, any future. What I discern in each moment is its exhaustion, its death-rattle, and not the transition to the next moment. I generate dead time, wallowing in the asphyxia of becoming.

*

Other people fall into time; I have fallen out of it. The eternity that set itself above time gives way to that other eternity which lies beneath, a sterile zone where I can desire only one thing: to reinstate time, to get back into it at any price, to appropriate a piece of it, to give myself the illusion of a place of my own. But time is sealed off, time is out of reach; and it is the impossibility of penetrating it which constitutes this negative eternity, this *wrong* eternity.

*

Time has withdrawn from my blood; they used to sustain each other, they flowed together; now that they are each paralyzed, is it surprising that nothing *becomes*? Only they, if they started up again, could restore me to the living and relieve me of this sub-eternity I stagnate in. But they won't—or can't. A spell must have been cast on them: they no longer

move, they're frozen stiff. No moment can creep into my veins. A polar blood—for centuries!

Everything that breathes, everything that has the color of being, vanishes into the immemorial. Did I really once taste the sap of things? What was its flavor? It is inaccessible to me now—and insipid. *Satiety by default.*

*

If I don't *feel* time, if I am incomparably remote from it, at least I *know* it, I constantly observe it: time occupies the center of my consciousness. Can I believe that even its Author ever weighed and pondered it as much? God, if it is true that God created time, could not know it in depth, since He is not in the habit of making it the object of His ruminations. But if I'm sure of anything, it's that I was evicted from time only to turn it into the substance of my obsessions. In fact I identify myself with the nostalgia it inspires in me.

Granted I once did live in time, what was it, how did I represent its nature? The period when it was familiar is alien to me, has deserted my memory, no longer belongs to my life. I suspect it would be easier to gain a foothold in the true eternity than to reestablish myself in time. Pity the man who was once in Time and can never be there again!

(Nameless downfall: how could I have grown infatuated with time when I have always conceived my salvation outside it, just as I have always lived with

the certainty that time was about to exhaust its last reserves and that, corroded from within, corrupt in its essence, time lacked *duration*?)

*

Sitting on the brink of time, watching the moments go by, we end up no longer able to see anything but a succession without content, time that has lost its substance, abstract time, version of our Void. From abstraction to abstraction, time shrinks because of us, dissolving into *temporality*, the shadow of itself. Now it is up to us to revive it, to adopt toward time a clear-cut attitude, without ambiguity. Yet how can we, when time inspires such irreconcilable feelings, a paroxysm of repulsion and fascination?

Time's equivocal ways turn up in everyone who makes it his chief concern and who, ignoring its positive content, concentrates on its dubious side, on the confusion it produces between being and nonbeing, on its impudence and its versatility, on its *louche* appearances, its double-dealing, its fundamental insincerity. A deceiver on a metaphysical level. The more we examine time, the more we identify it with a *character* we suspect and would like to unmask. And whose power and fascination we finally surrender to. From here to idolatry and bondage is only a step.

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I've *desired* time too much not to falsify its nature,

I've isolated it from the world, made it into a reality independent of any other, a solitary universe, a surrogate absolute: strange process which severs it from all it implies and involves, metamorphosis of the supernumerary into the protagonist, unwarranted and inevitable promotion. That time has succeeded in benighting me I should be the last to deny. Yet the fact remains that it has not foreseen that I should one day shift, in its regard, from obsession to lucidity, with all this implies of a threat to time.

Time is so constituted that it does not resist the mind's insistence on fathoming it. Its density disappears, its warp frays, and all that is left are a few shreds with which the analyst must be satisfied. This is because time is not made to be known, but lived; to examine, to explore time is to debase it, to transform it into an object. He who does so will ultimately treat himself the same way. Since every form of analysis is a profanation, indulgence in it is indecent. As we descend into our secrets in order to stir them up, we proceed from embarrassment to queasiness, and from queasiness to horror. Self-knowledge always costs too much. As does knowledge itself. Once we have reached the bottom, we won't bother to live any more. In an *explained* universe, nothing would still have a meaning, except madness itself. A thing we have encompassed no longer counts. In the same way, once we have penetrated someone, the best thing he can do is disappear. It is less in self-defense than out of modesty—a desire to conceal their unreality—that the living all wear masks. To tear them off is to de-

stroy their wearers and oneself. No doubt about it, it is a bad practice to linger under the Tree of Knowledge.

There is something sacred in every being unaware it exists, in every form of life exempt from consciousness. He who has never envied the vegetable has missed the human drama.

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Time takes its revenge for my slanders by making me into a favor-seeker, forcing me to regret time. How could I have identified it with hell? Hell is this motionless present, this tension in monotony, this inverted eternity which issues nowhere, not even into death, whereas time, that used to flow, to *flow by*, offered at least the comfort of an expectation, even if it was a mortal one. But what is there to expect down here, at the end of the fall, where there is no possibility of falling farther, where even the hope of another abyss fails? And what else is there to expect from these evils that lie in wait for us, constantly calling attention to themselves, that seem to be the only things which exist, that are, in fact, the only things which do? If we can start all over again from rage, which represents a throb of life, a possibility of light, the same is not true of this sub-temporal desolation, annihilation by degrees, burial in blind repetition, demoralizing and opaque, from which indeed we can emerge only by means of rage.

When the eternal present stops being God's time

to become the Devil's, everything goes bad, everything becomes an autopsy of the intolerable, everything collapses into that abyss where one hopes in vain for the dénouement, where one rots in immortality. He who falls into it turns round and round, struggles to no avail, and produces nothing. Thus every form of sterility and impotence participates in hell.

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We cannot believe we are free when we are always with ourselves, facing ourselves, *the same*. At once fatality and obsession, this identity chains us to our flaws, drags us backward and casts us outside the new, outside time. And when we are cast out, we *remember* the future, we no longer run toward it.

Sure though we may be of not being free, there are certitudes we have difficulty resigning ourselves to. How can we act if we know we are determined? How can *automatons* desire? Fortunately there is a margin of indeterminacy in our actions—and in them alone: I can postpone *doing* this or that; on the other hand it is impossible for me to *be* different from what I am. If, on the surface, I have a certain latitude of maneuver, in depth everything is *arrested* forever. Only the mirage of freedom is real—without it, life would scarcely be practicable, or even conceivable. What incites us to believe we are free is our *consciousness* of necessity in general and of our shackles in particular; consciousness implies distance, and all distance provokes in us a feeling of autonomy and superiority,

which, it goes without saying, has only a subjective value. How does the consciousness of death alleviate the idea of death or postpone its arrival? To know we are mortal is really to die twice over—no, is to die each time we know we must die.

The good thing about freedom is that we are attached to it precisely insofar as it seems impossible. Still better, we can deny it, and this negation has constituted the great resource and the basis of more than one religion, more than one civilization. We cannot praise Antiquity enough for believing that our destinies were written in the stars, that there was no trace of improvisation or chance in our joys, in our miseries. Unable to oppose so noble a “superstition” by anything more than the “laws of heredity,” our science has disqualified itself forever. Once we each had our “star”; now we find ourselves slaves of an odious chemistry. This is the ultimate degradation of the notion of destiny.

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It is not at all unlikely that an individual crisis will someday become generalized and thereby acquire a significance no longer psychological but historical. This is not a matter of mere hypothesis; there are signs we must get used to interpreting.

After having botched the true eternity, man has fallen into time, where he has managed if not to flourish at least to live; in any case he has adjusted himself to it. The process of this fall and this adjustment is called History.

But now he is threatened by another fall, whose scope is still difficult to determine. Now it will no longer be a matter of falling out of eternity, but out of time; and, to fall out of time is to fall out of history; once Becoming is suspended, we sink into the inert, into the absolute of stagnation where the Word itself bogs down, unable to rise to blasphemy or prayer. Imminent or not, this fall is possible, even inevitable. Once it is man's fate, he will cease to be a historical animal. And then, having lost even the memory of the true eternity, of his first happiness, he will turn his eyes elsewhere, toward the temporal universe, toward that second paradise from which he has been expelled.

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As long as we remain inside time, we have our own kind with whom we may compete; once we cease to be there, all that others do and all they may think of us no longer matters, for we are so detached from them and from ourselves that to produce a work or even to think of doing so seems futile or preposterous.

Insensibility to his own fate is the quality of someone who has fallen out of time, and who, as this fall grows more evident, becomes incapable of manifesting himself or even of wanting to leave some trace of his existence. Time, we must admit, constitutes our vital element; once dispossessed of it, we sink, without support, into unreality or into hell. Or into both at once, into *ennui*, that unslaked nostalgia for time, that impossibility of recapturing it and reinstating our-

selves within it, that frustration of seeing time flow by *up there*, above our miseries. To have lost both eternity and time! Ennui is the rumination upon this double loss. In other words, our normal state, humanity's official mode of feeling, once it has been ejected from history.

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Man defies and denies the gods, though still acknowledging their quality as ghosts; once cast out from time, he will be so far from them that he will no longer even retain the idea of gods. And it is as a punishment for forgetting them that he will then experience his complete downfall.

A man who seeks to be more than he is will not fail to be less. The disequilibrium of tension will sooner or later yield to that of slackness and abandonment. Once we have posited this symmetry, we must take the next step and acknowledge that there is a certain mystery in downfall. For example, the fallen man has nothing to do with the failure; rather he suggests the notion of someone supernaturally stricken, as if some baleful power had beset him and taken possession of his faculties.

The spectacle of downfall prevails over that of death: all beings die; only man has the *vocation* to fall. He is on a precipice overhanging life (as life, indeed, overhangs matter). The farther from life he moves, whether up or down, the closer he comes to his ruin. Whether he transfigures or disfigures him-

self, in either case he loses his way. And we must add that he cannot avoid this loss without short-changing his destiny.

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To will means to keep oneself in a state of exasperation and fever at any cost. The effort is exhausting, nor does it appear that man can sustain it indefinitely. To believe it is his responsibility to transcend his condition and tend toward that of the superman is to forget that he has trouble enough sustaining himself *as man*, and that he succeeds only by straining his will, that mainspring, to the maximum. And the will, which contains a suspect and even disastrous principle, turns against those who abuse it. To will is not natural—or more exactly, one must will just enough to live; as soon as one wills less than that, or more, one either breaks down or runs down. If lack of will is a disease, the will itself is another, and a much worse one, for it is from the will and its excesses rather than from its failures that all man's miseries derive. But if he already wills to excess in his present state, what will become of him once he accedes to the rank of superman? He will doubtless explode and fall back upon himself. So that it is by a grandiose detour that he will then be led to fall out of time in order to enter the infra-eternity, ineluctable conclusion where it matters little, ultimately, whether he arrives by decay or by disaster.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

E. M. CIORAN writes: "I was born on the 8th April 1911 in Rasinari, a village in the Carpathians, where my teacher was a Greek Orthodox priest. From 1920 to 1928 I attended the Sibiu grammar school. From 1929 to 1931 I studied at the Faculty of Arts at Bucharest University. Post-graduate studies in philosophy until 1936. In 1937 I came to Paris with a scholarship from the French Institute in Bucharest and have been living here ever since. I have no nationality—the best possible status for an intellectual. On the other hand, I have not disowned my Rumanian origins; had I to choose a country, I would still choose my own. Before the war I published various essays in Rumanian of a more or less philosophical nature. I only began writing in French in about 1947. It was the hardest experience I have ever un-

dergone. This precise, highly disciplined, and exacting language seemed as restrictive to me as a straitjacket. Even now I must confess that I do not feel completely at ease with it. It is this feeling of uneasiness which has led me to ponder the problem of style and the very *anomaly* of writing. All my books are more or less autobiographical—a rather abstract form of autobiography, I admit.” Since 1949 M. Cioran has written *Précis de Décomposition*, *Syllogismes de l’Amertume*, *La Tentation d’Exister*, *Joseph de Maistre*, *Histoire et Utopie*, *La Chute dans le Temps*, and *Le Mauvais Démon*.