

# **Anthology of Black Humour**

André Breton

1940

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## Introduction: Laughter in the Dark

Breton's *Anthology of Black Humour* is aptly named in more ways than one. Originally intended as both a showcase for the Surrealist conception of humour and a way for its impecunious author to earn a quick advance, the book ultimately took Breton longer to assemble than practically any other work. It suffered years of publisher's delays, ran afoul of the censorship board and contributed to its author's dangerously poor standing under the Vichy government, and in the final account earned Breton very little money at all. As to its philosophical impact, and despite Breton's lifelong view of it as one of his major statements, the *Anthology* has never received the kind of attention granted most of his other books, making do instead, in the general response to Breton's opus, with the condescending status of poor cousin.

This relegation to the second tier is unjustified, for the *Anthology of Black Humour* not only gathers into one volume texts by many of Surrealism's most important precursors and practitioners, but it still stands as the first and most coherent illustration of a form of humour that, as Breton notes in his introduction, has only gained in prominence since the concept was first codified. Who today – in the wake not only of the Theatre of the Absurd, but even more so of the writings of Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, et al., not to mention Monty Python's Flying Circus and its avatars, the films of David Lynch and the Coen brothers, or even such mainstream television fare as *Saturday Night Live* – could fail to recognize a distinct timeliness in the dark, acidic humour of Sade's jovial Russian cannibal or Leonora Carrington's party-going hyena, or with the dismissive *whatever* echoing from the selections by Rimbaud, Apollinaire, and Jacques Vaché?

There is, in fact, a lot of what today we would call 'attitude' in these pages. This attitude, which takes the form of both a lampooning of social conventions and a profound disrespect for the nobility of literature, is perhaps the one thread that links these otherwise disparate writers: from Jonathan Swift's famous, deadpan prescriptions for overpopulation to Jacques Rigaut's nonchalant relations of his suicide attempts, from Charles Fourier's delirious cosmogony to the mind-bending wordplay of Jean-Pierre Brisset and Marcel Duchamp, from Alphonse Allais's neighbourly pranks and Alberto Savinio's rude *soirée* to Alfred Jarry's pataphysics and Charles Cros's physics of love. If some of Breton's choices (particularly those that most explicitly challenge the rules of 'acceptable' society) occasionally appear a bit heavy-handed, they nonetheless join with the others in subverting our expectations, upending our preconceived notions of life and art, and often – no small feat – making us laugh.

This laughter, however, is always a little green around the edges, for as Breton is quick to point out, black humour is the opposite of joviality, wit, or sarcasm. Rather, it is a partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd turn of spirit that constitutes the 'mortal enemy of sentimentality,' and beyond that a 'superior revolt of the mind.' Taking his cue from Freud's remarks in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* – the Freudian terminology recurs throughout his presentations – he describes this form of humour as 'the revenge of the *pleasure principle* (attached to the *superego*) over the *reality principle* (attached to the *ego*) ... The hostility of the hypermoral *superego* toward

the *ego* is thus transferred to the utterly amoral *id* and gives its destructive tendencies free rein.' A recipe for psychic unrest, perhaps, but hardly the stuff of mirth.

Still, despite the very modern aspect of black humour, the concept itself dates back well before Breton's definition of it, to Jonathan Swift at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Swift who was already listed in the 1924 *Manifesto* as being 'Surrealist in malice,' and whom Breton here singles out as humour's 'true initiator'). Breton himself had begun appreciating this kind of humour in 1914, via some recently unveiled works by Rimbaud: as he saw it, Rimbaud's offhand rejection of French nationalism during the Franco-Prussian War perfectly mirrored his own scepticism at the outbreak of World War I, and, perhaps more to the point, sounded the bitter guffaw over which the bellicose folly of his times had little hold.

But his first direct contact with the living spirit of black humour did not come until a year and a half later, during his service in the army medical corps, when he met a fellow soldier named Jacques Vaché. Although the two young men knew each other for a comparatively short time, and although Vaché's written output consisted of little more than a series of 'letters from the front,' his importance for Breton can be gauged not only by his prominent inclusion in the *Anthology*, but also by the various essays Breton would write about their friendship over the following years (notably in *The Lost Steps*). It was Vaché who provided Breton with his first definition of humour as it applies here – 'a sense ... of the theatrical (and joyless) pointlessness of everything' – and whose words and actions showed the young intern just how unsettling its manifestations could be. 'In Vaché's person, in utmost secrecy, a principle of total insubordination was undermining the world,' Breton later commented, 'reducing everything that then seemed all-important to a petty scale, desecrating everything in its path.' From that moment on, this particular form of humour – or *umour*, as Vaché spelled it – would become a main preoccupation of Breton's, and a major criterion in his evaluation of works and individuals.

Nevertheless, it was not actually Breton who came up with the idea of an anthology of black humour. In early 1935, finding to his distress that his recently married second wife, Jacqueline Lamba (the heroine of *Mad Love*), was expecting their first – and Breton's only – child, and desperately short of money, he appealed to his friend Léon Pierre-Quint, the editorial director of Editions du Sagittaire, to find him a book project that would demand little time and effort, but whose commercial prospects would justify a reasonably high advance. After several false starts, Pierre-Quint and the American poet and translator Edouard Roditi, a member of Sagittaire's editorial board, proposed an international anthology of writings that would gather and introduce the main proponents of *umour*.

By the end of 1936, Breton had assembled texts by the forty original contributors to the *Anthology* (the last four, plus Charles Fourier, were added in a later edition, while several extracts by the original authors were deleted). He had also drafted the short introductory pieces that preface each excerpt, as well as 'Lightning Rod,' his overall foreword to the volume, in which he elaborates his own theory of black humour.

Unfortunately, by this time as well, Editions du Sagittaire was on the verge of bankruptcy, and after some hesitation Pierre-Quint ceded the rights to rival publisher Robert Denoël. But neither was this edition to see the light of day: Denoël was experiencing his own financial difficulties, on top of which Breton's requirements for the book – photographs of the contributors throughout, a full-colour cover designed by Duchamp, a Picasso etching for the deluxe editions – made the production costs prohibitive. In 1939, after France once again found itself at war, Denoël abandoned the project altogether.



In despair, Breton then turned to Jean Paulhan of Editions Gallimard, the publisher of several of his best-known works (among them *Nadja* and *Mad Love*), hoping that Paulhan could rescue the *Anthology* from oblivion. His letters over the following months revealed an anxiety that – while largely due to worry over the Fascist menace, the constraints of military service, and his enforced separation from Jacqueline, their four-year-old daughter, Aube, and the majority of his friends – seemed to take as its main focus the fate of his anthology. ‘I would ask you and Gaston Gallimard to please not make me lose hope over *Black Humour*,’ he wrote to Paulhan in January 1940. ‘You know that the silence surrounding me is at least partly due to the non-distribution of my books.’ And two months later, he pleaded directly with Gallimard to publish the anthology ‘in the very period we are living through, [for] I believe that afterward it would no longer be quite so *situated*.’

Breton’s concern was not merely that of an author eager to see his work in print. In his view, the message implicit in the *Anthology* was even more pertinent to the wartime climate than it had been several years earlier. ‘It seems to me this book would have a considerable *tonic* value,’ he told Paulhan at the time. Just as Rimbaud’s anti-war poems and letters had stayed him in 1914, so now he wanted to further that message, to spread the word to youths of the next generation who refused the jingoism of the war effort, as he himself had refused it twenty-five years earlier. In this regard, it is no accident that five of the *Anthology*’s forty original contributors are Germanic: a devotee of Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Novalis, Breton abhorred the Nazis but would not reject German culture. Instead, he highlighted those Germans whose works most forcefully belied the Fascist programme.

Still, although Gaston Gallimard initially professed enthusiasm for Breton’s anthology, in the end he, too, would decline, and it was Léon Pierre-Quint of Sagittaire, the book’s original publisher, who ultimately reclaimed the project in April 1940. On the 29<sup>th</sup>, a relieved Breton told him: ‘You know that I had originally composed this book for Sagittaire: I’m delighted that it is now back with you. It seems to me, furthermore, that its publication at any other time would have been less fitting.’

The printed sheets came off the press on 10 June; four days later, German forces entered Paris and the Occupation began. The puppet Vichy regime was quickly established, as was a censorship board to which all forthcoming books had to be sent for clearance. Pierre-Quint duly submitted the *Anthology* for authorization in January 1941, but that same month the board gave its unequivocal refusal and the *Anthology of Black Humour*, finally printed after a four-year delay, languished for another five.

When the book was at last distributed in 1945, it was to almost total silence – hardly more than three or four notices in the papers, including a piece by ex-Surrealist Raymond Queneau, typical of the reigning attitudes, that chided Breton for his parlour anarchism. In any case, Breton, who had left France and taken wartime refuge in the United States, would not see these reactions, or his anthology in the bookstores, until after his return to Europe a year later.

Not surprisingly, the first edition soon disappeared from circulation, and for several years the book was again unavailable. A second, revised edition was issued in 1950, this time to slightly increased notice, and a ‘definitive’ one, featuring a new preface, was published shortly before Breton’s death. Only then did the *Anthology of Black Humour* begin to receive at least a share of the attention normally paid Breton’s works.

As of this writing, all those included in this volume, with the exception of Leonora Carrington and Gisèle Prassinos, are dead. This was not the case when Breton published the final edition,

and I have acknowledged the passage of time by putting death dates in brackets for those who, when Breton died, were still alive.

As to the translations themselves, in keeping with the spirit of a collective work I have used existing versions whenever good ones were available, to preserve a diversity of voices. I have also expanded Breton's selected bibliographies at the end of each prefatory note to account more specifically for English editions of the relevant works, if such exist.

In translating this *Anthology of Black Humour*, it is my hope, as it surely was Breton's, that the samples provided here will inspire further contact with these strange, hilarious, and sobering minds.

M. P.

July 1996

## Foreword to the 1966 French Edition

The current, revised edition brings to the preceding one a few corrections of detail. It has deliberately not been expanded, even at the risk of leaving a few readers dissatisfied. In the perspective that initially informed this book, it is certain that the author, in the course of these past few years, could not help but see new figures emerge who emit a similar light. He particularly had to resist the temptation to include the works of Oskar Panizza, Georges Darien, G. I. Gurdjieff (as he appears in his magisterial 'The Arousing of Thought,' the opening chapter of *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*), Eugène Ionesco, and Joyce Mansour; but he finally chose not to, for obvious reasons. This book, published for the first time in 1940 and reprinted with a few additions in 1950, marked, as is, its era. Let us simply recall that when it first appeared, the words 'black humour' made no *sense* (unless to designate a form of banter supposedly characteristic of 'Negroes'!). It is only afterwards that the expression took its place in the dictionary: we know what fortune the notion of black humour has enjoyed. Everything suggests that it remains full of effervescence, and is spreading as much by word of mouth (in so-called 'Bloody Mary' jokes) as in the visual arts (especially in the cartoons featured in certain weekly magazines) and in film (at least when it deviates from the safe path of mainstream production). My wish is that this book should remain directly linked to our era no less than to the preceding one, and that it should never be seen as some sort of constantly updated annual, a pathetic honour roll bearing no trace whatsoever of its original purpose. Kindly consider this, then, the definitive edition of the *Anthology of Black Humour*.

André Breton  
Paris, 16 May 1966

# Lightning Rod

*'The preface could be called "the lightning rod"'* Lichtenberg

'For there to be comedy, that is, emanation, explosion, comic release,' said Baudelaire, 'there must be ...'

*Emanation, explosion*: it is startling to find the same two words linked in Rimbaud, and this in the heart of a poem that is as prodigal in black humour as can be (it is, in fact, the last poem we have of his, one in which his 'expression as buffoonish and strange as possible' reemerges, supreme and extremely condensed, from efforts that aimed first at its affirmation, then at its negation):

'Dream'

*In the barracks stomachs grumble –*

*How true .....*

*Emanations, explosions,*

*An engineer: I'm the gruyere!*

.....

Chance encounter, involuntary recall, direct quotation? To decide once and for all, we would have to take the exegesis of this poem – the most difficult in the French language – rather far, but this exegesis has not even begun. Such a verbal coincidence is nonetheless significant in and of itself. It reveals in both poets a shared concern with the atmospheric conditions, so to speak, in which the mysterious exchange of humorous pleasure between individuals can occur – an exchange to which, over the past century and a half, a rising price has been attached, which today makes it the basis of the only intellectual commerce that can be considered high luxury.

Given the specific requirements of the modern sensibility, it is increasingly doubtful that any poetic, artistic, or scientific work, any philosophical or social system that does not contain *this kind* of humour will not leave a great deal to be desired, will not be condemned more or less rapidly to perish. The value we are dealing with here is not only in ascendancy over all others, but is even capable of subsuming them, to the point where a great number of these values will lose the universal respect they now enjoy. We are touching upon a burning subject; we are headed straight into a land of fire: the gale winds of passion are alternately with us and against us from the moment we consider lifting the veil from this type of humour, whose manifest products we have nonetheless managed to isolate, with a unique satisfaction, in literature, art, and life. Indeed, we have the sense – if only obscurely – of a hierarchy in which the total possession of humour would assure man the highest rung; but to this very degree, any global definition of humour eludes us, and will probably continue to elude us for some time to come, in virtue of the principle that 'man naturally tends to deify what is at the limit of his understanding.' Just as 'high initiation (which only a few elite spirits have reached), as the ultimate postulate of High Science, hardly teaches us how to reason with Divinity'<sup>1</sup> (the High Kabbalah, reduction of High Science

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<sup>1</sup> Armand Petitjean, *Imagination et Réalisation* (Paris, 1936).

to an earthly level, is jealously kept secret by the initiates), there can be no question of explaining humour and making it serve didactic ends. One might just as well try to extract a moral for living from suicide. 'There is nothing,' it has been said, 'that intelligent humour cannot resolve in gales of laughter, not even the void ... Laughter, as one of humanity's most sumptuous extravagances, even to the point of debauchery, stands at the lip of the void, offers us the void as a pledge.'<sup>2</sup> We can imagine the advantage that humour would be liable to take of its very definition, and especially of this definition.

Under these conditions, we shouldn't wonder that the various surveys on the subject have so far yielded only the most paltry results. For one of them, poorly executed in the November 1921 issue of *Aventure*, Paul Valéry wrote: 'The word *humour* cannot be translated. If it could, the French would not employ it [in its English form]. But employ it they do, precisely because of the indeterminacy that they read into it, which makes it a very useful word when trying to account for taste. Every statement in which it figures alters its meaning, so that this very meaning is rigorously no more than the statistical totality of all the sentences that contain it, or that eventually will contain it.' In the final analysis, this stance of total reticence is still preferable to the verbosity demonstrated by Mr Aragon, who in his *Treatise on Style* seems to have taken it into his head to exhaust the subject (one might say cloud the issue); but humour was not so forgiving, and, subsequently, I can think of no one whom it has abandoned more radically. 'You want the rest of humour's anatomical parts? All right, if you look at that fellow who is raising his hand, Suh? to ask permission to speak, you've got the head of hair. The eyes: two holes for mirrors. The ears: shooting lodges. The right hand called symmetry represents the law courts, the left hand is the arm of a one-armed person missing the right ... Humour is what soup, chickens and symphony orchestras lack. On the other hand, road pavers, elevators, and crush hats have it ... It has been pointed out in kitchen utensils, it has been known to appear in bad taste, and it has its winter quarters in fashion ... Where is it running to? To the optical effect. Its home? The Petit Saint-Thomas. Its favourite writers? A certain Binet-Valmer. Its weakness? The sun like a fried egg in the evening sky. It does not scorn adopting a serious tone. All in all, it bears a strong resemblance to the foresight of a rifle,' etc. A good grade-A senior paper, which takes this theme as it might any other, and which has only an *external* view of humour. Once again, all this juggling merely begs the question. On the other hand, the subject has been handled with rare precision by Léon Pierre-Quint, who in *Le Comte de Lautréamont et Dieu* presents humour as a way of affirming, above and beyond 'the absolute revolt of adolescence and the internal revolt of adulthood,' a *superior revolt of the mind*.

For there to be humour ... The problem remains posed. Still, we can credit Hegel with having made humour take a giant step forward into the domain of knowledge when he raised it to the concept of *objective humour*. 'The fundamental principle of Romantic art,' he said, 'is the concentration of the soul upon itself. On finding that the external world does not perfectly respond to its innermost nature, the soul turns away from it. This opposition was developed in the period of Romantic art, to the point where we have seen interest be paid sometimes to the accidents of the external world, sometimes to the whims of personality. But, now, if that interest goes so far as to absorb the mind in external contemplation, and if at the same time humour, while maintaining its subjective and reflective character, lets itself be captivated by the object and its real form, we

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Piobb, *Les Mystères des Dieux* (Paris, 1909).

obtain in this penetration a *humour* that is in a certain sense *objective*.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, I stated that the black sphinx of *objective humour* could not avoid meeting, on the dust-clouded road of the future, the white sphinx of *objective chance*, and that all subsequent human creation would be the fruit of their embrace.

Let us note in passing that the position Hegel assigns the various arts (poetry leads them all as the only *universal art*; it patterns their behaviour on its own, insofar as it is the only art that can represent the *successive situations* of life) suffices to explain why the kind of humour at issue here began appearing in poetry much earlier than it did in painting, for example. Satiric and moralizing intentions exert a degrading influence on almost every work of the past that, in some way, has been inspired by that kind of humour, threatening to push these works into caricature. At most, we would be tempted to make an occasional exception for Hogarth or Goya, and to reserve judgment about others in whose work humour can be sensed but at best remains hypothetical – such as in the quasi-totality of Seurat's painted opus. It would seem that, in visual art, we must consider the triumph of humour in its pure and manifest state a much more recent phenomenon, and recognize as its first practitioner of genius the Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada. In his admirable 'popular' style woodcuts, Posada brought to life all the upheavals of the 1910 revolution (the ghosts of Villa and Fierro should be studied alongside these images, for a possible passage from speculative humour to action – Mexico, moreover, with its splendid funeral toys, stands as the chosen land of black humour). Since then, this kind of humour has acted in painting as if it were on conquered territory. Its black grass ceaselessly ripples wherever the horse of Max Ernst, 'the Bride of the Wind,' has passed. If we limit ourselves to books, there is in this regard nothing more accomplished, more exemplary than his three 'collage' novels: *The Hundred Headless Woman*, *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*, and *Une Semaine de bonté ou les Sept Eléments capitaux* [A Week of Goodness, or the Seven Deadly Elements].

Cinema, insofar as it not only, like poetry, represents the successive stages of life, but also claims to show the passage from one stage to the next, and insofar as it is forced to present extreme situations to move us, had to encounter humour almost from the start. The early comedies of Mack Sennett, certain films of Chaplin's (*The Adventurer*, *The Pilgrim*), and the unforgettable 'Fatty' Arbuckle and 'Fuzzy' (Al St John) command the line that should by rights lead to the midnight sunbursts that are *Million Dollar Legs* and *Animal Crackers*, and to those excursions to the bottom of the mental grotto – Fingal's Cave as much as Pozzuoli's crater – that are Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or*, by way of Picabia's *Entr'acte*.

'It is now time,' says Freud, 'to acquaint ourselves with some of the characteristics of humour. Like wit and the comic, humour has in it a *liberating* element. But it has also *something fine and elevating*, which is lacking in the other two ways of deriving pleasure from intellectual activity. Obviously, what is fine about it is the triumph of narcissism, the *ego's* victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure.' Freud gives this common, but adequate, example: the condemned man being led to the gallows on a Monday who observes, 'What a way to start the week!' We know that at the end of his analysis of humour, he sees it as a mode of thought that aims at saving itself the *expenditure of feeling* required by pain. 'Without quite knowing why, we

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<sup>3</sup> 'Surrealist Situation of the Object,' in *Political Position of Surrealism* (1935). [English translation in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969).]

attribute to this less intensive pleasure a high value: we feel it to have a peculiarly liberating and elevating effect.' According to him, the secret of the humorous attitude would rest on the ability that certain individuals have, in cases of serious alarm, to displace the psychic accent away from the *ego* and onto the *superego*, the latter being genetically conceived as heir to the parental function ('it often holds the *ego* in strict subordination, and still actually treats it as the parents – or the father – treated the child in his early years'). I thought it might be interesting to confront this thesis with a certain number of individual attitudes that reveal humour, and with some texts in which this humour has been given its highest degree of literary expression. In order to reduce them to a common, fundamental idea, I thought it best to employ Freudian terminology in my account, without this dispelling the reservations caused by Freud's necessarily artificial distinction between the *id*, the *ego*, and the *superego*.

I will not deny a considerable partiality in the choice of texts, all the more so in that such a frame of mind seems the only one appropriate to the subject at hand. My greatest fear in this case, my only cause for regret, would be not to have proven exacting enough. To take part in the black tournament of humour, one must in fact have weathered many eliminations. Black humour is hemmed in by too many things, including stupidity, sceptical sarcasm, light-hearted jokes ... (the list is long). But it is the mortal enemy of sentimentality, which seems to lie perpetually in wait – sentimentality that always appears against a blue background – and of a certain short-lived whimsy, which too often passes itself off as poetry, vainly persists in inflicting its outmoded artifices on the mind, and no doubt has little time left in which to lift towards the sun, from amid the poppy seeds, its crowned crane's head.

1939

## Jonathan Swift, 1667–1745

When it comes to black humour, everything designates him as the true initiator. In fact, it is impossible to coordinate the fugitive traces of this kind of humour before him, not even in Heracitus and the Cynics or in the works of the Elizabethan dramatic poets. Swift's incontestable originality, the perfect unity of his production viewed from the angle of the very special and almost unprecedented emotion it elicits, the unsurpassable character, from this same viewpoint, of his many varied successes historically justify his being presented as the first black humorist. Contrary to what Voltaire might have said, Swift was in no sense a 'perfected Rabelais.' He shared to the smallest possible degree Rabelais's taste for innocent, heavy-handed jokes and his constant drunken good humour. In the same way, he stood opposite Voltaire in his entire way of reacting to the spectacle of life, as their two death masks so expressively attest: one bearing a perpetual snicker, the mask of a man who grasped things by reason and never by feeling, and who enclosed himself in scepticism; the other impassive, glacial, the mask of a man who grasped life in a wholly different way, and who was constantly outraged. It has been remarked that Swift 'provokes laughter, but does not share in it.' It is precisely at this price that humour, in the sense we understand it, can externalize the sublime element that, according to Freud, is inherent in it, and transcend the merely comic. Again in this respect, Swift can rightfully be considered the inventor of 'savage' or 'gallows' humour. The profoundly singular turn of his mind inspired in him a series of diversions and reflections on the order of 'The Lady's Dressing Room' and the 'Meditation Upon a Broom-Stick,' which partake of a remarkably modern spirit, and are responsible in and of themselves for the fact that perhaps no body of work is less out of date.

Swift's eyes were, it seems, so changeable that they could turn from light blue to black, from the candid to the terrible. This variation perfectly matches his ways of feeling: 'I have ever,' he says, 'hated all nations, professions, and communities, and all my love is towards individuals ... But principally I hate and detest that animal called man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth.' The man who more than anyone despised the human race was no less possessed by a frantic need for justice. He wandered through the ministries of Dublin and his little vicarage in Laracor, anxious to know whether he was meant to look after his willows and enjoy the playing of his trout or to meddle with affairs of state. He did meddle with them, moreover, as if despite himself and on several occasions, in the most active and effective way. 'That Irishman,' it was said, 'who considers himself an exile in his own country, has yet to reside elsewhere; that Irishman, always ready to speak ill of Ireland, risked for her his fortune, his freedom, his life, and saved her, for almost a century, from the slavery with which England threatened it.' In the same way, the misogynistic author of the 'Letter to a Young Lady on Her Marriage' was doomed in his own life to the worst emotional complications: three women, Varina, Stella, and Vanessa, fought over his love, and, if he broke with the first in a shower of insults, he was condemned to see the other two tear each other apart and die without having forgiven him. It was to this priest that one of them wrote: 'Was I an Enthusiast still you'd be the Deity I should worship.' From one end of his life to the other, his misanthropy was the only disposition that never altered, and that events never



belied. He had said one day, pointing to a tree struck by lightning, 'I shall be like that tree; and die first at the top.' As if for having wished to reach 'the sublime and refined point of felicity ... the possession of being well-deceived; the serene peaceful state of being a fool among knaves,' he saw himself decline, in 1736, into a mental enfeeblement whose progress he was able to follow for ten years, with horrible lucidity. In his will, he left ten thousand pounds to build a hospital for the insane.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *A Tale of a Tub*, 1704. *The Works of Sir William Temple*, 1720. *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726. *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse*, 1727–1735. *Directions to Servants*, 1751, etc.

## DIRECTIONS TO SERVANTS

Masters and ladies are usually quarrelling with the servants for not shutting the doors after them; but neither masters nor ladies consider that those doors must be open before they can be shut, and that the labour is double to open and shut the doors; therefore the best, and shortest, and easiest way is to do neither. But if you are so often teased to shut the door, that you cannot easily forget it, then give the door such a clap as you go out, as will shake the whole room, and make every thing rattle in it, to put your master and lady in mind that you observe their directions.

If you find yourself to grow into favour with your master or lady, take some opportunity in a very mild way to *give them warning*; and when they ask the reason, and seem loth to part with you, answer, that you would rather live with them than any body else, but a poor servant is not to be blamed if he strives to better himself; that service is no inheritance; that your work is great, and your wages very small. Upon which, if your master hath any generosity, he will add five or ten shillings a quarter rather than let you go: But if you are balked, and have no mind to go off, get some fellow-servant to tell your master that he had prevailed upon you to stay.

Whatever good bits you can pilfer in the day, save them to junket with your fellow-servants at night, and take in the butler, provided he will give you drink.

Write your own name and your sweetheart's, with the smoke of a candle, on the roof of the kitchen or the servants' hall, to show your learning.

If you are a young, sightly fellow, whenever you whisper your mistress at the table, run your nose full in her cheek, or if your breath be good, breathe full in her face; this I have known to have had very good consequences in some families.

Never come till you have been called three *or* four times; for none but dogs will come at the first whistle; and when the master calls 'Who's there?' no servant is bound to come; for *Who's there* is no body's name.

Some nice ladies who are afraid of catching cold, having observed that the maids and fellows below stairs often forget to shut the door after them, as they come in or go out into the back yards, have contrived that a pulley and a rope with a large piece of lead at the end, should be so fixed, as to make the door shut of itself, and require a strong hand to open it; which is an immense toil to servants whose business may force them to go in and out fifty times in a morning: But ingenuity can do much, for prudent servants have found out an effectual remedy against this insupportable grievance, by tying up the pulley in such a manner that the weight of the lead shall have no effect; however, as to my own part, I would rather choose to keep the door always open, by laying a heavy stone at the bottom of it.

The servants' candlesticks are generally broken, for nothing can last for ever. But you may find out many expedients; you may conveniently stick your candle in a bottle, or with a lump of butter against the wainscot, in a powder-horn, or in an old shoe, or in a cleft stick, or in the barrel of a pistol, or upon its own grease on a table, in a coffeecup, or a drinking-glass, a horn can, a teapot, a twisted napkin, a mustard-pot, an ink-horn, a marrowbone, a piece of dough, or you may cut a hole in the loaf, and stick it there.

When you invite the neighbouring servants to junket with you at home in an evening, teach them a peculiar way of tapping or scraping at the kitchen-window, which you may hear, but not your master or lady, whom you must take care not to disturb or frighten at such unseasonable hours.

Lay all faults on a lap-dog, a favourite cat, a monkey, a parrot, a child, or on the servant who was last turned off; by this rule you will excuse yourself, do no hurt to any body else, and save your master or lady from the trouble and vexation of chiding.

When you want proper instruments for any work you are about, use all expedients you can invent rather than leave your work undone. For instance, if the poker be out of the way, or broken, stir up the fire with the tongs; if the tongs be not at hand, use the muzzle of the bellows, the wrong end of the fire-shovel, the handle of the fire-brush, the end of a mop, or your master's cane. If you want paper to singe a fowl, tear the first book you see about the house. Wipe your shoes, for want of a clout, with the bottom of a curtain, or a damask napkin. Strip your livery lace for garters. If the butler wants a jordan, he may use the great silver cup.

There are several ways of putting out candles, and you ought to be instructed in them all: You may run the candle end against the wainscot, which puts the snuff out immediately; you may lay it on the floor, and tread the snuff out with your foot; you may hold it upside down, until it is choked with its own grease; or cram it into the socket of the candlestick; you may whirl it round in your hand till it goes out: when you go to bed, after you have made water, you may dip the candle end into the chamber-pot: you may spit on your finger and thumb, and pinch the snuff until it goes out. The cook may run the candle's nose into the meal-tub, or the groom into a vessel of oats, or a lock of hay, or a heap of litter; the housemaid may put out her candle by running it against a looking-glass, which nothing cleans so well as candle-snuff; but the quickest and best of all methods is to blow it out with your breath, which leaves the candle clear, and readier to be lighted.

## **A MODEST PROPOSAL**

for preventing the children of poor people from being a burthen to their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the public.

It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, *all in rags*, and importuning every passenger for an alms. These mothers, instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling, to beg sustenance for their helpless infants, who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for want of work, or leave their dear Native Country to fight for the Pretender in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes.

I think it is agreed by all parties that this prodigious number of children, in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is in the present deplorable state of the kingdom a very great additional grievance; and therefore whoever could find out a fair, cheap, and easy method of making these children sound useful members of the commonwealth would deserve so well of the public as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation.

But my intention is very far from being confined to provide only for the children of professed beggars; it is of a much greater extent, and shall take in the whole number of infants at a certain age who are born of parents in effect as little able to support them as those who demand our charity in the streets.

As to my own part, having turned my thoughts, for many years, upon this important subject, and maturely weighed the several schemes of other projectors, I have always found them grossly mistaken in their computation. It is true a child, just dropped from its dam, may be supported by her milk for a solar year with little other nourishment, at most not above the value of two shillings, which the mother may certainly get, or the value in scraps, by her lawful occupation of begging, and it is exactly at one year old that I propose to provide for them, in such a manner as, instead of being a charge upon their parents, or the parish, or wanting food and raiment for the rest of their lives, they shall, on the contrary, contribute to the feeding and partly to the clothing of many thousands.

There is likewise another great advantage in my scheme, that it will prevent those voluntary abortions, and that horrid practice of women murdering their bastard children, alas, too frequent among us, sacrificing the poor innocent babes, I doubt, more to avoid the expense than the shame, which would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast.

The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about two hundred thousand couple whose wives are breeders, from which number I subtract thirty thousand couples who are able to maintain their own children, although I apprehend there cannot be so many under the present distresses of the kingdom, but this being granted, there will remain an hundred and seventy thousand breeders. I again subtract fifty thousand for those women who miscarry, or whose children die by accident or disease within the year. There only remain an hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born: The question therefore is, how this number shall be reared, and provided for, which, as I have already said, under the present situation of affairs, is utterly impossible by all the methods hitherto proposed, for we can neither employ them in handicraft, or agriculture; we neither build houses (I mean in the country), nor cultivate land: they can very seldom pick up a livelihood by stealing till they arrive at six years old, except where they are of towardsly parts, although, I confess they learn the rudiments much earlier, during which time they can however be properly looked upon only as *probationers*, as I have been informed by a principal gentleman in the County of Cavan, who protested to me that he never knew above one or two instances under the age of six, even in a part of the kingdom so renowned for the quickest proficiency in that art.

I am assured by our merchants that a boy or a girl, before twelve years old, is no saleable commodity, and even when they come to this age, they will not yield above three pounds, or three pounds and half-a-crown at most on the Exchange, which cannot turn to account either to the parents or the kingdom, the charge of nutriment and rags having been at least four times that value.

I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection.

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, baked, or boiled, and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout.

I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration, that of the hundred and twenty thousand children already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males, which is more than we allow to sheep, black-cattle, or swine, and my reason is that these children are seldom the fruits of marriage, a circumstance not much regarded by our savages, therefore one male will be sufficient to serve four females. That the remaining hundred thousand may at a year old be offered in sale to the persons of quality, and fortune, through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump, and fat for a good table. A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends, and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter.

I have reckoned upon a medium, that a child just born will weigh 12 pounds, and in a solar year if tolerably nursed increaseth to 28 pounds.

A very worthy person, a true lover of this country, and whose virtues I highly esteem, was lately pleased, in discoursing on this matter, to offer a refinement upon my scheme. He said that many gentlemen of this kingdom, having of late destroyed their deer, he conceived that the want of venison might be well supplied by the bodies of young lads and maidens, not exceeding fourteen years of age, nor under twelve, so great a number of both sexes in every country being now ready to starve, for want of work and service: and these to be disposed of by their parents if alive, or otherwise by their nearest relations. But with due deference to so excellent a friend, and so deserving a patriot, I cannot be altogether in his sentiments; for as to the males, my American acquaintance assured me from frequent experience that their flesh was generally tough and lean, like that of our schoolboys, by continual exercise, and their taste disagreeable, and to fatten them would not answer the charge. Then as to the females, it would, I think with humble submission, be a loss to the public, because they soon would become breeders themselves: And besides, it is not improbable that some scrupulous people might be apt to censure such a practice (although indeed very unjustly) as a little bordering upon cruelty, which, I confess, hath always been with me the strongest objection against any project, however so well intended.

I think the advantages by the proposal which I have made are obvious and many, as well as of the highest importance.

For first, as I have already observed, it would greatly lessen the number of Papists, with whom we are yearly over-run, being the principal breeders of the nation, as well as our most dangerous enemies, and who stay at home on purpose with a design to deliver the kingdom to the Pretender, hoping to take their advantage by the absence of so many good Protestants, who have chosen rather to leave their country than stay at home, and pay tithes against their conscience to an Episcopal curate.

Secondly, The poorer tenants will have something valuable of their own, which by law be made liable to distress, and help to pay their landlord's rent, their corn and cattle being already seized, and *money a thing unknown*.

Thirdly, Whereas the maintenance of an hundred thousand children, from two years old, and upwards, cannot be computed at less than ten shillings a piece *per annum*, the nation's stock will be thereby increased fifty thousand pounds *per annum*, besides the profit of a new dish, introduced to the tables of all gentlemen of fortune in the kingdom, who have any refinement in taste, and the money will circulate among ourselves, the goods being entirely of our own growth and manufacture.

Fourthly, The constant breeders, besides the gain of eight shillings sterling *per annum*, by the sale of their children, will be rid of the charge of maintaining them after the first year.

Fifthly, This food would likewise bring great custom to taverns, where the vintners will certainly be so prudent as to procure the best receipts for dressing it to perfection, and consequently have their houses frequented by all the fine gentlemen, who justly value themselves upon their knowledge in good eating; and a skilful cook, who understands how to oblige his guests, will contrive to make it as expensive as they please.

Sixthly, This would be a great inducement to marriage, which all wise nations have either encouraged by rewards, or enforced by laws and penalties. It would increase the care and tenderness of mothers toward their children, when they were sure of a settlement for life, to the poor babes, provided in some sort by the public to their annual profit instead of expense. We should see an honest emulation among the married women, which of them could bring the fattest child to the market, men would become as fond of their wives, during the time of their pregnancy, as they are now of their mares in foal, their cows in calf, or sows when they are ready to farrow, nor offer to beat or kick them (as it is too frequent a practice) for fear of a miscarriage.

## A MEDITATION UPON A BROOM-STICK

This single stick, which you now behold ingloriously lying in that neglected corner, I once knew in a flourishing state in a forest; it was full of sap, full of leaves, and full of boughs; but now, in vain does the busy art of man pretend to vie with nature, by tying that withered bundle of twigs to its sapless trunk; 'tis now, at best, but the reverse of what it was, a tree turned upside down, the branches on the earth, and the root in the air; 'tis now handled by every dirty wench, condemned to do her drudgery, and, by a capricious kind of fate, destined to make other things clean, and be nasty itself: at length, worn to the stumps in the service of the maids, it is either thrown out of doors, or condemned to the last use, of kindling a fire. When I beheld this I sighed, and said within myself, Surely man is a Broomstick! Nature sent him into the world strong and lusty, in a thriving condition, wearing his own hair on his head, the proper branches of this reasoning vegetable, until the axe of intemperance has lopped off his green boughs, and left him a withered trunk: he then flies to art, and puts on a periwig, valuing himself upon an unnatural bundle of hairs, (all covered with powder,) that never grew on his head; but now, should this our broomstick pretend to enter the scene, proud of those birchen spoils it never bore, and all covered with dust, though the sweepings of the finest lady's chamber, we should be apt to ridicule and despise its vanity. Partial judges that we are of our own excellencies, and other men's defaults.

But a broomstick, perhaps, you will say, is an emblem of a tree standing on its head; and pray what is man, but a topsyturvy creature, his animal faculties perpetually mounted on his rational, his head where his heels should be, grovelling on the earth; and yet, with all his faults, he sets up to be a universal reformer and corrector of abuses, a remover of grievances, rakes into every

slut's corner of Nature, bringing hidden corruption to the light, and raises a mighty dust where there was none before; sharing deeply all the while in the very same pollutions he pretends to sweep away: his last days are spent in slavery to women, and generally the least deserving, till, worn out to the stumps, like his brother besom, he is either kicked out of doors, or made use of to kindle flames for others to warm themselves by.

# THOUGHTS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS, MORAL AND DIVERTING

If a man will observe as he walks the streets, I believe he will find the merriest countenances in mourning coaches.

Venus, a beautiful, good-natured lady, was the goddess of love; Juno, a terrible shrew, the goddess of marriage; and they were always mortal enemies.

Apollo was held the god of physic, and sender of diseases. Both were originally the same trade, and still continue.

Old men and comets have been revered for the same reason; their long beards, and pretences to foretell events.

There is a story in Pausanias of a plot for betraying a city discovered by the braying of an ass: the cackling of geese saved the Capitol, and Catiline's conspiracy was discovered by a whore. These are the only three animals, as far as I remember, famous in history for evidences and informers.

If a man makes me keep my distance, the comfort is, he keeps his at the same time.

That was excellently observed, say I, when I read a passage in an author, where his opinion agrees with mine. When we differ, there I pronounce him to be mistaken.

A man would have but few spectators, if he offered to shew for threepence how he could thrust a redhot iron into a barrel of gunpowder, and it should not take fire.

Query, whether churches are not dormitories of the living as well as of the dead?

Jealousy, like fire, may shrivel up horns, but it makes them stink.

A footman's hat should fly off to everybody: and therefore Mercury, who was Jupiter's footman, had wings fastened to his cap.

Vision is the art of seeing things invisible.

I asked a poor man how he did? He said, he was like a washball, always in decay.

It is said of the horses in the vision, that 'their power was in their mouths and in their tails.' What is said of horses in the vision, in reality may be said of women.

Elephants are always drawn smaller than life, but fleas always larger.

No man will take counsel, but every man will take money: therefore money is better than counsel.

At Windsor I was observing to my Lord Bolingbroke, 'that the tower where the maids of honour lodged (who at that time were very handsome) was much frequented with crows.' My lord said, 'it was because they smelt carrion.'

## D.A.F. de Sade, 1740–1814

There can be no doubt about submitting to the distinctive viewpoint that informs this anthology, a body of work whose multiple horizons are only now starting to be discovered. At the same time, there is surely nothing more *serious* than that same body of work, and this precisely to the extent that in a ‘civilized’ society the taboo of an almost total ban continues to weigh on it. It took the combined intuition of all the poets to save, from the final darkness to which hypocrisy had condemned it, the expression of a thought considered the most subversive of all, the thought of the Marquis de Sade – ‘the freest mind that ever was,’ according to Guillaume Apollinaire. It took nothing less than the will shown by true analysts, surmounting every prejudice, to extend the field of human knowledge by extracting the fundamental aspirations of that thought. To this task were devoted the successive efforts of Charles Henry, future director of the Laboratory of the Physiology of Sensations at the Sorbonne, in 1887, in an anonymous brochure entitled *La Vérité sur le marquis de Sade*; of Dr Eugène Deuhren (*Le Marquis de Sade et son temps*) at the beginning of this century; and, from 1912 to the present day, of Maurice Heine, whose systematic studies have resulted in an unbroken string of triumphs. Thanks to Maurice Heine, the immense significance of Sade’s writing is now beyond question: psychologically speaking, it can be considered the most authentic precursor of Freud’s work and of modern psychopathology in general; socially, it aims at nothing less than the establishment of a true science of mores, which has been deferred from revolution to revolution.

Even recalling that Sade wrote, on the sheet bearing the manuscript of his stories: ‘There is no story or novel in all the literatures of Europe in which the sombre mode is taken to a more terrifying and pathetic degree,’ we are not entirely surprised at the idea that he might periodically have made a concession to black humour. The very excesses of imagination to which his natural genius led him, and in which he was encouraged by his long years of captivity; the madly prideful bias that makes him keep his heroes from ever being sated, whether in pleasure or in crime; his evident concern with varying *ad infinitum* (if only by complicating them a little further each time) the circumstances that help maintain their aberrations, dot his narrative with a number of plainly outrageous passages, which relax the reader by tipping him off that the author is not taken in, either. For very brief moments the fantastic takes possession of Sade’s work; the real and the plausible are deliberately transgressed. One of the greatest poetic virtues of this work is to situate the portrait of social inequalities and human perversions in the light of childhood phantasmagoria and terrors, and this at the risk of making them overlap, as in the episode concerning the monster of the Apennines that we have chosen to reproduce here.

In more ways than one, Sade magisterially incarnates what we call black humour. It was he who, in life, seems to have inaugurated – *at his own terrible expense, moreover* – the kind of sinister joke bordering on ‘amusing murders,’ in the sense that Jacques Vaché would later mean it. The misdeeds which earned him his first years of imprisonment were, by a wide margin, much



less horrible than was claimed.<sup>1</sup> This relentless hater of the family, this monster of cruelty, was the same man who – in order, it is believed, to save his in-laws from the gallows, but no doubt especially out of a deep and disinterested conviction – stood up against the death penalty during the Terror and was thrown in jail by the same Revolution that he had enthusiastically served from the first. Freed after the 9<sup>th</sup> of Thermidor, he was arrested yet again in 1803, following the publication of a pamphlet against the First Consul and his entourage, and transferred as a madman from his prison to the Bicêtre hospital, then to the Charenton asylum, where he died.

It is permissible to see the manifestation of a supreme humour in the final paragraph of his will, in poignant contradiction with the fact that Sade, for his ideas, spent twenty-seven years, under three different regimes, in eleven prisons, and appealed, with more dramatic hope than anyone else has ever shown, to the judgment of posterity:

I forbid that my body be opened for any reason whatsoever. I ask with the greatest possible insistence that it be kept for forty-eight hours in the room in which I die, placed in a wooden coffin that will not be nailed shut before the end of the aforementioned forty-eight hours, at the expiration of which the aforesaid coffin will be nailed shut. During this interval, an urgent message will be sent to M. Lenormand, wood merchant, no. 101 Boulevard de l'Égalité in Versailles, asking him to come in person, with a cart, and to take possession of my body, which will be transported, under his escort, to the woods on my property in Malmaison, commune of Mancé, near Epernon. There I would like it to be placed, without any kind of ceremony, in the first copse of thickets on the right in said woods, as one enters from the direction of the old castle by the main path dividing it. My grave will be dug in this copse by the farmer at Malmaison, under the supervision of M. Lenormand, who will not leave my body until he has placed it in said grave; if he wishes, he may be accompanied in this ceremony by any of my family or friends who, without any sort of pomp, might wish to show me this last sign of affection. Once the grave has been filled in, acorns will be sown on top, so that afterward, the grounds of said grave being covered over again and the copse once again being filled with thickets as before, the traces of my tomb will disappear from the surface of the earth, as I like to think that all memory of me will be erased from the minds of men.

In Charenton-Saint-Maurice, of sound mind and body, on 30 January 1806.

Signed: D.A.F. Sade.

'Sade,' wrote Paul Eluard, 'wanted to restore to civilized man the power of his primitive instincts; he wanted to deliver the amorous imagination from its own objects. He believed that out of this, and this alone, true equality would come. Since virtue is its own reward, he laboured, in the name of everything that suffers, to drag it down and humiliate it, to subject it to the supreme law of unhappiness, with no illusions and no lies, so that those it normally condemns might build here on earth a world on the immense scale of mankind.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Maurice Heine on 'the case of the Marquis de Sade's "Spanish-fly" candies' (*Hippocrate*, March 1933) and on 'Rose Keller, or the Arcueil affair before the Parliament' (*Annales de Médecine légale*, March 1933).

<sup>2</sup> *L'Evidence poétique*.

## JULIETTE

Leaving the volcanic plain of Pietra-Mala, we climbed for an hour back up a tall mountain situated to the right. From the crest of this mountain, we noticed chasms more than two thousand fathoms deep, toward which our path was leading us. The entire area was enveloped by woods that were so remarkably thick, so laden with foliage, that one could scarcely see the road ahead. After descending a rigid slope for nearly three hours, we arrived at the edge of a vast lake. On an island located in the middle of that body of water, one could see the keep of the palace that served as our guide's retreat; because of the high walls surrounding it, we could see no more than its roof. We had been walking for six hours without noticing a single house; not a single individual had crossed our sight. A small black skiff like a Venetian gondola was waiting for us at the edge of the lake. It was from there that we could take in the horrible basin in which we found ourselves: it was surrounded on all sides by mountains as far as the eye could see, whose summits and arid flanks were covered with green pine, larch, and oak trees. It would have been impossible to see anything more rustic and sombre; it was as if we had reached the end of the universe. We climbed into the skiff, which the giant steered all by himself. It was still three furlongs from the dock to the castle. We then arrived at the foot of an iron door cut into the thick rampart surrounding the castle, after which a six-foot-wide moat lay before us; we crossed over it on a bridge that was raised the moment we had passed. When a second rampart stood before us, we passed through another iron door, and found ourselves in a clump of woods so dense that we thought it impossible to go any farther. And indeed we would not: this clump, formed by a living hedge, offered only spikes and no passage. In the heart of it stood the last rampart of the castle; it was ten feet thick. The giant lifted an enormous block of stone that only he could have moved, revealing a tortuous stairway. The stone closed over it again, and it was through the bowels of the earth that we arrived (still in blackness) in the midst of the building's cellars, from which we climbed back up by means of an opening that was blocked by a stone similar to the one just mentioned. We finally found ourselves in a low-ceilinged room covered from end to end with skeletons. The seats in this place were formed only by dead men's bones, and one had no choice but to sit on skulls. Horrible cries seemed to reach us from below the earth, and we soon learned that it was in the vaults of this room that were located the dungeons in which this monster's victims were moaning.

'I have you now,' he told us once we were seated. 'You are in my power; I can do with you as I please. Do not be alarmed, however: the actions I have seen you commit are too close to my own way of thinking for me not to feel you are worth knowing and worthy of sharing the pleasures of my retreat. Listen to me: I have time to tell you all before supper. They should be preparing it as I speak.'

'I am a Muscovite, born in a small village on the banks of the Volga. My name is Minsky. My father, when he died, left me enormous wealth, and nature endowed me with physical faculties and tastes in proportion to the favours with which fortune gratified me. Sensing that I was not cut out to vegetate in the depths of some obscure province such as the one in which I first saw the light of day, I travelled; the entire universe did not seem large enough to contain the breadth of my desires. It tried to impose limitations: I did not want any. Born a libertine, impious, debauched, bloodthirsty, and fierce, I travelled the world over in search only of vices, which I tried the better to refine them. I began with China, Mongolia, and Tartary; I visited all of Asia. Heading up toward Kamchatka, I entered America by the famous Bering Strait. I crossed through that vast

portion of the world, living alternately with civilized populations and with savages, imitating the crimes of one group, the vices and atrocities of the other. I brought back to Europe penchants so dangerous that I was sentenced to be burned alive in Spain, broken on the wheel in France, hanged in England, and crushed under rocks in Italy: my wealth protected me from everything.

‘I headed on to Africa. It was there that I learned that what you have the madness to call depravity is nothing more than man’s natural state, and still more often the result of the very soil onto which nature has thrown him. Those good children of the sun laughed at me when I tried to scold them for their barbarity toward their women. “And what is a woman,” they answered, “except the domestic animal that nature has given us to satisfy both our needs and our desires? What right does she have to be worthy of us, any more than the cattle in our farmyards? The only difference we can see,” these sensible people told me, “is that our domestic animals might warrant some indulgence because of their gentle and submissive natures, whereas women deserve only harshness and barbarity, given their perpetual state of fraud, spitefulness, betrayal, and perfidy ...”

‘... I’ve maintained these tastes. All the debris of corpses that you see here are the remains of creatures I’ve devoured. I live exclusively on human flesh. I hope you will enjoy the feast that I’ve had prepared for you ...

‘... I have two harems. The first contains two hundred young girls, ranging in age from five to twenty; I eat them when the ways of lust have sufficiently mortified them. The second contains two hundred women aged twenty to thirty; you shall see how I treat them. Fifty valets of both sexes are employed in the service of this considerable number of objects of lubricity, and for recruitment I have a hundred agents deployed over every large city in the world. Would you believe that with the phenomenal movement that all of this requires, there is still but one way to enter my island: the road you have just taken? One would surely not suspect the number of creatures who pass by this mysterious path.

‘Never have the veils I’ve thrown over all this been pierced. It’s not that I have the slightest reason to fear: this belongs to the estates of the Grand Duke of Tuscany: they know the full extent of my irregular conduct, and the money I spread around keeps me safe from everything ...

‘... The furniture you see here,’ our host told us, ‘is alive: each will walk at the slightest sign.’ Minsky made this sign and the table moved forward; it had been in a corner of the room, and now came toward the middle. Five armchairs went to group themselves around it; two chandeliers descended from the ceiling and floated over the centre of the table. ‘The mechanism is simple,’ said the giant, seeing us looking closely at the composition of these furnishings. ‘You can see that this table, these chandeliers, these armchairs are composed exclusively of groups of girls artistically arranged. My dishes shall be served piping hot on the backs of these creatures ...’

‘Minsky,’ I observed to our Muscovite, ‘the role these girls have to play is exhausting, especially if you prolong your stay at table.’

‘In the worst case,’ said Minsky, ‘a few of them drop dead, and such losses are too easily repaired for me to worry about for even a second ...

‘... My friends,’ our host said, ‘I have warned you that we eat only human flesh here. There is not a single dish before you that is not made from it.’

‘We shall try it,’ said Sbrigani. ‘Repugnance is an absurdity: it derives only from lack of habit. All meats are fit for nourishing man, all of them have been given us by nature, and there is nothing more extraordinary about eating a man than there is about eating a chicken.’ And so saying, my husband plunged his fork into a quarter of young boy that seemed particularly well

prepared, and having put at least two pounds on his plate, he devoured it. I did likewise. Minsky urged us on; and as his appetite matched all his other passions, he had soon emptied a dozen dishes.

Minsky drank the way he ate: he was already on his thirtieth bottle of burgundy when they served the last course, which he washed down with champagne. Aleatico, falernian, and other precious Italian wines were drunk with dessert.

Sade's posthumous good fortune, as if meant to compensate by some mysterious process for the insane harshness of the fate he suffered in life, has not only drawn long-distance the worthiest exegeses to his cause, but, on the uniquely lightning-struck terrain that is his opus – a terrain liable to bring forth a mutation of life – has brought to the task the prospectors most able to detect precious new veins. On the death of Maurice Heine in 1940 – coinciding with the bicentennial of Sade's birth – the noble relay was picked up by Gilbert Lely, who, seconded in turn by the greatest luck in his love and his zeal, is preparing to unveil a number of works and documents that up until now have been concealed from us, certain of which throw new light on the Marquis's extremely elusive profile. *L'Aigle, Mademoiselle* [The Eagle, Mademoiselle], which inaugurates this series of publications, takes us as if for the first time to the burning core of his passion, and in human terms allows us to penetrate all the way to their source. In the frenzy of that moment, of which the following letter reproduces the paroxysm, we will see that humour demands the role of the eagle and assumes it more than anywhere else in the secret structuring of its arithmetic operations, to which Sade attributed the meaning of *signals* – operations which, according to Gilbert Lely, 'constitute a kind of reaction of his psyche, an unconscious struggle against the despair into which his sanity might have collapsed without the help of such a distraction.'

## TO MADAME DE SADE

This morning I received a letter from you that went on forever. Do not write me such long letters, I beg of you: don't you think I have better things to do than read your constant prattling? You must have an awful lot of time on your hands to write letters of that length, as must I to answer them, you will agree. And yet, as the subject of my letter is of great consequence, I would ask you to read it with a level head and a calm spirit.

I have just come upon three signals of the utmost beauty. I cannot keep them from you. They are so sublime that I am convinced that when you read them, in spite of yourself you'll applaud the extent of my genius and the richness of my knowledge. One could say of your *clique* what Piron said of the Academy: you are forty *who have wit enough for four*. It's the same with your little gang: you are six who have wit enough for *two*. Well, with all your genius, and although you have been working on *the great work* for only twelve years, I'll bet you double against simple,<sup>3</sup> if you like, that my three signals are worth more than everything you've ever done. Hold on, I'm mistaken, my goodness, there are four of them ... Well, anyway, it's three or four, and you know that three-four is very strong.

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<sup>3</sup> Hey! double against simple: that's a good one. Don't you wish *you'd* thought of it? [Sade's note]

**1<sup>st</sup> signal invented by me,  
Christophe de Sade:**

The first time you have to inform me of a cut or tear, you will cut off Cadet de la Basoche's (Albaret's) b—s and send them to me in a box. I shall open the box and cry out, 'Oh, my God! what is *this*?' And Jacques, the prompter, who will be looking over my shoulder, shall answer, 'It's nothing, Sir. Can't you see that it's a 19?' 'No, not really,' I'll say ... All vanity aside, do you have anything to match that?

**2<sup>nd</sup> signal by the same:**

When you want to indicate *the 2, the double, the duplicata, your second self, paying twice, etc.*, this is how you go about it: You must set a beautiful creature posing in my room (doesn't matter which sex; I take after your family a bit there, I don't look too closely; and besides, *mad dog* and all that), you must, I was saying, put in my room a beautiful creature in the pose of the *Farnese Callipygian Venus*, showing it off nicely. I have nothing against that part of the body; like the magistrate, I believe that it's fleshier than the rest and that, consequently, for whoever likes flesh, that's always better than things that are *level* ... Coming in, I'll say to the prompter, or to the prompted, 'What is this infamous thing doing here?' (just for form's sake), and the prompter will answer, 'Sir, that is a duplicata.'

**3<sup>rd</sup> signal, again by the same:**

When you want to make a large *bridge*, like this summer, with lightning and the rod (horrible effect that almost made me die in convulsions), you will have to set fire to the powder stores (it is turned *vertically* toward the study where I sleep): the effect will be sublime.

**Oh! here's the best of them all, don't you think?**

**For the 4<sup>th</sup>, finally:**

When you want to make a 16 into a 9 (pay attention now), you must take two *death's heads* (*two*, do you hear; I could have said six, but, although I served in the *Dragoons*, I'm modest: so I'll just say *two*) and, while I'm in the garden, you'll have all that arranged in my room, so that I'll find the decoration all ready when I come in. Or else you'll tell me I've just received a package from Provence, one that has already been signed for: I'll open it eagerly ... and it will be *that* – and I'll get quite a scare (I'm really quite timid by nature, as I've proved two or three times in my life).

Ah, good people, good people! believe me, do not invent anything, for it isn't worth the effort to invent things that are so flat, so stupid, so easy to guess. There are so many better ways to spend your time than inventing, and when you don't have a mind for invention, you're better off making shoes or cannulas, than inventing *heavily, clumsily, and stupidly*.

The 19<sup>th</sup>, sent on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

By the way, hurry up and send me my linens; and tell those who *judge* that I couldn't care less, that they *judge* very badly, for M. de Rougemont, the director, who *judges* very well, has just *judged* that my stove was due for some serious repairs, and he's having them done. And so, for once in your life, if it's possible, pull the cart together; for however horrid you all may be, you should still try not to be so horrid that one of you is pulling to the right while the other is pulling to the left. Pull like M. de Rougemont, the director; *there's* a man with good common sense, who always pulls straight – or who has himself pulled when he isn't doing the pulling. My valet commends himself to you so that the magistrate's wife won't forget that if he indeed gave the signal, she had promised to have his son made a sergeant.

## Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, 1742–1799

*To believe or not to believe:* this dilemma has never been debated with more pathos or genius than by a man such as Lichtenberg, endowed as he was to the highest degree with a sense of intellectual quality. We see him in 1775, in the front row of a London theatre, eyes riveted on the actor Garrick as he delivers Hamlet's monologue: 'Dignified and serious, he looks to the ground, to the side. Then, removing his right hand from his chin (but if I remember correctly, his right arm nonetheless remains supported by his left), he utters the words: "To be or not to be," in hushed tones. But because of the great silence (and not the exceptional quality of his voice, as some have written), he can be heard everywhere.' Lichtenberg's voice was no less admirably posed, and his particular inquiry into the realm of knowledge managed to draw the most unexpected benefits from his physical deformity (he was a hunchback), even as it provoked only unparalleled silence, which at present has grown into total neglect. It would be rather pointless to call him back from that silence, which has rarely been broken since his death, if not for the fact that many of the figures Lichtenberg inspired were precisely those for whom posterity most counted. Goethe, for example, despite some very definite disagreements with Lichtenberg, wrote that we can use his writings 'as a marvellous magic wand. Whenever he makes a joke, there is always a problem hidden inside.' Kant, toward the end of his life, placed Lichtenberg at the highest level, and in his personal copy of the *Aphorisms* he underlined many passages in red or black. Schopenhauer saw him as the thinker par excellence, one who used his mind *for himself* and not for others. Nietzsche placed the *Aphorisms*, alongside Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*, among the 'treasures of German prose.' In 1878, Wagner believed he discovered in them an anticipation of his own thought. Tolstoy, in 1904, placed himself under Lichtenberg's influence more willingly than under Kant's, and expressed amazement at the injustice of his posthumous fate: 'I don't understand how contemporary Germans could so neglect this author, whereas they are crazy about a slick journalist like Nietzsche.'

Lichtenberg's life, no less than Swift's, abounded in fascinating contradictions, all the more fascinating in that they stemmed from an eminently reasonable mind. A supremely conscious atheist, not only did he deem Christianity to be 'the most perfect system for fostering peace and happiness in the world,' but it even happened in moments of emotional turmoil that he abandoned himself to the mystical life of others, going so far as to 'pray fervently.' After having written: 'The French Revolution is the result of philosophy, but what a leap from *Cogito ergo sum* to the cry "To the Bastille!" echoing from the Palais Royal!' and after having accepted the Terror, he was moved to tears by the death of Marie Antoinette. As much as he despised love *à la Werther*, in 1777 he fell for a young girl of twelve: 'Since Easter 1780,' he wrote six years later to the pastor Amelung, 'she had spent all her time at my home ... We were together constantly. When she was in church, I felt I had sent my eyes and all my senses with her. In a word, she was, without the consecration of a priest (forgive me this expression, my dear and excellent friend), my wife ... Great God, this celestial creature died on 4 August 1782, in the evening, just before sunset.'

Although the man of ‘enlightenment’ was the decided adversary of the *Sturm und Drang* movement that at the time presided over German literature, he was from the first the most enthusiastic admirer of Jean Paul. In him, the man of *science* (as a professor of physics at the University of Göttingen, he was Humboldt’s teacher, and discovered that positive and negative electricity are not conducted equally in insulating materials) coexisted in perfect intimacy with the dreamer (the rationalist Lichtenberg sang the praises of Jacob Boehme, and was the first to penetrate the deep meaning of dream activity; the least we can say is that his views on the subject remain extremely current). He should be celebrated as the very prophet of *chance*, which Max Ernst would later call the ‘master of humour.’ Nothing could be more symptomatic, in this regard, than to see him devote his earliest lessons to calculating probability in games of fortune.

One of the most remarkable traits of my character is surely the singular superstition by which I see everything as a premonition, and take one hundred things a day as oracles. I don’t need to describe them here: I understand what I mean all too well. Every crawling insect serves as an answer to questions about my destiny. Isn’t this strange in a physics professor?

Neither deny nor believe ... ‘I am confident,’ he says again, ‘of my ability to demonstrate that one can sometimes believe in something and yet not believe in it. Nothing is less fathomable than the systems that motivate our actions.’

In the white cone of his famous ‘smouldering candle,’ we rediscover with emotion on Abel’s pastel the subtlest smile that ever there was, belonging to a precursor in every genre: one is reminded of a Paul Valéry in his early phase, as revised and corrected by Monsieur Teste (but Valéry has no more in common with Lichtenberg than the art of numbering his notebooks). Here is one of the great masters of humour. He was the inventor of this sublime philosophical inanity, which configures by absurdity the dialectical masterpiece of the object: ‘a knife without a blade, which is missing the handle.’ In his solitude, he managed to do much more than vary the positions of love, as some men do: he described sixty-two ways of resting one’s head on one’s hand.

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## APHORISMS

I’ve studied hypochondria, and how greatly this study has pleased me! – To tell the truth, my hypochondria is a special talent that consists in this: knowing how to draw from any incident in life, no matter what it might be called, the greatest quantity of poison for my personal use.

It is not the force of his mind, but the force of the wind that has carried that man so far.

He was one of those who want to do everything better than you ask them to. This is a frightful quality in a servant.

The highest level that can be reached by a mediocre but experienced mind is a talent for uncovering the weaknesses of those greater than itself.

If you want to see what man can do if he wanted to, you have only to think of those who have broken out of prison or tried to break out. They have done as much with a single nail as they could have with a battering ram.

Man loves company, even if it is only that of a smouldering candle.

There are people who can make no decision before having a chance to sleep on it. That’s all very well; but there might be cases where one risks becoming a prisoner, along with one’s bedclothes.



When we are young we scarcely know we are alive. We acquire the feeling of health only through sickness. That the earth draws us toward it becomes apparent when we jump into the air through the blow we receive on falling. When age sets in, the state of being sick becomes a species of health and we no longer notice we are sick. If recollection of the past did not stay with us we would notice little of the change. I therefore also believe that animals grow old only from our point of view of them. A squirrel which on the day of its death leads the life of an oyster is no more unhappy than the oyster. Man, however, who lives in three places – in the past, in the present, and in the future – can be unhappy if one of these three is worthless. Religion has even added a fourth – eternity.

Out of an exaggerated care to avoid a disaster you do precisely that which brings one down upon you, whereas *if you had done nothing* you would certainly have been safe: this is one of the most annoying of situations to be in. For in addition to the unpleasantness of the thing itself, you have also the mortification of self-reproach and of having made yourself ludicrous in the eyes of others. I have seen someone smash a valuable vase by trying to move it from where it had been standing quietly for at least six months simply because he was afraid it might one day be accidentally knocked over.

He had outgrown his library as one outgrows a waistcoat. Libraries can in general be too narrow or too wide for the soul.

Whereas everyone these days is writing for children, it would be a good idea to have, for once, a book written by children for adults. But this is no mean task, if one expects to remain in character.

It would be an excellent thing to invent a catechism, or better still a course of study, by which members of the third estate could be metamorphosed into something like beavers. I know of no better animal in all creation: he bites only when attacked, is industrious, extremely matrimonial, a capable artisan, and his hide is excellent.

The man was such an intellectual he was of almost no use.

If I know the genealogy of Dame Science, Ignorance is her older sister. Is it really so repulsive to choose the older sister, even if one has been offered the younger? From all those who have known the older, I have heard that she possesses many charms, that she is a fine, plump thing, and that, precisely because she is more often asleep than awake, she would make an excellent spouse.

He made all his discoveries more or less the way wild boars and hunting dogs root out salt-water and mineral springs.

The man was working on a system of natural history in which animals were classified by the shape of their excrements. He distinguished three classes: cylindrical, spheric, and pie-shaped.

In my view this theory corresponds in psychology to a very celebrated one in physics that explains the northern lights as the phosphorescence of herrings.

Long live those who have nerves as thick as cables!

He marvelled at the fact that cats had two holes cut in their fur at precisely the spot where their eyes were.

If you paint a bull's-eye on your garden gate, you can be sure that someone will take a shot at it.

A. Why don't you help your father? – B. How do you mean? – A. He's quite poor. – B. Yes, but he's a hard worker, and I don't have fortune enough to make him a do-nothing.

I once knew a miller's boy who never removed his cap when he met me unless he had a donkey walking beside him. For a long time I could not explain it. At length I discovered that he regarded this company as a humiliation and was pleading for compassion; by removing his cap he seemed to want to evade the slightest comparison between himself and his companion.

'Many are less fortunate than you' may not be a roof to live under, but it will serve to retire beneath in the event of a shower.

I have long thought that philosophy will eventually consume itself. Metaphysics has already done so to some extent.

He had given names to his two slippers.

I would give something to know for precisely whom the deeds were really done, of which it is publicly stated they were done *for the Fatherland*.

Gallows with lighting rod.

Autobiography: Not to be forgotten: that I once wrote down the question What are the northern lights? and left it in Graupner's garret addressed to an angel, and next morning crept quietly back to collect the note. Oh, if only there had been some little rascal to reply to that note!

Once while on a journey I was eating at an inn, or rather a roadside shack, where they were playing dice. Sitting across from me was a fresh-faced young man who seemed a bit dissipated and who, without paying any attention to the people around him, whether seated or standing, was eating his soup; nonetheless, he tossed every second or third spoonful into the air, caught it again in his spoon, and swallowed it calmly.

What I find so singular about this dream is that it inspired my *habitual* remark: that such things cannot be invented, only seen (by which I mean that no novelist would ever have come up with the idea); and yet I had just invented it myself.

At the table where they were playing dice, a tall, thin woman sat knitting. I asked her what could be won at this game, and she answered: *Nothing!* When I asked her whether anything could be lost, she said: *No!* The game struck me as very important (February 1799).

– from *Aphorisms*

(some translations by R. J. Hollingdale)

## Charles Fourier, 1772–1837

His most favourable commentators, and even the most enthusiastic proponents of his socio-economic system, have been united in deploring the ravings of Fourier's imagination. They have gone to great lengths to conceal the 'extravagances' he indulged in, and have glossed over the 'fantastic and rambling' aspects of his thought, which most often was so beautifully controlled. How can one explain the coexistence in a single mind of a preeminent gift of reason and a taste for vaticination taken to extremes? Marx and Engels, normally so harsh toward their predecessors, have paid homage to Fourier's sociological genius. Marx observed, apropos the 'Passionate Series' that form the cornerstone of Fourier's work, that 'it is possible to criticize such constructions (and this applies also to the Hegelian method) only by demonstrating how they are made and thereby proving oneself master of them.'<sup>1</sup> Engels presented him as 'one of the greatest satirists of all time' and a consummate dialectician.<sup>2</sup> How could Fourier both satisfy such demanding men and disconcert almost everyone who has approached him with his dizzying ascents into things marvellous and uncontrollable? His theory of natural history – which held that the cherry was the product of the earth's copulation with itself and the grape the product of the earth's copulation with the sun – was deemed patently insane, and many say that his cosmology is no better. For in it, the earth occupies only the insignificant place of a bee in a hive formed by a few hundred thousand starry universes, the totality of which constitute a *biniverse*, these *biniverses* being themselves grouped by the thousands into *triniverses*, and so on; creation proceeds by successive stages and gropings; our individual existence is subject to 1,260 avatars covering 54,000 years in the other world and 27,000 in this one, etc.

Nevertheless, Fourier's cosmology, in which his most troublesome digressions are said to reside, had no small influence on the minds of certain nineteenth-century poets, in particular Victor Hugo. The latter became interested in it through contact with Victor Hennequin, and no doubt through his readings of the works of Eliphaz Lévy (the former Abbé Constant), 'who, on the road from divinity to magic, encountered the phalansterian library and put under Rabelais's patronage the theory of series and that of attractions which are proportional to destinies.'<sup>3</sup> It is high time to establish precisely what this cosmology, as well as the other unusual theses Fourier propounded, owes or does not owe to hermetic philosophy – especially if we keep in mind that the *Theory of the Four Movements* is purportedly the 'minutes' of lectures that its author gave in Masonic lodges under the Consulate. In any case, their constant intersection with the boldest plans for social transformation, whose rightness and viability have largely been demonstrated, throws them into extraordinary relief. Any attempt to segregate them from Fourier's message, so as to make him more palatable, is a betrayal of this message, as is pretending not to know that in 1818 Fourier proclaimed the absolute need 'to refashion human understanding and forget everything

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.

<sup>3</sup> Auguste Viatte, *Victor Hugo et les Illuminés de son temps*.

we have learned'<sup>4</sup> (which requires us first and foremost to break with universal assent and to do away with so-called 'common sense').

On two occasions, Baudelaire proved rather narrow-minded toward Fourier, by speaking of him without rendering him the honours he is due. 'Fourier,' he writes in *L'Art romantique*

came along one fine day, far too pompously, to reveal to us the mysteries of *analogy*. I will not deny the value of some of his meticulous discoveries, though I think that his mind was too fond of material exactitude to avoid making mistakes and to reach the moral certainty of intuition directly ... Moreover, Swedenborg, whose soul was much greater [?], had already taught us that *the sky is an enormous man*; that everything – form, movement, number, scent, in the *spiritual* as well as the *natural* realm – is significant, reciprocal, converse, *corresponding*.

(We should reread the entire context.) In his letter of 21 January 1856, to Alphonse Toussenel, his bias goes so far as to make him deny, all evidence to the contrary, that the delightful author of *Le Monde des oiseaux* owes anything whatsoever to Fourier: 'Even without Fourier, you would have been who you are. No *reasonable man* needed Fourier to arrive on this earth before he could understand that nature is a *word*, an allegory, a mould, an *embossing*, if you will. We know this, and not because of Fourier. We know it by ourselves, and through the poets.' (Given that Swedenborg and Claude de Saint-Martin are still more forgotten today than they were in Baudelaire's time, the claim that their main ideas were usurped – assuming *they* didn't inherit them – could just as falsely be turned against Baudelaire himself.)

Certainly, the forms in which these ideas were received and the ways in which they were diffused – by Fourier on the one hand, by Nerval and Baudelaire on the other – were very different. What for the latter two affects and reinforces their immutable concept of the sacred, unleashes in the fundamentally profane mind of the former a turbulent principle whose sole aim is the conquest of happiness. *Contrast* – which in Fourier's system is the first 'serial' condition, necessary to satisfy the 'butterfly' passion – is the fully armed Minerva surging from a head in which, on the transcendental plane, hyperlucidity and extreme rigour in matters of social criticism are allied with total freedom of conjecture. Someone has suggested that 'a good thesis topic might be Fourier as humorist and mystifier.' It is certain that a humour of very high tension, punctuated by sparks such as might be generated between the two Rousseaus (Jean-Jacques and Henri), crowns this lighthouse, one of the brightest I know of, whose base defies time and whose crest is thrust into the heavens.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Publication des manuscrits de Fourier,' vol. 4.

<sup>5</sup> 'From an examination of the manuscripts that have already been printed, it is clear that everything concerning the relations between the sexes in Harmony or in other periods has been highly expurgated. Notebooks 50 through 54, class mark 9, of the listing established upon Fourier's death remain unpublished, or almost entirely unpublished.' (Maurice Lansac, *Les Conceptions méthodologiques et sociales de Charles Fourier*.) At last word, these notebooks seem to have disappeared during the recent war, while being secretly transferred from the library of the Ecole Normale Supérieure as part of an effort to safeguard the most precious documents housed there.

## CORONA BOREALIS

When the human race has exploited the globe beyond 60 degrees north latitude, the temperature of the planet will grow noticeably milder and more stable; rutting activities will increase. The aurora borealis, which will occur very frequently, will attach itself to the North Pole and flare out in the form of a ring or corona. The fluid, which today is only luminous, will acquire a new property: the ability to distribute heat as well as light.

The corona will be of such dimensions that at least one of its points will always be in contact with the sun, whose rays will be needed to embrace the circumference of the ring: it should present the sun with an arc, even in the sharpest inclination of the earth's axis.

The influence of the corona borealis will make itself strongly felt up through the first third of its hemisphere; it will be visible in St Petersburg, in Okuotsk, and in every region of the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel.

From the 60<sup>th</sup> degree to the Pole, the heat will increase in such a way that the polar crust will enjoy temperatures comparable to those in Andalusia and Sicily.

At that point, the entire globe can be cultivated, which will cause temperatures to rise by five or six and even twelve degrees in still uncultivated areas such as Siberia and Upper Canada.

While waiting for this future event to take place, let us note the various indicators that announce it. First, there is the contrast in shape between the lands neighbouring the South Pole and those neighbouring the North Pole. The three meridional continents are sharpened into a point, so as to distance themselves from the polar latitude. But we notice a completely different shape in the septentrional continents; they flare out as they near the Pole and group around it, to absorb rays from the ring that will one day crown it; they pour their great rivers toward it, as if to encourage relations with the glacial sea. Now, if God had not planned to give the fecundating corona to the North Pole, it would follow that the arrangements of continents surrounding this Pole would bespeak a monumental ineptitude. And God would be all the more ridiculous for having acted so very unwisely at the opposite point, on the southern continents; for he has given them dimensions perfectly suited to surrounding a pole that will never have a fecundating corona.

One can regret only that God pushed the tip of the Strait of Magellan too far down, which causes a momentary hindrance; but his intent is for the entire route to be abandoned, and for man to build canals in the isthmuses of Suez and Panama through which large craft can navigate. These projects and so many others, the very idea of which horrifies the Civilized, will be mere child's play for the industrial armies of the Spheric hierarchy.

Another harbinger of the corona is the defective positioning of the earth's axis. If we assume that the corona shall never be, then the axis, for the good of the two continents, should be reversed by one-twenty-fourth, or seven and one-half degrees, on the meridians of Sandwick and Constantinople; so that this capital would be located at the 32<sup>nd</sup> parallel. It follows that the Bering Strait and the two tips of Asia and America would sink by the same amount into the ice of the North Pole: it would mean sacrificing the most useless tip of the globe to benefit the other portions.

No one has ever made this observation on the inappropriateness of the axis, because the philosophical spirit makes us shy away from any rational critique of God's works and adopt extreme

positions, whether doubt of Providence or blind and stupid admiration – as is the case with a few scientists, who admire even the spider, even the toad and other such filth, in which we can see only the Creator’s shame, at least until we can learn the motives for this misdeed. It is the same with the earth’s axis, whose deviant position should induce us to disapprove of God, and divine the birth of the corona that will justify the Creator’s apparent blunder. But because our philosophical exaggeration, our mania for either atheism or admiration, has diverted us from any impartial judgment of God’s works, we have managed neither to determine the rectifications required of his work, nor to foresee the material and political revolutions by which he will effect these corrections.

– from *Theory of the Four Movements*

## THE UNION OF THE SEXES IN THE SEVENTH PERIOD [AND NOT THE EIGHTH]

In the cuckolded world, we may distinguish nine degrees of Cuckoldry, either among men or among women, for women are much more frequently cuckolded than men; and if the man wears horns that rise as high as stag’s antlers, we can say that the woman’s rise to the height of tree branches.

I will limit myself to citing the three most distinct classes; namely, the *Cuckold* proper, the *Short-Horn*, and the *Long-Horn*.<sup>6</sup>

1. The *Cuckold*, properly speaking, is honourably jealous and unaware of his disgrace, believing himself to be the sole possessor of his wife. As long as the public maintains his illusion with laudable discretion, we have no reason to mock him: can he become irritated over an offence of which he knows nothing? The ridicule is all for the seducer who cajoles and bows before the man with whom he knowingly shares his beauty.

2. The *Short-Horn* is a husband who has had his fill of domestic love and who, wishing to seek his love-making elsewhere, turns a blind eye to his wife’s conduct and freely leaves her to her admirers, it being understood that he will accept no child from her. Such a husband is not to be ridiculed; on the contrary, he has the right to comment on the horns of others as boldly as if he wore none himself.

3. The *Long-Horn* is ridiculously jealous, bothersome for his wife and quite aware of her infidelity. He is a wild man who wishes to rebel against the decrees of fate, but who, resisting clumsily, becomes an object of mockery by his useless precautions, his anger, his outbursts. When it comes to long-horns, Molière’s George Dandin is a perfect example.

– from *Theory of the Four Movements*

## DETAIL OF A CREATION OF THE HYPOMAJOR KEYBOARD

For us, a familiarity with nature’s system would be quite useless if it did not give us the means to right existing wrongs and replace divisive products, the creatures harmful to man, with counter-moulded and useful servants. What good does it do us to know in what order each star entered

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<sup>6</sup> The complete table contains sixty-four types progressively distributed into classes, orders, and genera, from the *cuckold in the bud* to the *posthumous cuckold*. I have described only three types here, wishing, on this subject as on so many others, to gauge just how far I should develop this Treatise. [Fourier’s note]

the ranks of creation; to know that the horse and the donkey were created by Saturn in such-and-such a modulation; that the zebra and the quagga were created by Proteus (a star that is as yet undiscovered but very real, as we see its effects in every domain); that in this modulation Jupiter begat the ox and the bison; and Mars the camel and the dromedary? After these peculiar notions, we would be left with the bothersome certainty that these stars, normally branded idle strollers, have on the contrary performed on our planet sevenfold too many works, by providing us with creatures seven-eighths of which are nefarious.

What we will find precious is the art of bringing them back to the scene of creation through an effort of countermoulding, by which he who gave us the lion will give us as countermould a superb and docile quadruped, an elastic carrier, the anti-lion: the kind of post animal that would allow a rider, who leaves Calais or Brussels in the morning, to lunch in Paris, dine in Lyons, and sup in Marseilles, less worn out by his journey than one of our mailmen at full gallop. For the horse is a rude and simple carrier (soliped), which will be to the anti-lion what the springless carriage is to the vehicle with suspension. The horse will be left for harnessing and parades, once we possess the family of elastic carriers: the anti-lion, anti-tiger, and anti-leopard will be thrice the size of the current versions. Thus an anti-lion will easily cover eight yards with each bound, and the rider, on the back of his charger, will be as comfortably installed as if in a well-suspended berlin. It will truly be a pleasure to inhabit this world once we have such servants to enjoy.

The new creatures that will start arriving five years from now will give us a profusion of such riches *in every domain*, on sea as on land. Instead of creating whales and sharks, hippopotamuses and crocodiles, would it have cost any more to make these precious servants?

Anti-whales that tow vessels through calm waters

Anti-sharks that help track down fish

Anti-hippopotamuses that tug our boats up river

Anti-crocodiles or river collaborators

Anti-seals or sea-steeds

All these brilliant products will necessarily result from a creation in countermoulded aromas, which will begin with a spheric aromal bath that will purge the seas of their bitumen.

Let us skip over the portrait of these forthcoming marvels: rather than satisfying the reader, the prospect bores a generation that has been raised in impiety and doubts in Providence, a generation that, in its mental indigence, imagines that God does not have as much power to do good as he uses to do evil, for which he must have organized a sevenfold majority in subversive creations, as he will organize a sevenfold majority of good in harmonian creations.

– from *Treatise of the Domestic-Agricultural Association*

## FAMILIAR DEMONSTRATIONS OF THE CATARACT

In harmony, one of the first operations will be to assemble a congress of grammarians and naturalists to compose a unified language, whose system will be regulated based on analogy, with the cries of animals and other natural documents. This work will barely be completed after a century; to finish it, they will have *a certain compass that it is not yet time to reveal*.

# *Punctuation*

In addition to the alphabet of letters, we will have to create one for punctuation, which must contain the same number of signs. So little is known of punctuation that French has only seven signs for it; to wit , ; : . ! ?). The bracket, which was the eighth, is no longer in use. As for accents (é, è, ê, ë), they belong to the various vowels and are not punctuation marks. It is the same for the apostrophe, which would require a mark of its own, rather than just a raised comma. Our language is so poor in this regard that we are obliged to use either the period or the colon, which causes confusion.

I had undertaken to write a work on the full range of punctuation, and had gotten as far as twenty-five marks, illustrated by examples that proved the ambiguity of our current marks: I lost this work before it was finished and I have not returned to it since. Let us note in this regard that the first of all marks, the lowest, called the *comma*, should be differentiated into at least four distinct marks, to allow us to appreciate its many meanings, its different and infinitely varied senses, which now are expressed by means of a single mark: this is the height of confusion. It is the same for the other marks: they accumulate three or four meanings. Civilized punctuation is in real chaos, much like spelling, which varies with every printer in Paris. The Academy, with its obscurantist principle of not allowing even the most blatant vices to be corrected, has alienated people's minds to such a degree that it has resulted in widespread rebellion, a universal anarchy in grammar.

– from *The New Industrial and Societal World*

## **ELEPHANT AND DOG**

Let us first define real and false virtue, by comparing the elephant with the dog, one of whom is the emblem of noble friendship and the other of false friendship.

1. Friendship. – It is noble in the elephant, and always compatible with honour. The elephant has none of the baseness of the dog, who, having been beaten for no reason, retains no memory of it. The elephant will endure just punishment, but he will not let himself be mistreated for no reason; he does not forgive offences. Moreover, his friendship is as constant and devoted as the dog's. This noble friendship is the kind that leads to collective and corporate bonds, while the servile friendship of the dog favours only despotism, the Civilized and barbarian regime that would hardly allow noble passions to flourish, as they do in the elephant. Despots prefer the friendship of the dog, who, unjustly mistreated and debased, still loves and serves the man who wronged him.
2. Love. – It is decent and faithful in the elephant; it is scandalous and criminal in the dog, who in love is the most ignoble of quadrupeds, uniting all vices in this passion; like the loves of the Civilized, in which wiles, fraud, and oppression hold sway.



3. Paternity. – It is judicious and honourable in the elephant. He does not wish to sire offspring who would be born to misery, and he will not procreate in slavery. It is a lesson for the Civilized, who murder their children by producing too many of them without being able to provide for their well-being. Morality or theories of false virtue stimulate them to manufacture cannon fodder, anthills of conscripts who are forced to sell themselves out of poverty. This improvident paternity is a false virtue, the selfishness of pleasure. Thus nature preserved the elephant from this vice, making him the very model of the four affective passions taken in their truly social sense, passions that are suited to general relations. The dog, emblem of false virtues, embodies the kind of false paternity that engenders anthills, litters of eleven (the first of the anti-harmonic numbers), veritable heaps, three-quarters of which will perish by the knife, the tooth, or starvation.
4. Honour. – This is the fourth moulded virtue in the elephant; but it is not the kind of moral honour that claims to disdain riches and recommends that one drink from cupped hands, like Diogenes. The elephant wants not only good food (eighty pounds of rice per day); he also appreciates luxurious clothing, edibles, dishware, and libation. He is humiliated when one switches from silverware to earthenware.

If the elephant is the model of the four social virtues, we must, for the fidelity of our portrait, take him as representative of the fate ridiculed virtue suffers in Civilization. Thus nature has covered him in mud. He himself likes to be covered in dust, in the image of the virtuous man who chooses the path of poverty rather than seeking out a fortune that he can attain only by practising every vice, plunder, baseness, venality, injustice, trafficking, speculation, monopoly, and usury. Nature could have provided this noble animal with a rich coat like the tiger's; but this would have been absurd and inaccurate, for in our societies real and truly honourable virtue leads only to poverty. I say real virtue and not philosophical virtues, such as the wisdom of the chameleon who lends himself to any infamy that will bear fortune.

Nature has given the elephant ivory defences, very rich weapons, by analogy with our social status that allots luxury to force, to the unproductive dominant class. Thus his trunk, which is simultaneously a weapon and a machine, is poorly dressed because it is productive, and the elephant must represent the state of industry and virtue falling victim to injustice and mockery. As an emblem of virtue's fate, he is laughable *behind* by the contrast between his rump and his scrawny, graceless tail.

The extreme smallness of his eyes makes for a shocking contrast with the huge dimensions of his body. It depicts the narrow views of the virtuous man ... His ears are the opposite of his eyes. Their immense mass and flattened form figure the suffering of the man of good will who hears only the language of hypocrisy and perversity in our societies, in which some preach virtue without practising it and others brazenly preach joyful vice. The just man is overwhelmed and offended by this double language of debasement; his ear is flattened from hearing only falseness: this ill-being is externalized in the elephant's ear.

– from *Final Analogies*

## Thomas De Quincey, 1784–1859

‘De Quincey,’ Baudelaire said, ‘is essentially digressive; the term *humorist* can be applied to him more appropriately than to anyone else. At one point, he compares his own thought to a thyrsus, a simple rod that derives its entire physiognomy and charm from the complicated foliage entwined around it.’ In his two famous memoirs (1827 and 1839), published together as *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*, he attempts to lay hold of crime not, as he says, ‘by its moral handle,’ but in an extrasensory, wholly intellectual manner, and to consider it solely in function of the more or less remarkable gifts that it brings into play. Leaving aside the all-too-conventional horror it inspires, murder, according to him, demands to be treated *aesthetically* and appreciated in terms of its qualities, as one would appreciate a work of art or medical case study. The object of pure speculation that it thus becomes is mainly valuable insofar as it meets certain criteria: mystery, indeterminacy of motives, obstacles overcome, breadth and splendour of its success. Brilliantly filling a single one of these conditions, moreover, can be deemed satisfactory: ‘There was ... an unfinished design of Thurtell’s for the murder of a man with a pair of dumb-bells, which I admired greatly.’ One of the book’s heroes, Toad-in-the-hole, an extremely unnerving convulsive character, is identified with the ‘Old Man of the Mountains,’ precursor and master of the art, a ‘shining light’ who later dazzled Alfred Jarry.<sup>1</sup> In an 1854 postscript to his book on three exemplary murders, the author justifies the wilful extravagance of his developments by his desire not to completely abandon levity in such a shocking context, and he lengthily invokes the precedent of Swift.

‘The reader,’ De Quincey says elsewhere, ‘will think I am laughing ... Nevertheless, I have a very reprehensible way of jesting at times in the midst of my own misery.’<sup>2</sup> Few lives were as pathetic as his, few stories as cruel or as marvellous. He wasn’t yet seventeen when he ran away from the provincial school in which his guardians were trying to keep him. Soon out of resources, he wandered through Wales, surviving on blackberries and rosehips. He nonetheless managed to reach London, where he found shelter in a large abandoned house that was occupied at mealtimes by a weasel-faced businessman and, day and night, by a timid ten-year-old girl who acted as this enigmatic fellow’s servant. At breakfast, his host left him some crusts of bread, and the little girl huddled against him to sleep on the floor. In the course of his peregrinations around London, the young De Quincey, who made it a philosophical policy to converse familiarly with anyone – man, woman, or child – that he might meet, fell into a platonic romance with a sixteen-year-old prostitute, Ann, an adorable creature full of tenderness and innocence. Baudelaire dreamed of plucking ‘a feather from an angel’s wing’ with which to describe all the love and desperation that bound those two together. ‘Poor Ann,’ recounted Marcel Schwob, ‘ran to Thomas De Quincey ... as he stumbled in wide Oxford Street under the hefty street lamps. Her eyes brimming with tears, she held a glass of port wine to his lips, kissed and caressed him; then she disappeared once more into the night. She might have died not long afterward. “She was coughing,” said De Quincey, “the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Days and Nights* (1897).

<sup>2</sup> *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.

last time I saw her." Perhaps she was still wandering the streets. But although he looked high and low, although he was ridiculed by all he approached, Ann was lost forever. When later he had a warm house to live in, he often thought with tears in his eyes that poor Ann should have been living there, with him, instead of (as he imagined her) being ill, or dying, or desperate, in the central darkness of a London brothel. She had taken with her all the pitiful love that was in his heart.<sup>3</sup>

Lost forever? No, for at least she returned seventeen years later to haunt his opium-eater's dreams (it was only in 1812 that he began using drugs, to overcome the suffering caused by his long earlier experience of hunger). Her luminous apparition again calmed the torments of utter perdition that are, in De Quincey, the terrible underside of 'the most astonishing, the most complicated, the most splendid vision.'

No one ever showed a deeper compassion for human misery than De Quincey. His sense of universal brotherhood led him, in 1819, to become a passionate admirer of Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy* and to attempt a contribution to the development of this new science (*Prolegomena to all future Systems of Political Economy*). By dint of this very compassion, no one ever showed greater disdain for established reputations: 'Generally speaking, the few people whom I have disliked in this world were flourishing people, of good repute. Whereas the knaves whom I have known, one and all, and by no means few, I think of with pleasure and kindness.'

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## ON MURDER CONSIDERED AS ONE OF THE FINE ARTS

But it is now time that I should say a few words about the principles of murder, not with a view to regulate your practice, but your judgments. As to old women, and the mob of newspaper readers, they are pleased with anything, provided it is bloody enough. But the mind of sensibility requires something more. *First*, then, let us speak of the kind of person who is adapted to the purpose of the murderer; *secondly*, of the place where; *thirdly*, of the time when, and other little circumstances.

As to the person, I suppose it is evident that he ought to be a good man, because, if he were not, he might himself, by possibility, be contemplating murder at the very time; and such 'diamond-cut-diamond' tussles, though pleasant enough where nothing better is stirring, are really not what a critic can allow himself to call murders. I could mention some people (I name no names) who have been murdered by other people in a dark lane; and so far all seemed correct enough; but, on looking further into the matter, the public have become aware that the murdered party was himself, at the moment, planning to rob his murderer, at the least, and possibly to murder him, if he had been strong enough. Whenever that is the case, or may be thought to be the case, farewell to all the genuine effects of the art. For the final purpose of murder, considered as a fine art, is precisely the same as that of tragedy in Aristotle's account of it; viz. 'to cleanse the heart by means of pity and terror.' Now, terror there may be, but how can there be any pity for one tiger destroyed by another tiger?

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<sup>3</sup> *Le Livre de Monelle*.

It is also evident that the person selected ought not to be a public character. For instance, no judicious artist would have attempted to murder Abraham Newland.<sup>4</sup> For the case was this: everybody read so much about Abraham Newland, and so few people ever saw him, that to the general belief he was a mere abstract idea. And I remember that once, when I happened to mention that I had dined at a coffee-house in company with Abraham Newland, everybody looked scornfully at me, as though I had pretended to have played at billiards with Prester John, or to have had an affair of honour with the Pope. And, by the way, the Pope would be a very improper person to murder; for he has such a virtual ubiquity as the father of Christendom, and, like the cuckoo, is so often heard but never seen, that I suspect most people regard *him* also as an abstract idea. Where, indeed, a public man is in the habit of giving dinners, 'with every delicacy of the season,' the case is very different: every person is satisfied that *he* is no abstract idea; and, therefore, there can be no impropriety in murdering him; only that his murder will fall into the class of assassinations, which I have not yet treated.

*Thirdly.* The subject chosen ought to be in good health; for it is absolutely barbarous to murder a sick person, who is usually quite unable to bear it. On this principle, no tailor ought to be chosen who is above twenty-five, for after that age he is sure to be dyspeptic. Or, at least, if a man will hunt in that warren, he will of course think it his duty, on the old established equation, to murder some multiple of 9 – say 18, 27, or 36. And here, in this benign attention to the comfort of sick people, you will observe the usual effect of a fine art to soften and refine the feelings. The world in general, gentlemen, are very bloody-minded; and all they want in a murder is a copious effusion of blood; gaudy display in this point is enough for *them*. But the enlightened connoisseur is more refined in his taste; and from our art, as from all the other liberal arts when thoroughly mastered, the result is, to humanize the heart; so true is it that

'Ingenuas didicisse fideoliter artes  
Emollit mores, nec sinit esse ferus.'

A philosophic friend, well known for his philanthropy and general benignity, suggests that the subject chosen ought also to have a family of young children wholly dependent on his exertions, by way of deepening the pathos. And, undoubtedly, this is a judicious caution. Yet I would not insist too keenly on such a condition. Severe good taste unquestionably suggests it; but still, where the man was otherwise unobjectionable in point of morals and health, I would not look with too curious a jealousy to a restriction which might have the effect of narrowing the artist's sphere.

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Newland [chief cashier of the Bank of England] is now utterly forgotten. But, when this was written [1827], his name had not ceased to ring in British ears, as the most familiar and most significant that perhaps has ever existed. It was the name which appeared on the face of all Bank of England notes, great or small; and had been, for more than a quarter of a century (especially through the whole career of the French Revolution), a shorthand expression for paper money in its safest form. [*De Quincey's note*]

## Pierre-François Lacenaire, 1800–1836

‘I’m going to my death,’ says Lacenaire, ‘by a poor route: up a stairway.’

Deserter and forger in France, murderer in Italy, then thief and murderer in Paris – and constantly, as he himself said, ‘thinking up sinister projects against society’ – Lacenaire devoted the few months preceding his execution to writing his *Memoirs, Revelations, and Poems*, and put all his efforts into reinforcing the spectacular appeal of his trial. The ghost of not one of his victims, whether the Swiss guard from Verona, his ex-cellmate Chardon, or the latter’s mother, no more than the image of the bank messenger whom he had tried to kill in order to rob, ruffled for even one instant the half-distracted, half-amused attitude he maintained throughout the proceedings. Without seeking in the least to save his own neck, he played one last cruel trick by testifying against his accomplices, who were trying mightily to save theirs. As for himself, he limited his efforts to offering a materialistic justification for his crimes. From the ethical viewpoint, there seems never to have been a more *serene* conscience than this bandit’s.

On the eve of his death, he joked with the priests who came to bother him, the phrenologists and anatomists who were waiting to get their hands on him; he admitted feeling ‘little bouts of melancholy’ that ‘entertained’ him. That night, through the bars of his cell, he was ‘on the verge of playing peek-a-boo with the guard.’

One critic, recently celebrating the hundredth anniversary of a famous work by Balzac, wrote: ‘In 1836, when the book appeared, coldly received and even denigrated by the press, the public that had just been wild about Lacenaire, the elegant murderer in the blue frock coat, the poet of the courtroom and theoretician of the “right to crime,” did not seem immediately to appreciate the charms of *The Lily of the Valley*.’

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Mémoires, Révélations et Poésies de Lacenaire*, 1836.

### DREAMS OF A MAN ON DEATH ROW

How happy you are when you dream! ...  
Dreams without sleep are a treat.  
In less than an hour, I compose  
A novel both pleasant and sweet.  
I dream up a world to my taste,  
The best lots are always for me,  
And so I shall never decide  
A king or a ruler to be.  
In my retreat so solitary  
The future is not my concern;  
I revel in my fantasy  
And dwell on the past’s sweet return;

Such dreams fresh and green from my youth,  
Which sorrow could not mortify,  
Bring comfort to soothe my old age:  
One is old when one is soon to die.  
Sometimes in a palace superb  
I gather up beauties galore;  
More frequently stretched on the grass  
I have only Lise to adore;  
The gauze that her breast gently lifts  
Despite me calls my mind to roam.  
What pity that I am then left  
To finish these visions alone.  
Sometimes in a humble abode,  
Glad father and sensible spouse,  
My good mother dotes at my side  
And my children rest on my knees;  
In the shadow of plants green and lush  
I read and I write turn by turn;  
But alas! comes a storm loud and harsh –  
Oh why must this dream end so soon?

# Christian Dietrich Grabbe, 1801–1836

The detestable renown that has attached itself to Grabbe's life story does not even spare his childhood. No author has been more sharply rebuked by his biographers, none has offered more footholds for criticism in its most useless and least scientific form: moralizing. They tell us that he grew up with the worst influences: his father ran a house of correction, he inherited his mother's penchant for drunkenness. As a law student in Berlin, he composed at the age of eighteen his first drama, *Herzog Theodor von Gothland*, becoming for a moment the great hope of the Romantic school. Soon afterward, he disappointed the expectations of the public, which he lost no opportunity to shock and scandalize. Even Heine and Tieck, who were his friends, could not stand for long his antisocial nature and the extreme laxity of his morals. After trying to become an actor, he returned to the study of law, practising for a while the profession of attorney, then of low-ranking military official in his native city. He married during that same period, but abandoned his wife almost immediately and was stripped of his functions. Employed by the theatre director, Immermann, to copy out roles, he adapted extraordinarily badly to his new existence and, completely worn out by alcoholism, returned to die near his wife, no doubt the only person still willing to see him.

In Grabbe's dramatic output, the play translated by Alfred Jarry under the title *Les Silènes* – the German original of which actually translates as *Comedy, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Meaning* – occupies a place all its own.<sup>1</sup> A summary analysis could give only a hint of the merits of this work, whose genial buffoonery has never been surpassed, which clashes with its era to the highest degree and is endowed more than any other with countless extensions that reach all the way down to us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Don Juan und Faust*, 1829. *Kaiser Friedrich Barbarossa*, 1829. *Heinrich VI*, 1830. *Napoleon oder Die hundert Tage*, 1831. *Hannibal*, 1835.

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: *Comedy, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Meaning*. *Don Juan and Faust*.

## THE SILENI

### 1.

*A bright, hot summer's day. The Devil is sitting on a hillock, freezing.*

THE DEVIL: It's cold, cold, cold – the weather's much hotter in Hell! – And just because seven is the most frequent number in the Bible, my satirical grandmother has given me seven little fur

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<sup>1</sup> Since this notice was written, Mr Robert Valançay has shown that we must be extremely cautious about crediting Jarry with the entire French text of *Les Silènes*. 'The liminary poem and the erotic passages that pepper this work do not appear in any German edition of Grabbe. Are they by Jarry? I am inclined to believe that they were written by the publisher, a capable pastiche artist, who added them for the purpose at hand.' We can do no better than to refer the reader to Mr Valançay's own, very faithful rendition.

shirts, seven little fur coats, and seven little fur hats. – But it's cold, cold, cold! God help me, it really is cold! If only I could steal some wood or light a forest – light a forest! – By all the angels in Heaven! It'd really be something if the Devil froze to death! Steal some wood – light a forest – light – steal ...

*He freezes to death.*

## 2.

*Enter a botanist, botanizing.*

THE NATURALIST: I say, you can really find some rare plant life in this neck of the woods; Linnaeus, Jussieu ... Good lord, who's that lying on the ground? A dead man, and as one can plainly see, frozen! Well, if that doesn't beat all! A miracle, if anything can be called a miracle! Today is the second of August, the sun is blazing in the sky, it's the hottest day I've ever seen, and this man dares, has the nerve, against all the laws and observations of the great sages, to freeze to death! – No, that's impossible, absolutely impossible! I'd better put my glasses back on!

*He puts on his glasses.*

Astounding! Astounding! I've put my glasses back on and this fellow is just as frozen as ever! Astounding and more astounding! I must show my colleagues!

*He grabs the Devil by the collar and drags him away.*

## 3.

*A room in a castle. The Devil is stretched out on a table with four naturalists standing around him.*

FIRST NATURALIST: You will agree, will you not, Gentlemen, that this corpse presents a rather complicated case?

SECOND NATURALIST: If you say so! But it is a shame that his fur garments are knotted in such labyrinthine fashion that not even Captain Cook, who has sailed round the world, could undo them.

FIRST NATURALIST: So you agree that this is a man?

THIRD NATURALIST: Naturally! He has five fingers and no tail.

FOURTH NATURALIST: Well, then, here is the question: what sort of man is he?

FIRST NATURALIST: Precisely! But since we cannot proceed too cautiously, and even though it is still broad daylight, I propose that we light one of the lamps.

THIRD NATURALIST: Quite so, dear colleague!

*They light a lamp and set it on the table, near the Devil.*

FIRST NATURALIST, *after all four have examined the Devil with the closest possible attention:* Gentlemen, I now believe that I see the facts clearly as regards this enigmatic cadaver, and I trust that I am not mistaken. Observe the turned-up nose, the wide and thick-lipped mouth – observe, I say, the inimitable streak of divine vulgarity shaping the entire face, and there shall be no doubt that you see lying before you one of our modern critics, and an authentic one at that.

SECOND NATURALIST: Dear colleague, I cannot fully share your view, perspicacious as it might otherwise be. Leaving aside the fact that our critics today, and our drama critics in particular, are more naive than they are vulgar, I do not see in this dead face a single one of the characteristics you have kindly enumerated. On the contrary, I utterly maintain that it possesses something of a maiden's comeliness! The bushy, plunging eyebrows indicate delicate feminine



modesty, which takes such pains to conceal its gaze; and the nose, which you call *turned-up*, seems rather to be tilted aside out of courtesy, so as to offer the languishing lover more room to plant his kisses ... But enough: unless everything deceives me, this frozen human being is a parson's daughter.

THIRD NATURALIST: I must confess, Sir, that I find your hypothesis rather haphazard. Parson's daughter though she may be, a parson's daughter is nonetheless endowed with that bearing generally possessed by those divine creatures we call women: the nonchalant inflection of the neck, the musical undulation of the vertebrae, the distinguished swelling of the thighs (from the Old Teutonic *theuhom*), and I cogitate that in the place normally reserved for the lips (from the Greek *nymphê*) the subject before us is adorned with an appendage in the form of a trident. I therefore posit that this is the Devil.

FIRST AND SECOND NATURALISTS: That is *ab initio* impossible, for the Devil can hardly fit into our system.

FOURTH NATURALIST: Please, esteemed colleagues, let us not bicker! Now I will give you *my* opinion, which I wager shall immediately become yours. Consider the phenomenal ugliness of this face, which leads us to squabble over its every expression, and you will surely be forced to concede that such a gargoyle could hardly exist if there were no such thing as a woman of letters.

THE THREE OTHER NATURALISTS: Yes, it's a woman of letters. We yield to the force of your arguments.

FOURTH NATURALIST: I thank you, my dear colleagues! But what's this? Do you see how the corpse has begun to move since we placed the light before her nose? Now her fingers are twitching – now her head is nodding – she's opening her eyes – she's alive!

THE DEVIL, *sitting up on the table*: Where am I? Oooh, I'm still freezing! *To the naturalists*: Would you be so kind, Gentlemen, as to shut those two windows over there? I can't stand drafts!

FIRST NATURALIST, *closing the windows*: Weak lungs, I see.

THE DEVIL, *getting down from the table*: Not always! Not if I'm sitting in a nice roaring oven!

SECOND NATURALIST: What? You can sit in a roaring oven?

THE DEVIL: Why, yes, I do enjoy sitting in one now and then.

THIRD NATURALIST: Astounding habit!

*He jots it down.*

FOURTH NATURALIST: Is it not true, Madam, that you are a woman of letters?

THE DEVIL: A woman of letters? Whatever do you mean? The Devil plagues such women, but God save the Devil if they're the Devil himself.

ALL FOUR NATURALISTS: What? So that's the Devil? The Devil??

*They begin to flee.*

THE DEVIL, *aside*: Ah! now for once I can lie to my heart's content. *Aloud*: Gentlemen, Gentlemen, where are you going? Calm down. Surely you're not going to run off like that just because I indulged in a small joke on my name!

*The naturalists return.*

*My name* is Devil, but that's not who I really *am*.

FIRST NATURALIST: To whom do we have the honour of speaking, then?

THE DEVIL: Theophilus Christian Devil, at your service: Bishop for the Duchy of —, honorary member of a Society for the Advancement of Christianity among the Jews, and Knight of the

Papal Order of Civic Merit, which was recently – in the Middle Ages, that is – bestowed on me by the Pope for keeping the populace in a state of perpetual fear.

FOURTH NATURALIST: So, you must have reached a ripe old age by now!

THE DEVIL: Not at all. I'm only eleven years old.

FIRST NATURALIST *to the second*: That's the biggest liar I've ever seen.

SECOND NATURALIST *to the third*: Then he'll be very successful with the ladies.

*During this time, the Devil has moved closer to the lamp and has unwittingly plunged his finger into the flame.*

FIRST NATURALIST: Good lord, Mr Bishop, what are you doing? Your finger is in the flame!

THE DEVIL, *disconcerted, yanking his finger out*: I ... I like putting my finger into flames!

THIRD NATURALIST: Curious pastime.

*He jots it down.*

*The Devil makes an offer to the Margrave Murdrock, to whose home they have brought him frozen in the month of August. He will procure for him the young Baroness Liddy on two conditions: first, that Murdrock will make his eldest son study philosophy, and second, that he will put thirteen journeyman tailors to death.*

THE MARGRAVE: Why journeyman tailors, of all people?

THE DEVIL: Because they are the most innocent.

*They haggle over the number of journeyman tailors and finally agree on twelve, deciding that the thirteenth will not be put to death, but will only have his ribs broken.*

*The Devil buys the young woman from her fiancé, Du Val, for 19,999 écus, 18 cents, and 2 farthings, the product of a correct estimation of her physical and moral faculties (with a discount on the grounds of her being intelligent). It is agreed that they will persuade the poet Ratbane to bring the young woman to the little house in Schallbrünn.*

*They find the poet Ratbane busy looking all around him for subjects of inspiration. Here is a young man who cloisters himself away to satisfy a natural urge – this will not do. At the same time, here is an old man gnawing on a crust of bread, and Ratbane, in a state of exaltation, writes these three lines:*

I was sitting at my table and gnawing on my quill

Much like the lion, when dawn pales with fear,

Gnaws on the horse, his rapid quill ...

*Enter the Devil.*

THE DEVIL: Don't be alarmed! I've read all your works.

*Nothing remarkable about that – for one of the great consolations of the damned, he confides, is to delight in the worst literature in the world: German literature.*

RATBANE: Hey, man! if German literature's your main business, your other hobbies must be pretty weird!

THE DEVIL: Here's the thing: in our off-hours, we make window panes or eyeglass lenses out of invisible spirits. So the other day, when my grandmother was seized with the curious notion of looking into the essence of Virtue, she set the two philosophers Kant and Aristotle on her nose. But her vision only grew cloudier; so she made herself a lorgnette out of two Pomeranian peasants, and then she could see clear as a bell.

*Why did the Devil come to earth? 'Because they're cleaning Hell top to bottom.' All the irreproachable, heroic, or brilliant individuals Ratbane asks about are in Hell: the Marquis Posa, the painter*

*Spinarosa, the Wallenstein of Schiller and the Hugo of Miller, as well as Shakespeare, Dante, Horace – the latter having married Mary Stuart – Schiller, Ariosto – Ariosto’s just bought himself a new umbrella – Calderón, etc.*

*A fabulous schoolmaster à la Groucho Marx reigns over the scene in all his vertiginous loquaciousness, dominating a few colourless individuals, veritable ‘palcontents’ before the fact:*

THE SCHOOLMASTER *to Mushcliff*: Mister Mushcliff! What a pleasant surprise! How did you like Italy, land where the stones speak? Is the Venus de Medici showing any signs of age yet? I hope the Pope hadn’t trod in any dung before you kissed his foot? I ...

Mister Tobias, have you heard that a dentist who pulls teeth for free arrived at the inn just an hour ago?

TOBIAS: Why should I care! As you can see, my twin rows of teeth are so healthy I could use them to whet my pitchforks.

THE SCHOOLMASTER: So what? He’ll pull them *for free*. You can’t pass up a bargain like that!

TOBIAS: You’re right. Any bargain is a good bargain. I’ll go over right now and have all my molars ripped out.

*He exits.*

*Intent on ensnaring the Devil, the schoolmaster takes his leave and stumbles toward the forest. Having placed several volumes of erotica<sup>2</sup> in a huge cage that he has carried on his back, he goes off to lie in wait. The Devil enters, sniffing.*

THE SCHOOLMASTER: There he is already. How that tickles his nose!

THE DEVIL: I smell two kinds of things here. To my left, something immodest ...; to my right, something drunk that looks after children.

THE SCHOOLMASTER: I’ll be damned! I hope he doesn’t mean me!

*But the Devil falls victim to the plot all the same. Shut up in the cage, he is freed only by the intervention of his grandmother – a blooming young woman in Russian winter garb – accompanied by Nero and Tiberius (Nero stands near the great stairway and is cleaning the horse’s boots; ‘Comrade Tiberius’ is at the laundry, drying his clothes).*

*All the drunkards in the play, in the company of the young Baroness Liddy, are reunited in the little house in Schallbrunn.*

RATBANE, *at the window*: Who goes there with a lantern in the forest! He seems to be heading this way.

THE SCHOOLMASTER, *sitting by the window*: The Devil take him. That wiseguy is coming this late at night just to drink up our punch. It’s the damned author – or as we should call him, the minuscule author, the author of this play. He’s dim as a cow’s clog, spits on every other writer though he’s good for nothing himself, has a gimpy leg, shifty eyes, and an insipid monkey’s face. Slam the door in his face, Mister Baron, slam the door!

THE AUTHOR, *outside, behind the door*: Oh! Cursed Schoolmaster! You colossal liar!

THE SCHOOLMASTER: Slam the door, Mister Baron, slam the door in his face!

LIDDY: Schoolmaster, how bitter you are toward the man who created you. *A knock at the door.* Come in.

*Enter the author, carrying a lit lantern.*

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<sup>2</sup> In the original version, these ‘volumes of erotica’ were twenty condoms, but censorship forced Grabbe to change the reference. [*trans.*]

## Pétrus Borel, 1809–1859

‘*Yo soy que soy*’ (I am what I am): this phrase, Borel’s motto, was also the last one uttered by Swift three years before his death, as he stared pityingly into a mirror and they hurriedly removed the knife within his reach. And Pétrus Borel, in the portrait used as the frontispiece to his volume of poems, *Rhapsodies*, is also holding a dagger pointed at his breast. His book of ‘bitter tales,’ *Champavert*, a ‘book without equal, a lugubrious hoax, a joke played by a terrible imagination,’ in which the ‘sinister, semi-farcical, semi-repugnant word’ holds sway (so says Jules Claretie), and his admirable *Madame Putiphar*, a work swept by one of the strongest revolutionary winds that ever blew (in *Les Débats*, the very hostile Jules Janin compared it to the writings of the Marquis de Sade), abound in situations that elicit laughter and tears at the same time, in strokes that blend the most painful sincerity with a keen sense of provocation and an irresistible need for defiance. ‘I’ve come to ask you a favour,’ one of Borel’s characters, Passereau the schoolboy, tells an executioner. ‘I’ve come to beg you humbly, and I would be most appreciative of your gentle indulgence, to do me the honour and the kindness of chopping off my head? ...’ ‘What’s that?’ ‘I would very much like you to chop off my head!’ The writer’s style, to which the epithet ‘frenetic’ applies as to no one else, as well as his attentively baroque spelling, indeed seem bent on inspiring in his reader a certain resistance to the very emotions he is trying to elicit – a resistance stemming from the extreme peculiarity of the author’s form, without which his inordinately alarming message would surpass all human ability to receive it.

A lithograph by Célestin Nanteuil, after Louis Boulanger, preserves the expression of those ‘large, sad, shining eyes’ that Théophile Gautier spoke of, adding: ‘We feel that he is not our contemporary, that nothing about him suggests modern man, but rather that he must come from the depths of the past.’ A certain ambiguity does indeed arise from the contrast between that expression and the spectral appearance of the man at full height, hand resting on the head of his dog, who would die from having shared his master’s poverty for too long. This poverty was so great that after the publication of *Champavert*, Borel had to force himself, in order to survive, to mass-produce speeches for scholastic awards ceremonies. In 1846, exhausted by his mercenary chores, physically aged and morally unrecognizable, he let Gautier request on his behalf the vacant post of colonial inspector in Mostaganem. Destitute soon after his arrival, then offered the same post in Constantine, he again found himself destitute and, utterly desperate, was forced to work the soil. Up to the end, this man, whom life spared so few hardships, never argued with the forces of nature. Under the broiling sun, he said: ‘I will not cover my head. Nature does what she does perfectly well, and it is not our place to correct her. If my hair falls out, it simply means that my forehead is now meant to go bare.’ Several days later, he died from sunstroke.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Rhapsodies*, 1831. *Champavert*, 1833. *Madame Putiphar*, 1839, etc.

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: *Champavert: Seven Bitter Tales*.

## RHAPSODIES (INTRODUCTION)

Those who judge me by this book and despair will be mistaken; those who appoint me a great talent will be mistaken as well. I am not being modest: for those who accuse me of meta-quarrellizing I have my poetic convictions, and I will laugh at them.

I have nothing more to say, except that I could easily have made this preliminary into a paranymp, or my ethopoeia, or else a long treatise on art *ex professo*; but the thought of selling a preface revolts me. And besides, wouldn't it be ridiculous to say so much about so little? And yet I cannot help thinking about it. I have a few pieces tainted by politics: won't I be anathematized, won't people yowl that I sound like a Republican? – To forestall any questions, I'll say it very plainly: yes, I am a Republican! Just ask the Duc d'Orléans, senior, if he remembers, as he was being sworn in before the ex-Chamber on 9 August, if he remembers the voice that pursued him, throwing the cries of *Liberty* and *Republic* in his face, in the midst of applause from a stacked crowd? Yes! I am a Republican; but it is not the July sun that makes this lofty thought bloom in me. I have been a Republican since childhood, but not a Republican with a red or blue garter on my *carmagnole*,<sup>1</sup> windy haranguer of warehouses and planter of poplars. I'm a Republican in the sense that a lynx would understand: my Republicanism is lycanthropy! – If I speak of the Republic, it is because for me the word represents the greatest independence that civilized association can allow. I'm a Republican because I cannot be a Caribbean. I need an enormous amount of liberty: will the Republic provide it? I haven't had enough experience to judge. But when this hope is dashed like so many other illusions, I will still have Missouri! ... When one is as divided as I am, when one has been embittered by so many evils – if one then dreams of equality and calls for agrarian reform, one would still deserve only applause.

There are those who say: This volume is the work of a lunatic, one of those pamphleteers who have put God and the soul back in fashion; who according to journalistic hacks eat children and mix their grogs in skulls. Those people I can avoid: I know who they are.

Forehead dented and crushed as if by forceps, stringy hair, on each cheek a strip of hairy hide, a shirt collar that buries the head and forms a double triangle of white cloth, stovepipe hat, clawhammer coat, and umbrella.

For those who will say, It's the work of a Saint-Simoniac! ... For those who say, It's the work of a Republican, a king-eater: he must be killed! ... For those, they will be shopkeepers without a clientele: hucksters without clients are tigers! ..., notaries who would lose everything with one reform: the notary is as Philippist as a haberdasher! ... They will be good people, equating the Republic with the guillotine and *assignats*.<sup>2</sup> For them, the Republic is just head-chopping. They have understood nothing about Saint-Just's great mission: they hold a few necessities against him, and then they admire the carnages of Buonaparte – Buonaparte! – and his eight million men killed.

To those who will say, This book has something revoltingly lower-class about it, the answer is that indeed the author does not sleep in a king's bed.

Moreover, isn't it appropriate for an era when our government consists of stupid discount brokers and arms merchants, and when we have as monarch a man whose legend and epigraph goes: 'Praise be to God and to my shops, too!'

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<sup>1</sup> A short jacket worn at the time of the French Revolution. [*trans.*]

<sup>2</sup> Banknotes used during the Revolution. [*trans.*]

Luckily we can still take consolation in adultery! Maryland tobacco! and *papel español por cigaritos*.

## MERCHANT IS SYNONYMOUS WITH THIEF

A poor man who out of need takes the smallest object is thrown in jail; but privileged merchants open shops on the roadside to rob any passerby who strays in. These thieves have neither passkeys nor crowbars, but they do have scales, ledgers, boutiques, and no one can walk out again without feeling that he has just been fleeced. Little by little, over time, these thieves get rich and turn into landowners – brazen landowners, as they call themselves.

At the slightest political movement, they assemble and take up arms, screaming that someone's trying to rob them, and they go massacre any generous heart who stands up against the tyranny.

Stupid junk dealers! You've got some nerve to talk about property, as you fall like plunderers onto the poor souls who come to your counters! ... Go ahead, defend your property! evil boors! who, abandoning the country, have descended on the city like hordes of starving wolves and crows, to suck at the carcass. Go ahead, defend your property! ... Filthy crooks, would you even *have* any if not for your barbarous pillaging? Would you! ... if you didn't sell brass for gold, dye for wine? Poisoners!

I do not believe that one can become rich without being a shark; a sensitive man will never amass wealth.

To get rich, one must have but a single idea, one fixed, hard, immutable thought: the desire to make a heap of gold. And in order to increase this heap of gold, one must be inflexible, a usurer, thief, extortionist, and murderer! And one must especially mistreat the small and the weak!

And when this mountain of gold has been amassed, one can climb up on it, and from up on the summit, a smile on one's lips, one can contemplate the valley of poor wretches that one has created.

Big business robs the merchant, the merchant robs the retailer, the retailer robs the skilled labourer, the skilled labourer robs the worker, and the worker dies of starvation.

It isn't those who labour with their hands who make good, it's those who exploit their fellow men.

I will say nothing about the death penalty: there have been enough eloquent voices since Beccaria to condemn it. But I will stand in protest, I will call infamy down upon the head of the witness for the prosecution, I will cover him with shame! Can you imagine being a witness for the prosecution? ... How horrible! Only humanity could come up with such monstrosities! Is any barbarity more refined, more civilized than the witness for the prosecution? ...

In Paris there are two dens, one for thieves, the other for murderers. The den of thieves is the Stock Exchange; the den of murderers is the Courthouse.

– from *Champavert*

## THE UNDERTAKER

'You're enjoying a smoke with some friends and you're waiting for refreshments, when – bang! bang! someone knocks at your door. "Who's there?" – "It's me, Sir, bringing your beer." – "Is it

light?” – “Yes, Sir.” – “Good. Leave it in the anteroom and come back for the empties tomorrow.” The man obeys and leaves. But imagine your surprise when, rushing out in his wake, you find yourself staring at a horrible can!

... All joking, all antitheses aside, if old-fashioned French gaiety with its pot belly and its little kazoos still flourishes in any corner of the world, you can believe – and I’m telling you the truth – that it is surely in funerals. That is where the mountebank’s platform is still impounded. Only there does Momus still shake his little bells. – So it is that businessmen farmers (for, since the decree of the Year XII, the dead are farmed like tobacco), whom you imagine to be drenched in sorrow and chock-full of epitaphs regarding God and Honour!, are on the contrary good and joyful lugs, gay dogs all the way, grabbing the best of everything and heartily leading a merry life! They are pretty much all friendly song-and-dance men, all adorable vaudevillians! who can claim a monopoly at the same time over the boulevards, the Royal Palace, the fairs, and the catacombs. – And after having made us die laughing in the evening, they bury us the next day.

All Souls’ Day is the feast of Funerals, the carnival of the Undertaker! How short the day after All Saints’ Day seemed, but how brilliant! ... Early in the morning, the entire corporation gathered in new clothes, and while these gentlemen farmers, dressed in their most elegant mourning outfits with cloaks nonchalantly thrown over their shoulders, spread their largesse about, while the glasses and pitchers circulated, they handily emptied a barrel. Then, a herald having sounded the boot-and-saddle, they rushed into their gear, headed off belly to the ground, triple time, and before long they reached the fires of hell, a dance hall that once enjoyed quite a reputation. There, in a solitary garden, under a magnificent catafalque, an enormous table was set (the tablecloth was black and littered with silver tears and embroidered crossbones), and everyone immediately took a seat. – They served the soup in a cenotaph, the salad in a sarcophagus, the anchovies in coffins! – Everyone slept on gravestones, – they sat on cypresses; – the goblets were urns; – they drank beer of every variety; – they ate crepes; and, under the names *nature’s jelly moulds*, *embryos in béchamel*, *orphan hash*, *geezer stew*, and *cavalryman supremes*, they consumed the most delicate and sumptuous dishes. – Everything was in abundance and in circulation! – Everything was served in mountains! – Compared to this, the wedding in Cana was like Lent, and Rubens’s kermesse but a desolate scene. – With spirits rising and growing more and more expansive, and with a thousand sparks flying from the shock, jokes finally overflowed from all sides – witticisms rained down – vaudeville acts were spawned by the bellyful. – They sang, they shouted, they drank the health of the departed and toasted Death, and soon the most hair-raising and dishevelled orgy was unleashed. Everything was knocked over! Everything was turned inside-out! Everything was demolished! Everything was topsy-turvy! It looked like a vast common grave jolted awake by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. – Then, when this first tumult had begun to die down, they lit the punch; and by its infernal glow – several undertakers having stretched ropes of intestines over empty caskets, made bows out of heads of hair and tibial flutes from leg bones – a horrific orchestra improvised. And as the multitude got ahold of itself, an immense round dance was organized and turned ceaselessly on itself, emitting blood-freezing howls like a round of the damned.

– first published in *L’Artiste*

## Edgar Allan Poe, 1809–1849

Whatever Poe's main claim might have been, judging from his 'Philosophy of Composition' – i.e., to make the realization of a work of art depend on a prior, methodic organization of its elements in view of producing a desired effect – we must nonetheless admit that he often departed from that discipline in his own work and let his fantasy run wild. No matter what has been said, his taste for the artificial and extraordinary won out on many occasions over his will to analysis: it would be hard to imagine this lover of Chance not allowing for chance expressions. I can recall the specious distinction that Paul Valéry, in conversation some twenty years ago, tried to establish between what he called 'strange' and 'bizarre' individuals. Only the first kind found favour in his eyes, Poe naturally belonging to that category. He chided the others, such as Jarry, for being so concerned with their external oddity. But in the man whom Mallarmé physically described as the 'devil from head to toe!', his tragic, black stylishness, worried and discreet, we can sometimes recognize, as Apollinaire did, 'the marvellous drunk from Baltimore.' 'Literary jealousies, the vertigo of the infinite, marital woes, the insults of poverty: Poe,' recounts Baudelaire, 'fled all of it in the darkness of his drunken stupor, as if in the darkness of the grave. For he drank not as a lush, but as a barbarian ... In New York, on the very morning that the *American Whig Review* published "The Raven,"<sup>1</sup> while Poe's name was on everyone's lips and everyone was fighting over his poem, he was lurching down Broadway, stumbling and clutching the building facades.' By itself, such a contradiction would be enough to generate humour, whether it bursts nervously from the conflict between exceptional logical faculties, high intellectual tenor, and the fog of drunkenness ('The Angel of the Odd'), or whether, in its most shadowy form, it prowls around the human inconsistencies revealed by certain morbid states ('The Imp of the Perverse').

### THE ANGEL OF THE ODD: *An Extravaganza*

It was a chilly November afternoon. I had just consummated an unusually hearty dinner, of which the dyspeptic *truffle* formed not the least important item, and was sitting alone in the dining-room, with my feet upon the fender, and at my elbow a small table which I had rolled up to the fire, and upon which were some apologies for dessert, with some miscellaneous bottles of wine, spirit and *liqueur*. In the morning I had been reading Glover's 'Leonidas,' Wilkie's 'Epigoniad,' Lamartine's 'Pilgrimage,' Barlow's 'Columbiad,' Tuckermann's 'Sicily,' and Griswold's 'Curiosities'; I am willing to confess, therefore, that I now felt a little stupid. I made effort to arouse myself by aid of frequent Lafitte, and, all failing, I betook myself to a stray newspaper in despair. Having carefully perused the column of 'houses to let,' and the column of 'dogs lost,' and then the two columns of 'wives and apprentices runaway,' I attacked with great resolution the editorial

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<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire seems to have been mistaken: 'The Raven' was actually published, in January 1845, in the New York *Evening Mirror*. Poe did contribute to the *American Whig Review* that same year, but with a critical piece on 'American Drama.' [trans.]



matter, and, reading it from beginning to end without understanding a syllable, conceived the possibility of its being Chinese, and so re-read it from the end to the beginning, but with no more satisfactory result. I was about throwing away, in disgust,

This folio of four pages, happy work

Which not even poets criticize,

when I felt my attention somewhat aroused by the paragraph which follows:

‘The avenues to death are numerous and strange. A London paper mentions the decease of a person from a singular cause. He was playing at ‘puff the dart,’ which is played with a long needle inserted in some worsted, and blown at a target through a tin tube. He placed the needle at the wrong end of the tube, and drawing his breath strongly to puff the dart forward with force, drew the needle into his throat. It entered the lungs, and in a few days killed him.’

Upon seeing this I fell into a great rage, without exactly knowing why. ‘This thing,’ I exclaimed, ‘is a contemptible falsehood – a poor hoax – the lees of the invention of some pitiable penny-a-liner – of some wretched concoctor of accidents in Cocaigne. These fellows, knowing the extravagant gullibility of the age, set their wits to work in the imagination of improbable possibilities – of odd accidents, as they term them; but to a reflecting intellect (like mine,’ I added, in parenthesis, putting my forefinger unconsciously to the side of my nose), ‘to a contemplative understanding such as I myself possess, it seems evident at once that the marvellous increase of late in these “odd accidents” is by far the oddest accident of all. For my own part, I intend to believe nothing henceforward that has any thing of the “singular” about it.’

‘Mein Gott, den, vat a vool you bees for dat!’ replied one of the most remarkable voices I ever heard. At first I took it for a rumbling in my ears – such as a man sometimes experiences when getting very drunk – but, upon second thought, I considered the sound as more nearly resembling that which proceeds from an empty barrel beaten with a big stick; and, in fact, this I should have concluded it to be, but for the articulation of the syllables and words. I am by no means naturally nervous, and the very few glasses of Lafitte which I had sipped served to embolden me a little, so that I felt nothing of trepidation, but merely uplifted my eyes with a leisurely movement, and looked carefully around the room for the intruder. I could not, however, perceive any one at all.

‘Humph!’ resumed the voice, as I continued my survey, ‘you mus pe so dronk as de pig, den, for not zee me as I zit here at your zide.’

Hereupon I bethought me of looking immediately before my nose, and there, sure enough, confronting me at the table sat a personage nondescript, although not altogether indescribable. His body was a wine-pipe, or a rum-puncheon, or something of that character, and had a truly Falstaffian air. In its nether extremity were inserted two kegs, which seemed to answer all the purposes of legs. For arms there dangled from the upper portion of the carcass two tolerably long bottles, with the necks outward for hands. All the head that I saw the monster possessed of was like a Hessian canteen which resembles a large snuff-box with a hole in the middle of the lid. This canteen (with a funnel on its top, like a cavalier cap slouched over the eyes) was set on edge upon the puncheon, with the hole toward myself; and through this hole, which seemed puckered up like the mouth of a very precise old maid, the creature was emitting certain rumbling and grumbling noises which he evidently intended for intelligible talk.

‘I zay,’ said he, ‘you mos pe dronk as de pig, vor zit dare and not zee me zit ere; and I zay, doo, you most pe pigger vool as de goose, vor to dispelief vat iz print in de print. ’Tis de troof – dat it iz – eberry vord ob it.’

‘Who are you, pray?’ said I, with much dignity, although somewhat puzzled; ‘how did you get here? and what is it you are talking about?’

‘As vor ow I com’d ere,’ replied the figure, ‘dat iz none of your pizzness; and as vor vat I be talking apout, I be talk apout vat I tink proper; and as vor who I be, vy dat is de very ting I com’d here for to let you zee for yourzef.’

‘You are a drunken vagabond,’ said I, ‘and I shall ring the bell and order my footman to kick you into the street.’

‘He! he! he!’ said the fellow, ‘hu! hu! hu! dat you can’t do.’

‘Can’t do!’ said I, ‘what do you mean? – I can’t do what?’

‘Ring de pell,’ he replied, attempting a grin with his little villainous mouth.

Upon this I made an effort to get up, in order to put my threat into execution; but the ruffian just reached across the table very deliberately, and hitting me a tap on the forehead with the neck of one of the long bottles, knocked me back into the arm-chair from which I had half arisen. I was utterly astounded; and, for a moment, was quite at a loss what to do. In the meantime, he continued his talk.

‘You zee,’ said he, ‘it iz te bess vor zit still; and now you shall know who I pe. Look at me! zee! I am te *Angel ov te Odd*.’

‘And odd enough, too,’ I ventured to reply; ‘but I was always under the impression that an angel had wings.’

‘Te wing!’ he cried, highly incensed, ‘vat I pe do mit te wing? Mein Gott! de you take me vor a shicken?’

## Xavier Forneret, 1809–1884

Xavier Forneret, or ‘The Man in Black,’ or ‘The Stranger of Romanticism.’ ‘For the literary annals of the current part of the nineteenth century,’ he said in 1840, ‘there will be a book filled with an infinite quantity of names (not including mine): you know the main ones. Let us not forget the cover, which will bear the words “half the Academy” and “Scribe.” Everyone knows that the old cover of a rebound book is meant to be discarded.’

In fact, we would know nothing about this multifariously engaging personality if not for the article that Charles Monselet devoted to him some time back in *Le Figaro*, excerpts of which were reprinted in the auction catalogue of his works. This article, moreover, is more liable to excite our curiosity than to satisfy it. I maintain without hesitation that there exists a Forneret case, whose persistent enigma would justify patient and systematic research. How could it be that the author of twenty such singular works should have gone completely unnoticed? How can we explain the uneven quality of his output, in which the most authentic innovation coexists with the worst cliché, in which the sublime rubs shoulders with the inane, in which the constant originality of expression frequently reveals a poverty of thought? Who was this man, whose external behaviour seems to have been entirely geared toward attracting the public’s attention, even though his way of writing could not fail to alienate that same public; this man who was vain enough to run a newspaper advertisement for one of his books that said: ‘The new book by Xavier Forneret will be sold only to those who submit their names to the printer, M. Duverger on Rue de Verneuil, and after their request has been reviewed by the author,’ and who at the same time was humble enough to apologize for his lack of talent at the end of several of his works, and to beg the public’s indulgence? In various respects, this attitude presents striking analogies with the one that Raymond Roussel would later adopt. Forneret’s style, moreover, seems to foreshadow Lautréamont’s, just as his repertoire of fresh and daring images already announces Saint-Pol-Roux. A poem such as ‘Jeux de mère et d’enfant’ [Games of a Mother and Her Child], in *Vapeurs ni vers ni prose* [Vapours Neither Verse Nor Prose], anticipates with disconcerting naivety the clinical illustration of current psychoanalytic theory.

‘Dijon,’ Monselet wrote, ‘still remembers the first performance of *L’Homme noir* [The Man in Black], a prose drama in five acts. It was in 1834 or 1835. The author was a rich young man from Burgundy, whose habits, so unlike those of the provincial bourgeoisie, had the privilege of arousing his fellow townsmen’s mistrust. First of all, he did not dress like them – one mark against him. He fancied velvet and overcoats; he wore a rather peculiar hat and carried a black-and-white cane. Strange things were said about him, such as that he lived in a Gothic tower where he played the violin all night long. For these reasons and more, the citizens of Dijon remained on their guard against Xavier Forneret; and so their curiosity was piqued by the announcement of *L’Homme noir*. Xavier Forneret had spared no expense. On the eve of the premiere, halberdiers, heralds costumed as in the Middle Ages canvassed the streets, waving banners bearing the name of the play. One could therefore count, if not on success, at least on the box office receipts.

‘The theatre was indeed filled, but *L’Homme noir* was hardly a success; I believe that it did not even make it to the end, such was the hullabaloo and the cabal. Xavier Forneret printed his play with a symbolic cover: white letters on a black background. More than that, he adopted the nickname “The Man in Black,” and signed several of his works that way. At the same time, he retreated more than ever into unconventionality. This personality, clearly defined but without sharp edges, irritated the populace of Dijon and Beaune for nearly twenty years. The town papers could not resist poking fun at his expense. He became the local eccentric, and people tried to interpret his isolation; there were numerous trials and scandals. Through all of it, Xavier Forneret stood firm.’

After mentioning the various eccentricities that characterized the presentations of his works (composition in very large type; immoderate use of white space: two or three lines to a page, or the text only on the recto; the word ‘end’ not necessarily interrupting the story, which might continue in an ‘after the end’; the insertion of, among other things, a single poem printed in red ink; peculiar titles – which, moreover, were almost always extremely felicitous), Monselet subtly notes: ‘As such, we are certain of coming upon a humorist.’ And he adds: ‘But that is the danger rather than the attraction. France has never been short of humoristic writers, but they are less appreciated here than anywhere else ... Much has been written about the audacity of Pétrus Borel, the werewolf, or about the ramblings of Lesailly; they are all surpassed by Xavier Forneret.’

Monselet, more courageous in this regard than all the critics of the past hundred years, is not afraid to admire what is admirable in Forneret: ‘*Temps perdu!* contains a masterpiece’ – an opinion to which I totally subscribe – ‘which is “*Le Diamant de l’Herbe*” [The Diamond in the Grass], a story no more than twenty pages long. The strange, the mysterious, the sweet, and the terrible have never flowed from a single pen with such intensity.’ Its author therefore underestimated his own talent when he said: ‘Everything for me is a matter of feeling, without my ever being able to truly express it.’ The evidence suggests that Monselet saw more clearly, and that posterity will follow his lead: ‘Xavier Forneret exaggerates his weaknesses. In his efforts and his feverish aspirations, he is worth more than a hundred writers in their stupid and serene abundance. There is a true personality in him. Under the pickaxe of the critic who strikes it, this unexplored terrain sometimes yields a gleaming vein of pure metal.’

Let us observe that we could hardly discredit the author of *Sans titre* [Untitled] by alleging that he was more or less irresponsible or unaware of the effect he had on impartial and attentive readers – he who placed his book under the invocation of this phrase by Paracelsus: ‘Often there is nothing above and everything below. Seek.’

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## A SHAMEFUL PAUPER

He pulled it out  
Of his pocket worn,  
Held it up,  
And gazed forlorn,  
Saying, 'Poor thing!'  
He blew on it  
With moistened lips.  
He shudders once  
At the thought that grips  
His heart.  
He wet it  
With a frozen tear  
That chanced to melt;  
His room is drear  
As a junk shop.  
He rubbed it,  
Did not warm it,  
Barely felt it;  
For, pierced by chill,  
It held back.  
He weighed it  
Like a bright idea,  
Upon the air.  
Then with some wire  
He measured it.  
He touched it  
With his wrinkled pout.  
In frantic terror  
It cried out:  
Kiss me farewell!  
He kissed it,  
And then crossed it  
O'er his body's clock:  
Poorly wound, it gave off  
A dull and heavy tock.  
He felt it  
With a hand resolved  
To put the thing to death.  
'Yes, it will make a hearty snack,'  
He muttered 'neath his breath.  
He folded it up,  
He broke it off,  
He set it down,

He cut it up.  
He washed it off,  
He carried it over,  
He fried it up,  
He swallowed it down.  
*When he was little, they told him:  
If you're still hungry, you can eat your hand.*  
– from *Vapours Neither Verse nor Prose*

## UNTITLED AND ANOTHER YEAR OF UNTITLED

One can walk perfectly well without a head. –  
Certain hearts are very much like a full bottle that has been wrapped in a wet cloth and placed in the sun. – The cloth gets burning hot, the inside of the bottle is ice cold. –  
Promises and truth are like balls that people toss each other back and forth and that remain hanging in the air. –  
The pine tree, from which they make coffins, is an evergreen. –  
Oh, how sad it is that women eat! – even strawberries in cream. –  
There is no 1 truer than a 2 that makes a 3. –  
I like women too much not to confess this truth: That they can sometimes be wicked. – May they forgive my use of the word; it's a smiling bone from out of my graveyard. –  
A small city is a big hole, and its great ideas, a little rat. –  
I have seen a mailbox mounted on a cemetery wall. –  
I would laugh if everything one grabbed hold of attached itself to one's hands like bolts, because in that case the only thing left in the World would be brimstone merchants. –  
At the exhibits of the Louvre and the large department stores – so many grand portraits IN MINIATURE, so many statuettes IN PLASTER – which are missing a name, just as two preceding words are missing the downstroke of an m to make the one that – according to the Academy – designates the object Figaro used on lost eyes.<sup>1\*</sup> –  
ALL or NOTHING. – These three words are a pair of glasses, to be sent to the woman who claims she can READ only what is in our hearts. ALL and NOTHING would be the two lenses, and OR, the part that rests on the nose. –  
Minutes in a hotel are wings without the bird. –  
How frightening beautiful hands are, with their long nails.<sup>2</sup> –  
NEWSPAPER: What great paper is the earth; what a typeface is the Day; what ink the Night!  
– Everyone prints, everyone reads; no one understands. –  
It is not that one is good; one is happy. –  
To think bitter thoughts, you need only see a lock touched by a living hand – and a cemetery in which dead hands are never GRASPED. –

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<sup>1</sup> In Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*, the eponymous barber from Seville uses a poultice to treat the eyes of a blind donkey. Forneret's rather abstruse pun is based on the fact that one word for poultice in French is *emplâtre*, and that, with 'the downstroke of an m,' this is precisely what the phrase *en plâtre* ('in plaster') becomes. [*trans.*]

<sup>2</sup> These words seem to have changed season; they would have become passé if beautiful hands, first, and their long nails, second, were not for all time – [*Forneret's note*]

– from *Untitled and Another Year of Untitled*, by a man in black, with face of white

## Charles Baudelaire, 1821–1867

Humour in Baudelaire is an integral part of his concept of *dandyism*. We know that, for him, ‘the word “dandy” implies a quintessence of character and subtle intelligence, free of the entire ethical mechanism of this world.’ No one ever took greater pains to distinguish humour from the trivial gaiety or leering sarcasm in which the ‘Gallic spirit’ gladly recognizes itself. He placed Molière at the head of ‘ridiculous modern religions,’ while Voltaire was ‘the anti-poet, the king of wags, the prince of superficiality, the anti-artist, preacher to concierges, the Père Gigogne among the editors of *Le Siècle*.’ The dandy is caught between a narcissistic concern for his attitudes and actions (‘He must aspire to be sublime without interruption. He must live and die at his mirror’) and the desire to leave in his wake a long rumble of disapproval (‘The oh-so-intoxicating thing about bad taste is the aristocratic pleasure of causing displeasure’). In Baudelaire, sartorial affectations would in and of themselves attest to this bias, which triumphs over all the vicissitudes of fortune: from the pale pink gloves of his luxurious youth, through the green wig exhibited at the Café Riche, to his scarlet chenille boa, the supreme finery of his declining years. His rude remarks and whimsical confidences in public were governed by a need to shock, to repulse, to stupefy. To Nadar, point blank: ‘Wouldn’t you agree that the brains of small children must taste like hazelnuts?’ To a passerby who had just refused to give him a light so as not to make the ash of his cigar drop: ‘Pardon me, Sir, would you be so extremely kind as to tell me your name? I would like to know the identity of the man who is so anxious to preserve his ashes.’ To a bourgeois who was bragging about the merits of his two daughters: ‘And which of these two young ladies are you grooming for prostitution?’ To a young woman in a restaurant: ‘Mademoiselle, you who are crowned by golden tufts, and who are listening to me *with such lovely teeth*, I would like to bite into you ... I would like to tie your hands together and hang you by the wrists from the ceiling of my room. Then I would get down on my knees and kiss your bare feet.’

In life, he made every effort to ensure that common mortals would be left with a nightmare image of him: ‘His love,’ we read in *Le Gaulois* (30 September 1886), ‘took some phenomenal women as its object. He went from the dwarf to the giantess, and often reproached Providence for having denied these privileged creatures health. He had lost two giantesses to consumption and two dwarves to gastritis. He sighed when he spoke of it, fell into a profound silence, and concluded with: “One of those dwarves was only twenty-eight inches tall. You can’t have everything in this world,” he murmured philosophically.’ Like it or not, we must admit that Baudelaire especially cultivated this aspect of his persona – and even more (this aspect having miraculously escaped his final collapse), that in some ways he sublimated himself to it in the years of mental enfeeblement preceding his death: ‘When he looked in the mirror, he often greeted his image, not recognizing whose it was.’ His final words, breaking several months of silence, were to ask, as casually as you please, for someone to pass the mustard at table.

Such instances reveal black humour to be a part of Baudelaire’s organic essence. If we affect not to take notice of this elective disposition, if we indulgently let it go by, then we have understood nothing of his genius. This disposition corroborates the entire aesthetic concept on which his



work rests. Poetically speaking, it was the strict concordance between work and disposition that allowed for the precepts which would overturn all subsequent sensibility. 'Relate comic things in pompous fashion. – Irregularity, in other words the unexpected, the surprising, the astonishing, are essential to and characteristic of beauty. – Two fundamental literary qualities: supernaturalism and irony. – The blend of the grotesque and the tragic are attractive to the mind, as is discord to blasé ears. – Imagine a canvas for a lyrical, magical farce, for a pantomime, and translate it into a serious novel. Drown the whole thing in an abnormal, dreamy atmosphere, in the atmosphere of *great days* ... The region of pure poetry' (*Intimate Journals*).

## THE SHODDY GLAZIER

There are certain individuals, contemplative by nature and not at all inclined to action, who nonetheless, on a mysterious and foreign impulse, sometimes act with a rapidity hitherto unsuspected even by themselves.

The man who, fearing he is about to hear distressing news from his landlady, woefully prowls around her door for an hour without daring to knock, or the one who keeps a letter for two weeks without opening it, or who takes six months to decide to do something that needed doing a year ago, sometimes feels himself abruptly rushed toward action by an irresistible force, like the arrow from a bow. The moralist and the doctor, who claim to know all things, cannot explain how such a mad frenzy so suddenly comes upon these lazy, voluptuous souls, and how they, who are normally incapable of handling the simplest and most elementary tasks, all at once find the luxurious courage to commit the most absurd and often even the most dangerous acts.

A friend of mine, the most innocuous dreamer who ever lived, once set a forest on fire to see, as he said, if it would catch as easily as people said. The first ten times the experiment was a failure; but on the eleventh it succeeded all too well.

Another lights his cigar standing near an open powder keg, *to see, to know, to tempt fate*, to force himself to prove his energy, to be a gambler, to feel the pleasures of anxiety, for no reason at all, on a whim, out of idleness.

This kind of energy surges from boredom and reverie; and those in whom it manifests itself so outwardly are, generally speaking, as I said, the dreamiest and most indolent of creatures.

Another friend, so shy that he lowers his eyes when even men gaze at him, that he has to gather up all his poor courage to enter a café or walk by a theatre box office, where the ticket takers seem to him endowed with the majesty of Minos, Aeacus, and Rhadamanthus, will suddenly throw his arms around the neck of an old man passing by in the street and fervently embrace him before the eyes of the astonished crowd.

Why? Because ... because he found the old man's physiognomy so irresistibly appealing? Perhaps; but it is more legitimate to suppose that he himself does not know why.

More than once have I fallen victim to these crises and outbursts, which would lead us to believe that evil Demons sometimes steal into us and make us carry out their most absurd commands without even realizing it.

One morning, I had gotten up ill-tempered, sad, weary from idleness, and impelled, it seemed, to do something big, some spectacular action; and I opened the window – alas!

(Kindly observe that the spirit of mystification, which for some is the result of neither labour nor premeditation but of fortuitous inspiration, has much to do, if only by the intensity of the

desire, with the kind of mood – hysterical according to the doctors, satanic according to those who see things a little more clearly than doctors – that pushes us irresistibly toward a host of dangerous or inappropriate actions.)

The first person I spotted in the street below was a glazier whose shrill, discordant shout rose up through the heavy, dirty Paris air. I could not say why I conceived such a hatred for this poor man, a loathing as sudden as it was despotic.

‘Hey! You!’ I called him to come up. As he did, I reflected, not without a certain glee, that since my room was all the way on the sixth floor and the staircase very narrow, the man must be having no small difficulty climbing the stairs, and was surely getting the corners of his fragile merchandise caught at every turn.

Finally he appeared. I closely examined each of his window panes, then said, ‘What’s this? You don’t have any coloured glass? Something pink, or red, or blue? Magic windows, windows of paradise? You impudent lout! How dare you come strutting around poor neighbourhoods without even bringing us windows that will make life beautiful!’ And I shoved him roughly toward the stairwell, where he stumbled with a grunt.

I rushed out to the balcony and grabbed a small flower pot, and when the man reappeared on the sidewalk below, I let my little engine of war fall in a perpendicular drop onto the rear edge of his hooks; and as the impact knocked him over, he managed to smash the whole paltry ambulatory fortune on his back, with the tingling sound of a crystal palace being shattered by lightning.

And, drunk with my folly, I screamed at him furiously: ‘*Make life beautiful! Make life beautiful!*’

These nervous pranks are not without their drawbacks, and one often pays dearly for them. But what can an eternity of damnation matter to someone who has felt, if only for a second, the infinity of delight?

– from *Paris Spleen*

## Lewis Carroll, 1832–1898

That an Anglican pastor should also be a distinguished professor of mathematics and a specialist in logic: no more than this is needed for *nonsense* to make its appearance in literature or at very least for it to make a spectacular reappearance (Lewis Carroll's most astounding poems show a constant, no doubt unsuspected filiation with certain 'incoherent' poems of the French thirteenth century, known as *fatrasies*, and with which only the name of Philippe de Beaumanoir has been associated). In Lewis Carroll, 'nonsense' draws its importance from the fact that it constitutes in and of itself the vital solution to a profound contradiction between the acceptance of faith and the exercise of reason, on the one hand, and on the other between a keen poetic awareness and rigorous professional duties. The characteristic of this subjective solution is to be coupled with an objective solution, one that is precisely poetic in nature: the mind, placed before any kind of difficulty, can find an ideal outlet in the *absurd*. Accommodation to the absurd readmits adults to the mysterious realm inhabited by children. Children's *games* (beginning with simple 'word games'), as a lost means of reconciling action and reverie so as to achieve organic satisfaction, thus regain their dignity and validity. The forces that preside over 'realism,' infantile animism, and artificialism, the forces that militate for unconstrained morals, and that go into remission between the ages of five and twelve, are not immune to a systematic recuperation that threatens the harsh, inert world in which we are told we must live. Right hand closed as if on the knob of the exit (or entrance) door, though actually closed on an orange, stands a little girl whom the poet Lewis Carroll – in reality Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, who is hiding behind this pseudonym – has just led before a mirror and who, in an attempt to understand how she can see herself holding the fruit in her left hand while still feeling it in her right, supposes she is holding it in her right hand 'through the looking glass.' (This theme of crossing through the mirror will be taken up again in tragic form by Jacques Rigaut in *Lord Patchogue*.) To be sure, this foreshadows an utterly authentic 'against the grain.' No one can deny that in Alice's eyes a world of oversight, inconsistency, and, in a word, impropriety hovers vertiginously around the centre of truth.

Pink humour? Black humour? It's hard to decide: '*The Hunting of the Snark*,' Mr Aragon has noted, 'appeared in the same year as *Maldoror* and *A Season in Hell*. In the shameful chains of those days of massacre in Ireland, of nameless oppression in factories where the ironic accounting of pleasure and pain preached by Bentham was established, while from Manchester rose in defiance the theory of *free* trade, what had become of *human* freedom? It rested entirely between the frail hands of Alice, in which this curious man had placed it.'

It seems no less abusive to present Lewis Carroll as a 'political' rebel and to impute direct satirical intentions to his work. It is pure and simple deceit to suggest that the substitution of one regime for another could put an end to this sort of need. The fact is, the child will always set a fundamental opposition against those who try to mould him, and then diminish him, by arbitrarily limiting his magnificent field of experience. Anyone who has preserved a sense of revolt will recognize in Lewis Carroll their first teacher in the art of playing hooky.

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## THE LOBSTER-QUADRILLE

The Mock Turtle sighed deeply, and drew the back of one flapper across his eyes. He looked at Alice and tried to speak, but, for a minute or two, sobs choked his voice. 'Same as if he had a bone in his throat,' said the Gryphon; and it set to work shaking him and punching him in the back. At last the Mock Turtle recovered his voice, and, with tears running down his cheeks, he went on again: –

'You may not have lived much under the sea –' ('I haven't,' said Alice) – 'and perhaps you were never even introduced to a lobster –' (Alice began to say 'I once tasted –' but checked herself hastily, and said 'No never') – 'so you can have no idea what a delightful thing a Lobster-Quadrille is!'

'No, indeed,' said Alice. 'What sort of a dance is it?'

'Why,' said the Gryphon, 'you first form into a line along the seashore –'

'Two lines!' cried the Mock Turtle. 'Seals, turtles salmon, and so on: then, when you've cleared all the jelly-fish out of the way –'

'*That* generally takes some time,' interrupted the Gryphon.

'– you advance twice –'

'Each with a lobster as a partner!' cried the Gryphon.

'Of course,' the Mock Turtle said: 'advance twice, set to partners –'

'– change lobsters, and retire in same order,' continued the Gryphon.

'Then, you know,' the Mock Turtle went on, 'you throw the –'

'The lobsters!' shouted the Gryphon, with a bound into the air.

'– as far out to sea as you can –'

'Swim after them!' screamed the Gryphon.

'Turn a somersault in the sea!' cried the Mock Turtle, capering wildly about.

'Change lobsters again!' yelled the Gryphon at the top of its voice.

'Back to land again, and – that's all the first figure,' said the Mock Turtle, suddenly dropping his voice; and the two creatures, who had been jumping about like mad things all this time, sat down again very sadly and quietly, and looked at Alice.

'It must be a very pretty dance,' said Alice timidly.

'Would you like to see a little of it?' said the Mock Turtle.

'Very much indeed,' said Alice.

'Come, let's try the first figure!' said the Mock Turtle to the Gryphon. 'We can do it without lobsters, you know. Which shall sing?'

'Oh, *you* sing,' said the Gryphon. 'I've forgotten the words.'

So they began solemnly dancing round and round Alice, every now and then treading on her toes when they passed too close, and waving their fore-paws to mark the time, while the Mock Turtle sang this, very slowly and sadly: –

*'Will you walk a little faster?' said a whiting to a snail,  
'There's a porpoise close behind us, and he's treading on my tail.  
See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!  
They are waiting on the shingle – will you come and join the dance?  
Will you, wo'n't you, will you, wo'n't you, will you join the dance?  
Will you, wo'n't you, will you, wo'n't you, wo'n't you join the dance?*

*'You can really have no notion how delightful it will be  
When they take us up and throw us, with the lobsters, out to sea!  
But the snail replied 'Too far, too far!' and gave a look askance –  
Said he thanked the whiting kindly, but he would not join the dance.  
Would not, could not, would not, could not, would not join the dance.  
Would not, could not, would not, could not, would not join the dance.*

*'What matters it how far we go?' his scaly friend replied.  
There is another shore, you know, upon the other side.  
The further off from England the nearer is to France –  
Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but come and join the dance.  
Will you, wo'n't you, will you, wo'n't you, will you join the dance?  
Will you, wo'n't you, will you, wo'n't you, wo'n't you join the dance?*

'Thank you, it's a very interesting dance to watch,' said Alice, feeling very glad that it was over at last: 'and I do so like that curious song about the whiting!'

'Oh, as to the whiting,' said the Mock Turtle, 'they – you've seen them, of course?'

'Yes,' said Alice, 'I've often seen them at dinn –' she checked herself hastily.

'I don't know where Dinn may be,' said the Mock Turtle; 'but, if you've seen them so often, of course you know what they're like?'

'I believe so,' Alice replied thoughtfully. 'They have their tails in their mouths – and they're all over crumbs.'

'You're wrong about the crumbs,' said the Mock Turtle: 'crumbs would all wash off in the sea. But they *have* their tails in their mouths; and the reason is –' here the Mock Turtle yawned and shut his eyes. 'Tell her about the reason and all that,' he said to the Gryphon.

'The reason is,' said the Gryphon, 'that they *would* go with the lobsters to the dance. So they got thrown out to sea. So they had to fall a long way. So they got their tails fast in their mouths. So they couldn't get them out again. That's all.'

'Thank you,' said Alice, 'it's very interesting. I never knew so much about a whiting before.'

'I can tell you more than that, if you like,' said the Gryphon. 'Do you know why it's called a whiting?'

'I never thought about it,' said Alice. 'Why?'

'*It does the boots and shoes,*' the Gryphon replied very solemnly.

Alice was thoroughly puzzled. 'Does the boots and shoes!' she repeated in a wondering tone.

'Why, what are *your* shoes done with?' said the Gryphon. 'I mean, what makes them so shiny?'

Alice looked down at them, and considered a little before she gave her answer. 'They're done with blacking, I believe.'

'Boots and shoes under the sea,' the Gryphon went on in a deep voice, 'are done with whiting. Now you know.'

'And what are they made of?' Alice asked in a tone of great curiosity.

‘Soles and eels, of course,’ the Gryphon replied, rather impatiently: ‘any shrimp could have told you that.’

‘If I’d been the whiting,’ said Alice, whose thoughts were still running on the song, ‘I’d have said to the porpoise “Keep back, please! We don’t want *you* with us!”’

‘They were obliged to have him with them,’ the Mock Turtle said. ‘No wise fish would go anywhere without a porpoise.’

‘Wouldn’t it, really?’ said Alice, in a tone of great surprise.

‘Of course not,’ said the Mock Turtle. ‘Why, if a fish came to *me*, and told me he was going a journey, I should say “With what porpoise?”’

‘Don’t you mean “purpose”?’ said Alice.

‘I mean what I say,’ the Mock Turtle replied, in an offended tone. And the Gryphon added ‘Come, let’s hear some of *your* adventures.’

‘I could tell you my adventures – beginning from this morning,’ said Alice a little timidly; ‘but it’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.’

‘Explain all that,’ said the Mock Turtle.

‘No, no! The adventures first,’ said the Gryphon in an impatient tone: ‘explanations take such a dreadful time.’

So Alice began telling them her adventures from the time when she first saw the White Rabbit. She was a little nervous about it, just at first, the two creatures got so close to her, one on each side, and opened their eyes and mouths so *very* wide; but she gained courage as she went on. Her listeners were perfectly quiet till she got to the part about her repeating ‘*You are old, Father William,*’ to the Caterpillar, and the words all coming different, and then the Mock Turtle drew a long breath, and said ‘That’s very curious!’

‘It’s all about as curious as it can be,’ said the Gryphon.

‘It all came different!’ the Mock Turtle repeated thoughtfully. ‘I should like to hear her try and repeat something now. Tell her to begin.’ He looked at the Gryphon as if he thought it had some kind of authority over Alice.

‘Stand up and repeat “*Tis the voice of the sluggard,*”’ said the Gryphon.

‘How the creatures order one about, and make one repeat lessons!’ thought Alice. ‘I might just as well be at school at once.’ However, she got up, and began to repeat it, but her head was so full of the Lobster-Quadrille, that she hardly knew what she was saying; and the words came very queer indeed: –

*“Tis the voice of the Lobster: I heard him declare  
‘You have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair.’  
As a duck with his eyelids, so he with his nose  
Trims his belt and his buttons, and turns out his toes.*

*When the sands are all dry, he is gay as a lark,  
And will talk in contemptuous tones of the Shark:  
But, when the tide rises and sharks are around,  
His voice has a timid and tremulous sound.’*

‘That’s different from what *I* used to say when I was a child,’ said the Gryphon.

‘Well, *I* never heard it before,’ said the Mock Turtle; ‘but it sounds uncommon nonsense.’

Alice said nothing: she had sat down with her face in her hands, wondering if anything would ever happen in a natural way again.

‘I should like to have it explained,’ said the Mock Turtle.

‘She ca’n’t explain it,’ said the Gryphon hastily. ‘Go on with the next verse.’

‘But about his toes?’ the Mock Turtle persisted. ‘How *could* he turn them out with his nose, you know?’

‘It’s the first position in dancing,’ Alice said; but she was dreadfully puzzled by the whole thing, and longed to change the subject.

‘Go on with the next verse,’ the Gryphon repeated: ‘it begins *‘I passed by his garden.’*”

Alice did not dare to disobey, though she felt sure it would all come wrong, and she went on in a trembling voice: –

*‘I passed by his garden, and marked, with one eye,  
How the Owl and the Panther were sharing a pie:  
The Panther took pie-crust, and gravy, and meat,  
While the Owl had the dish as its share of the treat.*

*When the pie was all finished, the Owl, as a boon,  
Was kindly permitted to pocket the spoon:  
While the Panther received knife and fork with a growl,  
And concluded the banquet by –’*

‘What is the use of repeating all that stuff?’ the Mock Turtle interrupted, ‘if you don’t explain it as you go on? It’s by far the most confusing thing that *I* ever heard!’

‘Yes, I think you’d better leave off,’ said the Gryphon, and Alice was only too glad to do so.

‘Shall we try another figure of the Lobster-Quadrille?’ the Gryphon went on. ‘Or would you like the Mock Turtle to sing you another song?’

‘Oh, a song, please, if the Mock Turtle would be so kind,’ Alice replied, so eagerly that the Gryphon said, in a rather offended tone, ‘Hm! No accounting for tastes! Sing her *“Turtle Soup,”* will you, old fellow?’

The Mock Turtle sighed deeply, and began in a voice choked with sobs, to sing this: –

*‘Beautiful Soup, so rich and green,  
Waiting in a hot tureen!  
Who for such dainties would not stoop?  
Soup of the evening, beautiful Soup!  
Soup of the evening, beautiful Soup!  
Beau—ootiful Soo—oop!  
Beau—ootiful Soo—oop!  
Soo—oop of the e—e—evening,  
Beautiful, beautiful Soup!  
‘Beautiful Soup! Who cares for fish,  
Game, or any other dish?  
Who would not give all else for two p  
ennyworth only of beautiful Soup?  
Pennyworth only of beautiful soup?  
Beau—ootiful Soo—oop!  
Beau—ootiful Soo—oop!  
Soo—oop of the e—e — evening,  
Beautiful, beauti—ful soup!’*

‘Chorus again!’ cried the Gryphon, and the Mock Turtle had just begun to repeat it, when a cry of ‘The trial’s beginning!’ was heard in the distance.

‘Come on!’ cried the Gryphon, and, taking Alice by the hand, it hurried off, without waiting for the end of the song.

‘What trial is it?’ Alice panted as she ran: but the Gryphon only answered ‘Come on!’ and ran the faster, while more and more faintly came, carried on the breeze that followed them, the melancholy words: –

*‘Soo—oop of the e—e—evening,*

*Beautiful, beautiful Soup!’*

*– from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*



## Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, 1840–1889

Entire sections of walls crumble in silence. The lightning squirrel leaps from height to height in the woods. A fundamental doubt besieges the reality principle, making the present forms of life lose the despotic character that they generally assume, so that human existence is seized in its continual becoming. This strictly Hegelian attitude on Villiers's part cannot help entailing in him a certain disaffection vis-à-vis his times, tipping his philosophical equilibrium toward the non-contemporary. Past and future monopolize the poet's sensory and intellectual faculties, detached from the immediate spectacle. These two filters become utterly clear the moment one stops being hypnotized by the cloudy precipitate constituted by the world of *today*. Here, possibility is 'just as terrible' as reality, and, for the absolute idealist that Villiers was, it goes without saying that the log one is about to throw on the fire is not identical to the same log burning: 'Where is the substance? – Between your two eyebrows!' Therefore, most of his protagonists look at the outside world through cloudy eyes – unless, like the beautiful Claire Lenoir, they mask those sightless eyes behind enormous 'blue spectacles.' This clairvoyance – desired at any price (even blindness itself) by Maeterlinck, who stated: 'I owe everything I've ever done to Villiers' – has never met a worse enemy than common sense, of which the character Tribulat Bonhomet, 'archetype of his century,' is the tragic and vengeful caricature.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam did not lose a single occasion to defy this common sense throughout what Mallarmé called his 'simulacrum of life.' It was, no doubt, via a similar process that he tried to assert his claim to the Greek throne and that he married *in extremis* his poor, illiterate servant. 'In Villiers's temperament,' said Huysmans, 'there was a corner reserved for black jokes and ferocious mockery. This was no longer the paradoxical mystification of an Edgar Allan Poe; this was ridicule of the most lugubrious sort, as one finds in the furies of Swift.'

### THE SWAN KILLER

From having pored over many a volume of Natural History, our illustrious friend Dr Tribulat Bonhomet had finished by learning that 'the swan emits a beautiful song in the moments before it dies.' In fact (as he admitted to us only recently), since he had first heard it, that music was the only one capable of helping him surmount the disappointments of life, and any other seemed mere hullabaloo, mere 'Wagner.'

How had he procured this amateur's delight? Like this:

One fine day, just outside the ancient fortified city where he lives, the practical old man had discovered, in an abandoned park, under the shade of the tall trees, a venerable pond, on whose dark mirror glided twelve or fifteen of the calm birds. He had carefully studied the surroundings, calculated the distances, and especially noticed the black swan, their sentinel, asleep in a ray of sunlight.

Every night, this swan kept its eyes wide open, a polished stone in its long pink beak. At the smallest sign of danger for those in its care, with a movement of his neck it would suddenly toss the waking stone into the water, in the middle of the white circle of sleepers; at this signal, and guided by their sentinel, the flock would fly through the darkness under the deep alleyways of trees, toward some far-off lawn or fountain reflecting grey statues, or some other haven in their memories. – And Bonhomet had watched them for a long time, in silence, even with a smile on his lips. Wasn't it on their final song that this perfect dilettante dreamed of soon feasting his ears?

Sometimes, then – in the middle of some autumnal moonless night – Bonhomet, unable to sleep, needing to hear the concert anew, would leap out of bed and dress in a particular way. The tall, gaunt doctor, after thrusting his legs into huge hobnailed rubber boots, which were seamlessly prolonged by an ample waterproof, fur-lined coat, slipped his hands into a pair of reinforced steel gauntlets from some medieval suit of armour (gauntlets that had become his happy acquisition for the price of thirty-eight *sous* – a real extravagance! – at the antique dealer's). That done, he donned his wide-brimmed hat, blew out the lamp, went downstairs, and, once the key to his house was safely in his pocket, headed to the edge of the abandoned park.

Soon he was venturing down the dark pathways, toward the hidden retreat of his favourite singers – toward the pond whose shallow waters, which he had tested throughout, never rose above his belt. And beneath the vaults of leafage that rimmed its banks, he quieted his step, feeling his way along the dead branches.

Having arrived just at the edge of the pond, it was slowly, very slowly – and without a sound! – that he dipped first one boot, then the other into the water, and that he waded forward with extreme caution, so extreme that he scarcely dared breathe, like a music lover in the moments just before the much-awaited cavatina. He walked so slowly that to cover the twenty steps separating him from his cherished virtuosi usually took him between two and two and a half hours, so fearful was he of disturbing the subtle vigilance of the black sentinel.

The breath of the starless heavens plaintively shook the upper branches in the shadows around the lake. But Bonhomet, without letting himself be distracted by that mysterious murmur, continued to advance imperceptibly, and so well that at around three in the morning he was finally invisible, a half-step away from the black swan, without the latter having felt the slightest hint of his presence.

Then the good doctor smiled in the darkness, and softly, very softly, scarcely grazing it with the tip of his medieval finger, he scratched the ruined surface of the water, right in front of the sentinel! ... And so light was his touch that the bird, though startled, did not judge this vague alarm to be so important as to warrant the stone being dropped. It listened. At length, as its instinct became obscurely penetrated by the *idea* of danger, its heart, oh!, its poor guileless heart, started to pound horribly – which filled Bonhomet with jubilation.

And so it was that the handsome swans, one after the other, disturbed in the depths of their slumbers by the sound, sinuously stretched out their heads from beneath their pale silver wings – and, under the weight of Bonhomet's shadow, little by little were filled with foreboding, with a confused awareness of the mortal danger that threatened them. But in their infinite delicacy, they suffered in silence, like the sentinel – unable to flee, *since the stone had not been dropped!* And the hearts of those white exiles began to beat with thuds of muffled agony, *intelligible* and distinct for the delighted ear of the excellent doctor who – knowing full well what his mere proximity

caused them, psychologically speaking – revelled in the incomparable pruritus of the terrifying sensation that his immobility made them suffer.

‘It’s a fine thing to support the arts!’ he murmured to himself.

Three-quarters of an hour this ecstasy lasted, more or less, which he would not have traded for a kingdom. Suddenly, the rays of the morning star, slipping between the branches, unexpectedly cast its light on Bonhomet, the black waters, and the swans with their dream-filled eyes! The sentinel, horrified by this vision, threw the stone ... – Too late! Bonhomet, with a loud and horrible cry that belied his syrupy smile, rushed, claws bared and arms outstretched, into the ranks of the sacred birds! – And rapid was the embrace of his iron fingers, this valiant knight of our times: and the pure snowy necks of two or three singers were slit or broken before the poet-birds could take radiant flight.

Then the souls of the expiring birds rose, unmindful of the good doctor, from their bodies toward the unknown Heavens, in a song of immortal hope, deliverance, and love.

The rational doctor smiled at this sentimentality, of which he, as a serious connoisseur, deigned to savour but one thing – *the timbre*. Musically speaking, he prized only the singular sweetness, only *the timbre* of those symbolic voices that vocalized Death as a melody.

With eyes closed, Bonhomet drew the harmonious vibrations into his heart. Then tottering, as if in a spasm, he went to collapse onto the shore, stretched out on the grass, lying flat on his back in his warm, waterproof clothes.

And there, lost in a voluptuous torpor, this Maecenas of our time again savoured, in the depths of himself, the memory of that song – delicious, though enchanted with a sublimity that he deemed old-fashioned – as performed by his beloved artists.

And as his comatose ecstasy gradually subsided, he continued to ponder the exquisite impression until daybreak.

## Charles Cros, 1842–1888

*Of verse eternal I've the art. And men  
Are gladdened by my voice, which speaks but truth.  
The supreme reason that I proudly bear  
Could not be bought for all a world of gold.  
All have I touched: women, apples, fire;  
All have I felt: winter, spring, and summer;  
All have I found, for no wall can halt me.  
But tell me, Fortune, what then is thy name?*

If the man who could, without exaggeration, introduce himself this way – he whose poetic works unveil a ‘morning paradise,’ and whose heart continues to form only a bouquet of lilacs from Mont Valérien – is still a long way from taking his rightful place, he no doubt owes this to his genius, which makes him fall like no other into the play of light and shadow generated by multiple spheres. Charles Cros’s fingers – like Marcel Duchamp’s, as we will soon see – are oriented by life-coloured butterflies, which also feed on the sap of flowers but which attract no sources of light other than those from the future. These fingers belong to a perpetual inventor. Ever trembling between the object and its conception, they flutter from the page on which plans accumulate, even as his verses make do with the humble materials of an unforeseen arrangement that might result in a conquest for all humanity. Charles Cros saw words themselves as ‘processes,’ which he held just as dear as the processes whose discovery and application mark the stages of scientific progress. The unity of his twin vocations – poet and scientist – comes from the fact that, for him, the goal was always to wrest from nature a part of her secret. Whence, for example, the surprising orchestration of some of his prose poems (‘On Three Aquatints by Henri Cros’), which pave the way for Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*; whence his feat of making the poetic engine run on empty in ‘Salt Herring.’ The freshness of his intelligence was such that no object of desire seemed utopian to him *a priori*; that he never felt, with regard to what is, an interdiction weighing over what *is not* (or in his eyes, what *is not yet*). He was the first to artificially synthesize rubies. He ‘imagined, worked out, and detailed all the specifications of the radiometer with which Sir William Crookes gauged the void and measured the imponderable, as well as of the “photophone”, that Alexander Graham Bell had dreamed of using to make light speak and to capture the sun’s echoes. He established the principle of colour photography, and it has been proven that eight and a half months before Edison’s discovery of the phonograph, he deposited at the Academy of Sciences a sealed envelope in which he described an apparatus that was nearly identical to it in every respect. Emile Gautier, who has taken particular pains to render him his due on this score, also reminds us of ‘Cros’s studies of electricity, whose “annoying slowness” and “syrupy constitution” he so humorously deplored; his musical stenographer, since realized by others under the name of the “melotrope”; his automatic telegraph, his chronometer, his dizzying project for interplanetary optical telegraphy,’ etc.

Charles Cros's remarkable mental adventure was counterbalanced by the pitiful living conditions he had to endure. From his garret above the Chat-Noir, where he devised the literary genre called 'interior monologue,' his daily choice was between poverty and bohemia. Suffice it to say that humour intervenes in his writing as a by-product of that 'profound and bitter philosophy' that Verlaine attributed to him, without which he couldn't have resigned himself to social reality. The pure playfulness of certain wholly whimsical portions of Cros's work should not obscure the fact that at the centre of some of his most beautiful poems a revolver is levelled straight at us.

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## SALT HERRING

There was a big white wall – empty, empty, empty;  
Against the wall there was a ladder – tall, tall, tall,  
And on the ground was a salt herring – dry, dry, dry.

He comes, holding in his hands – dirty, dirty, dirty,  
A heavy hammer, a huge nail – pointy, pointy, pointy,  
And a ball of twiny string – fat, fat, fat.

Then he climbs up the ladder – tall, tall, tall,  
And he plants the pointy nail – bang, bang, bang,  
At the top of the big wall – empty, empty, empty.

He lets go of the hammer – that falls, falls, falls,  
To the nail he ties the string – long, long, long,  
And to the string ties the salt herring – dry, dry, dry.

He climbs back down the ladder – tall, tall, tall,  
Carries it off with the hammer – heavy, heavy, heavy,  
And then he goes away – far, far away.

And since then the salt herring – dry, dry, dry,  
At the end of the string – long, long, long,  
Slowly twists in the wind – forever, ever, ever.

So I made up this story – simple, simple, simple,  
To annoy folks who are – serious, serious, serious,  
And to make the little children – laugh, laugh, laugh.

– from *The Sandalwood Box*

## THE SCIENCE OF LOVE

Ever since I was very young, I've possessed a tidy fortune and a taste for Science. Not the rash kind of science that pretentiously believes it can create the world from scratch and that flutters about in the blue stratosphere of the imagination. I've always thought, along with a tight cohort of modern scientists, that man is but a stenographer for hard facts, a secretary of palpable nature; that truth conceived of not as a few vain universalities, but as an immense and confused mass, can be but partly approached by the scrapers, clippers, pryers, commissioners, and stockers of real,

notable, undeniable facts; in a word, that one must be an ant, a mite, a rotifer, a vibrio, that one must be nothing! in order to add one's atom to the infinity of atoms that compose the majestic pyramid of scientific truths. Observe, observe, and especially never think, or dream, or imagine: such are the splendours of the current method.

It was with these sound doctrines that I came into the world; and with my first steps a marvelous project, a true scientific godsend occurred to me.

When I studied physics, I said to myself:

People have studied weight, heat, electricity, magnetism, and light. The mechanical equivalent of these forces has been or surely will be rigorously determined. But all those who work to express these elements of future knowledge have but a paltry role to play in the world.

There are other forces that wise and patient observation must subject to the mind of the scientist. I will avoid general classifications, because I consider them dull and I don't understand them. In short, I was led (how and why I do not know) to undertake the scientific study of love.

I am not altogether unpleasant to look at, being neither too tall nor too short, and no one has determined whether my hair is blond or brown. It's true that my eyes are a bit too small, a bit dull, and although this gives me a stupefied look useful in scientific company, it can be a disadvantage in the outside world.

Of this world, moreover, despite so many methodical efforts, I do not have very precise knowledge, and it was a real masterpiece of sangfroid for me to pursue my austere goal without attracting undue attention.

I had told myself: I want to study love, not like a Don Juan, who enjoys himself but records nothing, or like the poets, who sentimentalize nebulously, but like a genuine scientist. To study the effect of heat on zinc, one takes a bar of zinc, heats it in water to a rigorously determined temperature using the best possible thermometer, precisely measures the bar's length, resistance, sonority, and heat capacity, and then repeats the process at another temperature that was just as rigorously determined.

It was by an equally exacting process that I decided (a remarkable project at such a tender age – barely twenty-five) to *study* love. Difficult enterprise.

We exchanged portraits. Mine was a photograph on enamel, framed in gold, with a minuscule chain so that it could be worn under her clothes.

This portrait contained, hidden between an ivory casing and the enamel, two thermometers set at *maxima* and *minima*: two masterpieces of precision in such small dimensions.

Thus could I verify any variation from normal temperature in an organism affected by love.

On pretexts that were often difficult to invent, I had my portrait returned to me for a few hours each day, so that I could take down the numbers for that date and reset the thermometers.

On one evening when I had danced twice with a short brunette, I remember having noted a drop in temperature of four-tenths of a degree, followed or preceded (I had no way of knowing which phenomenon occurred first) by an increase of seven-tenths. Those are the facts.

Whatever the case, everything had been prepared. I took the following measures: I said to M. D –, 'Property is theft' (that's not original, it's not even new, but it works every time). To Mme D –, who had suffered a miscarriage that she mentioned a little too often: 'From an economic and social standpoint, women can and should be treated as foetus-factories.' And I hummed, to the tune of 'Near a Cradle,' a few lines from a song by W – called 'Near a Lab Jar':

... I could see him in priest's collar white,  
Fresh novice so noble and tall,  
Such things he would have done outright  
If he weren't preserved in alcohol!

Then I slipped this note into Virginia's hand:

'I'll explain later. Your parents and I have totally fallen out. The ideal, the dream, the prism of the impossible – that is what awaits us. One cannot live without love ... There's a carriage downstairs: come, or I'll kill myself and you'll be forever damned.'

And that is how I eloped with her.

The ease I had so far encountered in this project astounded me, when in the railway car I looked at the girl, so quietly raised, no doubt intended for some mediocre office clerk, and who was now following me by the grace of a series of sentimental formulas that I had not even invented and that I really could not explain.

We were heading somewhere, one might assume.

Well beforehand, I had been shrewd enough to install a delightful and methodical series of contraptions, whose aim will soon become clear.

The train trip took three hours, plenty of time for alarm, sobbing, palpitations. Fortunately, we were not alone in the compartment.

I had previously studied this situation in as many novels as I could find:

'You ... you have given up everything for me ... How can I ever ...' Then, after a pause: 'I love you! I love you! ... Oh! travelling with the beloved! The horizon blushes in the evening, and in the morning dawn pearls the sky, and we are face to face after a moment's distraction or sleep, in lands bursting with new aromas.'

I had that sentence written for me by my friend, the poet W –.

We arrived, she like a drenched bird, me thrilled by the initial success of my research. For, without letting myself be carried away by the romantic vanity of this *abduction*, I had during the journey, and all the while reassuring the terrified girl, adroitly applied between her tenth and eleventh ribs a long-lasting cardiograph, so exact that even the good Dr Marey, who could describe it perfectly, had refused to buy one for the sake of economy.

Then a cab came to fetch us at the station. Terror, confusion, panic on the young lady's part. Feebly rebuffed, my kisses permitted the cardiograph to record the visceral impulses of the situation.

And in the delightful boudoir where, laying her hands over her eyes, she cursed herself for having broken so irrevocably with the demands of morality and propriety, I could happily proceed to the exact determination of the weight of her body (the moment was of crucial importance). Here's how:

She had let herself drop onto the sofa, lost in thought. Stopping, moved and delighted at the sight of her, I pressed with my heel the button of an electric buzzer installed under the rug; in a secret compartment next door, at the other end of the seesaw whose near extremity was occupied by the sofa, Jean (my devoted and well-prepared valet) duly noted the weight of the girl when dressed.

I flew to her side and gave her every possible consolation, caresses, kisses, massages, hypnotism, etc. – all of which, given my plan of research, hardly amounted to much.

I will skip over the transitions that led me to remove her final garments, leaving them on the sofa, and to carry her into the alcove, where she promptly forgot family, propriety, and society.

During this time, Jean weighed the discarded clothing, stockings and ankle boots included, on the aforementioned sofa, so as to obtain by subtraction the net weight of the woman's body.

Moreover, in the bedroom where, drunk with love, she abandoned herself to my fictive transports (for I had no time to waste), we were as if in a retort. The copper-lined walls prevented any interaction with the surrounding atmosphere; and the air, first at its entry, then at its exit, was strictly analysed. Hour by hour, a team of able chemists measured the potassium hydroxide solution in the bulb device to determine the quantitative presence of carbonic acid. I recall some curious numbers in this regard, but they lack the necessary precision for a reliable table, since my own, non-amorous breath was mixed in with Virginia's truly amorous breath. Let me simply mention the carbonic excess on the tumultuous nights when passion attained its *maxima* of intensity and numerical expression.

Strips of litmus paper cannily distributed in the linings of her clothes revealed to me the constant and very acidic reaction of sweat. And then the following days, and then the following nights: so many numbers to record with regard to the mechanical equivalent of nervous contractions, the quantity of tears secreted, the composition of saliva, the variable hygroscopy of hair, the tension of remorseful sobs and sighs of pleasure!

The results of the *osculometer* are particularly curious. This instrument, of my own invention, is no larger than the device puppeteers stick in their mouths to make Punchinello talk, which we generally refer to as a *squeaker*. As soon as our dialogues took on a tender cast and the situation seemed opportune, I secretly (of course) set the device between my teeth.

Up until then, I had had nothing but contempt for the expression 'a thousand kisses' that people put at the end of love letters. These are just hyperboles that have passed into vulgar usage, I told myself, the doing of a few poets with poor taste. Well, I'm pleased to offer an experimental verification of these instinctive formulas, which many scientists before me had considered absolutely fanciful. In the space of roughly an hour and a half, my osculometer had recorded *nine hundred and forty-four kisses*.

The instrument in my mouth was cumbersome, and I was preoccupied with my research; besides, simulated activities never equal the real thing. Taking all that into account, you will easily see that the number nine hundred and forty-four can often be surpassed by individuals who are violently in love.

– from *The Claw Necklace*



## Friedrich Nietzsche, 1844–1900

It is striking that Nietzsche attracted the notice of psychiatrists by signing the admirable letter of 6 January 1889, in which we might be tempted to see the highest lyrical explosion of his entire opus. Humour has never attained such intensity, nor has it ever run up against stricter boundaries. Nietzsche's whole enterprise in fact tends to justify the *superego* by increasing and expanding the *ego* (pessimism given as a source of good will; death as a form of liberation; sexual love as the ideal realization of the unity of opposites: 'annihilating oneself to become anew'). The whole issue was to restore to man all the power that he had invested in the name of *God*. It might be that the *ego* dissolves at this temperature ('I is *an Other*,' Rimbaud would say, and we see no reason why there wouldn't also be for Nietzsche a series of 'others,' chosen according to the whim of the moment and designated by name). It is true that euphoria puts in an appearance here: it flares in a black star in the enigmatic 'Astu,' which is counterpart to 'Baou!' in Rimbaud's poem 'Devotions,' and attests to the fact that the bridges of communication have been cut. But bridges of communication with *whom*, if we are all, all in one, on the same side? 'Every morality,' Nietzsche tells us, 'has been useful in that it first provided the race with absolute stability. But once that stability has been reached, one can begin to aim higher. One of the movements is unconditioned: the levelling-off of humanity, the great human anthills, etc. The other movement, my movement, means on the contrary the accentuation of every contrast and every abyss, the suppression of equality, the creation of all-powerful beings.' One is delusional only to others. Only to small men did Nietzsche's ideas seem delusions of grandeur.

### LETTER TO JACOB BURCKHARDT

6 January 1889

Dear Professor,

In the end I would much rather be a Basel professor than God; but I have not dared push my private *egoism* so far as to desist for its sake from the creation of the world. You see, one must make sacrifices however and wherever one lives.

But I have reserved myself a small student's room, situated opposite the Palazzo Carignano (in which I was born as Vittorio Emanuele), which also permits me to hear from the desk the magnificent music below, in the Galleria Subalpina. I pay twenty-five francs, including service, buy my tea, and do all my shopping myself, suffer from torn shoes, and thank heaven every moment for the old world for which men have not been simple and quiet enough.

Since I am sentenced to while away the next eternity with bad jokes, I have my writing here, which really does not leave anything to be desired – very nice and not at all exhausting. The post office is five steps from here, so I mail my letters myself to play the great *feuilletonist* of the *grand monde*. Of course, I maintain close relations with *Figaro*; and in order to get an idea how harmless I can be, listen to my first two bad jokes.

Do not take the Prado case too hard. I am Prado; I am also father Prado; I dare say that I am Lesseps too. I wanted to give my Parisians, whom I love, a new notion: that of a decent criminal. I am also Chambige – also a decent criminal. *Second joke*: I salute the immortal one; Monsieur Daudet belongs to the *quarante*. Astu.

What is disagreeable and offends my modesty is that at bottom I am every name in history. With the children I have put into the world, too, I consider with some mistrust whether it is not the case that all who come *into* the kingdom of God also come *out* of God. This fall I was blinded as little as possible when I twice witnessed my funeral, first as Conte Robilant (no, that is my son, insofar as I am Carlo Alberto, unfaithful to my nature); but Antonelli I was myself. Dear Professor, this edifice you should see: since I am utterly inexperienced in the things which I create, you are entitled to any criticism; I am grateful without being able to promise that I shall profit. We artists are incorrigible.

Today I saw an operetta; Quirinal-Moorish, and on this occasion also noted with delight that Moscow as well as Rome are now grandiose affairs. You see, I am not denied considerable talent for landscapes too.

Consider, now we have beautiful, beautiful chats; Turin is not far; very serious professional obligations are lacking just now; a glass of Veltliner could be obtained. *Négligé* of dress, a condition of being decent.

With affectionate love, your  
Nietzsche

You may make any use of this letter which will not degrade me in the eyes of those at Basel.

I have had Caiphas put in fetters. Also, last year I was crucified by the German doctors in a very drawn-out manner. Wilhelm, Bismarck, and all anti-Semites abolished.

I go everywhere in my student's coat, and here and there slap somebody on the shoulder and say, *Siamo contenti? Son dio ho fatto questa caricatura*.

Tomorrow my son Umberto will come with the lovely Margharita, whom, however, I shall also receive here only in shirt-sleeves. The rest for Frau Cosima – Ariadne – from time to time there is magic.

– translated by Walter Kaufmann

## Isidore Ducasse (Comte de Lautréamont), 1846–1870

We must rediscover the colours that Lewis used in *The Monk* in order to paint the apparition of the infernal spirit behind the features of an admirable nude youth with crimson wings, his limbs caught in diamond orbit under the ancient breath of roses, star on his forehead and gaze marked by a fierce melancholy; the colours with which Swinburne captured the true appearance of the Marquis de Sade:

Amidst the whole of this noisy, imperial epic this thundering head is seen blazing, the vast chest streaked with lightning, the phallus-man, an august and cynical profile, the grimace of a sublime and awesome titan, circulating in these accursed pages like a shudder of the eternal, vibrating on the burnt lips like a breath of a stormy ideal. Come near and you will hear throbbing in this foul and bloody carrion the arteries of the universal soul, veins swollen with divine blood. This cloaca is entirely kneaded with azure ...

We must, I repeat, rediscover these colours in order to situate in the (to say the least) extraliterary atmosphere appropriate to him that dazzling figure of black light, the Comte de Lautréamont. In the eyes of certain contemporary poets, *Maldoror* and the *Poésies* shine with incomparable brilliance. They are the expression of a total revelation that seems to exceed human possibility. All of modern life, in its most specific aspects, is sublimated in one stroke. His backdrops revolve on the swinging doors of ancient suns that illuminate the sapphire floor; the silver-beaked gas lamp, winged and smiling, that glides over the Seine; the green membranes of space and the shops of Rue Vivienne, prey to crystalline rays from the centre of the earth. An absolutely virgin eye watches out for the scientific perfecting of the world, disregarding the consciously utilitarian nature of this perfection, situating it with all the rest in the light of apocalypse. *Definitive apocalypse*: in this work, the great instinctual urges are lost and exalted on contact with an asbestos cage containing a white-hot heart. For centuries to come, the boldest things that might be thought or undertaken will find their magic law formulated here in advance. It is the word, and no longer the style, that undergoes a fundamental crisis with Lautréamont and marks a *new beginning*. These are in fact the limits at which words could enter into contact with words, things with things. A principle of perpetual mutation has made away with both objects and ideas, aiming toward their complete deliverance, which also implies humanity's. In this regard, Lautréamont's language is at once a solvent and an unequalled germinal plasma.

The terms 'madness,' 'proof by absurdity,' 'infernal machine,' which have been applied, even reapplied, to Lautréamont's works, prove that the critics have never approached them without sooner or later having to admit failure. It's just that, brought down to human scale, this opus, which is the very hub of every mental interference, bathes sensibility in a tropical torpor. Léon Pierre-Quint, in his very lucid work *Le Comte de Lautréamont et Dieu*, has nonetheless isolated some of the most imperious features of this message, which may be handled only with fireproof gloves: (1) Since 'evil' is for Lautréamont (as it is for Hegel) the form in which the motor force of

historical development becomes manifest, it is important to strengthen its reason for being; and the best way to do this is to set it on the foundation of forbidden desires, which are inherent in primitive sexual activity and especially visible in sadism. (2) Poetic inspiration, for Lautréamont, results from the break between good sense and imagination, a break that is most often consummated in the latter's favour and obtained by a voluntary, dizzying acceleration of the verbal flux (Lautréamont speaks of the 'extremely rapid development' of his sentences; we know that the systematization of this means of expression was the starting point of Surrealism). (3) Maldoror's revolt would not be eternal Revolt if it perpetually spared one form of thought at the expense of another; it is therefore necessary that with the *Poésies* it should collapse into its own dialectical game.

From the moral viewpoint, the flagrant contrast between these two works requires no further explanation. But let us seek out what might constitute their unity, their identity from a psychological viewpoint and we will discover that it lies primarily in humour. The various operations that emerge, first, from the abdication of logical and ethical concepts, then from the two new ways of thinking defined by opposition to them, can in the end recognize only one common factor: overstatement of the obvious, a slew of the most audacious comparisons, demolition of anything solemn, cockeyed or topsy-turvy reconstructions of famous 'maxims,' etc. Anything that analysis can reveal of the processes in play here pales in comparison to the infallible image that Lautréamont leads us to create for ourselves of humour as he envisions it – humour that attains its supreme power in his work and that physically subjects us, wholly and completely, to its law.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Chants de Maldoror*, 1869. *Poésies*, 1870.

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: *Maldoror. Poésies*.

## MALDOROR

Two pillars, that it was not difficult, and still less impossible, to take for baobab trees, were to be seen in the valley, taller than two pins. Actually they were two enormous towers. And although at first glance two baobabs do not resemble two pins, nor even two towers, nevertheless, while cleverly pulling the strings of prudence one can affirm without fear of error (for if this affirmation were accompanied by a single iota of fear it would no longer be an affirmation; although the same name expresses these two phenomena of the spirit which present characteristics distinct enough not to be lightly confused) that a baobab is not so different from a pillar as to prohibit comparison between these architectural forms ... or geometric forms ... or both ... or neither ... or rather, raised and massive forms. I have just found – I don't even claim the contrary – the proper adjectives for the nouns pillar and baobab: let it be known that it is not without joy mingled with pride that I address the remark to those who, after waking again, have taken the very commendable resolution to scan these pages while the candle burns – if it be night, or while the sun shines – if day. And again, even if a higher power should command us in the plainest, most precise terms to cast back into the abyss of chaos the judicious comparison which everyone has certainly been able to savour with impunity, even then, and then above all, let none lose sight of this principal axiom: habits acquired through the years, books, contact with one's fellows, and the innate character of each person who develops in a quick efflorescence – these would impose on the human spirit the irreparable stigma of relapse into the criminal use (criminal, that is, if one momentarily and

spontaneously sees it from the higher power's point of view) of a rhetorical figure many despise, but which many eulogize. If the reader finds this sentence too long, I trust he will accept my apologies; but let him expect no servilities from me. I can acknowledge my faults, but not make them graver by my baseness. My reasonings will sometimes clash head on with the jester's bells of folly and the serious appearance of what is, in short, merely grotesque (although according to certain philosophers it is quite difficult to distinguish the jester from the melancholic, life itself being a comic drama or a dramatic comedy); however, everyone is allowed to kill flies and even rhinoceroses in order to rest occasionally from over-arduous work. Here is the most expeditious, though not the best, way to kill flies: one crushes them between thumb and forefinger. Most writers who have treated this subject thoroughly have calculated with great plausibility that in a number of cases it is preferable to cut off their heads. Should anyone reproach me for speaking of a radically frivolous subject such as pins, let him note without prejudice that the greatest effects have often been produced by the smallest causes. And so as not to deviate still further from the framework of this piece of paper, is it not evident that this laboured piece of literature I am bent on composing since the start of this stanza would, perhaps, be relished less had it taken as fulcrum some knotty problem of chemistry or internal pathology? Besides, nature caters to all tastes; and at the beginning when I compared pillars to pins with so much accuracy (indeed, I did not think that one day I would be upbraided for it), I based my observation on the laws of optics, which have established that the further the line of sight from the object, the smaller the image reflected on the retina.

Thus that which our minds' bent for farce takes to be a wretched witticism is generally, in its author's imagination, only an important truth majestically proclaimed! Oh! that asinine philosopher who burst out laughing when he saw a donkey eating a fig! I invent nothing: ancient books have related in the greatest detail this wilful, shameful deprivation of human nobility. *I* know not how to laugh. I have never been able to laugh, although I have tried it a number of times. It is very difficult to learn how to laugh. Or rather, I think that a feeling of repugnance for this monstrosity forms an essential characteristic of my personality. Well, I have witnessed something even more outrageous: I have seen a fig eating a donkey! And yet I did not laugh; frankly, no buccal portion stirred. I was seized by so strong an urge to weep that my eyes let fall a tear, 'Nature! Nature!' I cried out, sobbing. 'The sparrowhawk rends the sparrow, the fig eats the donkey, and the tapeworm devours man!' Without resolving to go further, I am really wondering whether I spoke of the way to kill flies. I did, didn't I? It is no less true that I did not speak of the destruction of rhinoceroses! If certain of my friends were to claim the contrary I would not listen to them, and would recall that praise and flattery are two great stumbling-blocks. However, so as to satisfy my conscience as much as possible, I cannot help pointing out that this dissertation on the rhinoceros would lead me beyond the bounds of patience and composure and in itself would probably (let us in fact have the audacity to say 'certainly') dishearten present generations. Not to have spoken of the rhinoceros after the fly! At least for a passable excuse I should promptly have mentioned (and did not do so!) this unpremeditated omission, which will astonish no one who has seriously studied the real and inexplicable contradictions that inhabit the lobes of the human brain. To a noble, simple intellect, nothing is unworthy: the least phenomenon of nature, if it hold mystery, gives the sage inexhaustible food for thought. If anyone sees a donkey eat a fig or a fig eat a donkey (these two incidents do not often occur, except in poetry) you may be sure that after two or three minutes' reflection in order to know what course to take, he will abandon the way of virtue and begin to crow with laughter like a cock! Again, has it not been correctly

proved that cocks open their beaks to imitate man and pull a cockeyed face? What I call grimace in birds bears the same name among men! The cock does not stray from its nature – less from incapacity than pride. Teach them to read and they rebel. This is no parrot – which would be in ecstasies before its ignorant and unforgivable weakness! Oh! loathsome degradation! How like a goat one is when one laughs! The calm brow has disappeared to make way for two enormous fishes' eyes which (is it not deplorable?) ... which ... begin to shine like lighthouses! I often happen to state, solemnly, the most clownish propositions ... I do not find that that provides a peremptorily sufficient reason for expanding the mouth! 'I cannot help laughing,' you will answer me; I accept this absurd explanation, but let it be a melancholy laugh, then. Laugh, but weep at the same time. If you cannot weep with your eyes, weep with your mouth. If this is still impossible, urinate. But I warn you, some sort of liquid is needed here to attenuate the aridity which laughter, with her rear-split features, carries in her womb. As for me, I shall not let myself be put out by the comical clucking and odd bellows of those who always find some fault in a character unlike their own, because this is one of the innumerable intellectual modifications that God, without departing from the primal model, created to regulate our bony frames. Until today poetry was on the wrong track. Rising up to heaven or grovelling on the ground, it has misunderstood the principles of its existence and has been, not without reason, constantly derided by upright folk. It has not been modest ... the finest quality that ought to exist within an imperfect being! *I* want to display my good qualities, but am not hypocrite enough to hide my vices! Laughter, evil, pride, folly, will appear in turn, between compassion and love of justice, and will serve – to mankind's stupefaction – as examples. Everyone will recognize himself herein, not as he should be but as he is. And perhaps this simple ideal conceived by my imagination will yet surpass all that poetry has hitherto deemed most imposing and most sacred. For if in these pages I let my vices leak out, people will only believe more strongly in the virtues I cause to glitter here and whose halo I'll let so high that the greatest geniuses of the future will sincerely express their grateful recognition of me. Hypocrisy will thus be driven firmly from my abode. And so as to scorn accepted opinions, there will be in my lyrics an impressive proof of force and authority. He sings for himself alone and not for his fellow men. He does not weigh his inspiration upon human scales. Free as the storm, some day he shall run aground upon the indomitable shores of his terrible will! He fears nothing, unless it be himself! In his supernatural battles he shall successfully assault man and the Creator, as when the xiphias sinks its sword into the whale's belly. Accursed – by his children and by this emaciated hand of mine – be he who persists in not understanding the implacable kangaroos of laughter and the bold lice of caricature! ... Two enormous towers were to be seen in the valley; this I stated at the start. Multiplying them by two, the product was four ... but I could scarcely perceive the need for this arithmetical process. I continued on my way with fevered brow, crying out incessantly: 'No ... No ... I can scarcely perceive the need for this arithmetical process!' I had heard the clank of chains, and painful groans. May no one, passing this spot, find it possible to multiply the towers by two so that the product be four! Some surmise that I love mankind as if I were its own mother and had borne it nine months in my perfumed womb: this is why I never again pass through the valley whence rise the two units of the multiplicand!

– Fourth Canto

Before broaching my theme, I think it stupid that it should be necessary (I imagine not everyone will be of my opinion, if I am mistaken) for me to set beside me an open inkwell and a few sheets of unrumpled paper. Thus it will be possible for me to begin, with love, with this sixth

canto, the series of instructive poems I am longing to produce. Dramatic episodes of a relentless utility! Our hero became aware that by frequenting caves, and taking refuge in inaccessible places, he was transgressing the rules of logic, and setting up a vicious circle. For if on the one hand he thus encouraged his repugnance for man by the compensation of solitude and distance, and passively circumscribed his limited horizon amid stunted bushes, brambles, and creepers – on the other, his activity no longer found any nutriment to feed the minotaur of his perverse instincts. Consequently he resolved to draw nearer to the human agglomerations, convinced that among so many ready-made victims his various passions would find plenty of means of satisfying themselves. He knew that the police, that shield of civilization, had been looking for him doggedly for a good many years, and that a veritable army of police and their spies were continually at his heels. Without, however, managing to find him. So greatly did his astounding cleverness baffle, in fine style, the most unquestioned wiles (from a stand-point of their success) and arrangements resulting from the best-informed cogitation. He had a special faculty for assuming forms unrecognizable to expert eyes. Superior disguises – speaking as an artist! Outfits of a really mediocre effect, if I consider the morality. On that score, he came close to genius. Have you not noticed the slimness of a pretty cricket with alert movements in the sewers of Paris? It can only be he: that was Maldoror! Mesmerizing the prosperous capitals with a pernicious fluid, he leads them into a lethargic state in which they are incapable of keeping watch upon themselves as they should. A state the more dangerous for being unsuspected. Today he is in Madrid; tomorrow he will be in St Petersburg; yesterday he was in Peking. But to state exactly the place which the exploits of this poetic Rocambole are currently filling with terror is a task beyond the possible strength of my dull-witted ratiocination. The bandit is perhaps seven hundred leagues away from this area – or perhaps a few steps from you. It is not easy to make men perish entirely, and there are laws; but with patience one can exterminate the humanitarian ants one by one. Now from the day of my birth, when, still inexperienced in setting my snares, I lived with the first forbears of our race; since remote times set beyond history, when, in subtle metamorphoses at divers epochs I ravaged the regions of the globe by conquests and carnage, and spread civil war among citizens – have I not already ground beneath my heel, member by member or collectively, whole generations whose untold total it would not be difficult to conceive? The radiant past has made brilliant promises to the future: it will keep them. To scrape together my sentences I needs must employ the natural method, regressing to the savages so they may give me lessons. Simple and majestic gentlemen, their gracious mouths ennoble all that flows from their tattooed lips. I have just proved that nothing on this planet is laughable. Droll but lofty planet. Grasping a style some may find naive (when it is so profound), I shall make it serve to interpret ideas which unfortunately may not seem imposing! For that very reason, ridding myself of the light and sceptical turn of ordinary conversation, and prudent enough not to pose ... I no longer know what I was intending to say, for I do not remember the start of the sentence. But know this: poetry happens to be wherever the stupidly mocking smile of duck-faced man is not. First I am going to blow my nose, because I need to; and then, mightily aided by my hand, shall again take up the penholder my fingers had let fall. How could the Pont du Carrousel observe its steadfast neutrality when it heard the harrowing screams seemingly uttered by the sack!

– Sixth Canto

## LETTERS

22 May 1869

Sir,

Just yesterday I received your letter dated 21 May: it was yours. Well, you must understand that I cannot, unfortunately, let this occasion pass without sending you my apologies. This is why: because, had you informed me the other day, in ignorance of what troubles might be affecting the circumstances in which I find my own self, that the funds were running out, I would have taken care not to draw on them; but assuredly I would have been quite as happy not to write these three letters as you yourself not to read them. You have enforced the deplorable system of distrust vaguely prescribed by my father's eccentricity; but you have guessed that my aching head does not prevent my considering attentively the difficult situation in which hitherto you have been placed by a sheet of writing paper from South America, its main shortcoming lack of clarity; for I am not taking into account the offensiveness of certain melancholy observations which one readily forgives an old man, and which appeared to me on first reading intended to impose upon you, in the future perhaps, the necessity of deviating from your clearly defined role of banker vis-à-vis a gentleman come to live in the capital ...

... Pardon me, Sir, I have a request to make of you: should my father send other funds before the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, at which time my body will make an appearance before your bank door, would you be kind enough to let me know? Besides, I am at home at all hours of the day; you would only have to write me the word and it is probable that I would receive it almost as soon as the young lady who opens the door, or even before, if I happen to find myself in the entrance-hall ...

... And all this, I repeat, for an insignificant bagatelle of formality! To present ten dry fingernails instead of five, is that all it comes to: after giving the matter much thought, I confess it looked to me full of a notable quantity of unimportance ...

(translated by Alexis Lykiard)



## Joris-Karl Huysmans, 1848–1908

‘This writer,’ Huysmans said of himself, in a supposed interview published under the name of A. Meunier but in fact entirely written by him, ‘is an inexplicable mixture of refined Parisian and Dutch painter. From such a blend, to which we could add a pinch of black humour and another of dry British comedy, comes the hallmark of the works in question’ (which in this case are his earliest works, up to and including *Against the Grain*). Until the appearance of *En route* in 1892, the date at which we lose him, Huysmans seems to have made this kind of humour – recommended in the above sentence as if it were a spice – the very condition for maintaining one’s mental appetite. By the excess of dark colours in his palette, by his customary habit of reaching and surpassing a certain critical point in horrendous situations, by the meticulous, acute prefiguration of the heartbreaks that in his view were entailed by any kind of alternative, no matter how banal, he managed to obtain the paradoxical result of tapping the pleasure principle in his reader. External realities constantly presented in their most petty, aggressive, and hurtful aspects require of this reader a constant restoration of vital energy, undermined by an accumulation of daily trials of which he is suddenly made all too aware. The great originality of the author of *En ménage* [Home Life] derives from the fact that he seems to deny himself any of the benefits of humorous pleasure, making these benefits seem exclusively reserved for us, while Huysmans maintains an attitude of despair that constantly gives us the illusion of having an advantage over him. In fact, this is a deliberate plan, a well-considered therapeutic method, a *ruse* intended to make us overcome our own indigence. ‘And,’ we read in *En ménage*, ‘on those evenings when black moods descended upon him, he went to bed early, lingering before his bookshelves in search of a work that would suit the kinds of thoughts troubling him. He would have liked to find one that could console him and at the same time reinforce his bitterness, one that told of boredom that was greater than and yet similar to his own, one that could soothe him by comparison. Naturally, he did not find it.’

Huysmans’s style, marvellously cast to highlight the nervous communicability of sensations, is the product of a misappropriation of several different vocabularies, whose combination alone causes spasmodic laughter, even as the circumstances of the plot seem the least apt to justify it. Owing to the same kind of pathetic turn that he was able to make us enjoy, this man of imagination was forced to waste his life away among the cartons of a ministry office (the reports of his hierarchical superiors all portray him as a model functionary). It is in keeping with the writer’s whole exalting-appalling manner that there, in his idle moments, a few technical manuals and an always-open cookbook within reach, Huysmans, with unmatched clairvoyance, should have formulated from whole cloth most of the laws that would regulate modern affectivity, been the first to penetrate the histological constitution of the real, and been elevated with *En rade* [In Port] to the heights of inspiration.

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## HOME LIFE

He was hungry. Fatigue and his walk seemed to have taken the edge off his worries. He was almost joyful to notice a little pub, behind whose front window swelled a melon drenched in liquor.

Rows of bottles with lead capsules on their heads and flaming stars on their bellies formed a semicircle around two tiers of bruised Neufchâtel cheeses. There were parsley-covered vinaigrettes on cold beef, congealed stews with turnips, hasty puddings with black burn stains, their yellow mire puckering.

In an iron pail spilled a half-eaten rice pudding; eggs the colour of wine filled a flowered salad bowl; a rabbit laid open on a serving dish, its four paws in the air, oozed the viscous purple of its liver over its washed, pale-vermillion carcass. A wall of bowls nested one inside the other stretched upward, alongside a tower of saucers with blue borders. They stood before the display tiles and behind a former jar of brandied prunes, now filled with water, into which gladiolas dipped their drooping stems.

André sat at an empty table. While waiting for someone to bring him his soup, he looked the place over. It was a fairly large room, decorated with green gaslamps and window shades, a cast-iron potbellied stove, and a counter painted in false mahogany shot through with darker streaks, which was garnished with a blue glass vase full of flowers, pewter measuring jugs hanging like panpipes, a nickel collection box, a yawning cat, and a writing desk. Behind this item of furniture, shelves rose to the ceiling, supporting unlabelled litres, a porcelain teapot, white cups with three scarlet feet and a scarlet handle, and smudged gilt initials in the middle. A mirror embedded in the centre of the shelving reflected the tops of the flowers marinating in the blue vase, the zigzagging pipe of the stove, three unoccupied coat pegs stuck into the wall, the ripped lining of an overcoat, and the sheen of a greasy hat. On a little table, in a corner, a Burgundy cheese, its belly gashed, collapsed under the attack of a thousand flies; near the wine racks, where napkins in rings were piled, a hutch contained lank, soggy bread that almost touched a cage hanging from the ceiling. This cage was empty following a death and a cuttlefish occupied it alone, hanging at the end of a thread.

This establishment was part country inn, part restaurant for a poor neighbourhood. The owner, in shirtsleeves, pug nose and stomach jutting forward like a hump, took his sweet time; he kept a towel draped over his arm, and dragged his slippers decorated with dominoes and decks of cards through a muck of spittle and sand.

The sound of dishes and cauldrons, the song of things frying, and the whining of sauces escaped through the ever-banging door of the kitchen. The furious sputtering of meat sauteed in the pan, of dripping steaks on a grill, of sudden reddish vapours arrived from time to time, accompanied by fetid blue smoke. Muffled arguments and snatches of bosses astounding their lackeys could be heard at every moment.

A pale, reedy serving girl vacillated, with a pained and idiotic look on her face, eaten away by a persistent leukorrhea. Another lugged stacks of dishes from the kitchen to the pantry and from the pantry to the kitchen like a sleepwalker, not seeming to realize the importance of the task assigned her.

André began to get impatient; they still had not brought him his soup. He was tired of watching the people around him. They all knew each other; he had stumbled into a kind of family boarding house, a cattle trough in which a strange crowd was stuffing itself. There were discreet groups

chatting in hushed tones, muffling their laughter behind napkins; there were braggarts, spewing up heavy-handed jokes in booming voices, grabbing attention with their hijinks.

Very familiar with his clientele, the owner chuckled, exclaiming, 'Ha! that's a good one!' then suddenly and authoritatively shouting: 'One braised veal, one steak in tomato sauce, one!'

André swallowed the noodle soup that they had finally gotten around to serving him. To his left, two gossips dug into a platter of tripe, dipped into a birchbark snuffbox, and emptied their glasses. Elbows on the table, they made salaams to each other for every spoonful of sauce, chattered like two old biddies, ran down a neighbour, pitied their concierge whose belly had swelled up from eating mussels.

André was beginning to cheer up, but then a group of cronies, installed near the stove, snuffed out the hubbub of the other groups with their racket.

A hairdresser was holding forth, emitting truths of this magnitude: 'When you've got money, they all take their hats off; without that, when you've put all your do-re-mi into stocks that don't earn squat, like I did, they won't even spit at you. And anyway, every time I buy shares of something, it goes down the very next day. I can't help it, though; I need the emotional thrill.'

His pals revelled in it. He kept filling their glasses, then, with his hooded eyes and glorious cretin's face, he went on: 'Personally, I like sex. For me to do without it, I'd have to be like the fig tree, standing stiff and still in the garden.' And making a punning allusion to his trade, he added: 'And besides, I still wouldn't be a *fig*, I'd be a *figaro*.'

Shouts of joy burst out; incomprehensible hilarity greeted that salvo of idiocies.

André was more than ready to grab his hat and flee, but the service was in no hurry. He had reduced by half a very tough roast beef and abandoned the rest, and now he had asked for a sorrel salad that did not appear to be coming. He asked the owner, who stupidly exulted, whether he had a newspaper. *Le Siècle* was at hand; they brought him the *Petites Affiches*. He tried to engross himself in it, to cut himself off from the joy of those tables, to plug his ears against the strident jabberings of those imbeciles; he heard them all the same. He forced himself to read three pages of the rag, then stopped at an advertisement that offered, as the result of a family's liquidation and as if it were some fabulous bargain, a dowry of eighteen thousand francs and an orphan girl. André remained lost in thought. In the words *time running out* placed between parentheses at the bottom of the advertisement, he saw parading before him an infinite perspective of filth. He imagined short-term pregnancies, bellies swollen after one month of marriage. He mused on the heartbreaks that the honest simpleton who let himself be taken in would suffer at the hands of that orphan. He had every chance of marrying a virgin who was thoroughly familiar with depravity since childhood! And André thought that it was already hard enough not to be made a fool of when one knows the family and has lived for several months with one's fiancée. Who would have believed that his own wife could deceive him? Once more, he had returned to the starting-point of his thoughts, to the miseries of his home life. He wanted to shake off those memories, whatever it took. He forced himself to look at his neighbours again, to listen to them.

A shrill falsetto drilled into his ear. The hairdresser had left the restaurant without his even noticing, and now his place was occupied by a large fellow with a red beard and a nose crossed by gold spectacles, who was explaining to a very young man the mysteries of teeth. The latter widened his eyes and listened devoutly, no doubt hoping to establish his own practice in that field.

'The biggest part of your profit picture,' the older fellow was saying, 'is putting in false teeth. They make them in England and sell them in Passage Choiseul. That's where you can take in

some serious money. Just think: you can charge ten francs a tooth and they only cost ten *sous* apiece without the rubber gums, and one franc with gums attached.'

'They have pink ones and brown ones, don't they?' the young man timidly interrupted. 'I think I'd like the pink ones better.'

'Hey, you're not as slow as you look! The brown ones are poor-man's gums! They go for less, but you can sell more of them,' the other resumed.

The young disciple gaped in astonishment.

'And what about dentures that open wide?' he ventured.

The man with the golden spectacles raised his arms heavenward. 'Now *those* are real works of art! Just think, you have to cut the tooth from solid ivory, put it in gold settings – it costs a mint!' And he continued explaining the tricks of his trade, admitted performing needless surgery on his patients' stumps and profiting from their pained stupor to sell them toothpaste at inflated prices.

André decided that one more of these pathetic epiphanies was more than he could bear. His sorrel was eaten. He furiously demanded the cheque, refused to order dessert, paid the amount of one franc and forty centimes, and was opening the door when, from the back of the room where a few people were lingering before their tiny cordial glasses, a voice said simply and with conviction:

'Women ain't really much a' nothin'!'

André closed the door behind him, reflecting with a certain sadness that, of all the insipid drivel he had heard that evening, this thought was perhaps the only one that had any depth or truth to it.

## IN PORT

One article caught his eye and plunged him into an extended reverie. What a marvellous thing science is! he said to himself. Here you have Professor Selmi from Bologna discovering an alkali in the putrefaction of corpses, a ptomaine in the form of a colourless oil that gives off a slow but persistent aroma of hawthorn, musk, syringa, orange blossom, or rose.

For the moment, these were the only scents they had obtained from those juices of an economy in decomposition, but others would surely follow. In the meantime, to satisfy the postulations of a practical century that buries the destitute by machine and that finds uses for everything (standing water, bottoms of sanitary tubs, the intestines of corpses, and old bones), they could convert cemeteries into factories that at the request of wealthy families would distil concentrated extracts of ancestors, essences of infants, or aromas of fathers.

This would be what in the business world they call the deluxe item. But for the needs of the working classes, who must not be neglected either, they could supplement these exclusive chemist's shops with industrial laboratories that could mass-produce the perfumes. Indeed, they could distil them from the unwanted remains of common graves. The art of perfume-making could be established on entirely new bases, put within everyone's reach: the deluxe item would give way to the ersatz item, discount perfumes that could be sold at very reduced prices, since the raw materials were plentiful and the only expense, so to speak, would be the labour costs of the gravediggers and the lab technicians.

Ah! I know many working-class women who would gladly spend a few pennies for whole tubs of ointments or blocks of soap made from essence of proletariat!

Besides, what an unending preservation of memory, what an eternal freshness of remembrance could be obtained from these sublimated emanations of the dead! As it is now, when one member of a loving couple dies, all the other has left is a photograph and, on All Saints' Day, a graveside visit. With the invention of ptomaines, it will soon be possible to keep the woman one loves at home or in one's own pocket, in an evanescent and spiritual state; to transmute the beloved into a flask of salts; to condense her into sap; to insert her like powder into a sachet embroidered with a sorrowful epitaph; to sniff her from a handkerchief on melancholy days, to breathe her in on happy ones.

Not to mention the fact that, when it comes to little sexual games, we could finally dispense with the inevitable 'appeal to mother' at just the wrong moment. The woman can swoon and call for help all she likes because she'll know full well that Mother won't be coming: the old lady will already be there, lying on her daughter's very breast, in the form of a taffeta fly or pancake makeup.

After that, as progress takes its course, even those ptomaines that today are fearsome poisons will in the future be made safe to eat: and so, why not use their essence to enhance certain dishes? Why couldn't that aromatic oil become a flavouring, like cinnamon and almond, vanilla and clove, adding an exquisite touch to cake batter? As with the perfume-maker, a new path, at once hearty and economic, would now be open to the pastry chef and the confectioner.

Finally, precious family ties, which our miserable age of disrespect is loosening and undoing, would be strengthened and secured by ptomaines. Thanks to them, there would be a shivery resurgence of affection, the solidarity of continued tenderness. They would forever inspire the appropriate moment for remembering the dear departed and holding them up as an example to the children, who in their greed would keep the memory perfectly vivid.

And so, on the evening of All Souls' Day, the family is seated around the table in the little dining room with its pale wooden buffet veneered with black strips, under the glow of the lamp muted by a shade. Mother is a good woman; Father, a cashier in a business firm or bank; Junior, still small, has only recently passed the stage of whooping cough and impetigo. Subdued by the threat of going without dessert, the brat has finally agreed not to slap at his soup with his spoon, to eat his meat with a little bread.

Unmoving, he watches his silent, thoughtful parents. The maid enters, carrying some cream of ptomaine. That morning, Mother had gone to the mahogany Empire writing desk decorated with a clover-shaped lockplate, and reverently drawn from it the vial with its ground-glass stopper containing the precious liquid extracted from the decomposed viscera of her forebear. With an eye-dropper, she herself had added a few droplets of this flavouring, which now gives the cream its aroma.

The child's eyes shine; but before being served, he must first listen to the praises sung about the old man, who along with a few facial traits has bequeathed him this posthumous taste of roses on which he will soon feast.

'Ah, your Grandpa Jules was a man of sober mind, a wise and hard-working man! He came to Paris in wooden clogs and he always put something aside, even when he was only earning one hundred francs a month. You wouldn't catch *him* lending money without interest or collateral! *He* was no fool: business first, everything even-Steven. And what respect he always showed to the rich! – And so he died revered by his children, to whom he left gilt-edged securities, like money in the bank!'

'Do you remember Grandpa, darling?'

'Yum, yum, Grandpa!' the kid cries, smearing ancestral cream over his cheeks and nose.

'And Grandma! Do you remember her, too, my little man?'

The child thinks about this. On the anniversary of the old woman's death, they make a rice pudding flavoured with the bodily essence of the departed. Curiously, though she smelled like snuff when alive, in death she gives off an aroma of orange blossoms.

'Yum, yum, Grandma too!' the child cries.

'And who do you love more, your grandma or your grandpa?'

Like all little nippers who prefer what they don't have to what is in hand, the child remembers the far-off pudding and confesses that he likes his grandma better. Which does not keep him from holding out his empty dish toward the platter of grandpa.

Fearing that too much filial love might give him indigestion, the provident mother has the cream removed.

'What a delightful and touching family scene!' Jacques said to himself, rubbing his eyes. And in the mental state he was in, he wondered whether he had only been dreaming, dozing off with his nose on the magazine whose science column related the discovery of ptomaines.

## Tristan Corbière, 1845–1875

The entire sea, it has been said, but especially the sea of nocturnal reefs, the femme fatale, and not only the entire sea, but also the entire countryside in the most distant light, where with each step one rouses the myths that lie sleeping beneath the thorny plants, the apparitions at the base of thorny plants, the apparitions at the end of hollow roads, the paltry thousand-year-old gestures around animals and before stones roughly hewn in the image of those modestly endowed protectors who are the Breton saints: such is the palimpsest – not dissimilar to Jarry’s – covered by the writing in flashes and ellipses of Tristan Corbière. Baudelairean dandyism is here transposed into complete spiritual solitude, in the shadow of the charnel house in Roscoff, that the poet, afflicted with a terrible bodily malformation and nicknamed *An Ankou* (Death) by the local sailors, haunted in the company of his dog, named Tristan like himself. The contrast between physical deformity and sensitive gifts of the first order could not avoid, in Corbière’s work, taking humour as a defence reflex and predisposing him, in life, toward the systematic pursuit of ‘bad taste.’ He would deck himself out as a sailor, thighs bare and legs quaking in enormous boots. He nailed a dried toad to the mantel of his fireplace. ‘Here, take my heart!’ he said to one woman, handing her the bloody heart of a sheep. But for another – for the beautiful, fleeting creature with whom he fell in love in 1871, and whom he miraculously made fall in love with him – he deployed such admirable simplicity in the service of seduction! Without a doubt, it’s with *Les Amours jaunes* [Yellow Loves] that verbal automatism first entered French poetry. Corbière must be chronologically the first to have let himself be carried away by the tide of words that, subject to no conscious direction, expires on our ears each second, and against which most men set the dike of immediate sense. If there’s any doubt, we need only evoke his terrifying phrase, ‘I speak below myself.’ All the resources that combinations of words can offer are here exploited without a second thought, starting with puns, which are employed – as they would later be by Nouveau, Roussel, Duchamp, and Rigaut – for purposes wholly other than to ‘amuse,’ and even, if need be, toward contradictory ends: taken on the verge of death to the Dubois sanatorium, Corbière wrote to his mother: ‘I am at Dubois [the wood], from which coffins are made.’

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### THE LITANY OF SLEEP (EXCERPTS)

SLEEP! Listen to me: I’ll speak very softly:  
Sleep – For those who haven’t got one, a bed-canopy!  
You hover with the Albatross of the tempest,  
And sit on the night-caps of the honest!

SLEEP! – White pillow of virgins sufficiently silly!  
 And secret Safety-valve of virgins developed sufficiently!  
 – For the backbone like herring-bone, a soft Mattress!  
 Black sack where the hunted man runs to hide his head in distress!  
 Prowler along the outward avenue! Procuress!  
 Land where the mute awakens prophet!  
 Caesura of the long line, and Rhyme of the poet!  
 SLEEP! – Grey werewolf! Black Sleep fuming!  
 SLEEP! – Wolfish mask of scented lace for illicit meetings!  
 Kiss of the Unknown Woman, and Kiss of the Darling!  
 – SLEEP! Thief of night! Mad breeze swooning!  
 Fragrance from fumigated tombs to the sky rising!  
*Cinderella's coach* picking up *the Street-walking!*  
 Obscene Confessor of the still-borns' revering!  
 You come, like a dog, to lick the old pain  
 Of the martyr on death's execution-hurdle strained!  
 O forced smile of the crisis slain!  
 SLEEP! Trade-wind! Dawn steam on the window-pane!  
 Excess of existence, and clean Duster to chase  
 Trash in the CAFÉ OF LIFE, on each table's greasy surface!  
 Squall of tedium raining on us from the tedium of space!  
 Thing that runs on, without wake or trace!  
 Drawbridge of moats! Way through a no-through place!  
 SLEEP! – Chameleon that many stars scale!  
 Phantom ship roving alone in full sail!  
 Covered by a net, the woman for sale!  
 SLEEP! – Sad Spider, stretch over me your web's veil!  
 SLEEP! crowned with a halo! fairy Apotheosis,  
 Exalting the pallet of the posing misfit!  
 Patient Listener to the misunderstood who gossips!  
 Refuge of the sinner, of the innocent who doesn't risk it!  
 Domino! Pink guardian-angel! Blue-devils!  
 Mortal voice that vibrates in immortal waters!  
 Awakening of dead echoes and deep matters,  
 – Evening paper: THE TIMES, EVERGREEN REVIEW and ENCOUNTER!  
 Fountain of Youth and longing's Frontier!  
 – You come to satiate the insatiable hunger!  
 You come to madden the poor transported sensitivity,  
 To drown it with pure air in life's open sea!  
 You come, when the curtain's dropped, to the aid  
 Of Punch and the Policeman, untying their braid,  
 Of the Cat, and the cellist and his serenade,  
 And the lyre of those whose Muse is maid!  
 Great God, Master of all! Master of my Mistress  
 Who deceives me with you – loving Laziness –



O Bath of voluptuousness! Fan of caresses!  
SLEEP! – Thieves' integrity! Moonlight  
Of the blind! – SLEEP! For all in an unfortunate plight  
Roulette of fortune! Scavenger of spite!  
O hangman's rope by which the heavy Planet is suspended!  
Aeolian harmony by which the deaf ear is haunted!  
– Fine Story-teller of tall stories: telling your tommy rot? ...  
SLEEP! – Hearth of those who've burnt their faggots!  
SLEEP! – Hearth of those whose faggot has burnt out!  
Skeleton key for those who are turned out!  
Moonlight flit from the creditors and their band!  
Screen against the strong woman for the husband!  
Surface of the depths! Depth of imbeciles!  
Nanny of the soldier and Soldier to nannies!  
Force of the police force! Peace of J.P.s!  
SLEEP! – Pretty-by-night half-opening her calyx!  
Larva, Glow-worm and nocturnal Cilice!  
For Peter crying wolf, the howl of peace!  
Ventilator from above! Impalpable dust's ray,  
Coming to rub out the implacable lantern from the day!  
SLEEP! – Listen to me, I'll speak very softly:  
Floating twilight of *to Be or not to Be!* ...  
– from *Yellow Loves*  
(translated by Val Warner)

## Germain Nouveau, 1851–1920

Even the most supple minds have difficulty reconciling the young man of twenty-one with sunlit voice and mirage eyes who immediately won Rimbaud's friendship – the latter, preceded by his despicable reputation, has just entered the Tabourey, where they pretend not to recognize him; Nouveau, moved by a boundless admiration, goes up to him; the next day they leave together for England – with the beggar of thirty years later stooped under the portico of Saint-Sauveur d'Aix cathedral, to whom Paul Cézanne, heading in to mass, would each Sunday give one *écu* in alms. And yet, absolute nonconformism regulated this life from start to finish. 'The author of *Valentines*,' said his friend Ernest Delahaye, 'was not contrary by nature; instead, he maintained a spirit of tranquil, smiling, and sometimes graciously ironic opposition. This derived from the constant need to construct his ideas by "building the manor house backward," as well as a perpetual tendency to seek out new sides of things. For him, the simplest thing was the opposite of what normal men say and do.' After the mechanism of intellectual subversion that he had helped perfect (alongside Cros, Rimbaud, and even Verlaine) exploded one day in his hands – his first mystical crisis in 1879 caught him while he was eating, on Good Friday, a rib steak that he had insisted on cutting himself at the butcher's – he began devoting the same worrisome zeal, the same total absence of measure to 'good' as he had to 'evil.' A ministry employee, he was forced to resign following a burlesque duel that he brought upon himself with a colleague. While a drawing instructor at the Janson-de-Sailly lycée, he dropped from the chair to his knees and started chanting a hymn. After a short stay at the Bicêtre hospice and two pilgrimages on foot, one to Rome, the other to Santiago de Compostela, he destroyed his works and spent the last fifteen years of his life haunting the churches of Provence with the spectre of Benoît Labre, the vermine-crowned saint whom he'd taken as his model.

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### THE COMB

The towel is a servant,  
The soap answers your call,  
The sponge is a scholar,  
But the comb is lord of all.  
Yes, Madam, lord of all,  
As noble as it is tall,  
Pure and clean in its soul,  
Yes, the comb is lord of all!  
What? they dare use the phrase

*Dirty as a comb!* What gall!  
 We should say: Don't blame, but praise,  
 For the comb is lord of all!  
 Yes, if the comb is not so clean  
 Should blame to its own self befall?  
 Or to a nature low and mean?  
 For ... the comb is lord of all.  
 The fault lies with him who leaves it  
 To wallow in its filth and squalor.  
 It's the fault of laziness.  
 He, the comb, is lord of all.  
 Yes, our hand is but its vassal,  
 And if grime should it befall,  
 Its filth worries it but little,  
 For the comb is lord of all.  
 Now, it gladly grooms our scalp,  
 But only if hand of John or Paul  
 Should clean its teeth, and I repeat,  
 That the comb is lord of all.  
 Yes, it is lord of all, the comb,  
 Without spite or caterwaul,  
 Its motto would be 'care I not,'  
 For the comb is lord of all.  
 Lord of all, its scorn doth sting,  
 Bearing its sword like an ancient Gaul,  
 Now, that sword is but a needle  
 If the comb is lord of all.  
 That needle, gentle and adept  
 Lands softly as a light snowfall,  
 On the hands of a little maid  
 Whose comb, I say, is lord of all.  
 So if you or I were to confess,  
 My friend, that it do us appal,  
 He would let drop such foolishness,  
 For the comb is lord of all.  
 For myself, I'll not opine:  
 I wouldn't have ... the wherewithal,  
 To make you smile is not my mind;  
 And ... the comb is lord of all.  
 So of your fine and spotless teeth,  
 I have the honour each cock's call;  
 To you, dear comb, my kisses sweet:  
 Your humble servant am I all.  
 – from *Valentines*

## Arthur Rimbaud, 1854–1891

The confounding, chilling, magnificent aspect of humour as we envision it, the ability it presupposes to have the most disinterested and paradoxical reactions, can hardly be said to find hospitable soil in Rimbaud. Never, we must admit, does this kind of humour come through in his work in anything but sporadic fashion, and even then it corresponds only partially to our general notion of it. Rimbaud's physical expression, as revealed in the photograph by Carjat or the ones from Ethiopia, is enough to eliminate all doubt on the subject. The filtering gaze of the visionary, the all but deadened one of the adventurer, reveal nothing of the profound mischief that can never entirely be masked in the eyes of born humorists. This is perhaps his weak point: the concept we have today of poetry and art, insofar as it is determined by the needs of a given era and as it *overdetermines* them, has granted humour an importance that it could not claim before. Our whole modern sensibility is attuned to it, and we cannot truly say that Rimbaud satisfies this need – as Lautréamont does, for example. For one thing, his inner and outer selves never managed to coexist in harmony. They alternated with each other and even, in the early part of his life, constantly interfered with each other. We shall ignore his later years, in which the puppet gained the upper hand, in which a pathetic buffoon waved his golden sash every other minute, and consider only the Rimbaud of 1871–72, a veritable god of puberty such as no mythology had ever seen. Here, emotional trauma offers sublimation such fertile paths on which to flower that in one stroke the external world comes to occupy no more space than it does for the zealots of the Japanese Zen sect. 'The man with the wind at his heels' reminds us of all the 'flying carpets' from the Orient, which, they say, if you are chaste and abstinent, will allow you to beat any automotive or other kind of speed record. Maybe, maybe not: both are true, like Rimbaud writing his poems and selling keyrings on the sidewalks of Rue de Rivoli. The only flashes of humour that Rimbaud ever showed, the only illuminations of a type quite beyond the *Illuminations* – let's not forget that to a professional humorist (as one might say 'professional revolutionary') such as Jacques Vaché, he seemed childish and disappointing – are almost always clouded by blots of desperate sarcasm, the exact opposite of humour. With Rimbaud, the seriously threatened *ego* generally cannot make the leap to the *superego*, which would allow for a displacement of psychic accent, but rather persists in defending itself by its own means, taking its weapons from the intellectual and moral indigence of the individuals surrounding it. Faced with its own suffering, it attacks others instead of *being resolved* in them. And thus it loses its only chance of dominating this suffering and of reaching us *intact*.

Still, these reservations, serious as they may be, cannot lessen the value – on the contrary – of certain shattering confessions from 'Alchemy of the Word': 'I liked stupid paintings, door panels, stage sets, backdrops for acrobats, signs, popular engravings, old-fashioned literature, church Latin, erotic books with bad spelling'; and especially of the admirable poem 'Dream,' from 1875, which constitutes Rimbaud's poetic and spiritual legacy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Une saison en enfer*, 1873. *Les Illuminations*, 1886. *Poésies complètes*, 1895. *Un coeur sous une soutane*, 1924, etc.

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: *A Season in Hell. Illuminations. Complete Works* (various editions).

## A HEART UNDER A CASSOCK

I opened my eyes again slightly.

Césarín and the sacristan each smoked a thin cigar, with every possible delicate mannerism, which made them seem terribly ridiculous. The sacristan's wife, on the edge of her chair, her hollow chest leaning forward, spreading behind her the waves of her yellow dress which enveloped her to her neck, and her one flounce in full bloom around her, was amorously pulling the petals from a rose. A frightful smile half opened her lips and revealed on her thin gums two black and yellow teeth like the stoneware of an old stove. – But you, Thimothina, you were beautiful with your white collar, your lowered eyes, and your flat braids!

'He is a young man with a future. His present inaugurates a future, the sacristan said as he exhaled a wave of grey smoke ...'

'Oh! Monsieur Léonard will bring honour to the cloth, said his wife with a nasal twang, and her two teeth were visible! ...'

I blushed in the manner of a well brought up boy. I saw that the chairs were moving away from me and that I was the subject of their whispering ...

Thimothina still looked at my shoes ... the two dirty teeth threatened ... the sacristan laughed ironically ... I still kept my head down! ...

'Lamartine is dead, ...' said Thimothina suddenly.

Dear Thimothina! It was for your worshipper, for your poor poet Léonard, that you cast into the conversation the name of Lamartine. Then I raised my head, I felt that the thought of poetry alone would restore virginity to these profane people, I felt my wings quiver, and I said joyously, with my eyes on Thimothina:

'The author of the *Méditations poétiques* had beautiful flowers in his crown!'

'The swan of poetry is dead! said the sacristan's wife.'

'Yes, but he sang his death song', I replied ardently.

'But', said the sacristan's wife, 'Monsieur Léonard is a poet also! Last year his mother showed me some attempts of his muse ...'

I made bold to say:

'Oh! Madame, I brought neither lyre nor cithara, but ...'

'Oh! you must bring your cithara another day ...'

'But, if it is not displeasing to you, I will read you a few verses ... I dedicate them to Mademoiselle Thimothina.'

'Yes! yes! young man! very good! do recite them. Go to the other end of the room ...'

I moved there ... Thimothina looked at my shoes. The sacristan's wife played the Madonna. The two gentlemen leaned toward one another ... I blushed, coughed, and said, marking the rhythm tenderly:

In its cotton retreat

Sleeps the zephyr with sweet breath ...

In its nest of silk and wool

Sleeps the zephyr with the gay chin.

Everyone present guffawed. The men leaned toward one another making coarse puns. But what was especially frightful was the behaviour of the Sacristan's wife who, her eyes raised to heaven, played the mystic and smiled with her ugly teeth! Thimothina, Thimothina roared laughing. This was a mortal blow to me: Thimothina held her sides! ... – A sweet zephyr in cotton, why that's very pleasant! ... Père Césarín said as he sniffed the air ...

I thought I saw something, but the laughter lasted only a second. They all tried to recover their seriousness, although it still broke out from time to time ...

'Continue, young man, it's very good!'

When the zephyr raises its wing

In its cotton retreat ...

When it hastens to where the flower calls it,

The sweet breath smells so good ...

This time heavy laughter shook my listeners. Thimothina looked at my shoes. I was warm, my feet burned as she watched them, and they swam in their sweat; for I said to myself: these socks I have been wearing for a month are a gift of her love, the glances she casts on my feet are a token of her love. She worships me!

Then some slight smell seemed to come from my shoes. Oh! I understood the horrible laughter of those people! I understood that Thimothina Labinette, out of place in that wicked group, Thimothina would never be able to give free reign to her passion! I understood that I too would have to abolish that sorrowful love which had been born in my heart one May afternoon, in the Labinettes' kitchen as I watched the wriggling posterior of the Virgin with the bowl!

Four o'clock, the time for my return, rang from the parlour clock. Bewildered, burning with love, crazed with grief, I picked up my hat, upset a chair as I fled, crossed the hall as I murmured: I worship Thimothina, and fled to the seminary without stopping ...

The tails of my black habit flapped behind me in the wind like sinister birds! ...

(translated by Wallace Fowlie)

## LETTER

14 October 1975

Dear friend,

Got the Postcard and V's letter a week ago. To make life easier, I told the mailman to send the gen'l. deliv. letters to my house, so you can write me here if you still can't get anything through gen. deliv. I won't comment on Loyola's latest vulgarities, and anyway I've got nothing more to do with all that: it seems the second 'portion' of the 'contingent' of the 'class' of '74 is going to be called up on 3 November or just after. Here's what it's like in the barracks at night:

'DREAM'

*In the barracks stomachs grumble –*

*How true .....*

*Emanations, explosions,*

*An engineer: I'm the gruyere!*

*Lefebvre: All clear!*

*The engineer: I'm the brie!*

*Soldiers hack at their bread.*

That's Life, see?

*The engineer: I'm the bleu!*

*– It'll be the death of you.*

*– I'm the gruyere*

*And the brie ... etc.*

WALTZ

*They've paired us up, Lefebvre and I ... etc ... !*

You can get totally wrapped up in thoughts of that kind. Still, it would be good if you could send along any 'Loyolas' that might turn up, when you have the chance.

One favour: can you tell me clearly and concisely what the current requirements are for a science degree: classics, maths, etc ... – Tell me what grade you've got to get for each part: maths, phys., chem., etc., and then what books (and how to get them) they use in your school, for ex. for the degree exam, unless it changes with the different universities: in any case try to find out what I've asked you from some professor or student in the know. I need to know as precisely as possible, since I'll have to buy the books soon. As you see, I've got two or three pleasant seasons in store, what with military instruct. and this degree business! Anyway, to hell with that 'noble labour.' Only, be kind enough to let me know the best way to get started.

Nothing going on around here.

– I like to think the Pharthounds and stinkpots full of patriotic beans (or not) aren't distracting you any more than you need. At least it doesn't snow in dumps, the way it does here.

Yours 'to the best of my humble abilities.'

You write:

A. RIMBAUD

31, rue Saint-Barthélemy

Charleville (Ardennes), goes without saying.

PS: The 'official' mail has gotten to the point where the P.O. gets a *policeman* to deliver Loyola's newspapers to me!

## Alphonse Allais, 1854–1905

Perhaps it is because the jars in the pharmacy where Alphonse Allais spent his childhood reflected nothing dark – above them hung the sky of Honfleur as it was painted with unprecedented tenderness by Eugène Boudin, who was no less familiar than Courbet or Manet with the paternal drugstore – but it is rare indeed for his work, so filled with humour, to betray a serious apprehension, reveal the slightest reservation. If he is nonetheless related to the incomparably more noxious authors who give this anthology its character, it's less for the clear and almost always vernal substance of his stories, whose aroma is rarely bitter, than for the ingeniousness with which he hunted down the many forms of petty-bourgeois stupidity and *egotism* that reached their peak in his day. Not only did he waste no opportunity to mock pitiful religious and patriotic ideals, which the defeat of 1871 only exacerbated in his compatriots, but he excelled in disorienting the self-satisfied, self-assured, truism-dazzled individuals he saw around him every day. He and his friend Sapeck, in fact, reign over a form of activity that was almost unknown before them: *practical jokes*. We can say that they elevated this activity to an art form. Their goal was nothing less than to exert a terrorism of the mind, in a variety of ways, which would highlight people's banal, threadbare conformity; to flush out the social, remarkably limited beast in them and harass it by gradually removing it from the context of its sordid interests. There is in this a call to reason for being that is equivalent to a death sentence: 'As his ancestors on their ship sailed against the river tides,' said Maurice Donnay, 'so he sailed in his stories against the tides of prejudice.' The shadow of Baudelaire is not far off and, indeed, his biographers remind us that when the poet went to see his mother in Honfleur, he enjoyed visiting Alphonse Allais's father, no doubt making his mark on the child as well (at the end of his life, Alphonse Allais would live in 'Baudelaire's house').

Allais's existence is tied to the rapidly falling star of those eccentric enterprises that were the *Hydropathes*, the *Hirsutes*, and the *Chat-Noir*, which reveal, with a flourish of the top hat, the still-mysterious thought of the late nineteenth century. Some have tried – quite unsuccessfully so far – to enumerate the completely gratuitous *inventions* proposed by the author of *A se tordre* [Splitting Sides], the products of a poetic imagination located between that of Zeno of Elea and that of children: a rifle whose calibre is one millimeter and in which the bullet is replaced by an authentic needle, which can pass through fifteen or twenty men, leaving them threaded, bound, and bundled all at once; carrier fish, intended to replace pigeons for the transmission of urgent messages; an aquarium made of frosted glass for bashful goldfish; intensification of the light source in glow worms; oiling the ocean to soften the waves; a corkscrew powered by tidal pull; a pocket wringer; an elevator-building that sinks into the ground to the desired floor; a train running on ten superimposed tracks, each one moving at a speed of twenty leagues an hour, etc. It goes without saying that the erection of this mental house of cards demands first and foremost a profound knowledge of all the resources language offers, of its secrets as well as its pitfalls: 'He was a great writer,' judged even the harsh Jules Renard after Alphonse Allais's death.



BIBLIOGRAPHY: *A se tordre*, 1891. *Vive la Vie*, 1892. *Rose et Vert Pomme*, 1894. *Le parapluie de l'escouade*, 1894. *Deux et deux font cinq*, 1895. *On n'est pas des boeufs*, 1896. *Le bec en l'air*, 1897. *Amours, délices et orgues*, 1898. *Pour cause de fin de bail*, 1899. *L'affaire Blaireau*, 1899. *Ne nous frappons pas*, 1900. *Le Captain Cap*, 1902. *A l'oeil*, 1921, etc.

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## A FINE PARISIAN DRAMA

### *Chapter IV*

*In which we learn that those who stick their noses into other people's business would do better to mind their own.*

I can't believe how crummy the world is getting these days! (*A reflection from my concierge last Monday morning.*)

One morning, Raoul received the following message:

'A word to the wise: If you wish to see your wife happy for once, be at the Incoherents' Ball next Thursday at the Moulin Rouge. She will be there, masked and disguised as a Congolese Pirogue.

A Friend.'

That same morning, Marguerite received the following message:

'A word to the wise: If you wish to see your husband happy for once, be at the Incoherents' Ball next Thursday at the Moulin Rouge. He will be there, masked and disguised as a turn-of-the-century Templar.

A Friend.'

These words did not fall on four deaf ears.

Admirably cloaking their designs, when the fateful day arrived:

'Dearest,' said Raoul in his most guileless tone, 'I shall be forced to leave you until tomorrow. Affairs of the utmost importance require my presence in Dunkirk.'

'It's just as well,' replied Marguerite, delightfully candid, 'I've just received a telegram from my Aunt Aspasia, who is quite ill and has called me to her bedside.'

### *Chapter V*

*In which we see today's foolish youth whirl about in the most fanciful and transitory pleasures, instead of devoting their thoughts to eternity.*

Mai vouéli vièure pamens:

La vido es tant bello!

*August Marin*

The society columns of the *Limping Devil* were unanimous in proclaiming that this year's Incoherents' Ball shone with unusual splendour.

Many bare shoulders and a fair number of legs, without mentioning their accessories.

Two of those present did not seem to be taking part in the general merriment: a turn-of-the-century Templar and a Congolese Pirogue, both hermetically masked.

At the stroke of three in the morning, the Templar approached the Pirogue and invited her to join him for supper.

In response, the Pirogue merely laid her delicate hand on the Templar's robust arm, and the couple departed.

## **Chapter VI**

*In which the plot thickens.*

'I say, don't you think the rajah laughs at us?'

'Perhaps, sir.'

*Henry O'Mercier*

'Leave us for a moment,' said the Templar to the waiter. 'We shall decide on our menu and ring for you when ready.'

The waiter withdrew, and the Templar carefully locked the door of their compartment.

Then, with a sudden movement, after having rid himself of his helmet, he ripped off the Pirogue's mask.

Both of them, at the same time, emitted cries of stupefaction, as neither recognized the other.

*He was not Raoul.*

*She was not Marguerite.*

They offered each other their apologies, then lost no time in making each other's acquaintance over a light supper, and that's all I have to say about that.

– from *Splitting Sides*

## **THE PLEASURES OF SUMMER**

My home during the beautiful months borders a modest dwelling inhabited by the most odious shrew on the entire coast.

The widow of a town surveyor whom she drove to an early grave, that fishwife joined an uncommon sourness with the most sordid avarice, all of it under cover of a religious devotion pushed to excess.

She is dead, may her ashes rest in peace!

She is dead, and I laughed loud and long when I saw her beat the air with two long skinny arms and collapse onto the thin grass of her ridiculous and excessively tidy garden.

For I was witness to her demise; better still, I engineered it, and I believe that little exploit will remain one of my fondest memories.

Moreover, things had to end that way, for I had gotten to the point where I could no longer sleep, so obsessed was I with the very thought of that harpie.

Horrible, horrible woman!

I attained my morbid result by dint of various practical jokes, each in the worst possible taste, but which, my word, reveal both cleverness and relentlessness in their author.

Would you care for a small glimpse of my machinations?

My neighbour was insane about gardening. No lettuce in the country could compare with her lettuce, and as for her strawberries, they were all so beautiful that they made you want to genuflect before them.

Against weeds, crafty insects, and the most ravenous worms, she tirelessly used a thousand fearsomely effective tricks.

The way she would hunt down slugs was a poem unto itself, as François Copée might have said in an immortal line.

Now, one day when a rainstorm battered the entire country, this is what I hit upon:

I gathered myriad local boys (*myriad* is just an expression) and, handing each one a bag, I said: 'Off with you, my young lads, off onto the country paths, and find me as many snails as you can. You'll get a few pennies' reward when you return.'

And off the little rascals went.

A copious prey awaited them: never, in fact, had so much escargot mottled the landscape.

I then collected all those molluscs in a large, sealed case, in which they were encouraged to fast for a good week. After which, on a radiant summer's eve, I released those creatures into the old bat's garden.

The sunrise soon illuminated this Waterloo. Of the romaine, chicory, and strawberry plants that once had flourished, there now remained only sinister, tattered veins.

Oh, if I hadn't been laughing so hard, the sight of all that devastation would have made me mighty sad!

The shrew couldn't believe her eyes.

Meanwhile, stuffed but not sated, my snails pursued their destructive efforts. From my little observatory, I saw them resolutely climbing to attack the pear trees.

... At that moment, the bell rang for the ten-o'clock mass. My neighbour ran off to recount her woes to the Good Lord.

It would be tedious to give a detailed account of the ferocious pranks that I inflicted on my wicked neighbour.

I'll skip over all the pieces of impure calcium carbide that I lobbed into the little basin in front of her lawn: no human pen could adequately describe the stench of garlic that her stupid water fountain then sprayed in all directions. And as it turned out (a detail that I learned only later and that filled me with joy), the fishwife had an insurmountable aversion to the odour of garlic.

At the foot of the wall separating her lawn from mine, she grew a superb parsley plant. Oh, what beautiful parsley!

By countless handfuls, I covered her platform with hemlock seeds, which yield a plant that is almost indistinguishable from parsley.

(I feel sorry for the new owners of that lawn, if they can't tell the difference.)

Let us go directly to the two supreme pranks, the second of which, as I mentioned above, entailed the horrible old crone's sudden demise.

I had carefully observed our shrew and knew her daily routine like the back of my hand.

Up at dawn, she would run her suspicious eye over the slightest details of her garden, mashing a snail here, pulling a weed there.

At the first chime for the six-o'clock mass, the devout old thing would scam; then, her religious duties fulfilled, she would return and take from her mailbox the newspaper *La Croix*, whose edifying contents accompanied the slurping of her coffee with milk.

Now, one morning, her favourite gazette featured some very peculiar items. The lead story, for example, began with this sentence:

‘Will we ever get those G-d- pulpiteers off our backs!’ and the rest of the article continued on that tone.

After which, one could read this notice:

To our readers,

We cannot caution too strenuously those of our readers who, for one reason or other, find themselves obliged to let clergymen into their homes.

Last Monday, for instance, the priest from Saint Lucien, summoned to the home of one of his parishioners to administer last rites, deemed it wise to take along the dying man’s gold watch and a dozen silver place settings when he left.

This is by no means an isolated incident, etc., etc.

And the human interest stories!

They notably recounted that the papal nuncio had been arrested the evening before, at the Moulin Rouge, for drunk and disorderly conduct and for insulting an officer.

Strange newspaper!

Need I add that this curious periodical had been written, typeset, and printed not by the sort of good women who put out the newspaper *La Fronde*, but by yours truly, with the help of a printer friend whose perfect connivance in this instance I cannot praise too highly.

There is one joke I can particularly recommend to my elegant clientele. It does not shine by its keen intellectualism, nor by its exquisite tact, but playing it can procure for its author an extremely intense happiness.

Naturally, I did not fail to play it on my detestable neighbour.

Starting in the morning, and at various intervals throughout the day, I sent telegrams to people in every part of France, signed by the old witch and giving her address. Each of these telegrams, which came with a *prepaid reply*, consisted of a request for information on a given subject.

One can hardly envision the stupor mixed with terror that the old woman felt each time the telegraph carrier delivered her a slip of blue paper, bearing the most preposterous sentences imaginable.

Following close behind the special issue of *La Croix* that I had concocted, these telegrams precipitated my odious neighbour into a highly comical hallucination. In the end, she refused to let the mailman near her house, and even threatened the humble functionary with her broom handle, should he ever show his face.

Installed at my attic window and furnished with excellent binoculars, I had never laughed so hard.

Nevertheless, the evening came.

An old custom had it that the woman’s cat, a long, skinny, but superb black feline, would come to prowl around my garden as soon as evening fell.

Assisted by my nephew (a very promising lad), I quickly captured the animal.

No less quickly, we dusted it copiously with barium sulphate.

(Barium sulfate is one of those substances that have the property of making objects glow in the dark. You can find it at any shop that sells chemical products.)

It was an opaque night, a night without moon or stars. Worried at not seeing her pussy come home, the old lady called:

‘Polytus! Polytus! Come, my little Polytus!’

(Now *there’s* a name for a cat!)

Suddenly, released by us, mad with rage and terror, Polytus fled, flew up the wall in less time than it takes to write it, and scrambled for home.

Have you ever seen a glowing cat fly through the night shadows? It’s a sight worth seeing; personally, I don’t know of anything more fantastic. It was too much.

We heard cries, screams:

‘Beelzebub! Beelzebub!’ the old lady screeched. ‘It’s Beelzebub!’

Then we saw her drop the candle she was holding and fall onto her lawn.

When the neighbours, alerted by her cries, came to help her up, it was too late: I no longer had a neighbour.

– from *Nothing to Get Worked Up About*

## Jean-Pierre Brisset, 1837–1919

If the uniquely remarkable opus of Brisset is worth studying in relation to humour, the intentions presiding over it can hardly be called humorous. At no time does the author, in fact, depart from the most serious, the gravest of attitudes. It's only at the end of a process of identification with Brisset, of the sort required by the study of any philosophical or scientific system, that the reader hastens to take refuge in humour for his own good. For him, it's a matter of necessity, of sparing himself too great an emotional agitation, as would result from sanctioning a discovery that could shake the very foundations of thought, annihilate any previous conscious gain, and challenge the most elementary principles of social intercourse. Such a discovery is said to be impossible *a priori*, and insane asylums have been built to keep any of it from filtering through, on the exorbitant chance that this might occur. With respect to Brisset, the public's instinct for self-preservation seems to have been much less acute, since it led, in 1912, only to his being saddled by a circle of writers with the sarcastic title *prince of thinkers*. This paltry dignity will seem a disservice only to those who pass by the greatest peculiarities that the human mind has to offer with their eyes closed. The emotional discharge of Brisset's expression into a humour produced entirely in *reception* (in contrast to the humour of *emission* practised by most of the authors who interest us) particularly highlights certain defining characteristics of that humour. The author claims to possess a secret of such import that everything conceived before its revelation can be considered null and void. We are witnessing here the return, not of one individual but, in his person, of the entire race to childhood. (A similar thing happened in the case of Henri Rousseau.) The flagrant discord between the nature of commonly held beliefs and the writer's or painter's affirmation of this absolute primitivism generates a large-scale humour in which the person responsible does not participate.

Jean-Pierre Brisset's guiding principle was the following: 'The word which is God has retained in its folds the history of the human race since the beginning, in each language the history of every people, with a certainty and an irrefutability that might confound both the simple and the wise.' From the outset, the analysis of words allowed him to establish that man descended from the frog. As he saw it, this discovery, which he took great pains to justify, then to exploit via an unprecedentedly rich play of verbal associations, corroborated the anatomical observation that 'human sperm, when seen through a microscope, is such that one would think one were seeing a puddle of water filled with young tadpoles, so completely are the little creatures of this sperm reminiscent of the tadpole's form and movements.' In this way, against a pansexualist backdrop of great hallucinatory value and bolstered by a rare erudition, he developed a dizzying series of impressively rigorous verbal equations, constituting a doctrine that he presented as the sure and infallible key to the Book of Life. Brisset did not conceal that he was himself dazzled by the brilliance of the gift he was offering humanity, which he felt should confer upon him divine omnipotence. He recognized no predecessors save Moses and the prophets, Jesus and the apostles. He proclaimed himself to be the Seventh Angel of the Apocalypse and the Archangel of the Resurrection.

It goes without saying that, in personal terms, a communication of this sort was destined to win its author only grave disappointments. ‘*La Grammaire logique*, published in 1883,’ he says, ‘has spread reasonably well throughout the scientific world. We presented it to the Academy for a contest, but our volume was rejected by M. Renan. In 1891, having failed to find a publisher, we self-published *Le Mystère de Dieu* [The Mystery of God] and announced two public lectures in Paris. This book caused a stir among the students in Angers. We had made arrangements to give a lecture there, but the local authorities put a stop to our project. In 1900, we published *La Science de Dieu* [The Science of God] and a broadside printed in 1,000 copies, *La Grande Nouvelle* [The Great News], which summed up all our previous works. Our criers seemed to be paralysed, and could not sell this great news. We distributed it free in Paris and sent it, along with the book, more or less to the whole world. The book sold after distribution of the broadside, about which we were informed only when our distributor had gone bankrupt. These two publications made enough noise for *Le Petit Parisien* to devote an entire article to us (29 July 1904) entitled “Among the Crazies.” This is what concerns us directly: they cite a madman “who, by a system of alliterations and non sequiturs, had claimed to found a whole metaphysical treatise entitled *La Science de Dieu*. For him, the Word is all. And the analyses of words express the relations between things. I don’t have space enough to quote passages from this appalling philosophy. Moreover, reading it leaves one’s mind in a state of utter turmoil, and my readers will thank me for having spared them.” The madman,’ continued Brisset, ‘who was an officer in the judicial police and whose way of writing has nothing to do with the obscure verbiage cited above, was nonetheless pleased with this critique and even sent thanks. On its publication, *La Science de Dieu* was the seventh trump of the Apocalypse, and, in 1906, we published *Les Prophéties accomplies* [The Prophecies Borne Out]. A rather long prospectus printed in 2,000 copies was sent hither and yon and, as we still needed to make our voice heard, a lecture was held at the Hôtel des Sociétés Savantes on 3 June 1906. We were met by much ill will, and the posters intended to go all over Paris were put up only around the Hôtel. We had an audience of about fifty, and resolved in our indignation that from then on no one would hear the voice of the seventh angel.’ A second, completely revised edition of *La Science de Dieu* nonetheless appeared in 1913 under the title *Les Origines humaines* [Man’s Origins]. In it, the author declares that, as he is old and tired, he fears he will not be able to bring to fruition his supreme project: a dictionary of all the existing languages.

Seen from the perspective of humour, Jean-Pierre Brisset’s work draws its importance from its unique situation, commanding the line that links the *pataphysics* of Alfred Jarry (the ‘science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments’) to the *paranoia-critical activity* of Salvador Dalí (‘a spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the interpretive and critical association of delirious phenomena’). It is striking that the works of Raymond Roussel and the writings of Marcel Duchamp were produced, whether consciously or not, in direct connection with those of Brisset, whose influence can be traced down through the most recent attempts at poetically dislocating language (‘revolution of the word’): Léon-Paul Fargue, Robert Desnos, Michel Leiris, Henri Michaux, James Joyce, and the school of young American writers in Paris.

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## THE GREAT LAW, OR THE KEY TO SPEECH<sup>1</sup>

In speech there exist many hitherto unknown Laws, the most important of which is that a sound or series of sounds which are identical, intelligible, and clear can express different things, depending on changes in the manner of writing or understanding these sounds or words. All ideas expressed by means of similar sounds have a common origin and, at bottom, refer to the same object. For example, the following sounds:

*Les dents, la bouche* [the teeth, the mouth].

*Les dents la bouchent* [the teeth stop it up],

*l'aidant la bouche* [with the mouth's help].

*L'aide en la bouche* [aid in the mouth].

*Laides en la bouche* [ugly in the mouth].

*Laid dans la bouche* [ugly in the mouth].

*Lait dans la bouche* [milk in the mouth].

*L'est dam le à bouche* [it's harm to the mouth].

*Les dents-là bouche* [those teeth: hide 'em].

If I say, *les dents, la bouche*, it elicits only familiar ideas: one's teeth are in one's mouth. That would be the same as fully understanding the exterior of the book of life that is hidden within speech and sealed with seven seals. But in this book, today open before us, we shall now read what was concealed beneath the words *les dents, la bouche*.

The teeth stop up the entrance to the mouth and the mouth helps with and contributes to this closure: thus *Les dents la bouchent, l'aidant la bouche*.

The teeth are the aid, the support inside the mouth [*l'aide en la bouche*], and too often they are also ugly inside the mouth [*laides en la bouche*], and this fact, too, is ugly [*laid*]. At other times, it is like milk: they are white as milk [*lait*] in the mouth.

*L'est dam le à bouche* must be understood: it is harm – evil or damage – visited upon the mouth; put more plainly, I have a toothache. We can see by this that the first harm [*dam*] originated in the tooth [*dent*]. *Les dents-là bouche* means: close up or hide those teeth of yours; shut your mouth.

Everything that is thus written in words and that can be clearly read is imbued with an inescapable truth; it is true the world over. What is said in one language is said for the entire world: the teeth are an aid in, and are ugly in, the mouth all over the world, even if other languages do not express this as the French language does (but they say other, equally important things about which our language is silent). The languages have not joined in agreement; the Spirit of the Eternal, creator of all things, has alone determined his book of life. How was he thus able to conceal such a simple science from all men, the world over?

This is the key to unlock the books of speech.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Breton gives more extensive examples of Brisset's work, I have retained only the two following excerpts, for obvious reasons. Needless to say, Brisset's examples (such as in the list beginning '*Les dents, la bouche*,' or the various sentences revolving around the word *sex*) all depend on the fact that, because of the rules of French phonetics, each element of the series sounds exactly like all the others. [*trans.*]



## THE FORMATION OF SEX

Let us first note that one can alter the arrangement of words in a sentence without modifying the idea expressed: *La porte est ouverte* [the door is open] and *porte est ouverte là* [door is open there] both express the idea that *open is the door ...*

Having admitted this, we then read: *ai que ce?* [what have I with this?], meaning: *ce qu'ai?* or *qu'ai ce?*, in other words, what do I have? This was said on the *quays* where our forebear stood. The questions *ai que ce? est que ce?*, expressing: have I that? is it that?, created the word *exe*, the primitive name for *sex ...*

Then came the question: *ce exe, sais que ce?* = do you know what that point is?, which then became: *Sais que c'est? ce exe est, sexe est, ce excès* [Do you know what it is? that ex is, sex is, that excess], and that is *sex*. We can see that *sex* was the first *excess*. One need fear no excess from those who do not possess a *sex ...*

*Je ne sais que c'est. Jeune sexe est* [I don't know what it is. Young sex is]. The first thing our forebear saw that wasn't familiar to him was a young *sex* being formed. In that case, even the most clairvoyant are sometimes obliged to say, *Je ne sais que c'est. Jeune sexe est*, in other words: *sex is young and young is sex*. The word *young* can be taken as a noun. It results that *young* designates and designated those who took *sex*. The young are children whose *sex* has not yet attained its full potency, for it always develops very slowly.

*Tu sais que c'est bien. Tu sexe est bien* [You know it's good. You sex is good]. The word *tu* [you], like the word *young*, also designated the *sex*. It was a child's word: hide your *tu*, your *tutu*. *Tu tu* = your *sex*. *Tu relues tu tu* = you're looking at your *sex* again. *Turlututu*, bitterly repeated the one toward whom that hurtful remark was directed.

*Y ce ai que c'est? Il sait que c'est. Y sais que c'est. Y sexe est* [What is this Y that I have? He knows what it is. I know what Y is. Y is sex]. *Y* originally designated *sex*, then meant *I* and finally *he* or *it ...*

*On sait que c'est. On sexe est* [One knows what it is. One is sex]. The pronoun *one* designated the *sex* and was equivalent to *in, in this place* [*en ce lieu*], *in that eye* [*en ce l'yeu*]. The *sex* presented itself in the shape of an eye. It was a slight opening. The pronoun *one* is indefinite, and all the words it can replace initially referred to *sex*, the origin of all living words: *Peter, John, Julie*, etc., *knows it's good* [*sait que c'est bien*] and *sex is good* [*sexe est bien*]. Anything capable of knowledge was necessarily a *sex* at its origin, a member of the human or divine family.

*Je sais que c'est bien. Je or jeu sexe est bien* [I know it's good. I or game sex is good]. The first game [*jeu*] was *sex*. Whence our passion for games. The prudent man kept his game hidden. The pronoun *I* [*je*] thus designates the *sex*, and when *I* speak, it's a *sex*, a virile member of the Eternal God that acts by his will or by his leave. In speaking about his *sex*, our forebear noticed that he was speaking about his own individuality, about himself.

– from *The Science of God, or The Creation of Man*

## O. Henry, 1862–1910

O. Henry, who wore a top hat to visit Niagara Falls, claimed, in listening to it, to be able to determine the pitch of its voice: 'The note was about two feet below the lowest G on the piano.' The great popular humorist drags throughout his work a lyrical past that evokes the clear eyes of the early American cinema, the ardent stanzas of Apollinaire's 'The Emigrant from Landor Road,' and the great appeals of Jacques Vaché to the sole calling of an entire generation: 'I'll also be a thief, or trapper, or prospector, or hunter, or miner, or well driller. – Arizona Bar ...' So it was that O. Henry, a pure product of that Texas where he went to school, between Mexico and the Indian territories of Oklahoma, was successively a cowboy, prospector, hardware clerk, and copyist for a real estate agent, before being sent to prison for forgery; found innocent, he then became editor of a satirical newspaper. His humour ('gebrochener' humour), like that of the early Chaplin, is tender and doesn't seek to change the world. 'All of us,' he says, 'have to be prevaricators, hypocrites, and liars every day of our lives; otherwise the social structure would fall into pieces the first day. We must act in one another's presence just as we must wear clothes. It is for the best.' His benevolence and compassion, like Thomas De Quincey's, nonetheless gravitated toward 'knaves,' outlaws. The great poetic byways down which he speeds in stories such as 'The Voice of the City' are of the type that only an admirable horseman can portray. 'A man lost in the snow wanders, in spite of himself, in perfect circles.' Moreover, he is preserved from bitterness by his sense of *awestruck love*, as if he possessed the gift of peering at will into the well of childhood illusions. From the country, he wrote to his young daughter: 'Here it is summertime, and the bees are blooming and the flowers are singing and the birds making honey ... I haven't heard a thing about Easter, and about rabbit's eggs – but I suppose you have learned by this time that eggs grow on eggplants and are not laid by rabbits.'

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *The Gentle Grafter*, *Cabbages and Kings*, *The Four Million*, *Sixes and Sevens*, *The Voice of the City*, etc.

### WHILE THE AUTO WAITS

Promptly at the beginning of twilight, came again to that quiet corner of that quiet, small park the girl in gray. She sat upon a bench and read a book, for there was yet to come a half hour in which print could be accomplished.

To repeat: Her dress was gray, and plain enough to mask its impeccancy of style and fit. A large-meshed veil imprisoned her turban hat and a face that shone through it with a calm and unconscious beauty. She had come there at the same hour on the day previous, and on the day before that; and there was one who knew it.

The young man who knew it hovered near, relying upon burnt sacrifices to the great joss, Luck. His piety was rewarded, for, in turning a page, her book slipped from her fingers and bounded from the bench a full yard away.

The young man pounced upon it with instant avidity, returning it to its owner with that air that seems to flourish in parks and public places – a compound of gallantry and hope, tempered with respect for the policeman on the beat. In a pleasant voice, he risked an inconsequent remark upon the weather – that introductory topic responsible for so much of the world’s unhappiness – and stood poised for a moment, awaiting his fate.

The girl looked him over leisurely; at his ordinary, neat dress and his features distinguished by nothing particular in the way of expression.

‘You may sit down, if you like,’ she said, in a full, deliberate contralto. ‘Really, I would like to have you do so. The light is too bad for reading. I would prefer to talk.’

The vassal of Luck slid upon the seat by her side with complaisance.

‘Do you know,’ he said, speaking the formula with which park chairmen open their meetings, ‘that you are quite the stunningest girl I have seen in a long time? I had my eye on you yesterday. Didn’t know somebody was bowled over by those pretty lamps of yours, did you, honeysuckle?’

‘Whoever you are,’ said the girl, in icy tones, ‘you must remember that I am a lady. I will excuse the remark you have just made because the mistake was, doubtless, not an unnatural one – in your circle. I asked you to sit down; if the invitation must constitute me your honeysuckle, consider it withdrawn.’

‘I earnestly beg your pardon,’ pleaded the young man. His expression of satisfaction had changed to one of penitence and humility. ‘It was my fault, you know – I mean, there are girls in parks, you know – that is, of course, you don’t know, but –’

‘Abandon the subject, if you please. Of course I know. Now, tell me about these people passing and crowding, each way, along these paths. Where are they going? Why do they hurry so? Are they happy?’

The young man had promptly abandoned his air of coquetry. His cue was now for a waiting part; he could not guess the rôle he would be expected to play.

‘It is interesting to watch them,’ he replied, postulating her mood. ‘It is the wonderful drama of life. Some are going to supper and some to – er – other places. One wonders what their histories are.’

‘I do not,’ said the girl; ‘I am not so inquisitive. I come here to sit because here, only, can I be near the great, common, throbbing heart of humanity. My part in life is cast where its beats are never felt. Can you surmise why I spoke to you, Mr – ?’

‘Parkenstacker,’ supplied the young man. Then he looked eager and hopeful.

‘No,’ said the girl, holding up a slender finger, and smiling slightly. ‘You would recognize it immediately. It is impossible to keep one’s name out of print. Or even one’s portrait. This veil and this hat of my maid furnish me with an *incog*. You should have seen the chauffeur stare at it when he thought I did not see. Candidly, there are five or six names that belong in the holy of holies, and mine, by the accident of birth, is one of them. I spoke to you, Mr Stackenpot –’

‘Parkenstacker,’ corrected the young man, modestly.

‘– Mr Parkenstacker, because I wanted to talk, for once, with a natural man – one unspoiled by the despicable gloss of wealth and supposed social superiority. Oh! you do not know how weary I am of it – money, money, money! And of the men who surround me, dancing like little marionettes all cut by the same pattern. I am sick of pleasure, of jewels, of travel, of society, of luxuries of all kinds.’

‘I always had an idea,’ ventured the young man, hesitatingly, ‘that money must be a pretty good thing.’

'A competence is to be desired. But when you have so many millions that – !' She concluded the sentence with a gesture of despair. 'It is the monotony of it,' she continued, 'that palls. Drives, dinners, theatres, balls, suppers, with the gilding of superfluous wealth over it all. Sometimes the very tinkle of the ice in my champagne glass nearly drives me mad.'

Mr Parkenstacker looked ingenuously interested.

'I have always liked,' he said, 'to read and hear about the ways of wealthy and fashionable folks. I suppose I am a bit of a snob. But I like to have my information accurate. Now, I had formed the opinion that champagne is cooled in the bottle and not by placing ice in the glass.'

The girl gave a musical laugh of genuine amusement.

'You should know,' she explained, in an indulgent tone, 'that we of the non-useful class depend for our amusement upon departure from precedent. Just now it is a fad to put ice in champagne. The idea was originated by a visiting Prince of Tartary while dining at the Waldorf. It will soon give way to some other whim. Just as at a dinner party this week on Madison Avenue a green kid glove was laid by the plate of each guest to be put on and used while eating olives.'

'I see,' admitted the young man, humbly. 'These special diversions of the inner circle do not become familiar to the common public.'

'Sometimes,' continued the girl, acknowledging his confession of error by a slight bow, 'I have thought that if I ever should love a man it would be one of lowly station. One who is a worker and not a drone. But, doubtless, the claims of caste and wealth will prove stronger than my inclination. Just now I am besieged by two. One is a Grand Duke of a German principality. I think he has, or has had, a wife, somewhere, driven mad by his intemperance and cruelty. The other is an English Marquis, so cold and mercenary that I even prefer the diabolism of the Duke. What is it that impels me to tell you these things, Mr Packenstacker?'

'Parkenstacker,' breathed the young man. 'Indeed, you cannot know how much I appreciate your confidences.'

The girl contemplated him with a calm, impersonal regard that befitted the difference in their stations.

'What is your line of business, Mr Parkenstacker?' she asked.

'A very humble one. But I hope to rise in the world. Were you really in earnest when you said that you could love a man of lowly position?'

'Indeed I was. But I said "might." There is the Grand Duke and the Marquis, you know. Yes; no calling could be too humble were the man what I would wish him to be.'

'I work,' declared Mr Parkenstacker, 'in a restaurant.'

The girl shrank slightly.

'Not as a waiter?' she said, a little imploringly. 'Labor is noble, but – personal attendance, you know – valets and –'

'I am not a waiter. I am cashier in' – on the street they faced that bounded the opposite side of the park was the brilliant electric sign 'RESTAURANT' – 'I am cashier in that restaurant you see there.'

The girl consulted a tiny watch set in a bracelet of rich design upon her left wrist, and rose, hurriedly. She thrust her book into a glittering reticule suspended from her waist, for which, however, the book was too large.

'Why are you not at work?' she asked.

'I am on the night turn,' said the young man; 'it is yet an hour before my period begins. May I not hope to see you again?'

‘I do not know. Perhaps – but the whim may not seize me again. I must go quickly now. There is a dinner, and a box at the play – and, oh! the same old round. Perhaps you noticed an automobile at the upper corner of the park as you came. One with a white body.’

‘And red running gear?’ asked the young man, knitting his brows reflectively.

‘Yes. I always come in that. Pierre waits for me there. He supposes me to be shopping in the department store across the square. Conceive of the bondage of the life wherein we must deceive even our chauffeurs. Goodnight.’

‘But it is dark now,’ said Mr Parkenstacker, ‘and the park is full of rude men. May I not walk –?’

‘If you have the slightest regard for my wishes,’ said the girl, firmly, ‘you will remain at this bench for ten minutes after I have left. I do not mean to accuse you, but you are probably aware that autos generally bear the monogram of their owner. Again, good-night.’

Swift and stately she moved away through the dusk. The young man watched her graceful form as she reached the pavement at the park’s edge, and turned up along it toward the corner where stood the automobile. Then he treacherously and unhesitatingly began to dodge and skim among the park trees and shrubbery in a course parallel to her route, keeping her well in sight.

When she reached the corner she turned her head to glance at the motor car, and then passed it, continuing on across the street. Sheltered behind a convenient standing cab, the young man followed her movements closely with his eyes. Passing down the sidewalk of the street opposite the park, she entered the restaurant with the blazing sign. The place was one of those frankly glaring establishments, all white paint and glass, where one may dine cheaply and conspicuously. The girl penetrated the restaurant to some retreat at its rear, whence she quickly emerged without her hat and veil.

The cashier’s desk was well to the front. A red-haired girl on the stool climbed down, glancing pointedly at the clock as she did so. The girl in gray mounted in her place.

The young man thrust his hands into his pockets and walked slowly back along the sidewalk. At the corner his foot struck a small, paper-covered volume lying there, sending it sliding to the edge of the turf. By its picturesque cover he recognized it as the book the girl had been reading. He picked it up carelessly, and saw that its title was ‘New Arabian Nights,’ the author being of the name of Stevenson. He dropped it again upon the grass, and lounged, irresolute for a minute. Then he stepped into the automobile, reclined upon the cushions, and said two words to the chauffeur:

‘Club, Henri.’

– from *The Voice of the City*

## André Gide, 1869–1951

Black humour is the veritable bone of contention between two generations that could, in some respect, claim to have taken their inspiration from the works of André Gide. For better or worse, we must recognize that the publication of *Lafcadio's Adventures*, just before the war, marked the apogee of the misunderstanding between these generations. From the moment of its appearance in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, the novel provoked two violently opposed currents of opinion. Whereas most of the author's old friends and admirers hastened in their dismay to claim he had taken a wrong turn (they accused him of indulging in 'serial novels,' of sacrificing to parody nobody really knew what, but at all events to parody; they resented him for being, for the first time, less than serious), young people were ecstatic – not so much over the plot, if truth be told, though its frivolity was actually quite tolerable; or over the style, which had its share of preciousness; but over the creation of the main character, Lafcadio. This character, who was totally unintelligible to the first group, seemed full of meaning to the second, the forebear of a remarkable lineage. For the latter, he represented a temptation and a justification of the highest order. In the years of intellectual and moral debacle that saw the War of 1914, this character did not stop growing in significance; he incarnated nonconformism in all its guises, with a smile that even the 'dromedaries' found rather seductive, though it was imperceptibly sidelong and cruel. From Lafcadio came a sort of 'unconscientious objection,' much more dangerous than the other kind, that has by no means had its final say. The ideas of family, fatherland, religion, and even society emerged somewhat the worse for wear from the assault that this latest form of resigned adolescent boredom, of wandering adolescent idleness, had waged on them.

'For me, a work of art is only a last resort,' a young German who had come to visit M. Gide would declare in 1919: 'I prefer life ... Look here' – and, notes the author of *The Fruits of the Earth*, he stretched out his arm in an admirable gesture. 'I feel more joy simply from extending my arm than from writing the most beautiful book in the world. Action is what I want; yes, the most intense action ... intense ... to the point of murder ...' One can easily see in this attitude, and in Lafcadio's, the logical, active, modern outgrowth of the concept of dandyism. At the 'front,' Jacques Vaché (who in some respects was very hostile toward Gide) dreamed of setting up his easel between French and German lines to draw Lafcadio's portrait. Several years earlier, Arthur Cravan, nephew of Oscar Wilde and *partial* Lafcadio before the fact, had – as harshly and amusingly as could be, moreover – measured the gap between André Gide and his protagonist. But the reality principle was nonetheless given a rest by Gide on a few occasions. And since among our contemporary authors he is also – all humour aside – the one most concerned with *lasting*, there are several of us who believe this to be the least perishable segment of his work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Paludes*, 1895. *Le Prométhée mal enchainé*, 1899. *Les Caves du Vatican*, 1914, etc.

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: *Marshlands*. *Prometheus Misbound*. *Lafcadio's Adventures*.

## PROMETHEUS' LECTURE

### IV

At eight o'clock sharp the crowd entered the Hall of Blue Moons.

Cocles sat in the centre on the left, Camocles in the centre on the right; the rest of the public between them.

A thunder of applause greeted the entry of Prometheus; he ascended the steps of the platform, put down his eagle at his side, and gathered himself together. In the hall there was a thrilling silence ...

#### *Begging the Question*

'Gentlemen,' began Prometheus, 'having, alas, no expectation of interesting you in what I am about to say, I have taken the precaution of bringing this eagle with me. After every tedious portion of my discourse, it will be so kind as to perform a few tricks for us. Moreover, I have with me some obscene photographs and some sky-rockets; at the most serious parts of my lecture I shall take care to amuse the public with them. I venture, therefore, gentlemen, to hope for some attention on your part.

At each new point in my speech, I shall have the honour, gentlemen, of inviting you to witness my eagle taking a meal; for my lecture, gentlemen, has three points; (I felt there was no need to reject this style of construction, which suits my classical turn of mind.) – And with this as an exordium, I will now announce, in advance and without meretricious disguise, the first two points of my discourse:

'First point: Everyone should have an eagle.

'Second point: We all have one anyway.

'Fearing lest you should accuse me of making up my mind in advance, gentlemen, fearing also lest I should impair the liberty of my thought, I have not prepared my discourse beyond this stage; my third point will devolve naturally from the two others; in arriving at it I mean to let the passion of the moment have full play. – And by way of conclusion, the eagle, gentlemen, will take the collection.'

'Bravo! Bravo!' cried Cocles.

Prometheus drank a mouthful of water. The eagle pirouetted three times round Prometheus, and then bowed. Prometheus looked at the audience, smiled at Damocles and Cocles, and then, as no sign of boredom was visible as yet, postponed his rockets till later, and continued:

### V

'Whatever rhetorical skill I brought to bear, gentlemen, I should never succeed in concealing from your perspicacious intelligence the fatal begging of the question, which lies in wait for me at the very beginning of my discourse.

'Gentlemen, whatever our efforts, we shall never escape from begging the question. What does it mean, to beg the question? Gentlemen, if I may venture to say so, begging the question is always an assertion of temperament; for it is unprincipled to beg, and where principles are lacking, assertion of temperament steps in.

‘When I declare: everyone should have an eagle, all of you might well exclaim: Why? – Now, is there any answer I could give you, which might not be reduced to this formula, in which my temperament asserts itself: I do not love men: I love what devours them.

‘Temperament, gentlemen, may be defined as “that which must be asserted.” He’s begging the question again, you will say. But I have just declared that begging the question is always an assertion of temperament; and as I say that temperament must be asserted, I repeat: I do not love Man; I love what devours him – Now, what devours Man? – His eagle. Therefore, gentlemen, everyone should have an eagle. This point, I think, needs no further demonstration.

‘... Alas! I see, gentlemen, that I am boring you; certain persons are beginning to yawn. I could, it is true, make a few jokes at this point; but you would feel they were being dragged in; I have an incurably serious turn of mind. I prefer to distribute some indecent photographs; they will cause those of you who are being bored by my words to hold their peace: and that will permit me to continue.’

Prometheus drank a mouthful of water. The eagle pirouetted three times round Prometheus, and then bowed. Prometheus went on:

### ***Prometheus’ Lecture Continued***

‘Gentlemen, I have not always known my eagle. That is what makes me infer, by a form of reasoning which has a special name that I can’t recall for the moment, as I have only been studying logic during the past week – that, I was saying, is what makes me infer, although the only eagle to be seen here is my own, that an eagle, gentlemen, is something all of you have.

‘Up till now I have kept silence concerning my story – besides, until now I did not quite understand it myself. And if I now decide to speak of it to you, it is because, thanks to my eagle, it now seems to me miraculously wonderful.’

## **VI**

‘Gentlemen, as I have told you, I have not always seen my eagle. Before I saw it, I was careless and handsome, happy and naked without knowing it. Delightful days! On the gushing flanks of Caucasus, happy and naked as myself, the voluptuous Asia embraced me. Together we tumbled in the valleys; our senses were filled with the singing of the air, the laughter of the water, the fragrance of the meanest flowers that blow. Often we lay together under the spreading branches, among flowers where murmuring swarms brushed wing with wing. Asia, full of laughter, became my bride; and then the sounds of humming swarms and rustling leaves, mingling with the ripple of innumerable streams, invited us softly to the softest of slumbers. Everything around us gave permission and protection to our inhuman solitude. – Suddenly, one day, Asia said to me: “You ought to pay some attention to human beings.”

‘First of all I had to go and find them.

‘I was only too willing to pay attention to them; but all I could do was pity them.

‘They were extremely unenlightened; I invented various forms of fire for them; and from that day forth my eagle began. Ever since then I have been aware of my nakedness.’

At these words applause broke out in different parts of the hall. Prometheus abruptly burst into tears. The eagle clapped its wings and cooed. With a terrible gesture Prometheus unbuttoned his waistcoat and offered his wincing liver to the bird. The applause was redoubled. Then the eagle



pirouetted three times round Prometheus; the latter drank a mouthful of water, gathered himself together, and continued his discourse in the following terms:

## VII

‘Gentlemen, my modesty carried me away; forgive me: this is the first time I have spoken in public. But now it is my candour that carries me away: gentlemen, I have paid far more attention to men than I told you just now. Gentlemen, I have done a very great deal for men. Gentlemen, I have loved men passionately, desperately, and deplorably. – And I have given them so much, that I might just as well say that I have given them their being; for what were they previously? – They existed, but they weren’t conscious of existing. Like a fire for their enlightenment, gentlemen, out of all my love for them I made them this consciousness. – The first conscience they ever had was that of their beauty. That is what made possible the propagation of the species. Man prolonged himself in his posterity. The beauty of the forerunners repeated itself, equal, indifferent, and without history. That might have gone on indefinitely. Then I became anxious; already bearing within me, without knowing it, the egg of my eagle, I wanted something more, or something better. This propagation, this piecemeal prolongation seemed to me to indicate in them a state of waiting – whereas in reality it was only my eagle that was waiting. I knew nothing of this; I believed this state of waiting was inside man; in fact, it was I that put it inside them. Now, of course, because I had made man in my own image, I understand that in each man something that hadn’t yet opened out was lying in wait; in each one of them there was the eagle’s egg ... And yet, I don’t know; I can’t quite explain all that. – What I do know is that, not satisfied with giving them consciousness of their existence, I wanted to give them also a reason for existing. I gave them fire, flame, and all the arts whose nutriment is a flame. Warming their spirits within them, gentlemen, I brought into existence the devouring belief in progress. And I rejoiced strangely, that man’s health should be spent in producing it. – No more belief in good, but a sick hope for better. Belief in progress, gentlemen, was their eagle. Our eagle is our reason for existing, gentlemen.

‘Man’s happiness grew less and less, and it was all one to me: the eagle was born. Gentlemen, I loved men no more, it was what lived through and on them that I loved. I had finished with a humanity without a history ... The history of mankind is the history of eagles, gentlemen ...’

– from *Prometheus Misbound*

(translated by George D. Painter)

## John Millington Synge, 1871–1909

If one were to take the singular power of domination that humour confers over oneself and others and seal it in a talisman, it would have to contain a bit of Irish soil. And it is a pouch of this soil, at its freshest and most aromatic, that the theatrical and poetic works of John Millington Synge offer above all. At the summit of these works, *The Playboy of the Western World* not only appears, as it did to George Moore, the most significant play of the last two hundred years, but it also has the distinction of raising on the theatre to come, as it *ought to be*, the opacity of several thousand curtains. With it, we do away with the outmoded formulas through which modern playwrights have vainly tried to recreate modes of expression that had been elevated above all the others by an Aeschylus, a Shakespeare, or a Ford, but that today trail behind them centuries of debasement. As Antonin Artaud observed, the issue is to ‘rediscover the secret of an objective poetry based on the humour that theatre renounced, that it abandoned to vaudeville, before cinema got hold of it.’ This secret rests entirely in Synge’s hands, as Guillaume Apollinaire foresaw. The day after the Paris premiere of *Playboy*, he noted: ‘Such strong poetry, of a constantly unexpected perfection, emanates from its realism that I’m not surprised people found it shocking.’ The play had been booed in Dublin; in New York the performances ended in riots. ‘In Paris,’ Apollinaire added, ‘it was greeted by utter indifference, except from the poets who were keenly impressed by such a new kind of tragedy; it’s just that poets have always more or less tried to kill their fathers. But that’s a very difficult thing, as the *Playboy* attests, and looking at the audience on the day of the premiere, I said to myself, “Too many fathers, not enough sons.”’ This interpretation of the play’s meaning, however well-founded it may be, cannot exclude several others, and one of the main features of this ‘comedy’ is to have given rise to interpretations that are so numerous and so varied. For the puritanical New Yorkers who (wilfully or not) turned a blind eye to its manifest content, it broke ‘on all four counts’ the law prohibiting the performance of any ‘lascivious, sacrilegious, obscene, or indecent’ work. For one Irish critic, notes Maurice Bourgeois, author of the admirable French translation, the play could only be seen as a dramatization of Baudelaire’s practical joke, in which the poet entered a Paris restaurant loudly exclaiming: ‘After having murdered my poor father ...,’ to the great horror of the diners. For the German translators, it symbolized the struggle of ‘young Ireland’ against ‘old Ireland’; for still others, nothing less than the struggle of matter against spirit. Is there any need to point out that, though no one has yet mentioned it, a very satisfactory explanation of the play’s surface data could revolve purely and simply around the ‘Oedipus complex’? The important thing is that the exploration of the ‘latent content’ here forces us to confront a rosette of meanings that can be valid on a variety of levels even as they are valid on all of them – as if, with *The Playboy*, we were dealing with the precipitate of a universal dream.

Synge, who, before retiring to Ireland and taking up theatre, had travelled through Germany and Italy and long resided in France, had a very clear idea of the stumbling block that threatened the two opposing tendencies in literature and art: ‘In the modern literature of towns, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away

from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this literature, and on the other, Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words.' He found a resolution of that conflict in the language, at once ultra-concrete and hopelessly incantatory, of the Irish people, forced by geographic and economic factors to rely solely on their own genius, and in the blazing imagination with which this people – shepherds, fishermen, bartenders, itinerant tinkers – managed to come out from under 'the oppression of the hills.' The extraordinary light of Synge's works comes from the fact that he was able to strip this magnificent primitive tree down to its very sap.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *In the Shadow of the Glen*, 1903. *Riders to the Sea*, 1904. *The Well of the Saints*, 1905. *The Aran Islands*, 1907. *The Playboy of the Western World*, 1907. *The Tinker's Wedding*, 1908. *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, 1910.

## THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

SARA: And asking your pardon, is it you's the man killed his father?

CHRISTY [*sidling toward the nail where the glass was hanging*]: I am, God help me!

SARA [*taking eggs she has brought*]: Then my thousand welcomes to you, and I've run up with a brace of duck's eggs for your food to-day. Pegeen's ducks is no use, but these are the real rich sort. Hold out your hand and you'll see it's no lie I'm telling you.

CHRISTY [*coming forward shyly, and holding out his left hand*]: They're a great and weighty size.

SUSAN: And I run up with a pat of butter, for it'd be a poor thing to have you eating your spuds dry, and you after running a great way since you did destroy your da.

CHRISTY: Thank you kindly.

HONOR: And I brought you a little cut of cake, for you should have a thin stomach on you, and you that length walking the world.

NELLY: And I brought you a little laying pullet – boiled and all she is – was crushed at the fall of night by the curate's car. Feel the fat of that breast, mister.

CHRISTY: It's bursting, surely.

[*He feels it with the back of his hand, in which he holds the presents.*]

SARA: Will you pinch it? Is your right hand too sacred for to use at all? [*She slips round behind him.*] It's a glass he has. Well, I never seen to this day a man with a looking-glass held to his back. Them that kills their fathers is a vain lot surely.

[*Girls giggle.*]

CHRISTY [*smiling innocently and piling presents on glass*]: I'm very thankful to you all to-day

...

WIDOW QUIN [*coming in quickly, at door*]: Sara Tansey, Susan Brady, Honor Blake! What in glory has you here at this hour of day?

GIRLS [*giggling*]: That's the man killed his father.

WIDOW QUIN [*coming to them*]: I know well it's the man; and I'm after putting him down in the sports below for racing, leaping, pitching, and the Lord knows what.

SARA [*exuberantly*]: That's right, Widow Quin. I'll bet my dowry that he'll lick the world.

WIDOW QUIN: If you will, you'd have a right to have him fresh and nourished in place of nursing a feast. [*Taking presents.*] Are you fasting or fed, young fellow?

CHRISTY: Fasting, if you please.

WIDOW QUIN [*loudly*]: Well, you're the lot. Stir up now and give him his breakfast. [*To Christy.*] Come here to me [*she puts him on the bench beside her while the girls make tea and get his breakfast*] and let you tell us your story before Pegeen will come, in place of grinning your ears off like the moon of May.

CHRISTY [*beginning to be pleased*]: It's a long story; you'd be destroyed listening.

WIDOW QUIN: Don't be letting on to be shy, a fine, gamey, treacherous lad the like of you. Was it in your house beyond you cracked his skull?

CHRISTY [*shy but flattered*]: It was not. We were digging spuds in his cold, sloping, stony, divil's patch of a field.

WIDOW QUIN: And you went asking money of him, or making talk of getting a wife would drive him from his farm?

CHRISTY: I did not, then; but there I was, digging and digging, and 'You squinting idiot,' says he, 'let you walk down now and tell the priest you'll wed the Widow Casey in a score of days.'

WIDOW QUIN: And what kind was she?

CHRISTY [*with horror*]: A walking terror from beyond the hills, and she two score and five years, and two hundredweights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a limping leg on her, and a blinded eye, and she a woman of noted misbehaviour with the old and young.

GIRLS [*clustering round him, serving him*]: Glory be.

WIDOW QUIN: And what did he want driving you to wed with her?

[*She takes a bit of the chicken.*]

CHRISTY [*eating with growing satisfaction*]: He was letting on I was wanting a protector from the harshness of the world, and he without a thought the whole while but how he'd have her hut to live in and her gold to drink.

WIDOW QUIN: There's maybe worse than a dry hearth and a widow woman and your glass at night. So you hit him then?

CHRISTY [*getting almost excited*]: I did not. 'I won't wed her,' says I, 'when all know she did suckle me for six weeks when I came into the world, and she a hag this day with a tongue on her has the crows and seabirds scattered, the way they wouldn't cast a shadow on her garden with the dread of her curse.'

WIDOW QUIN [*teasingly*]: That one should be right company.

SARA [*eagerly*]: Don't mind her. Did you kill him then?

CHRISTY: 'She's too good for the like of you,' says he, 'and go on now or I'll flatten you out like a crawling beast has passed under a dray.' 'You will not if I can help it,' says I. 'Go on,' says he, 'or I'll have the divil making garters of your limbs to-night.' 'You will not if I can help it,' says I.

[*He sits up, brandishing his mug.*]

SARA: You were right surely.

CHRISTY [*impressively*]: With that the sun came out between the cloud and the hill, and it shining green in my face. 'God have mercy on your soul,' says he, lifting a scythe. 'Or on your own,' says I, raising the loy.

SUSAN: That's a grand story.

HONOR: He tells it lovely.

CHRISTY [*flattered and confident, waving a bone*]: He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a lep to the east. Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet.

[*He raises the chicken bone to his Adam's apple.*]

GIRLS [*together*]: Well, you're a marvel! Oh, God bless you! You're the lad, surely!

## Alfred Jarry, 1873–1907

Just as he himself said, ‘Redon: he who mysteries,’ or ‘Lautrec: he who posters,’ we should say, ‘Jarry: he who pistols.’ ‘It is,’ he wrote to Mme Rachilde in the year of his death, ‘one of the great joys of homeownership to fire a pistol in one’s own bedroom.’ One evening when he was with Guillaume Apollinaire at a performance of the Bostock Circus, he terrorized his neighbours, whom he was trying to convince of his exploits as a lion tamer, by brandishing his revolver. ‘Jarry,’ said Apollinaire, ‘made no secret of the satisfaction he had felt in horrifying the philistines, and he was still clutching his pistol when he climbed onto the upper deck of the bus that was to bring him back to Saint-Germain-des-Prés. From up there, to say goodbye, he continued to wave his bull-dog.’ Another time, in a backyard, he was amusing himself by uncorking champagne with gunshots. A few bullets strayed over the fence, prompting the irruption of the neighbour whose children were playing next door. ‘Just imagine, if they were hit!’ – ‘Ah!’ said Jarry, ‘not to worry, Madam, we’ll simply make you some more.’ Still another time, over dinner, he fired at the sculptor Manolo, guilty, he claimed, of having made a pass at him; and, to the friends who were dragging him away: ‘Wasn’t that a beautiful work of literature? ... But I forgot to pay for the drinks.’ And it was flanked by two revolvers, in addition to a heavy leaded cane, that Jarry, dressed in furs and shod in slippers, would go every evening toward the end of his life to visit Dr Saltas (the same Saltas who, on the eve of Jarry’s death, having inquired what he would like most, was asked for a toothpick).

This unshakable alliance between Jarry and the pistol – much like André Marcueil, the hero of his novel *The Supermale*, with his ‘love-inspiring machine’ – can be taken as the final key to his thought. The pistol serves here as the paradoxical hyphen between the outer and inner worlds. In the small, parallelogrammic box called his *clip* sleep an infinity of readymade solutions, conciliations: ‘From the dispute between the Plus sign and the Minus sign, the Reverend Pa Ubu, of the Company of Jesus, former King of Poland, will soon write a great book entitled *Caesar Antichrist*, in which one will find the only practical demonstration, by means of a mechanical engine called a physics rod, of the identity of opposites.’

Literature, after Jarry, moves hazardously over mine-filled terrain. The author imposes himself in the margins of the text; the prop man, suitably exasperating, keeps walking in front of the lens while smoking a cigar. No way to rid the finished house of that workman who’s gotten it into his head to fly a black flag over the roof. We can say that after Jarry, much more than after Wilde, the distinction between art and life, long considered necessary, found itself challenged and wound up being annihilated in principle. After the premiere of *Ubu Rex*, we are told, Jarry tried to merge with his creation come what may – but what creation *was* that? We know that humour represents the revenge of the pleasure principle (attached to the *superego*) over the reality principle (attached to the *ego*). The latter being put in too uncomfortable a position, it is easy to see in the character of Ubu the magisterial incarnation of the Nietzschean-Freudian *id* that designates the totality of unknown, unconscious, repressed energies, of which the *ego* is but the sanctioned emanation, dictated by prudence. ‘The *ego*,’ says Freud, ‘does not completely envelop the *id*, but only does

so to the extent to which the system *Pcpt.* [= perception, as opposed to *Cs.* = consciousness] forms its surface, more or less as the germinal disk rests upon the ovum.' As it happens, the ovum, or egg, is none other than Ubu, triumph of the instinct and the instinctive impulse, as he himself proclaims: 'Like an egg, a pumpkin, or a blazing meteor, I roll over this earth doing as I please. Whence are born these three animals [the pal-contents] whose nearoles are imperturbably directed northward, and whose virgin noses are like trunks that have not yet blared.' Under the name Ubu, the *id* assumes the right to punish and reprimand what in fact belongs only to the *superego*, the psychic final appeal. Raised to supreme power, the *id* immediately proceeds to liquidate every noble sentiment ('Push all the Nobles through the trap!'), every feeling of guilt ('Down the hatch with the judges!'), every notion of social dependence ('Down the hatch with the financiers!'). The hostility of the hypermoral *superego* toward the *ego* is thus transferred to the utterly amoral *id* and gives its destructive tendencies free rein. Humour, the process that allows one to brush reality aside when it gets too distressing, is exercised here almost exclusively at others' expense. We are nonetheless, without contradiction, at the very source of that humour, as witnessed by its continual outpouring.

This is, we believe, the deep meaning of Ubu's character, and at the same time it is the reason why he overflows any particular symbolic interpretation. As Jarry took care to point out, 'He is not entirely M. Thiers, or the bourgeois, or the boor. Rather, he would be the perfect anarchist, except for what prevents us from ever becoming perfect anarchists: the fact that he is a man, whence cowardice, filth, etc.' But the particular role of this creation is to overcome the most varied forms of human activity, beginning with collective forms. Starting from there, *the same* Ubu will renounce the personal advantage that, in *Ubu Rex*, constituted his sole motive for reentering the human masses, whose emotions he will now personify – emotions all the more contagious in that they are more vulgar. In counterpoint to *Ubu Rex*'s unbridled will to domination, *Ubu Enchained* will stage an unbridled will to servility. The *superego* has removed itself from the proceedings only to reappear in a stereotyped, rather disturbing form, *in which one can see equally both the fascist and the Stalinist*. We must recognize that events of the past two decades confer upon this second Ubu an immeasurable prophetic value, whether we look at the 'Free Men' manoeuvring on the parade ground of the Champ de Mars, brought to us by all the world's movie screens with an unprecedentedly enthusiastic and unanimous 'Hurrah for the Pschittanarmy!'; or at the ambience of the 'Moscow Trials': 'Pa Ubu (to his Defending Counsel): Hey, you there, Sir, shut up please! You're telling lies and preventing this assembly from hearing all about our magnificent achievements. Yes, gentlemen, try to keep your nearoles open and stop kicking up such a row; ... we have massacred more persons than can be counted ... we dreamed solely of bloodletting, cash extortion, flaying alive and assassination; we performed the debraining ceremony regularly every Sunday on a convenient hillock in the suburbs, surrounded by an audience of wooden horses and coconut-shy operators. Being very tidy in our habits, we have filed and disposed of these old criminal cases ... For all these reasons, we command you, gentlemen, our judge and prosecutor, to sentence us to the harshest punishment you can think up between you, so that we get what we deserve for our crimes: do not condemn us to death, however ... We rather fancy ourselves as a galley-slave, a fine green cap on our head, foddered at State expense and occupying our leisure hours in petty tasks.'

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## EPILOGUE

In the triangular forest, after dusk.

## THE CHORUS

*Its voice, at first almost mute, then murmuring, thundering loud and louder still.*

The tall hats of the Yankees black  
Confer on the forgotten sky  
Three pillars of the hourglass.  
The long repose of femurs crossed  
In philosophic Xes light.  
The squall unravels fast our beards of white.  
So may the ball formed by our hoods,  
Pink echo of the flowing blood,  
Seek out the mummy in the golden dusk;  
Once they the hourglass do upend  
Sand at the top gives the condemned  
One night before the wand'ring of the Jews.  
The alabaster hourglass filled,  
The wailing heart is ever stilled.  
Our ibis feet on marsh, like him 'neath yews.  
The future light will rain upon  
The lead of forest windows and  
Our task of Necrophori solitaire.  
On the woes of mandragora  
And the plaints of passiflora  
The earthworm pale of burials emerges from its lair.

*The chorus, which we have never seen, whitens the background in vaulted streaks with its sulphury alb. As it appears:*

The earthworm pale of burials emerges from its lair.  
– from *Minutes of Memorial Sand*

## THE DEBRAINING SONG

MEMNON: A cabinet-maker was I for many a long year,  
Rue du Champs de Mars in All Saints' Parish;  
My dear wife was a dressmaker designing lady's wear,



And the style in which we lived was pretty lavish.

Every blooming Sunday if it wasn't raining,  
We'd put on our best clothes and toddle down  
To join the mob who came for the Debraining,  
Rue de l'Echaudé, the greatest show in town.

*One, two, watch the wheels go round,*

*Snip, snap, the brains fly all around,*

*My oh my the Rentier's in a stew!*

THE PALCONTENTS: *Hip hip arse-over-tip! Hurrah for Old Ubu!*

MEMNON: With our two beloved nippers, clutching us jammily

And waving paper dolls, as happy as can be,

Upstairs on the bus we're a well-adjusted family

As we roll off merrily towards the Echaudé

Crowding to the barrier, risking broken bones,

Regardless of the blows, we push to the front row.

Then yours truly climbs up on a pile of stones

To protect my turn-ups when the claret starts to flow,

*One, two, etc.*

THE PALCONTENTS: *Hip hip arse-over-tip! Hurrah for Old Ubu!*

MEMNON: Soon with brains we're plastered, the old girl and me,

Our two kids lap it up and we're all jubilating

As we watch the Palcontent display his cutlery –

The first incision's made and the numbered coffins waiting.

Suddenly I notice right up by the machine

The half-familiar phiz of a chap I used to know.

Hey, there! I shout to him, So much for you, old bean!

You tried to cheat me once, am I glad to see you go!

*One, two, etc.*

THE PALCONTENTS: *Hip hip arse-over-tip! Hurrah for Old Ubu!*

MEMNON: A plucking at my sleeve, it's my spouse as I perceive.

Come on, you slob, she screeches, Take a crack!

Chuck a man-sized wad of dung at the lying bastard's tongue,

The Palcontent's just turned his ruddy back!

Such excellent advice won't allow me to think twice,

I summon all my courage and let fly –

An enormous lump of pschitt meant to score the winning hit,

Got the Palcontent instead full in the eye.

THE PALCONTENTS *and* MEMNON: *One, two, etc.*

MEMNON: Toppled from my heap of stone, on the barrier I'm thrown,

As the Palcontent turns round to see who nicked him:

Down the hole of no return, pulped like butter in a churn,

And The People's justice claims another victim.

So that is what you cop for a little Sunday hop,

Rue de l'Echaudé where necks are craning –

You set out like a lord and they return you on a board,

Just because you fancied a debraining.  
THE PALCONTENTS and MEMNON: *One, two, see the wheels go round,  
Snip, snap, the brains fly all around,  
My oh my the Rentier's in a stew!  
Hip hip arse-over-tip! Hurrah for Old Ubu!*  
– from *Ubu Cuckolded*  
(translated by Cyril Connolly)

## UBU ENCHAINED

### ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

*The Parade Ground. The THREE FREE MEN, their CORPORAL.*

THREE FREE MEN: We are the Free Men and this is our Corporal. – Three cheers for freedom, rah, rah, rah! We are free. – Let's not forget, it's our duty to be free. Hey! not so fast, or we might arrive on time. Freedom means never arriving on time – never, never! – for our freedom drills. Let's disobey together ... No! not together: one, two, three! the first will disobey on the count of one, the second on two, the third on three. That makes all the difference. Let's each march out of step with the other two, however exhausting it may be to keep it up. Let's disobey individually – here comes the corporal of the Free Men!

CORPORAL: Fall in!

*They fall out.*

You, Free Man number three, you get two days' detention for being in line with number two. The training manual lays down quite clearly that you must be free! – Individual drills in disobedience ... Blind and unwavering indiscipline at all times constitutes the real strength of all Free Men. – Slope ... arms!

THREE FREE MEN: Let's talk in the ranks. – Let's disobey. – The first on the count of one, the second on the count of two, the third on the count of three. – One, two, three!

CORPORAL: As you were! Number one, you should have grounded arms; number two, surrendered your weapon; number three thrown your rifle six paces behind you and then tried to strike a libertarian attitude. Fall out! One, two! one two!

*They fall in and then march off, being careful not to march in step.*

– from *Ubu Enchained*

(translated by Simon Watson Taylor)

## THE NYCTALOPES

Sengle got two weeks' 'convalescence' leave to go to Paris. And once more the little soldier boy, all clad in red and blue, he headed out across the entire city toward the station.

He crossed paths with several officers whom he neglected to salute, but who did not call him to order. And besides, to demonstrate his good intentions and military obsequiousness, six steps before and six after he lifted a regulation hand *to*:

Two mailmen;

Seven schoolboys in uniform;

A bank messenger;

A bus driver, who was walking in a public garden in full regalia. And as several cyclists strolled there as well, their mounts resting against a clump of trees, he went looking for the bus depot.

He saluted one of the cyclists because on his left shoulder he was wearing a horrid little club insignia, all crumpled up.

He went into the cathedral and asked for the Swiss guard, so as to honour him with a genuflection. Then, following the meanderings of his path, he prostrated himself before:

The zinc flag of a wash house;

A pulchinello on a junk shop sign;

Several delivery boys, because of their badges;

A kitchen boy, who might have been using the similarity between the military uniform and his work garb to conceal the fact that he was really an officer;

And when night fell and his opportunities for saluting became less honourable, he headed toward the lights of the train station.

In the street, he noticed a group of enlisted men contorted in strange postures. They were not drunkards, who, having toasted to the sign of infinity, wandered from one stream to the next, precisely following in their zigzags the laws of refraction. These soldiers felt their way along the walls, sometimes bumping painfully into a passer-by, or lurching into each other at a drop in the sidewalk. They seemed like the blind leading each other into a ditch: Brueghel with uniforms.

Sengle, overhearing scraps of their conversation, pieced together their problem:

‘We’ll never find the hospital. That’s the third time we’ve been around this city. The hospital must have collapsed. Like last year, when the major went for his evening inspection and found only the walls standing, since he’d neglected to tell the engineers. The roof caved in on the typhoid cases, whom they evacuated to the corridors of a midwives’ clinic. It’s a fact that one patient immediately got better. So does a hospital collapse in this town every year because of some major’s negligence?’

And off they headed, groping their way toward a fourth lap around the city.

Sengle understood their hallucination when he read their regimental number. At a small nearby garrison on the hill, cases of night blindness were on the rise because of the altitude. The major, on his morning visit, had ordered those affected to the emergency hospital; but first they waited until they had enough to make a convoy, which was not formed until after the evening meal, then sent off without a guide. Having reached the city at sunset, and unable to penetrate the artificial lighting, the poor devils stumbled about in absolute darkness. People were used to it. That was why the officers had not thought twice about Sengle’s lapse of military etiquette.

May this chapter make the throng – that great nyctalope which knows how to see only familiar lights – understand that others might consider it a morbid exception, and calculate the right ascensions and declinations of a starless night for itself; may this chapter make that throng forgive this book for what it deems sacrilegious toward its idols – for in short, we declare the following: that it is not a daily occurrence for military hospitals to collapse because of a medical officer’s negligence; that the event might in fact be quite rare; that such a thing has not happened in several years; that even then it was perhaps an isolated case; that, despite its authenticity (see certain newspaper accounts from the summer of ’89), we have been indulgent enough to describe it as an hallucination ...

Sengle, mindful of the Scriptures, at first thought of asking where one might find a deep hole or shop's display window, so that the temporary blind men might topple into it. But afraid of missing his train, he instead contented himself with telling them:

'This is the general speaking. Next time, try to act more like soldiers.'

– from *Days and Nights*

## THE SUPERMALE

'Look, I'm going to kill the beast,' said Marcueil, very calmly.

'What beast? You're drunk, old man ... my young friend,' said the general.

'The beast,' said Marcueil.

In front of them, compact in the moonlight, an iron thing was squatting, with things that looked like elbows on its knees, and armoured shoulders without a head.

'The dynamometer!' exclaimed the general gleefully.

'I'm going to kill it,' repeated Marcueil obstinately.

'My young friend,' said the general, 'when I was your age, and even younger, when I was reading for the *Ecole Polytechnique*, I often unhooked shop signs, unscrewed street urinals, stole milk bottles and locked drunks in hallways. But I haven't yet burgled a slot machine. You needn't deny it, you think it's a slot machine! Well, anyway, he's drunk ... But be careful, there's nothing in it for you, my young friend!'

'It's full, it's full of strength, and full of numbers,' André Marcueil was saying to himself.

'Well,' the general condescended, 'I don't mind helping you break the thing, but how? With our feet, with our fists? You don't want me to lend you my sword, do you, to cut it in half?'

'Break it? Oh, no,' said Marcueil. 'I want to kill it.'

'Look out for the law, then, for *defacing a public monument!*' said the general.

'Kill ... with a permit,' said Marcueil. And he fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a French ten centime piece.

The dynamometer's slot glistened vertically.

'It's a female,' said Marcueil gravely, '... but a very strong one.' The coin went in with a click; it was as if the massive machine were cunningly putting itself on guard.

André Marcueil seized the sort of iron armchair by both its arms and, with no apparent effort, pulled:

'Come, madame,' he said.

His phrase ended in a terrible crashing of twisted steel, the broken springs writhed on the ground as if they were the beast's entrails; the dial grimaced and its needle raced madly around two or three times like a hunted creature looking for a way of escape.

'Let's move along,' said the general. 'The dog! Just to impress me he picked a worn-out instrument.'

They were both very lucid now, although Marcueil had not thought to drop the two handles, which were like burnished *cestus*. They went out of the enclosure and up the avenue, toward the coupé.

Dawn was breaking, like the light from another world.

(translated by Ralph Gladstone and Barbara Wright)

## THE PASSION CONSIDERED AS AN UPHILL BICYCLE RACE

Barabbas, slated to race, was scratched.

Pilate, the starter, pulling out his clepsydra or water clock, an operation which wet his hands unless he had merely spit on them – Pilate gave the send-off.

Jesus got away to a good start.

In those days, according to the excellent sports commentator St Matthew, it was customary to flagellate the sprinters at the start the way a coachman whips his horses. The whip both stimulates and gives a hygienic massage. Jesus, then, got off in good form, but he had a flat right away. A bed of thorns punctured the whole circumference of his front tire.

Today in the shop windows of bicycle dealers you can see a reproduction of this veritable crown of thorns as an ad for puncture-proof tires. But Jesus's was an ordinary single-tube racing tire.

The two thieves, obviously in cahoots and therefore 'thick as thieves,' took the lead.

It is not true that there were any nails. The three objects usually shown in the ads belong to a rapid-change tire tool called the 'Jiffy.'

We had better begin by telling about the spills; but before that the machine itself must be described.

The bicycle frame in use today is of relatively recent invention. It appeared around 1890. Previous to that time the body of the machine was constructed of two tubes soldered together at right angles. It was generally called the right-angle or cross bicycle. Jesus, after his puncture, climbed the slope on foot, carrying on his shoulder the bike frame, or, if you will, the cross.

Contemporary engravings reproduce this scene from photographs. But it appears that the sport of cycling, as a result of the well known accident which put a grievous end to the Passion race and which was brought up to date almost on its anniversary by the similar accident of Count Zborowski on the Turbie slope – the sport of cycling was for a time prohibited by state ordinance. That explains why the illustrated magazines, in reproducing this celebrated scene, show bicycles of a rather imaginary design. They confuse the machine's cross frame with that other cross, the straight handlebar. They represent Jesus with his hands spread on the handlebars, and it is worth mentioning in this connection that Jesus rode lying flat on his back in order to reduce his air resistance.

Note also that the frame or cross was made of wood, just as wheels are to this day.

A few people have insinuated falsely that Jesus's machine was a *draisienne*, an unlikely mount for a hill-climbing contest. According to the old cyclophile hagiographers, St Briget, St Gregory of Tours, and St Irene, the cross was equipped with a device which they name *suppedaneum*. There is no need to be a great scholar to translate this as 'pedal.'

Lipsius, Justinian, Bosius, and Erycius Puteanus describe another accessory which one still finds, according to Cornelius Curtius in 1643, on Japanese crosses: a protuberance of leather or wood on the shaft which the rider sits astride – manifestly the seat or saddle.

This general description, furthermore, suits the definition of a bicycle current among the Chinese: 'A little mule which is led by the ears and urged along by showering it with kicks.'

We shall abridge the story of the race itself, for it has been narrated in detail by specialized works and illustrated by sculpture and painting visible in monuments built to house such art.

There are fourteen turns in the difficult Golgotha course. Jesus took his first spill at the third turn. His mother, who was in the stands, became alarmed.

His excellent trainer, Simon the Cyrenian, who but for the thorn accident would have been riding out in front to cut the wind, carried the machine.

Jesus, though carrying nothing, perspired heavily. It is not certain whether a female spectator wiped his brow, but we know that Veronica, a girl reporter, got a good shot of him with her Kodak.

The second spill came at the seventh turn on some slippery pavement. Jesus went down for the third time at the eleventh turn, skidding on a rail.

The Israelite *demimondaines* waved their handkerchiefs at the eighth.

The deplorable accident familiar to us all took place at the twelfth turn. Jesus was in a dead heat at the time with the thieves. We know that he continued the race airborne – but that is another story.

(translated by Roger Shattuck)

## Raymond Roussel, 1877–1933

The difficulty one has, at a certain distance, in telling a genuine automaton from a false one has held man's curiosity spellbound for centuries. From Albert the Great's android doorman, who ushered in visitors with a few words, to the chessplayer that Poe made famous, via Jan Müller's iron fly that flitted about and came to rest on his hand and Vaucanson's famous duck – not to mention the homunculi, from Paracelsus to Achim von Arnim – the most troubling ambiguity has always existed between animal life, especially human life, and its mechanical simulacrum. The specific response of our age has been to transpose this ambiguity by shifting the automaton from the outer world to the inner world, by letting it develop freely within the mind itself. Psychoanalysis has detected the presence of an anonymous mannequin in the recesses of the mental attic, 'without eyes, nose, or ears,' not unlike the ones Giorgio de Chirico painted around 1916. This mannequin, once the cobwebs that concealed and paralysed it were brushed away, has proven to be extremely mobile, 'superhuman' (it was precisely from the need to give this mobility free rein that Surrealism was born). This strange character, freed from the monstrous deformities that mar Mary Shelley's admirable creature in *Frankenstein*, enjoys the faculty of moving about without the slightest friction, in time as well as in space; in a single bound, it eliminates the supposedly unbreachable gap separating reverie from action. The marvellous thing is that this automaton is in everyone, ready to be liberated: we need only, following Rimbaud's example, help it recapture the sense of its absolute innocence and power.

We know that 'pure psychic automatism,' in the sense that these words are understood today, claims to designate only a borderline state that would require man to completely relinquish logical and moral control over his actions. Without needing to go so far – or, rather, without needing to remain in that state – it sometimes happens, after a certain point, that man finds himself motivated by an engine of unsuspected power, that he mathematically obeys an apparently cosmic impulse whose origin eludes him. The question that arises, apropos of these and other automatons, is whether a *conscious* being is concealed in them. And, one might wonder in the presence of Raymond Roussel's works, *conscious to what degree?* Certainly, in his lifetime, a few individuals already suspected that he owed his prodigious talent for invention to a method he had discovered and were utterly convinced that he used an *imagination prompt* (as there are memory prompts). Roussel himself divulged this method in the posthumously published work entitled *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*. We now know that his technique consisted of composing, by means of homonyms or close homophones, two sentences with completely different meanings, and of establishing these sentences as pillars (first and last sentences) of his narrative. The story would move from one to the other via a new process performed on the constituent words of the two sentences: relate one word with double meaning to another word with double meaning. As Roussel said, 'The purpose of this method was to bring forth a variety of *factual equations* that I then had to solve logically.' Once this vast arbitrariness had been introduced in the literary subject, the issue was then to dissipate it, to make it disappear by a series of passes in which the irrational is constantly limited and tempered by the irrational.

Roussel is, along with Lautréamont, the greatest mesmerizer of modern times. In him, the extremely laborious conscious self ('I bleed over every sentence,' he said; and he confided to Michel Leiris that each line of *New Impressions of Africa* cost him roughly fifteen hours of work) is constantly at odds with the highly demanding unconscious (it is rather symptomatic that he maintained a philosophically untenable technique for nearly forty years without seeking to modify or replace it). Raymond Roussel's humour, voluntary or not, resides entirely in this play of disproportionate balances: 'There are a few of us who hear [in Roussel] the lugubrious tick-tock of the infernal machine that Lautréamont left on the mind's doorstep,' says Jean Lévy,<sup>1</sup> 'and who greet each of its liberating explosions with admiration.'

The same critic has rightly noted that no one has yet come close to determining the relative portion of humour, obsession, and repression in this work. Roussel, in fact, had some dealings with psychopathology, and his case even furnished Pierre Janet with the pretext for a paper entitled 'The Psychological Characteristics of Ecstasy.' His suicide (?) only seemed to confirm the idea that throughout his entire writing career he had remained abnormal. At the age of nineteen, upon finishing his poem *La Doublure*, he experienced Nietzsche's final ecstasy: 'One feels that a particular work one has created is a masterpiece, that one is a genius ... I was the equal of Dante and Shakespeare; I experienced what the aged Victor Hugo felt at seventy, what Napoleon felt in 1811, what Tannhauser dreamt at the Venusberg. What I was writing was bathed in radiance. I closed the curtains, for fear that the slightest opening might let out the rays of light shining from my pen; I wanted to yank back the screen all at once and illuminate the world. To leave these papers lying about would have caused luminous beams to shine all the way to China, and frantic crowds would have stormed the house.'

All the way to China ... The child who adored Jules Verne, the lover of Punch and Judy shows, the very wealthy man who had built for his travels the most luxurious mobile home in the world remained until the end the worst detractor, the harshest critic of real voyages. 'In Peking,' said Michel Leiris, 'he shut himself away after a cursory tour of the city,' just as he remained writing in his cabin for several days, passing up his first opportunity to set foot in Tahiti.

The magnificent originality of Roussel's work significantly refutes and definitively affronts the champions of an outmoded primary realism, whether called 'socialist' or not. 'Martial,' as the author of *Locus Solus* is identified in Pierre Janet's study, 'has a very interesting conception of literary beauty: the work must contain nothing real, no observations about the world or the mind, nothing but completely imaginary constructions. These are in themselves ideas from an extrahuman world.'

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<sup>1</sup> A.k.a. Jean Ferry, who later figures in this anthology in his own right. [trans.]



## IMPRESSIONS OF AFRICA

The *C* was still vibrating in the distance when Fuxier came towards us, clasping to his breast, with his right hand spread round it, an earthenware pot from which sprouted a vine.

In his left hand he held a transparent, cylindrical jar, fitted with a cork with a metal tube running through it, and displaying in the bottom a heap of chemical salts, blossoming into beautiful crystals.

Placing his two burdens on the ground, Fuxier took from his pocket a small dark-lantern which he set down quite flat on the surface of the soil, so that it was just touching the inside edge of the stone pot. An electric current, turned on in the heart of the portable lamp, suddenly projected a dazzling beam of white light, directed towards the zenith by a powerful lens.

Then, picking up the jar, which he held horizontally, Fuxier turned a key placed at the end of the metal tube, from which an outlet, carefully directed at a particular part of the vine, sprayed out a heavily compressed gas. A brief explanation by the operator informed us that this fluid, on coming into contact with the atmosphere, at once produced an intense heat which, combined with certain very peculiar chemical properties, would ripen a bunch of grapes before our eyes.

He had scarcely finished his commentary when already the sight he had announced began to appear visibly in the form of a minute cluster of grapes. Fuxier, possessing the power which legend attributes to certain fakirs of India, was accomplishing for our benefit the miracle of sudden blossoming.

Under the influence of the chemical current, the embryo fruit developed rapidly, and soon a single bunch of white grapes, heavy and ripe, hung on the side of the vine.

Fuxier replaced the jar on the ground, after closing the tube with another turn of the key. Then, drawing our attention to the bunch of fruit, he pointed out tiny figures imprisoned in the centre of the translucent spheres.

By executing in advance on the incipient fruit modelling and colouring processes more intricate even than those involved in the preparation of his blue and red pastilles, Fuxier had deposited in each seed the embryo of a pleasing picture whose development had just followed the phases of the ripening so quickly achieved.

Through the skin of the grapes, which was particularly fine and transparent, it was possible, by standing near them, to study without difficulty the different groups which were lit from above by the electric beam.

The modifications carried out in the germinal phase had resulted in the suppression of pips so that nothing disturbed the clarity of the translucent, coloured, Lilliputian statues, whose material was provided by the pulp itself.

'A glimpse of ancient Gaul,' said Fuxier, pointing with his finger at the first grape, in which a number of Celtic warriors were preparing for battle.

Each of us admired the delicacy of the lines, so effectively thrown into relief by the luminous effulgence.

'Odo being sawn up by a demon in the dream of Count Valtguire,' continued Fuxier, indicating the second grape.

This time one could distinguish, within the delicate skin, a sleeper in armour lying at the foot of a tree; a wisp of smoke which seemed to issue from his forehead, to represent a dream, contained in its fine coils a devil armed with a long saw, whose pointed teeth were cutting into the body of one of the damned, contorted with pain.

Another grape, summarily explained, showed the circus in Rome, packed with a large crowd, watching with excitement a fight between gladiators.

'Napoleon in Spain.' These words of Fuxier's referred to a fourth grape, in which the Emperor, dressed in his green costume, rode as a conqueror on horseback among the inhabitants, who seemed to revile him by their sullen, menacing attitude.

'From the Gospel of St Luke,' Fuxier went on, lightly touching three grapes which hung side by side from the same parent stalk, divided into three branches, and in which the three scenes which follow were composed of the same characters.

In the first instance, Jesus was seen stretching out his hand to a little girl with her lips half-open and a fixed stare in her eyes, who seemed to be singing some light, long-drawn-out trill. Beside her on a straw pallet a little boy, lying motionless in the sleep of death, clutched between his fingers a long wand of osier; near the death-bed the father and mother, overcome by grief, wept silently. In the corner a sickly, hunchbacked girl remained humbly in the background.

In the middle grape, Jesus, turning towards the bed of straw, was looking at the dead child who, miraculously restored to life, was plaiting the light, flexible wand of osier like a skilled basket-weaver. The family, filled with wonder, showed their joyful amazement with ecstatic gestures.

The last scene, in the same setting, and with the same characters, glorified Jesus, as he touched the crippled girl, who suddenly became beautiful and erect.

Leaving this short trilogy to one side, Fuxier lifted up the bottom of the bunch and showed us a splendid grape, commenting on it with these words:

'Hans the woodcutter and his six sons.'

Inside, a remarkably robust old man was carrying on his shoulder a tremendous load of wood, consisting of whole trunks, mixed with bundles of fire wood, tied together with creepers. Behind him, six young men were all bent, severally under a burden of the same type, but infinitely lighter. The old man, half turning his head, seemed to be mocking the laggards, who were less enduring and less vigorous than himself.

In the penultimate grape, a youth, clad in the costume of the reign of Louis XV, while out for a stroll, gazed with emotion at a young woman in a flame-red gown who was sitting in her doorway as he passed.

'The first pangs of love, experienced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*,' explained Fuxier, who, turning the grape in his fingers, caused the electric beams to play among the bright red reflections of the gaudy dress.

The tenth and last grape contained a superhuman duel which Fuxier presented to us as the reproduction of a painting by Raphael. An angel, hovering a few feet from the ground, was driving the point of his sword into the breast of Satan, who staggered back, dropping his weapon.

Having thus surveyed the whole cluster, Fuxier extinguished the dark-lantern, which he replaced in his pocket, then went away, once more, as at his entrance, carrying the earthenware pot and the cylindrical container.

(translated by Rayner Heppenstall and Lindy Foord)

## THE DUST OF SUNS

*Sixteenth Tableau: A flat, empty place. At the back of the stage, an iron railing behind which a cross rises. Stage left, an outdoor table which the seated collection-taker supervises while plying her needle.*

### SCENE X

#### BLACHE, REARD, THE COLLECTION-TAKER.

REARD: I'm certain, Monsieur Blache. The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that we're still on the right track.

BLACHE: So in your view the three asterisks underlined among all the rest on the Okleat stamp that we found in my uncle's collection –

REARD: – can only indicate the three stars carved on this cross.

BLACHE: Is someone buried here?

REARD: Quite the opposite – someone whose name, François Patrier, is on every tongue. Over there lies a stretch of quicksand that in former times, before this railing existed, was fenced off by no more than a sign – on one occasion overlooked by a dizzy youngster with a butterfly net whom a common hawkmoth lured beyond it. On the run when he heard the shouts of the foolhardy boy came François Patrier, a fisherman, who could only wrest him from the clasp of death by enduring it himself.

BLACHE: He sank – ?

REARD: – very quickly, alas, and soon was obliged to hold over his head the child to whose voice he had joined his own in vain. The sand was almost level with his lower lip when at last a group appeared on the horizon, hurrying towards them.

BLACHE: The distance remaining couldn't fail to take several minutes to cover –

REARD: That's why, seeing, where he was concerned, that help would come too late, François Patrier made of the boy a final request. Anxious to demonstrate that no part of what had motivated him resembled a desire for fame, he asked that on the cross to be erected near the site of his disappearance there be merely inscribed three stars.

BLACHE: And when the rescuers arrived?

REARD: Nothing more emerged than two hands sustaining the boy, whom they were able to reach by firmly linking arms to form a long and sturdy chain – while François Patrier finally vanished for good.

BLACHE: The boy conveyed his last wish – ?

REARD [*pointing to the cross*]: – which was faithfully executed.

BLACHE: I see – three stars, not even the year ...

REARD: Nonetheless there soon arose a literally irresistible need to satisfy – so great was its sway – the universal yearning to honour such a hero; and since his brief oral will concerned only his burial cross, it was felt that raising a statue to him in town would not disobey his wish.

BLACHE: So a public subscription was opened – ?

REARD: – and is not yet closed. One touching detail: it's right here, every day, that contributions are taken and deposited in this urn. The minimum is five francs, and any greater sum must correspond to the product of one of the powers of that digit.

BLACHE: Then someone wanting to give more than five francs –

REARD: – must choose between twenty-five francs, one hundred and twenty-five, or six hundred and twenty-five, and there is nothing to stop him proceeding to three thousand one hundred and twenty-five, or fifteen thousand six hundred and twenty-five, or even ... Let's stop there. It is hoped that this progression will suggest high figures to the rich.

BLACHE: We must find out whether my uncle ... How can we make this woman –

REARD: Would you like to make a contribution?

BLACHE: Of course, and with all my heart.

REARD [*going up to THE COLLECTION-TAKER*]: This is Monsieur Blache, who wishes to participate –

THE COLLECTION-TAKER: Blache – I already have that name in my donation records. [*Thinking.*] Under five squared, or cubed ... More likely cubed.

REARD: You understand, contributions are scrupulously classified in a series of registers, all bearing the number five, the first unmodified, the remainder displaying, in order, the scale of powers up to the sixth.

BLACHE: And the registers accordingly decline in thickness from first to last.

THE COLLECTION-TAKER [*after leafing through one of the registers*]: Yes – here's the name. It does appear in the third register.

BLACHE [*taking out his wallet*]: In that case, out of family loyalty I'll follow this good example. I choose for my donation that number that will allow it to reappear there.

(translated by Harry Mathews)

## Francis Picabia, 1879–1953

The often much-less-inspired polemicist in Picabia acted to the detriment of the painter and poet. His highly developed sense of humour went poorly with the critical, defiant, aggressive stance that he adopted toward his contemporaries, whom he all too readily attacked on personal grounds. But perhaps this is the necessary verso of an opus that, more than any other, wanted to avoid being removed from life and that, putting Rimbaud's watchword into execution, was concerned most of all with being 'absolutely modern.' The will to scandal that long presided over it (from 1910 to 1925) made this opus a readymade target for the impatience, even the fury of all the guardians of conformity and taste. 'Anything but Picabia': that has been the bargain offered to innovative art these past two decades – a bargain that is usually struck, ignoble though it may be, and though Picabia can only benefit by it. Such a malediction is hardly the rule these days, and he systematically did the opposite of what he would have had to do in order to ward it off. This resolute detractor of every moral or aesthetic convention was one of the greatest poets of desire, of desire without respite whose very realization condemns it to be reborn in different form. Love and death naturally constitute the two poles, between which zigzags a dot that is hypersensitive to the image of the present moment.

Picabia was the first to understand that *any* juxtaposition of words is valid and that its poetic virtue is all the greater the more gratuitous or irritating it seems at first glance. The entire heroic period of his art attests not so much to the need for reacting against the vanity of subjects or techniques or for astounding imbeciles as to the desperate, Neronian dream of holding ever grander celebrations for himself: 'Royal Fern,' he once wrote me, 'is a very large painting, three yards by two and a half. It is composed of 261 black circles on a crushed strawberry background. In one corner, there is an enormous gold cup-and-ball game. As for the captions, I prefer not to spoil the surprise.'

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### THE COLD EYE

After we die, they should put us inside a ball. This ball would be made of particoloured wood. They would roll us in it toward the cemetery, and the undertakers charged with this task would wear transparent gloves, so as to remind lovers of our caresses.

For those wishing to embellish their homes with a pleasing view of the dear departed, there would be crystal balls through which one could see the definitive nudity of one's grandfather or twin brother!

Slipstream of the intelligence, steeple-chase lamp; humans look like unblinking crows taking flight above corpses, and all the redskins are stationmasters!

## FIVE MINUTE INTERMISSION

I had a Swiss friend named Jacques Dingue<sup>1</sup> who lived in Peru at an altitude of 13,000 feet. He'd left several years before to explore those regions, and while there he had succumbed to the charms of a strange Indian woman, whose refusal to grant her favours had driven him mad. He grew progressively weaker, no longer even leaving the hut where he'd gone to live. A Peruvian doctor, who had accompanied him there, treated him in the vain hope of curing a dementia praecox that he deemed incurable!

One night, a flu epidemic swooped down on the small tribe of Indians who were sheltering Jacques Dingue. Everyone was stricken without exception and, of two hundred natives, 178 died in just a few days. The terrified doctor had quickly hightailed it back to Lima ... My friend, too, was infected with this terrible disease, immobilized by fever.

Now, all the dead Indians owned one or several dogs, which soon had no other means of surviving but to eat their masters; they shredded the corpses, and one of them carried into Dingue's hut the head of the Indian woman with whom he was in love ... He recognized her at once and no doubt experienced an intense inner commotion, for he was suddenly cured of both his madness and his fever. His strength restored, he took the woman's head from the dog's mouth and amused himself by tossing it to the other side of the room, commanding the animal to fetch and bring it back. Three times the game began anew, with the dog carrying the head back with the nose between its teeth; but on the third toss, Jacques Dingue having thrown it a bit too hard, the head smashed against the wall. To his great delight, the handball player noticed that the brain flying out of it contained but a single circumvolution and could easily have been mistaken for a pair of buttocks!

– from *Jesus Christ the Carpetbagger*

## THE CHILD

The autumn is faded  
by the child  
whom we loved.  
Like a vulture  
on a carcass  
he diminishes his family then disappears  
like a butterfly.

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<sup>1</sup> A rough translation of this name would be 'Jack Wacko.' [trans.]

## Guillaume Apollinaire, 1880–1918

Guillaume Apollinaire is at the intersection of so many paths that only one side of him fits into the scope of this book – that, we might say, only one point of his star is consumed here. A world separates him from the most accomplished types of modern humour, who are at once agitating and reasoning: a Lafcadio, a Jacques Vaché, or that extraordinary Gino Pieri who was for a time Apollinaire's secretary, and whom, under the name Baron d'Ormesan, he made the hero of 'The False Amphion,' the last story in *The Heresiarch and Co*. Despite the sympathy that his great natural curiosity caused him to feel for such characters, he was for his part much less liable to attract or hold onto them. The moment one of them got him into trouble with the outside world, he fell into childishness, lost no time in courting ridicule in an effort to clear his name, and immediately made himself the butt of the jokes. When in 1913, victim of the interest he had taken in this same Gino Pieri (to the extent of harbouring two Phoenician statuettes that the latter had stolen from the Louvre), Apollinaire found himself implicated in the theft of the *Mona Lisa*, he wept, composed bad plaintive verses, and solicited character testimonials from his friends. On the other hand, everyone remembers – as noted in the anonymous preface to the 1931 reprinting of *The Debauched Hospodar* – letters from the 'Baron d'Ormesan' in which he detailed his own part in the affair: 'Nothing can better situate the difference that exists between a man who puts humour in his life and one who creates humour, between an adventurer and one who merely has a taste for adventure.'

Similar vexations occurred with Arthur Cravan, who, having used the term 'that Jew Apollinaire' in an article, was astounded to receive a visit from the latter's seconds. 'Although,' Cravan told them, 'I am not afraid of Apollinaire's big sword, but because I have very little pride, I am prepared to make every reparation in the world and state that ... Guillaume Apollinaire is in no way Jewish, but rather Roman Catholic. In order to avoid any future misunderstandings, I would like to add that M. Apollinaire, who has a fat belly, looks more like a rhinoceros than a giraffe, and that, when it comes to his head, he takes more after the tapir than the lion, and also that he tends more toward the vulture than toward the long-beaked stork.'

These reservations aside, it is undeniable that Apollinaire was better than anyone at introducing into the domain of expression (the only domain in which he excelled) several of the most characteristic attitudes of today's humour. If this sense of humour utterly failed him in certain instances when it would have been fitting (I'm thinking of his active gullibility in the face of war: I can still see him on his death bed on the eve of the armistice, staring delightedly at his kepi, on which they had just sewn a second stripe), he was marvellously adept at putting it into his poems and stories. 'So keen an awareness,' someone has said, 'of the bonds between poetry and sexuality, the awareness of the iconoclast and the prophet: that is what gives Apollinaire his particular place in history.' It was when he came to the end of his efforts to liberate every literary genre that Apollinaire, carried poetically by a furious wind, in the passion of imagination and imagination alone, encountered grand humour: let us recall the subject of *Ieximal Jelimite* in *The Poet Assassinated*. Often while walking in the street, he would turn back favourably toward those

old pack-rat vagrants whom one sometimes encounters at night, on Paris's Left Bank, heading toward the quays. He regarded them as a bit of literary history, and for a moment his eye seemed to drown in them. His laugh, inspired by something entirely different, made the same sound as an early shower of hail against the window pane.

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## DRAMATURGY

### *The Theatres*

Young man, we're going to tell you a few subjects for plays. If they were signed by known names we'd play them, but these are masterpieces by unknowns which have been entrusted to us and which, because you are a personable young man, we are about to bestow upon you.

*Problem Play:* The Prince of San Mecó finds a louse on his wife's head. He brushes it off and makes a scene. For six months the princess has slept with no one but the Viscount of Dendelophe. The spouse makes a scene with the Viscount who, having slept only with the princess and Madame Lafoulue, the wife of a Secretary of State, has the government overthrown and overwhelms Madame Lafoulue with his scorn.

Madame Lafoulue makes a scene with her husband. Everything is explained when Mister Bibier, the Senator, arrives. He scratches his head. He is deloused. He accuses his voters of being lousy. Finally everything is resolved.

Title: 'Parliamentary Procedure.'

*Character Piece:* Isabelle Daddy-Longlegs promises her husband to be faithful to him. Then she remembers having promised the same thing to Jules, the shopboy. She suffers from being unable to reconcile her good faith and her love.

Meanwhile, Longlegs fires Jules. This event determines the triumph of love and we find that Isabelle has become a cashier in a big store where Jules works.

Title: 'Isabelle Daddy-Longlegs.'

*Historical Play:* The famous novelist Stendhal is at the centre of a Bonapartist plot which is ended by the heroic death of a young singer during a presentation of *Don Juan* at La Scala in Milan. Since Stendhal goes under a pseudonym, he gets out of the affair admirably. Grand processions, historical characters.

*Opera:* The ass of Buridan is hesitant about satisfying his hunger and thirst. The she-ass of Balaam prophesies that the ass will die. The golden ass comes in, eats and drinks. Donkey Skin shows her nudity to this asinine bunch. While passing through, the ass of Sancho, pensive, decides to prove his robustness by kidnapping the Infanta, but the traitorous Melo warns the Genius of La Fontaine. He proclaims his jealousy and kicks the golden ass. *Metamorphoses.* The Prince and the Infanta enter on horses. The King abdicates in their favour.



*Patriotic Play*: The Mexican government brings suit against France for counterfeiting Mexican jumping beans. In the last act, they exhume the remains of a fourteenth-century alchemist who invented these beans at La Ferté-Gaucher.

*Vaudeville*:

*A driver who was quite appealing*

*Yelled to the lady next door:*

*If you let me see your ceiling*

*I'll let you see my floor.*

Here, sir, is enough to nourish an entire life of dramaturgy.

– from *The Poet Assassinated*

(translated by Ron Padgett)

## MEETINGS

It was while running after Tristouse Ballerinettes like this that Croniamantal continued his literary education.

One day when he was trudging across Paris he suddenly found himself beside the Seine. He passed over a bridge and walked a little further when suddenly, noticing Mr François Coppée ahead of him, Croniamantal regretted that this stroller was dead. But nothing prevents you from talking to a dead person, and the meeting was pleasant.

'You've got to admit,' thought Croniamantal, 'for a stroller, he's quite a stroller, in fact the very author of *The Stroller*. He's a skilful and witty rhymist full of a feeling for reality. Why not talk with him about rhyme?'

The poet of *The Stroller* was smoking a black cigarette. He was dressed in black, his face was black; he was funnily standing on a block of stone, and Croniamantal could clearly see by his pensive air that he was working on a poem. Croniamantal approached him, and after saying hello he said point-blank:

'Dear master, you look so sombre.'

He replied courteously:

'It's because my statue is bronze. It exposes me to constant mistakes. Thus, the other day,

*'Strolling by me the Negro Sam MacVea*

*'Saw me blacker than he and wept at the idea*

'See how clever these lines are. I'm in the process of perfecting rhyme. Have you noticed that the distich I recited for you rhymes perfectly for the eye.'

'Yes,' said Croniamantal, 'because it's pronounced *Sam MacVea*, as in Shakespeare.'

'Here's something that will do the job better,' continued the statue:

*'Strolling by me the Negro Sam MacVea*

*'Wrote three names on the base immediately*

'Now there is a seductive refinement, the full rhyme for the ear.'

'You enlighten me on the subject of rhyme,' said Croniamantal. 'And I'm very happy, my dear master, to have strolled your way.'

'It's my first success,' replied the metallic poet. 'However, I have just composed a little poem bearing the same title: there is a man walking along, *The Stroller*, down the corridor of a railroad

coach; he spies a charming lady with whom he stops at the Dutch frontier instead of going straight on to Brussels.

*'They passed at least a month at Rosendael*

*'He liked the ideal she loved the real*

*'In every way he was different from her*

*'Thus it was love that they knew there*

'I call your attention to these last two lines; although rich in rhyme, they contain a dissonance which causes a delicate contrast between the full sound or masculine rhymes and the morbidity of the feminine ones.'

'Dear master,' said Croniamantal louder, 'tell me about free verse.'

'Long live freedom!' cried the bronze statue.

– from *The Poet Assassinated*

(translated by Ron Padgett)

## THE SEA LION

Of a sea calf I've got the eyeses  
And of Miss XYZ the allure  
You'll find me at all our assizes  
I'm the one making literature  
I'm a seal by birth and by trade  
And since marry it seems we might  
One fine day I'll wed Ota the maid  
Otary<sup>1</sup> morning till night  
Papa Mama  
Pipe and tobacco spitoon cabaret  
Lai Tu

## HEADSTONE HEADGEAR

In his grave  
They've nestled him  
The bird who perched  
On your brim  
He once parked  
In Arkansas  
His little  
Or  
nithological ass  
Or  
Enough of this  
I've got to piss  
– from *Whatever's*

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<sup>1</sup> Untranslatable pun: *Otarie* (otary, or eared seal) can also be read *Ota rit*: Ota laughs. [*trans.*]

## A POEM

He enters  
He sits  
He pays no attention to the pyrogenic redhead  
The match flares  
He leaves  
– from *There Is*

## Pablo Picasso, 1881–1973

‘Humour,’ said Jacques Vaché, ‘derives too much from sensation not to be very difficult to express. I believe it is a sensation.’ Nothing could be better suited to shed light on this sensation, if indeed it is one, than to see it produced in relation to another, and it is perhaps in this regard that Picasso’s work is most significant. In it, the visual faculty is brought to the highest power and presented in a state of ‘permanent revolution.’ ‘Do you think,’ he says, ‘that I’m interested in the fact that this painting depicts two figures? These two figures once existed, but they exist no longer. Seeing them gave me an initial emotion, and little by little their real presence faded; for me they have become a fiction. Then they disappeared, or rather they were transformed into a whole gamut of problems.’ We cannot help seeing a relation between this desire to move the object from the particular into the general, to suppress anecdotal details – which represents the fundamental aim of Cubism – and the concern with overcoming accidents of the *ego*, expressed by a recourse to humour. We may nonetheless consider these accidents highly necessary: nothing could be less impassive than this art. But, given the emotion’s extreme mobility, we must pursue it within the work itself and not take it as the work’s preconceived subject, which would be tantamount to stopping it arbitrarily in its tracks: ‘At bottom, everything comes back to oneself. It’s a sun in the belly shining with a thousand rays. The rest is nothing.’ It is clear that the *superego* is acting here as the condenser of light, like a suit of armour turned inward.

The uninterrupted lyrical act that constitutes Picasso’s visual works can, therefore, admit of no better guarantee than humour, as it must result from emotion cultivated for its own sake and brought to its climax. A unique tremor runs through the obscure interval that here separates things of nature from human creations. A throbbing, tireless question passes back and forth between them, which by sole virtue of the interposed instrument makes man from his song (if it’s a guitar) or woman from her nudity (if it’s a mirror). The human face in particular is presented as eternity, as an inexhaustible game of patience, as the chosen site of every disturbance. The external world is merely a gangue for this forever unknown, ever changing face, in which all things must finally meet. It is the metaphorical world into which the emotions pour, a mould valid only insofar as it is common to all men, and is based on their daily experience. As Picasso says, ‘You should make paintings the way princes make children: with shepherdesses. You never draw the Parthenon or paint a Louis XV armchair. You create paintings out of a country shack, or a pack of cigarettes, or an old chair.’

Picasso’s recent poems allow us to embrace everything that such a process, which he has pursued for over thirty years, pathetically demands in the way of abandonment and defence, toppling the entire modern viewpoint as it goes.

## POEMS

Young girl nicely dressed in a tan coat with violent facings 150,000 – 300 – 22 – 95 centimes calico ensemble corrected and revised by allusion to ermine fur 143 – 60 – 32 an open bra, the edges of the wound held back spread by hand pullies making the sign of the cross flavoured with reblochon cheese 1,300 – 75 – 03 – 49 – 317,000 – 25 centimes openings openwork daylight added one day out of two embedded on the skin by shivers kept alert by the mortal silence of the colour lure Lola de Valence type 103 plus languorous gazes 310 – 313 plus 3,000,000 – 80 francs – 15 centimes for a glance forgotten on the dresser – penalties incurred during the game – throwing the discus between the legs by a succession of facts which for no reason manage to make themselves a nest and transform themselves in some cases into the reasonable image of the cup 380 – 11 plus expenses but the drawing so academic size of the whole story from his birth to this morning doesn't even write if they're walking on fingers that point to the exit but spits out his bouquet with the tumbler that the odour formed by regiments and parading flag at the head of the line that if the tickle of desire can't find a good place for transforming a sardine into a shark the shopping list lengthens only from this moment without the inevitable stop at the table at lunchtime so to write sitting down amid so many hyperboles mixed with cheese and tomato.

Tongue of flame fans its face in the flute the goblet that singing to it gnaws the knife thrust of blue so playful that sitting in the bull's-eye inscribed in its jasmine head waits for the veil to swell the piece of crystal that the wind enveloped in the cape of the *mandoble* drooling with caresses distributes bread blindly and to the lilac-coloured dove and squeezes with all its meanness against the lips of flaming lemon the horn torso whose farewell gestures frighten the cathedral that faints into its arms without a bravo while in its gaze the radio explodes wakened by dawn that photographing in the kiss a bedbug of sun eats the aroma of the hour that falls and crosses the page that flies undoes the bouquet that carries off stuck between the wing that sighs and the fear that sings the knife that hops with pleasure leaving even today floating as it likes and no matter how at the precise and necessary moment at the top of the well the cry of the rose that the hand tosses her like small charity.

## Arthur Cravan, 1881–1920

Between April 1912 and April 1915 appeared and disappeared the five issues – now impossible to find – of the little magazine *Maintenant*, edited by Arthur Cravan. This magazine displayed an entirely new conception of literature and art, somewhat akin to the fairground wrestler or lion tamer vis-à-vis *refined* entertainments. Out of hatred for stifling bookstores in which everything is jumbled together and begins crumbling to dust even when new, Cravan hawked his copies of *Maintenant* from a greengrocer's cart: twenty-five centimes apiece! This very short, very limited enterprise seems, in retrospect, to have possessed decongestive properties of the first order. It is impossible not to see in it the harbinger of *Dada*, although it sought its solution to the intellectual malaise from an entirely different angle. Cravan proposed to rehabilitate temperament, in almost the physical sense of the word (regression not toward individual childhood, but toward that of the world, toward prehistory, the love of the uncle – in this case, Oscar Wilde, presented in his old age as a pachyderm: 'I adored him because he resembled a huge beast'; and the poet adopts these lyrical accents to describe himself: 'I had folded my six-foot frame into the car, where my knees jutted forward like two polished globes, and I noticed how the cobblestones reflected rainbows of garnet-red gristle criss-crossed with green beefsteaks'). Proclaiming that 'every great artist has the sense of provocation,' he chose sarcastic confessions and insults as his favourite weapons. Whereas Rimbaud objects in tears: 'I do not understand your laws. I have no moral sense. I am a brute ... I am a beast, a Negro savage,' Cravan moves it onto the level of an apologia, of total demand: 'Anyone can understand that I'd take a big, stupid Saint Bernard over Miss Froufrou, who can dance all the steps of the *gavotte*, and, in any case, a yellow man over a white man, a Negro over a yellow man, and a Negro boxer over a Negro student.' Without seeking to rectify the erroneous judgments to which his predilection for boxers, swimmers, and other specialists of physical culture had led him in artistic matters, Cravan, in the fourth issue of *Maintenant*, penned a review of the Salon des Indépendants that remains a masterpiece of humour as applied to art criticism: 'How far all this is from train wrecks!' he exclaims. 'Maurice Denis should paint in heaven, for he knows nothing about tuxedos or toe jam. Not that I find it especially daring to paint an acrobat or someone taking a shit, since, on the contrary, I believe that a rose painted with some imagination is much more demoniacal ... If I were as famous as Paul Bourget I'd appear every night in some cabaret review wearing a G-string, and you can bet I'd fill the house.'

During the war, not content with having been a deserter from several countries, Cravan took pains to call upon his person the most tumultuous kinds of attention and disapproval. Invited to give a lecture on humour in New York, he climbed onstage completely drunk and began stripping off his clothes, until the room emptied and the police came to cart him off; in Spain, he challenged world champion boxer Jack Johnson and got himself knocked out in the first round. He is known to have been for a brief time, in 1919, a physical education instructor at the athletic academy in Mexico City; he was preparing a lecture on Egyptian art. We lose all trace of him shortly afterward in the Gulf of Mexico, where he cast off one night in the lightest of small craft.

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: Selected texts, in *4 Dada Suicides*.

## ANDRÉ GIDE

One day after a long period of horrible indolence, as I was feverishly dreaming of getting very rich (my god! how often I dreamed of that!), I had reached the part where I made my eternal plans, and as I was gradually warming up by thinking of dishonest (and so unexpected) ways to make my fortune via poetry – I’ve always seen art as a means rather than an end – I cheerfully said to myself, ‘I should pay a call on Gide. He’s a millionaire. What a gas it would be to take that old scribbler for a ride!’

Right then – isn’t it the thought that counts? – I bestowed upon myself a phenomenal gift for success. I wrote Gide a note, giving my kinship with Oscar Wilde as a reference; Gide agreed to see me. He found me to be a marvel, with my size, my shoulders, my beauty, my eccentricities, my words. Gide couldn’t get enough of me; I thought he was okay. Already we were running away to Algeria; he made another trip to Biskra, and I fully intended to drag him all the way to the Somali Coast. – My head soon tanned to a golden brown, for I’ve always been rather ashamed of my whiteness. And Gide paid for the first class coupés, the noble steeds, the palaces, the lovers. I finally gave substance to several of my thousands of souls. Gide paid, and paid some more; and I dare hope that he won’t sue me for damages if I admit to him that in the unwholesome shamelessness of my galloping imagination, he went so far as to sell his solid Normandy farmhouse to satisfy my modern childish whims.

Ah! I can still see the way I depicted myself back then, legs stretched out on the seats of the Mediterranean express, spewing out the most preposterous fancies to amuse my patron.

People might say that I have the mores of an Androgyde. Might people say that?

In any case, I succeeded so poorly in my little plan of exploitation that I’m going to have to take some revenge. I will add, so as not to alarm our readers from the provinces unduly, that I especially took a dislike to M. Gide on the day when, as I explained above, I realized that I would never squeeze ten lousy centimes out of him, and when, moreover, that threadbare stuffed shirt permitted himself to rip apart – on the grounds of talent – the naked cherub they call Théophile Gautier.

So I went to see M. Gide. I recall that in those days I didn’t own a suit, and I still regret it, for it would have been so easy to dazzle him. As I neared his villa, I recited to myself the sensational phrases that I was determined to utter in the course of our conversation. A moment later I rang at the door. A maid came to open (M. Gide has no footmen). They had me go up one flight and asked me to wait in a kind of little cell, which one reached via a corridor that bent at a right angle. Passing by, I cast a curious eye into different rooms, trying to glean some advance information about the guest accommodation. Now I was sitting in my little corner. Picture windows, which I found rather chintzy, let the daylight fall onto a writing desk on which lay a few sheets freshly moistened with ink. Naturally, I did not fail to commit the little indiscretion that you can guess. And so I can report that M. Gide polishes his prose something awful and that he must not give the typographers anything before the fourth draft at least.

The maid came to bring me back downstairs. The moment I entered the salon, some high-strung little lapdogs squeaked out a few barks. Things could have been going better. But M. Gide would soon come – and still, I had plenty of time to look around. The spacious room contained modern and not very attractive furniture; no paintings, bare walls (simple intent or simplistic attempt), and especially something very Protestant and fussy about the room’s arrangement and cleanliness.

For an instant, I even broke out in a rather unpleasant sweat at the thought that I might have soiled the carpet. I would probably have satisfied my curiosity a bit further, or yielded to the exquisite temptation to slip some small trinket into my pocket, had I been able to rid myself of the very distinct feeling that M. Gide was spying on me through some secret little hole in the wallpaper. If I was mistaken, I beg M. Gide to kindly accept the immediate and public apologies that I owe his dignity.

Finally, the man appeared. (What struck me most from that minute on is that he offered me absolutely nothing, except perhaps a seat, whereas at about four in the afternoon a cup of tea, if one is fond of economy, or better still a few liquors from the Orient, are rightly considered, in European society, conducive to the mood that sometimes makes it intoxicating.)

‘Monsieur Gide,’ I began, ‘I have taken the liberty of coming to see you, and yet I feel I must tell you straight away that I’d take boxing, for instance, over literature any day.’

‘Literature is nonetheless the only ground on which we may meet,’ my interlocutor replied rather curtly.

I thought to myself: This fellow gets the most out of life!

So we spoke about literature, and as he was about to ask me the question that must have been particularly dear to him – ‘What books of mine have you read?’ – I uttered without batting an eyelid, my gaze as sincere as I could make it: ‘I am afraid to read you.’ I imagine M. Gide must have batted quite a few eyelids.

Little by little, then, I managed to place my famous phrases, which only shortly before I was still reciting to myself, thinking that the novelist, like the uncle, should be grateful to use the nephew. First I negligently tossed out: ‘The Bible is the world’s biggest bestseller.’ A moment later, as he was kind enough to ask about my parents: ‘My mother and I,’ I said rather humorously, ‘were not made to understand each other.’

The subject of literature coming back up, I took advantage to speak ill of at least two hundred living authors, Jewish writers and Charles-Henri Hirsch in particular, and to add: ‘Heine is the Christ of modern Jewish writers.’ From time to time, I cast discreet and impish glances toward my host, who rewarded me with stifled chuckles, but who, I’m forced to admit, remained far behind me, being content with taking notes, it seemed, as he probably hadn’t prepared any phrases of his own.

At a given moment, interrupting a philosophical conversation, striving to resemble a Buddha who would unseal his lips once in ten thousand years, I murmured: ‘The great Joke is the Absolute.’ On the point of taking my leave, in the oldest and most world-weary tone I could muster, I inquired: ‘Monsieur Gide, where do we stand in relation to Time?’ Learning that it was a quarter to six, I got up, warmly shook the artist’s hand, and left, carrying away in my head the portrait of one of our most renowned contemporaries, a portrait that I shall now sketch, if my dear readers would be so kind as to grant me one final instant of their attention.

M. Gide does not look like a love child, nor like an elephant, nor like several men: he looks like an artist; and I will pay him this one compliment, moreover unpleasant, that his little plurality derives from the fact that he could very easily be mistaken for a show-off. There is nothing remarkable about his bone structure; his hands are those of a do-nothing – very white, my word! Overall, he’s a real weakling. M. Gide must weigh around 120 pounds and measure about 5’ 5”. His gait bespeaks a prose writer who could never produce a single line of verse. Along with that, the artist has a sickly face, with little flaps of skin, a bit larger than flakes, falling off around the



temples – a bothersome condition which the common folk explain by saying that someone is ‘peeling.’

And yet the artist hardly indulges in those noble and prodigious ravages that jeopardize his fortune and his health. No, a hundred times no: the artist seems to prove on the contrary that he cares meticulously for himself, that he is hygienic, and that he has no truck with the Verlaine sort, the type that wears its syphilis like languor; and barring his denial, I believe I am not going too far out on a limb by stating that he frequents neither women nor places of ill repute. Indeed, judging from these very same signs, we are glad to note, as we would often have occasion to do, that he is prudent.

I saw M. Gide in the street only once: he was leaving my place. He had a mere few steps to take before turning the corner and disappearing from my sight, when I saw him stop in front of a bookstore: and yet, there was also a confectioner’s and a shop selling surgical instruments.

Since then, M. Gide has written me once,<sup>1</sup> and I have never seen him again.

I’ve described the man, and now I would gladly have described the work, if I could just have avoided repeating myself on even a single point.

– first published in *Maintenant*

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<sup>1</sup> M. Gide’s handwritten letter can be procured at our offices for the price of 0.15 francs. [*Cravan’s note*]

## Franz Kafka, 1883–1924

Over the weft of today's average man, of the passerby who rushes parallel to the pouring rain, in a light that never varies beyond the hues found in a tailor's sample book, Kafka throws like a squall the capital questions of all time: where are we going, what are we subject to, what is the law? The human individual struggles within a play of forces whose meaning he has generally given up trying to unravel, and his utter lack of curiosity in this regard indeed seems to be the very condition of his adaptation to life in society: rarely is the shoemaker's or optician's trade compatible with any profound meditation on the goals of human activity. Of admirable Prague, his native city, Kafka's thought espouses every charm and spell. All the while marking the present minute, it symbolically turns backward with the hands of a synagogue's clock. At noon, it directs the frolicking of innumerable seagulls over the Moldau; at nightfall, it revives for itself alone the cold furnaces of narrow Alchemists Street, veritable red-light district of the mind. This deeply pessimistic thought is not strictly unaware of its affinities with the French moralists: I'm thinking in particular of one of the last and greatest of them all, Alphonse Rabbe, according to whom 'God has subjected the world to the action of certain secondary laws that are carried out toward an end that we do not know, even as they announce to us, via the powerful voice of moral instinct, the *invisible world of solemn atonements*, in which all will be revealed and explained.' But Kafka's heroes pound in vain on the doors of this world: one, desperately ignorant of his supposed crime, will be executed without judgment; another, sent to a castle, will not manage even after exhausting efforts to find its entrance. The problem raised here in all its breadth is that of obscure natural necessity (as opposed to human or logical necessity), which makes a mockery of any deep aspiration toward freedom.

Dreams provide Kafka with a temporary solution to the conflict. The virtual objects that populate them are not foreign to the sleeper; their presence always seems justified. The flame of the *ego* lights every one of their faces; if it leaves the reclining human body, it can even inhabit them momentarily.

'I' become confused with everything from which I was separated while awake. No one has managed like Kafka to innervate inanimate objects with his own sensibility; no one has been able to assume so brilliantly the teachings of Gérard de Nerval's *Vers dorés*. As he was employed in Austria by the Water Commission, we have the comforting illusion that he could release and direct those waters throughout the jumble of pipes, just as, by sole virtue of his emotional substance, he could spin a web that leaves no solution of continuity between kingdoms and species (up to and including man), and that vibrates from end to end at the slightest touch.

No body of work argues so strongly against admitting a sovereign principle external to the thinker himself. 'It's man,' someone said, 'who boils in Kafka's cauldron. He gently simmers in the shadowy broth of anxiety. But humour sends the lid flying off with a sharp whistle and traces cabalistic formulas in blue letters in the air.'

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: *The Trial*. *Amerika*. *The Castle*. *The Great Wall of China*. *The Penal Colony*, etc.

## METAMORPHOSIS

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armour-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes.

What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet between the four familiar walls. Above the table on which a collection of cloth samples was unpacked and spread out – Samsa was a commercial traveller – hung the picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a pretty gilt frame. It showed a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished!

Gregor's eyes turned next to the window, and the overcast sky – one could hear rain drops beating on the window gutter – made him quite melancholy. What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense, he thought, but it could not be done, for he was accustomed to sleep on his right side and in his present condition he could not turn himself over. However violently he forced himself towards his right side he always rolled on to his back again. He tried it at least a hundred times, shutting his eyes to keep from seeing his struggling legs, and only desisted when he began to feel in his side a faint dull ache he had never experienced before.

Oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Travelling about day in, day out. It's much more irritating work than doing the actual business in the office, and on top of that there's the trouble of constant travelling, of worrying about train connections, the bad and irregular meals, casual acquaintances that are always new and never become intimate friends. The devil take it all! He felt a slight itching up on his belly; slowly pushed himself on his back nearer to the top of the bed so that he could lift his head more easily; identified the itching place which was surrounded by many small white spots the nature of which he could not understand and made to touch it with a leg, but drew the leg back immediately, for the contact made a cold shiver run through him.

He slid down again into his former position. This getting up early, he thought, makes one quite stupid. A man needs his sleep. Other commercials live like harem women. For instance, when I come back to the hotel of a morning to write up the orders I've got, these others are only sitting down to breakfast. Let me just try that with my chief; I'd be sacked on the spot. Anyhow, that might be quite a good thing for me, who can tell? If I didn't have to hold my hand because of my parents I'd have given notice long ago, I'd have gone to the chief and told him exactly what I think of him. That would knock him endways from his desk! It's a queer way of doing, too, this sitting on high at a desk and talking down to employees, especially when they have to come quite near because the chief is hard of hearing. Well, there's still hope; once I've saved enough money to pay back my parents' debts to him – that should take another five or six years – I'll do it without fail. I'll cut myself completely loose then. For the moment, though, I'd better get up, since my train goes at five.

His immediate intention was to get up quietly without being disturbed, to put on his clothes and above all eat his breakfast, and only then to consider what else was to be done, since in bed,

he was well aware, his meditations would come to no sensible conclusion. He remembered that often enough in bed he had felt small aches and pains, probably caused by awkward postures, which had proved purely imaginary once he got up, and he looked forward eagerly to seeing this morning's delusions gradually fall away. That the change in his voice was nothing but the precursor of a severe chill, a standing ailment of commercial travellers, he had not the least possible doubt.

To get rid of the quilt was quite easy; he had only to inflate himself a little and it fell off by itself. But the next move was difficult, especially because he was so uncommonly broad. He would have needed arms and hands to hoist himself up; instead he had only the numerous little legs which never stopped waving in all directions and which he could not control in the least. When he tried to bend one of them it was the first to stretch itself straight; and did he succeed at last in making it do what he wanted, all the other legs meanwhile waved the more wildly in a high degree of unpleasant agitation. 'But what's the use of lying idle in bed,' said Gregor to himself.

He thought that he might get out of bed with the lower part of his body first, but this lower part, which he had not yet seen and of which he could form no clear conception, proved too difficult to move; it shifted so slowly; and when finally, almost wild with annoyance, he gathered his forces together and thrust out recklessly, he had miscalculated the direction and bumped heavily against the lower end of the bed, and the stinging pain he felt informed him that precisely this lower part of his body was at the moment probably the most sensitive.

So he tried to get the top part of himself out first, and cautiously moved his head towards the edge of the bed. That proved easy enough, and despite its breadth and mass the bulk of his body at last slowly followed the movement of his head. Still, when he finally got his head free over the edge of the bed he felt too scared to go on advancing, for after all if he let himself fall in this way it would take a miracle to keep his head from being injured. And at all costs he must not lose consciousness now, precisely now; he would rather stay in bed.

But when after a repetition of the same efforts he lay in his former position again, sighing, and watched his little legs struggling against each other more wildly than ever, if that were possible, and saw no way of bringing any order into this arbitrary confusion, he told himself again that it was impossible to stay in bed and that the most sensible course was to risk everything for the smallest hope of getting away from it. At the same time he did not forget meanwhile to remind himself that cool reflection, the coolest possible, was much better than desperate resolves. In such moments he focused his eyes as sharply as possible on the window, but, unfortunately, the prospect of the morning fog, which muffled even the other side of the narrow street, brought him little encouragement and comfort. 'Seven o'clock already,' he said to himself when the alarm clock chimed again, 'seven o'clock already and still such a thick fog.' And for a little while he lay quiet, breathing lightly, as if perhaps expecting such complete repose to restore all things to their real and normal condition.

But then he said to himself: 'Before it strikes a quarter past seven I must be quite out of this bed, without fail. Anyhow, by that time someone will have come from the office to ask for me, since it opens before seven.' And he set himself to rocking his whole body at once in a regular rhythm, with the idea of swinging it out of the bed. If he tipped himself out in that way he could keep his head from injury by lifting it at an acute angle when he fell. His back seemed to be hard and was not likely to suffer from a fall on the carpet. His biggest worry was the loud crash he would not be able to help making, which would probably cause anxiety, if not terror, behind all the doors. Still, he must take the risk.

When he was already half out of the bed – the new method was more a game than an effort, for he needed only to hitch himself across by rocking to and fro – it struck him how simple it would be if he could get help. Two strong people – he thought of his father and the servant girl – would be amply sufficient; they would only have to thrust their arms under his convex back, lever him out of the bed, bend down with their burden and then be patient enough to let him turn himself right over on to the floor, where it was to be hoped his legs would then find their proper function. Well, ignoring the fact that the doors were all locked, ought he really to call for help? In spite of his misery he could not suppress a smile at the very idea of it.

He had got so far that he could barely keep his equilibrium when he rocked himself strongly, and he would have to nerve himself very soon for the final decision since in five minutes' time it would be a quarter past seven – when the front doorbell rang. 'That's someone from the office,' he said to himself, and grew almost rigid, while his little legs only jiggled about all the faster. For a moment everything stayed quiet. 'They're not going to open the door,' said Gregor to himself, catching at some kind of irrational hope. But then of course the servant girl went as usual to the door with her heavy tread and opened it. Gregor needed only to hear the first good morning of the visitor to know immediately who it was – the chief clerk himself. What a fate, to be condemned to work for a firm where the smallest omission at once gave rise to the gravest suspicion! Were all employees in a body nothing but scoundrels, was there not among them one single loyal devoted man who, had he wasted only an hour or so of the firm's time in a morning, was so tormented by conscience as to be driven out of his mind and actually incapable of leaving his bed? Wouldn't it really have been sufficient to send an apprentice to inquire – if any inquiry were necessary at all – did the chief clerk himself have to come and thus indicate to the entire family, an innocent family, that this suspicious circumstance could be investigated by no one less versed in affairs than himself? And more through the agitation caused by these reflections than through any act of will Gregor swung himself out of bed with all his strength. There was a loud thump, but it was not really a crash. His fall was broken to some extent by the carpet, his back, too, was less stiff than he thought, and so there was merely a dull thud, not so very startling. Only he had not lifted his head carefully enough and had hit it; he turned it and rubbed it on the carpet in pain and irritation.

To make his voice as clear as possible for the decisive conversation that was now imminent he coughed a little, as quietly as he could, of course, since this noise too might not sound like a human cough for all he was able to judge. In the next room meanwhile there was complete silence. Perhaps his parents were sitting at the table with the chief clerk, whispering, perhaps they were all leaning against the door and listening.

Slowly Gregor pushed the chair towards the door, then let go of it, caught hold of the door for support – the soles at the end of his little legs were somewhat sticky – and rested against it for a moment after his efforts. Then he set himself to turning the key in the lock with his mouth. It seemed, unhappily, that he hadn't really any teeth – what could he grip the key with? – but on the other hand his jaws were certainly very strong; with their help he did manage to set the key in motion, heedless of the fact that he was undoubtedly damaging them somewhere, since a brown fluid issued from his mouth, flowed over the key and dripped on the floor. 'Just listen to that,' said the chief clerk next door; 'he's turning the key.' That was a great encouragement to Gregor; but they should all have shouted encouragement to him, his father and mother too: 'Go on, Gregor,' they should have called out, 'keep going, hold on to that key!' And in the belief that

they were all following his efforts intently, he clenched his jaws recklessly on the key with all the force at his command. As the turning of the key progressed he circled round the lock, holding on now only with his mouth, pushing on the key, as required, or pulling it down again with all the weight of his body. The louder click of the finally yielding lock literally quickened Gregor. With a deep breath of relief he said to himself: 'So I didn't need the locksmith,' and laid his head on the handle to open the door wide.

Since he had to pull the door towards him, he was still invisible when it was really wide open. He had to edge himself slowly round the near half of the double door, and to do it very carefully if he was not to fall plump upon his back just on the threshold. He was still carrying out this difficult manoeuvre, with no time to observe anything else, when he heard the chief clerk utter a loud 'Oh!' – it sounded like a gust of wind – and now he could see the man, standing as he was nearest to the door, clapping one hand before his open mouth and slowly backing away as if driven by some invisible steady pressure. His mother – in spite of the chief clerk's being there her hair was still undone and sticking up in all directions – first clasped her hands and looked at his father, then took two steps towards Gregor and fell on the floor among her outspread skirts, her face quite hidden on her breast. His father knotted his fist with a fierce expression on his face as if he meant to knock Gregor back into his room, then looked uncertainly round the living room, covered his eyes with his hands and wept till his great chest heaved.

Gregor did not go now into the living room, but leaned against the inside of the firmly shut wing of the door, so that only half his body was visible and his head above it bending sideways to look at the others. The light had meanwhile strengthened; on the other side of the street one could see clearly a section of the endlessly long, dark grey building opposite – it was a hospital – abruptly punctuated by its row of regular windows; the rain was still falling, but only in large singly discernible and literally singly splashing drops. The breakfast dishes were set out on the table lavishly, for breakfast was the most important meal of the day to Gregor's father, who lingered it out for hours over various newspapers. Right opposite Gregor on the wall hung a photograph of himself on military service, as a lieutenant, hand on sword, a carefree smile on his face, inviting one to respect his uniform and military bearing. The door leading to the hall was open, and one could see that the front door stood open too, showing the landing beyond and the beginning of the stairs going down.

– from *In the Penal Colony*

(translated by Willa and Edwin Muir)

## A CROSSBREED

I have a curious animal, half kitten, half lamb. It is a legacy from my father. But it only developed in my time; formerly it was far more lamb than kitten. Now it is both in about equal parts. From the cat it takes its head and claws, from the lamb its size and shape; from both its eyes, which are wild and flickering, its hair, which is soft, lying close to its body, its movements, which partake both of skipping and slinking. Lying on the window sill in the sun it curls up in a ball and purrs; out in the meadow it rushes about like mad and is scarcely to be caught. It flees from cats and makes to attack lambs. On moonlight nights its favourite promenade is along the eaves. It cannot mew and it loathes rats. Beside the hen coop it can lie for hours in ambush, but it has never yet seized an opportunity for murder.

I feed it on milk; that seems to suit it best. In long draughts it sucks the milk in through its fang-like teeth. Naturally it is a great source of entertainment for children. Sunday morning is the visiting hour. I sit with the little beast on my knees; and the children of the whole neighbourhood stand around me.

Then the strangest questions are asked, which no human being could answer: Why there is only one such animal, why I rather than anybody else should own it, whether there was ever an animal like it before and what would happen if it died, whether it feels lonely, why it has no children, what it is called, etc.

I never trouble to answer, but confine myself without further explanation to exhibiting my possession. Sometimes the children bring eats with them; once they actually brought two lambs. But against all their hopes there was no scene of recognition. The animals gazed calmly at each other with their animal eyes, and obviously accepted their reciprocal existence as a divine fact.

Sitting on my knees, the beast knows neither fear nor lust of pursuit. Pressed against me it is happiest. It remains faithful to the family that brought it up. In that there is certainly no extraordinary mark of fidelity, but merely the true instinct of an animal which, though it has countless step-relations in the world, has perhaps not a single blood relation, and to which consequently the protection it has found with us is sacred.

Sometimes I cannot help laughing when it sniffs around me and winds itself between my legs and simply will not be parted from me. Not content with being lamb and cat, it almost insists on being a dog as well. Once when, as may happen to anyone, I could see no way out of my business problems and all that they involved, and was ready to let everything go, and in this mood was lying in my rocking chair in my room, the beast on my knees, I happened to glance down and saw tears dropping from its huge whiskers. Were they mine, or were they the animal's? Had this cat, along with the soul of a lamb, the ambitions of a human being? I did not inherit much from my father, but this legacy is quite remarkable.

It has the restlessness of both beasts, that of the cat and that of the lamb, diverse as they are. For that reason its skin feels too tight for it. Sometimes it jumps up on the armchair beside me, plants its front legs on my shoulder, and puts its muzzle to my ear. It is as if it were saying something to me, and as a matter of fact it turns its head afterwards and gazes in my face to see the impression its communication has made. And to oblige it I behave as if I had understood, and nod. Then it jumps to the floor and dances about with joy.

Perhaps the knife of the butcher would be a release for this animal; but as it is a legacy I must deny it that. So it must wait until the breath voluntarily leaves its body, even though it sometimes gazes at me with a look of human understanding, challenging me to do the thing of which both of us are thinking.

## **THE BRIDGE**

I was stiff and cold, I was a bridge, I lay over a ravine. My toes on one side, my fingers clutching the other, I had clamped myself fast into the crumbling clay. The tails of my coat fluttered at my sides. Far below brawled the icy trout stream. No tourist strayed to this impassable height, the bridge was not yet traced on any map. So I lay and waited; I could only wait. Without falling, no bridge, once spanned, can cease to be a bridge.

It was towards evening one day – was it the first, was it the thousandth? I cannot tell – my thoughts were always in confusion and perpetually moving in a circle. It was towards evening in summer, the roar of the stream had grown deeper, when – I heard the sound of a human step! To me, to me. Straighten yourself, bridge, make ready, railless beams, to hold up the passenger entrusted to you. If his steps are uncertain steady them unobtrusively, but if he stumbles show what you are made of and like a mountain god hurl him across to land.

He came, he tapped me with the iron point of his stick, then he lifted my coattails with it and put them in order upon me. He plunged the point of his stick into my bushy hair and let it lie there for a long time, forgetting me no doubt while he wildly gazed around him. But then – I was just following him in thought over mountain and valley – he jumped with both feet on the middle of my body. I shuddered with wild pain, not knowing what was happening. Who was it? A child? A dream? A wayfarer? A suicide? A tempter? A destroyer? And I turned around so as to see him. A bridge to turn around! I had not yet turned quite around when I already began to fall, I fell and in a moment I was torn and transpierced by the sharp rocks which had always gazed up at me so peacefully from the rushing water.

– both *A Crossbreed* and *The Bridge* from *The Great Wall of China*  
(translated by Willa and Edwin Muir)



## Jakob van Hoddis, 1884–1942

A weather vane sings in the Berlin sky, an enchanted pump laughs beneath country ice, and a little book of poems won't burn. It refuses to suffer the fate of so many other works for which Hitler's dictatorship has arranged an auto-da-fé, in vain hopes of containing the revolutionary thought that is ever on the march. We are here at the extreme point of German poetry; van Hoddis's voice reaches us from the highest and thinnest branch of the lightning-struck tree. The man, who leans a moment on Arp's arm, stands out by his discordant behaviour: invited to dinner, he vigorously strikes his plate with his spoon in order to make a noise, and could easily be imagined, like Harpo Marx, offering his leg to the ladies. At the historical turning-point of the war's end, as it is most cruelly experienced in Germany, he disappears into an insane asylum. Beautiful songs of the asylum, which celebrate the feeling of total freedom – military and other assemblies shatter against the walls. We are with them in the very country of black humour, recognizable by its symbolic, mysterious, invariable aspect: swarms of white flies, carpets of flowers, green-tinted cats.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Weltende*.

### THE DREAMER

Blue-green night, the mute colours are sucked in.  
Is he threatened by the red rays of lances  
and crude armour? Are those Satan's troops parading here?  
The yellow stains floating in the dark are the disembodied eyes of large horses.  
His body is naked and pale and defenceless.  
A faded rose oozes from the earth.

### HULLAB

In the air three little men  
sing their terrible song:  
Do you have bedbugs, lice, and fleas?  
For you time won't seem long.  
Chew and chew you must.  
Here and there it runs.  
You can seize and pinch,  
good god, halleluja.  
Why find that time goes slowly  
as you wane so nobly.

Your minutes become leagues,  
seeing naught but time, you groan.  
On your skull, you hear your hair,  
grass grows behind your ears.  
Your jaw becomes a rattle,  
moaning heavily through the years,  
open shut open shut.  
In the air three little men  
sing their terrible song:  
Do you have bedbugs, lice, and fleas?  
For you time won't seem long.  
They rose into the dawn  
and sang both day and night,  
disturbing lunch and dinner,  
earth and air burst apart.

## THE VISION-AIRY

Lamp, do not bleat.  
From the wall juts a woman's thin arm.  
It was pale and blue-veined.  
Its fingers were covered with precious rings.  
As I was kissing its hand, I felt afraid:  
It was warm and alive.  
My face came away scratched;  
I took a kitchen knife and cut several veins.  
A large cat gracefully lapped the blood from the floor.  
Meanwhile a man with bristly hair  
crawled after a broom handle propped against the wall.  
– based on French versions by Hans Arp and Georges Hugnet

## Marcel Duchamp, 1887–1968

The genius of Marcel Duchamp perhaps consists, first, in having breached the gap separating particular ideas from general ones – already the mark of a great mind – and then in abandoning these distinctions in turn to anticipate what we might call particularized general ideas. In the same way, we must wonder whether Maurice Scève, addressing his ‘Délie,’ was singing of a specific woman, of the feminine ideal, or simply of ‘the idea’ (divorced from any female image), *l’idée*, of which Délie is the anagram. With accepted principles of knowledge and existence deliberately transgressed, the issue, for the first time with Duchamp, might have been ‘always or almost always to give the why of choice between two or several solutions (by ironic causality)’ – in other words, to introduce pleasure even into the formulation of the law to which reality must answer. (Examples: ‘a horizontal line, falling from a height of one yard onto a horizontal plane, curves *at will* and yields a new figure of the unity of length’; ‘*by condescendance*, a weight is heavier going down than going up’; bottles of *fine spirits*, such as Bénédictine, obey a ‘principle of oscillating density.’) In this resides what Duchamp has called ‘the irony of affirmation,’ in contrast to ‘negative irony, which depends solely on laughter.’ The irony of affirmation is to humour what fine-milled flour is to wheat. The miller in question – he who, at the end of the historical process tracing the development of dandyism, has agreed to act as ‘voluntary technician’ (to use Gabrielle Buffet’s term) – our friend Marcel Duchamp, is certainly the most intelligent and, for many, the most troublesome man of this first half of the twentieth century. The question of reality, in its relations to possibility – a question that remains the great source of anxiety – is here resolved with unmatched daring: ‘Possible reality [is obtained] *by slightly bending* physical and chemical laws.’ There is no doubt that someone will eventually attempt a rigorous chronology of the innovations to which this method has led Marcel Duchamp in the visual domain, whose enumeration would far exceed the limits of the present introduction. The future can do no less than systematically retrace its path, than scrupulously describe its meanderings, in search of the hidden treasure that was Duchamp’s mind and, through it, in its rarest and most precious aspects, the mind of time itself. We are dealing here with a complete, in-depth initiation to the most modern ways of feeling, which take humour as their implicit condition.

After a meteoric passage through painting (*Sad Young Man on a Train*, *Nude Descending a Staircase*, *The King and Queen Surrounded by Swift Nudes*, *The King and Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes*, *Virgin*, *The Passage from Virgin to Bride*, *The Bride*), Duchamp, all the while devoting his energies from 1912 to 1923 to the ‘antimasterpiece’ that constitutes his seminal work, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, signed, in protest against artistic indigence, seriousness, and vanity, a certain number of ‘readymade’ objects, dignified *a priori* by sole virtue of his choice: a coat rack, a comb, a bottle rack, bicycle wheels, a urinal, a snow shovel, etc. Before moving on to ‘reciprocal readymades’ (‘use a Rembrandt as an ironing board’), he continued along that path with ‘assisted readymades’: the *Mona Lisa* adorned with a moustache, a birdcage filled with cubes of white marble imitating sugar cubes across which lies a thermometer, etc.

The reader will enjoy finding on the following pages, alternating with some unpublished afterthoughts that are quite characteristic of his manner, a series of phrases made from words subjected to the 'realm of coincidence'; phrases in which his readymade objects find their ideal complement; phrases that shine with the light of compacting, and that show in linguistic terms what one can expect from 'canned chance,' the great speciality of Marcel Duchamp.<sup>1</sup>

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, 1935.

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even. Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*.

Strangles strangers.

Sacristy, crassity.

[*Eglise, exil.*]

We deliver domestic mosquitoes (half-stock).

[*Nous livrons des moustiques domestiques (demi-stock).*]

My niece is cold because my knees are cold.

Among our articles of lazy hardware we recommend a faucet which stops dripping when nobody is listening to it.

Have you already put the hilt of the foil in the quilt of the goil?

[*Avez-vous déjà mis la moelle de l'épée dans le poil de l'aimée?*]

Physics of luggage:

Calculate the difference between the volumes of air displaced by a clean shirt (ironed and folded) and by the same shirt when dirty.

Incest, or familial passion.

... An incesticide must sleep with his 'relative' before killing her; bugging required.

Adjustment of the coincidence of objects or parts of objects; the hierarchy of this kind of adjustment is in direct ratio to the 'disparate.'

Oblong dress, exclusively designed for ladies suffering from the hiccups.

A full box of wooden matches is lighter than an opened box because it doesn't make any noise.

Daily lady will dally with Daily Mail.

Should one react against the laziness of railway tracks between the passage of two trains?

Transformer intended to use up wasted bits of energy, such as:

excessive pressure on electric buzzers;

the exhalation of cigarette smoke;

the growing of hair, body hair, and nails;

the fall of urine and excrement;

movements of fear, astonishment, boredom, and anger;

laughter;

the dripping of tears;

demonstrative motions of the hands and feet, tics;

sour looks;

arms dropping to one's side;

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<sup>1</sup> As in the case of Jean-Pierre Brisset, many of Duchamp's phrases are too dependent on specifically French assonance and homonymy to be rendered effectively into English. The following selection is an abridged version of Breton's original, supplemented by a few related phrases (beginning with 'Anaemic cinema') that Breton did not include. [*trans.*]

stretching, yawning, sneezing;  
spitting normally and spitting blood;  
vomiting;  
ejaculating;  
unwanted hair, tufts;  
the sounds of nose-blowing and snoring;  
fainting;  
whistling, singing;  
sighing, etc.

Anaemic cinema.

Abominable abdominal furs.

Litany of the scents:

I believe the tips of her breasts smell.

Shut up, the tips of your breasts smell.

Why do the tips of your breasts smell?

I'd like the tips of my breasts to smell.

Oh! do shit again! ...

Oh! douche it again! ...

Ruined, urined.

Litter erasure.

(translations by Ron Padgett, Elmer Peterson, Mark  
Polizzotti, Roger Shattuck, and Trevor Winkfield)

## Hans Arp, 1887–1966

Supposing one could cut into the poetic thought of these times, one would discover that its roots reach deeply into the *id*, which is to the human mind what the geological stratum is to the plant. It is in the *id* that mnemonic traces, the residue of innumerable former existences, are deposited. Automatism is nothing more than the penetration and dissolution techniques that the mind uses to delve into this soil, nothing more than the counterpart of the mechanical action by which vegetable roots manage to push aside stones and break down hard strata. The *ego*, differentiated from the *id* in that it is forced to suffer the influence of the outside world, is charged with transforming sexual libido accumulated in that same *id*: we know that it can do this only by overcoming the Oedipus complex and the constitutional bisexuality of the individual. The *superego*, which presides over this latter operation, can be likened to the layer of humus that covers the soil after the leaves have fallen and that catalyses the earth's fertilizing elements. As we have seen, humour, in the sense we mean it here, would constitute a latent means of sublimation: it represents the possibility of landing softly, of resting on the humus that the plant uses to restore, to the benefit of all others, its own vital energy when this energy has been seriously depleted.

How I loved, as a child, effortlessly pulling from the forest's spongy carpet the light shoots of the chestnut tree, only a few inches high, at whose base the chestnut shone with a glow of antique furniture – the chestnut conserving all its presence and already bearing concrete witness to its power of green hands, shadow, white or pink airborne pyramids, dances ... and of future chestnuts that, beneath young sprouts, other children will discover in wonder, stretching into infinity! It's in this perspective that Arp's work is uniquely situated. He is par excellence the one who could make the cut mentioned above. All his poetry – whether visual or verbal – seems inclined to sensitize us to the partly aerial, largely subterranean world that the mind, like the plant, explores by means of feelers. Every morning he would sit down and make the same drawing in order to discover its variations: he composed it using pieces of cardboard that he would cut out, colour, shake, and paste down once they had stopped moving (objects assembled following the law of chance). In his innermost self, he entered into the secret of that germinative life in which the tiniest detail is of utmost importance, but in which any distinction between elements loses its value, thereby introducing a permanent, *under-rock-bed* humour of the most peculiar kind. 'The air is a root. The stones are filled with entrails. Bravo, bravo. The stones are branches of water. On the stone that replaces the mouth a fishbone-leaf grows. Bravo. The stones are tormented like flesh. The stones are clouds ... Bravo. Bravo.'

Summoned to the German consulate in Zurich during the last war, Arp, who admitted to feeling rather nervous, stopped to make the sign of the cross before the portrait of Hindenburg. Some time later, asked by a psychiatrist to write down his date of birth, he repeated it all the way to the bottom of the page, at which point he drew a line and, without worrying too much about the accuracy of his addition, presented a sum of several figures.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: *On My Way: Poetry and Essays. Arp on Arp* (selections).

## BESTIARY WITH NO FIRST NAME

the elephant is in love with the millimeter  
the snail is proud  
beneath its golden hat  
its leather is calm  
with its tallow laugh  
it carries its gelatin rifle  
the eagle has gestures of alleged void  
its udder is swollen with lightning  
the lion wears a moustache  
in pure flamboyant gothic  
and pale and purged slippers  
like a neo-soldier  
after a lunar defeat  
the crayfish climbs down from the mast  
exchanges its cane for a rod  
and with its stick it climbs back up  
the tree trunk  
the fly with a snoring gaze  
sets its nose down on a fountain  
the cow takes the parchment road  
which vanishes in a volume of flesh  
each hair of this volume  
has an enormous volume  
the serpent jerks itchingly and itchingly  
around washbasins of love  
filled with arrow-pierced hearts  
when a butterfly is stuffed  
it becomes a buttered stufferby  
the buttered stufferby  
becomes a salt-buttered stufferby  
the nightingale a brother to the sphinx  
waters stomachs hearts brains guts  
that is to say lilies roses marigolds lilacs  
the flea carries its right foot  
behind its left ear  
and its left hand  
in its right hand  
and jumps on its left foot  
over its right ear  
(translated by Joachim Neugroschel)

## Alberto Savinio, 1891–1952

The whole, as-yet-unformed modern myth rests at its origins on two bodies of work that are almost indistinguishable in spirit – by Alberto Savinio and his brother, Giorgio de Chirico – and that reached their culminating point just before the war of 1914. They simultaneously call upon visual and auditory possibilities so as to create a symbolic, concrete, universally intelligible language, one that claims to account fully for the specific reality of the age (the artist offering himself up as victim of his times) as well as for the metaphysical interrogation endemic to that age: the relation between the new objects that we are forced to use and old objects (abandoned or not) is extremely disturbing in that it heightens the sentiment of *fatality*. ‘The path that is currently liable to predominate,’ Savinio wrote in 1914, ‘is especially characterized by its dark, austere form and by the rigid, well-materialized aspect of its metaphysics ... Unlike the days in which abstraction reigned supreme, our age tries to draw the complete metaphysical elements out of matter itself (things). *The metaphysical idea* would pass from the state of abstraction to that of the senses. The elements that *inform*<sup>1</sup> the thoughtful and sensitive type of man would thus be highlighted.’

We are here at the very heart of the symbolic sexual world, as Volkelt and Schemer described it before Freud. Just as in Chirico’s early paintings, the arrangement of towers and arcades – the first justifying the titles that revolve around *nostalgia*, the second those that stress *enigma* – express the relations between the male and female sexes, in Savinio’s *Songs of Half-Death* (1914) we witness the ‘bald man,’ in the father’s image, as Chirico painted him in *The Child’s Brain*, his face vaguely reminiscent of ‘certain photos of Napoleon III and of Anatole France at the time of *Red Lily*: this gentleman who gazes at you while laughing up his sleeve is always the *demon of temptation*’; the ‘yellow man,’ pushed by an invisible love-god (quite probably the *ego* itself under the crossed beams of its lamps); ‘Daisyssina,’ the Eternal Feminine, the ‘mother of stone’ beneath whose mask it is impossible not to recognize the very haughty and severe Baroness de Chirico, in whose shadow her son Giorgio painted and ruined himself so many times (the yellow man ‘kills his mother, then kisses her; he throws her up to the ceiling and catches her; he tosses her aside and tramples her. Great bursts of laughter’); the ‘cast-iron man,’ who constitutes the decorative fence around society; ‘two angels, a mad king, the target-man,’ not to mention ‘the little boy,’ whose entrance is rather symptomatic: ‘in a nightshirt, holding a candle. With the bottom of his slipper, he squashes a daddy-long-legs that was crawling up the wall; then, trembling, he watches the flattened insect wave an antenna,’ singlehandedly placing the action within the mysterious confines of the *ego* and the *superego*. The latter is represented in all its power, as it is in Chirico’s work, by statues that ‘crop up here and there,’ most of them equestrian – in some cases, they start to gallop.

In these two brothers, humour surges from their intermittent but very acute awareness of their own repression. In this way, both of them keep alive the primitive belief that the properties of

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<sup>1</sup> My emphasis.



something eaten are transmitted to the person who absorbs them and that they form his character, whence all kinds of prohibitions. Hebdomeros, the hero of a book by Chirico, divides dishes into 'moral and immoral.' He absolutely frowns upon the consumption of shellfish and crustaceans. 'He also found very immoral the habit of eating ice cream in cafés, and the whole idea of putting cubes of ice in drinks ... He considered strawberries and figs the most immoral of fruits.' Freud has stressed the relation that exists between the persistence of this belief – namely, that oral absorption can have serious consequences – and anxiety at the moment of choosing the sexual object.

For *The Songs of Half-Death*, Alberto Savinio had scored an unusual accompaniment. On this subject, the critic for *Les Soirées de Paris* wrote: 'We mustn't neglect to mention the way in which M. Savinio interprets his works at the piano. Playing with incomparable mastery and strength, this young composer, who refuses to wear a jacket, stands before his keyboard in shirtsleeves. It is remarkable to see him thrash about, howl, shatter the pedals, describe dizzying windmills, throw punches in the grip of passion, of despair, of unabashed joy ... After each piece, they wiped off the blood that smeared the keys.' Three months later, the war broke out.

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: *The Lives of the Gods*.

## INTRODUCTION TO A LIFE OF MERCURY

To facilitate the circulation of ships of large displacement as well as to encourage home-delivery, the Casa Rana was encumbered by neither steps nor perron. Still, the whistling steamship pushed the door open with its arrogant prow and penetrated as far as the middle of the hall, where it was met with the most complete indifference.

The Rana family was out in full force, along with Roberto Danesi, the tragic postulant.

After the customary insults, the master of the house amicably invited the two guests to let themselves be kicked in the rear. The Ranas were of the bluest blood, and they maintained a cult of good manners.

Madame Giulia Rana, the mistress of the house, wore a magnificent evening dress with a large green floral design – it was very becoming.

Mr Pard, drawing close so he could spit in her face, discovered that the dress was just an illusion.

A daughter of batrachians and herself a frog, Mme Giulia Rana retained on her skin the identical ornamentation that had decorated the epidermis of her father, the amphibian. It is unnecessary to add that Mme Giulia was completely naked under her congenital floral patterns. Her belly, which was entirely white, plump, and sensitive to the point of irritation, was crushed like a child's balloon against the table edge.

Disgusted by this new evidence of the instability of the human character, the consul sat in a corner and, crossing his legs, began playing with the end of his tail, which protruded from his metallic trouser leg.

Monsieur Luigi Rana, Mme Giulia's husband and Honorary President of the Society for the Encouragement of Pederasty in the Family, mixed an ammonia and excrement cocktail in a douche bag.

As for Capt. Tullio Rana, a badly disabled veteran and M. Luigi's brother, he was hopping about the room like a silhouette target because, as a result of his valiant resistance to the onslaught of the *Sturmtruppen*, his body had been reduced to the thickness of a pill.

Some big, wheezy, worn-out stars were lined up against the walls. There was nothing left of their former splendour save for a vague, pallid gleam flickering at the ends of their once-so-radiant points. The town, white and round in its ramparts like a charlotte russe bathed in cream, was visible through the window.

The séance was about to open like a flower. Everyone surrounded the beautiful Mme Rana, who by dint of her unique talent served as a relief valve for occult revelations.

Although the Casa Rana was devoid of chairs, everyone attending this memorable séance was quietly seated around the table, with hands resting lightly on the carpet, torso well arched, and butt in the air.

Roberto Danesi took the floor. Ever since his famous attempt at suicide by strychnine poisoning he had been catoblepharic; so he had become accustomed to addressing his listeners with his back turned.

He said: 'In November 1918 we decided to leave Switzerland and return to Europe. We booked a passage, Mme Danesi, my son Themistocles, and I, on a laundry barge. The war was over, and I was eager to lend my country a hand. But that's only a detail. Outside 24 Rue Jacob in Paris our ship was accidentally torpedoed by some of the dynamite-wielding fishermen who worked that area. Clasp my son Themistocles in my arms, I managed to hold onto the ship's strongbox that, because it was completely empty, floated on the sea like a colocynth. It carried us without misadventure to the local house of ill-repute. Ever since that tragic night, I've had no news of my wife – until yesterday, 11 September, when an accordionist in Tel Aviv was kind enough to announce by radio that Mme Danesi is no more dead than you or I, and that she is at this moment hospitalized in a big frozen meat plant in London, where the best specialists have begun removing her tattoos.

'Gentlemen,' the tragic postulant continued in even graver tones, 'this is the reason we've come together this evening. I want to hear from the mouth of that slut Mme Giulia Rana, gracious representative of the beyond, and in the presence of that filth Mr Pard, British Consul, whether my dear Themistocles, flesh and blood of my adored wife's twenty-third lover, can still pronounce his mother's sweet name.'

Following Roberto Danesi's statement, Mme Rana, in a deep trance, puffed out her immense belly and said in a creamy voice: 'Spirit! Is it true that Mme Danesi is at present hospitalized in a big frozen meat plant in London, where they are proceeding to remove her tattoos? Answer without delay, I command you!'

A few seconds after the ecstatic silence had absorbed the echo of this umbilical exhortation, terrible spasms shook Mme Rana's belly and a voice no longer her own shouted: 'Jammed. Slitting child's throat. Call back later!'

– first published in *Bifur*  
(translated by James Brook)

## Jacques Vaché, 1896–1919

Strelitzia in hand, the very spirit of humour walks on eggshells back up the current of years covering the 'last' war,<sup>1</sup> body forward and face in profile. Anything but an abstentionist, he sports a uniform that is beautifully tailored and, moreover, divided in two – a synthetic uniform, as it were, which on one side is that of the 'allied' armies and on the other that of the 'enemy' forces. Their strictly superficial unification is accompanied by a great many outer pockets, pale shoulder belts, staff ID cards, and scarves about the waist in every colour of the horizon. His red hair, his 'dead-flame' eyes, and the glacial butterfly of his monocle perfect this constant, wilful dissonance and isolation. His refusal to participate is absolute, and takes the guise of a purely formal acceptance pushed to the limit: he maintains all the 'outer signs of respect,' of a somewhat automatic acquiescence to precisely what the mind deems most insane. With Jacques Vaché, not a cry, not even a whisper: man's 'duties,' which were typified in the agitation of those times by 'patriotic duty,' are defied – up to and including conscientious objection, which in his view still showed far too much good will. In order to find the desire and the strength for opposition, one still needs to fall less short of the mark. Instead of outward desertion in time of war, which for him still retained a rather *Palcontent* aspect, Vaché opted for another kind of insubordination, which we might call desertion within oneself. This was not even the kind of defeatism practised by Rimbaud in 1870–71, but rather a stance of utter indifference, along with a will not to serve any purpose whatsoever, or more precisely to conscientiously *disserve*. An individualistic attitude if ever there was one. It strikes me as the product – the most evolved product to date – of the emotional ambivalence that posits that the death of others is accepted much more freely in wartime than in peacetime, and that a person's life becomes more interesting as that of the collective stops being spared. There is in this a return to a primitive state usually expressed by the 'heroic' reaction (the overheated *superego* managing to obtain the *ego*'s withdrawal, its consent to loss) and, in exceptional cases, by the exacerbation of *egoistic* tendencies, for lack of having met the appropriate erotic ferment (the *id* reemerging as dominant, as in the case of Ubu or the Good Soldier Schweik). A *superego* of pure simulation, veritable pattern of its kind, was retained by Vaché only as an ornament; an extraordinary lucidity conferred an unusual, wilfully macabre, and extremely disquieting cast upon his relations with the *id*. It is from these relations that black humour surges in a continual flow – Umour (no *h*, following the inspired orthography he adopted) that will take on an initiatory and dogmatic character. From the outset the *ego* is sorely tried: 'I almost bought it,' says Vaché, '– in our last retreat. But I object to being killed in wartime.' He killed himself shortly after the Armistice. 'I was just finishing this article,' writes Marc-Adophe Guégan in *La Ligne du coeur* (January 1927), 'when a trustworthy source sent me a horrifying revelation. Apparently Jacques Vaché said a few hours before the tragedy: "I will die when I want to die ... But then I'll die with someone else. Dying alone is too boring ... Preferably one of my very best friends ..." Such statements,' adds M. Guégan, 'cast doubts on the hypothesis

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<sup>1</sup> (The other one, that is.)

of an accident, especially if we recall that Jacques Vaché *did not die alone*. One of his friends fell victim to the same poison, on the same evening. They seemed to be sleeping side by side, until it was discovered that they were no longer alive. But to admit that this double death was the consequence of a sinister plan is to make someone's memory horribly responsible.' To provoke the denunciation of that 'horrible responsibility' was, without a doubt, the supreme ambition of Jacques Vaché.

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x, 11 octo. 16

Dear Friend,

I am writing from a bed to which a bothersome fever and pure whimsy have confined me all day.

I received your letter yesterday – The Obvious Fact is that I have forgotten nothing of our friendship, which I hope shall last, so rare are Sars and Mimes!<sup>2</sup> – and even though you have but an approximate notion of Umour.

I am interpreter to the English – and, bringing to said function the sheer indifference leavened with peaceable fraud that I bring to all things official, from ruins to villages I parade my crystal monocle and my theory of disturbing paintings – I have successively been a writer laureate, a well-known pornographic cartoonist, and a scandalous Cubist painter – These days I stay at home and leave others the task of explaining and discussing my personality on the basis of those indicated – The results are unimportant.

I am going on leave toward the end of the month, and will spend some time in Paris – I must pay a visit to my very best friend, with whom I have completely lost touch.

... Other than that – which isn't much – Nothing. The British Army, preferable though it might be to the French variety, does not have much Umour – I have several times warned a colonel attached to me that I will perforate his nearoles with a little wooden pick<sup>3</sup> – I doubt he entirely seized my meaning = for one thing he doesn't know French.

My current dream is to wear a red blouse, a red scarf, and high boots – and to be a member of a secret and pointless Chinese society in Australia.

Are your Illuminati allowed to write? I'll gladly exchange letters with a paranoiac, or some 'catatonic' or other.

x. 4/29/17

Dear Friend,

... I am writing from an ex-village, in a very narrow pigsty covered with blankets – I am with the British soldiers – they have much advanced into enemy territory in these parts – It's very noisy – That's all.

... And then you ask me for a definition of umour – just like that! –

'IT IS IN THE ESSENCE OF SYMBOLS TO BE SYMBOLIC' has long seemed to me worthy of being such a definition in that it is liable to contain a host of living things: EXAMPLE: You know the horrible life of the alarm clock – it's a monster that has always appalled me because

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<sup>2</sup> Terminology borrowed from Rosicrucianism (as is the reference to 'Illuminati' at the end of the letter) to designate individuals who have reached certain stages of enlightenment. [*trans.*]

<sup>3</sup> A torture picked up from Alfred Jarry, one of the few writers to find favour in Vaché's eyes. See *Ubu Rex*, Act III, Scene 8. [*trans.*]

of the number of things its eyes project, and the way that good fellow stares at me when I enter a room – why, then, does it have so much umour, why then? But there you have it: it is so and not otherwise – There is also much that is UBU-ically tremendous in umour – as you shall see – But this is of course not – definitive and umour derives too much from sensation not to be very difficult to express – I believe it is a sensation – I almost said a SENSE – that too – of the theatrical (and joyless) pointlessness of everything.

*When you know.*

And that then is why the enthusiasms (first of all they're noisy) *of others* are hateful – for – isn't it so – we have genius – since we know UMOUR – And Everything – could you possibly doubt it? is permitted us. All this is quite boring, furthermore.

I'm enclosing a figure – and this could be titled OBSESSION – or else – yes – BATTLE OF THE SOMME AND THE REMAINDER<sup>4</sup> – yes.

He's been following me around for a long time, and has stared at me countless times in countless holes – I have great affection for him, among other things.

8/18/17

Dear Friend,

... Besides – ART doesn't exist, no doubt – It is therefore pointless to sing of it – and yet: people make art – because that's how it is and not otherwise – Well – what can you do?

So we like neither art nor artists (down with Apollinaire) and HOW RIGHT TOGRATH IS TO ASSASSINATE THE POET! Nevertheless since it is necessary to extract a little acid or old lyricism, may it be done with a lively jerk – for locomotives travel fast.

So modernity too – constant, and killed every night – We ignore MALLARMÉ, without rancour, but he is dead – We no longer recognize Apollinaire – BECAUSE – we suspect him of producing art too wittingly, of stitching up Romanticism with telephone wire and of not knowing dynamos. THE STARS still disconnected! – it's boring – and then sometimes they don't talk seriously! – A man who believes is a curiosity. BUT SINCE SOME PEOPLE ARE NATURAL-BORN SHOW-OFFS

...

Well then – I see two ways of letting things take their course – Create one's own sensations with the help of a flamboyant collision of rare words – not often, mind you – or else neatly draw the angles, the squares, the entire geometry of feelings – those of the moment, naturally – We shall leave logical Honesty – provided we contradict ourselves – like everyone else.

... Umour should produce nothing – but what can be done? I grant LAFCADIO a bit of umour, because he doesn't read and his only products are amusing experiments – such as Murder – and without Satanic lyricism at that – my dear old, rotten Baudelaire! – We needed our air dry, a little; machinery – rotating in stinking oil – throb, throb – throb – Whistle! Reverdy – amusing as po-wet, tedium in prose; MAX Jacob, my old charlatan – PUPPETS – PUPPETS – PUPPETS would you like some beautiful puppets in coloured wood!? Two dead-flame-eyes and the crystal wafer of a monocle – with an octopus typewriter – I like that better ...

11/14/18

Dearest friend,

Your letter found me in such a state of depression! – I'm devoid of ideas and almost totally muted, more than ever no doubt the unconscious recorder of many things, as a whole – what

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<sup>4</sup> The Somme, site of a major battle in the First World War, is also the French word for a mathematical sum. [trans.]

crystallization? ... I'll emerge from the war gently doddering, perhaps indeed like those splendid village idiots (and I hope so) ... or else ... or else ... what a film I'll star in! – With careening automobiles, don't you know, and collapsing bridges, and enormous hands creeping over the screen toward some document – useless and priceless! – With such tragic conversations, in evening wear, behind the palm tree with a thousand ears! – And then Charlie [Chaplin], of course, who grimaces, eyes serene. The Policeman left behind in the trunk!!

Telephone, shirtsleeves, people in fast motion, with those strange jerky movements – William R. G. Eddie, who is sixteen years old, has thousands of liveried Negroes, such beautiful ash-white hair, and a horn-rimmed monocle. He will be married.

I'll also be a trapper, or thief, or prospector, or hunter, or miner, or well driller. – Arizona Bar (whiskey – gin and mixed?), and fine, high-yielding forests, and you know those beautiful riding breeches with their machine pistols, the clean-shaven look, and such lovely hands for playing solitaire. It'll all go up in smoke, I tell you, or I'll end up in a saloon, having made my fortune. – Well.

However will I manage, my poor friend, to stand these final months in uniform? – (they've assured me the war is over) – I'm at wits' end ... and besides THEY don't trust me ... THEY suspect something – So long as THEY don't debrain me while THEY still have me in their power? ...

## Benjamin Péret, 1899–1959

It took – the reason I’m weighing my words will soon become clear – it took an *unfailing detachment*, of which I surely know no other example, to emancipate language as far as Benjamin Péret was able to, and this from the start. He alone fully performed on the *word* the operation corresponding to alchemical ‘sublimation,’ which consists in provoking the ‘ascension of the subtle’ via its ‘separation from the dense.’ The *dense*, in this regard, is the crust of exclusive meaning that has covered all words, and that leaves their juxtapositions practically no flexibility outside of the compartments in which immediate or conventional usefulness, solidly bolstered by routine, has narrowly confined them. The tight compartment that prevents signifying elements, now frozen in words, from entering into new relations constantly widens the zone of opacity that alienates humanity from nature and from itself. This is where Benjamin Péret steps in as a liberator.

Before him, in fact, the greatest poets had basically excused themselves for having ‘very frankly’ seen ‘a mosque in lieu of a factory,’ or had adopted a defiant attitude to report that they had witnessed ‘a fig eat a donkey.’<sup>1</sup> In uttering these words, they seem to have the feeling that they’re committing a violation, or profaning human consciousness, or transgressing the most sacred of taboos. With Benjamin Péret, on the contrary, this kind of ‘bad conscience’ has come to an end; censorship no longer obtains, and one takes it as a given that ‘everything is permitted.’ Never had words and what they designate, finally freed from domestication, shown such glee. It’s not only that natural objects succeed in dragging even manufactured objects into the hullabaloo; each side vies with the other for availability. We have finished once and for all with old-fashionedness, with dust. Frantic joy has returned. It’s all the magic in a glass of white wine:

*this wine is white only at sunrise  
because the sun runs a hand through its hair*

Everything is set free, everything is poetically saved by the reactivation of a generalized principle of mutation and metamorphosis. We are no longer forced to celebrate ‘correspondences’ merely as great but unfortunately intermittent glimmers. Now we are oriented and moved by an uninterrupted series of *passionate chords*.

I speak of this from too close up, as if describing a light that, day after day for thirty years, has made my life more beautiful. Humour gushes here as if from the source.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes come respectively from Rimbaud and Lautréamont. [trans.]

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## THE PARASITES ABROAD

This is how it happened:

'I had gotten a ferrous<sup>2</sup> on the round<sup>3</sup> and was sliding into white<sup>4</sup> when I felt my stems being squeezed.<sup>5</sup>

'I thought: "It's getting dry!"<sup>6</sup> but I was too far to express myself.<sup>7</sup> When there was some air,<sup>8</sup> I found myself with the flutterers,<sup>9</sup> at least fifteen pipes<sup>10</sup> above the dung,<sup>11</sup> but you know, I never did like to play with smoke;<sup>12</sup> I had only one wish: to find myself back on the dung. I said to myself: "This isn't deaf,<sup>13</sup> all I have to do is glide down the shootings."<sup>14</sup> But it was easier said than done. As I made the attempt I saw that the shootings and I were but one. It isn't funny to find oneself all of a sudden on the black payroll,<sup>15</sup> particularly as there was no reason for it to end. I tried once more to leave the shooting, but it was all wind!<sup>16</sup>

'I was shooting, and very shooting. I felt the knocker<sup>17</sup> going crazy in my suitcase.<sup>18</sup> I thought I had reached the last line of my chapter,<sup>19</sup> I was biting<sup>20</sup> myself: a chatter<sup>21</sup> positioned itself on my occ,<sup>22</sup> rolled onto my cornute,<sup>23</sup> from there to my suitcase, descended to my perker<sup>24</sup> and burnt one of my stems.

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<sup>2</sup> Ferrous: shell shard.

<sup>3</sup> Round: head.

<sup>4</sup> To slide into white: to faint.

<sup>5</sup> To squeeze the stems: to take by the limbs.

<sup>6</sup> It's getting dry: things are turning out badly.

<sup>7</sup> To be too far to express oneself: to be too giddy to defend oneself.

<sup>8</sup> When there was some air: when I came to.

<sup>9</sup> The flutterers: the birds.

<sup>10</sup> Pipe: metre.

<sup>11</sup> Dung: soil.

<sup>12</sup> To play with smoke: to find oneself up in the air in an unstable position.

<sup>13</sup> Deaf: difficult.

<sup>14</sup> To glide down the shootings: to slide along the branches, or a tree.

<sup>15</sup> To be on the black payroll: to be the leaves which create shade.

<sup>16</sup> Wind: impossible.

<sup>17</sup> Knocker: heart.

<sup>18</sup> Suitcase: chest.

<sup>19</sup> The last line of my chapter: my last moments to live.

<sup>20</sup> To bite oneself: to deceive oneself.

<sup>21</sup> Chatter: mouth.

<sup>22</sup> Occ: forehead.

<sup>23</sup> Cornute: nose.

<sup>24</sup> Perker: stomach.



‘I cried like a Siren, unaware that, since my stem had been burned, I was no longer affixed to the shooting. I made a bowl<sup>25</sup> and fell on a flasht<sup>26</sup> which, instead of being tussed,<sup>27</sup> plunged into my suitcase. It was not love!<sup>28</sup> He, especially, exploded<sup>29</sup> and I didn’t know how to make him leed.<sup>30</sup>

‘I had a blow<sup>31</sup> – I must have been a real balooka<sup>32</sup> not to have thought of this earlier. I set myself to making flowers,<sup>33</sup> and after a few big tulips,<sup>34</sup> the flasht’s round emerged from my piston.<sup>35</sup> And he sang, how he sang, it was worse than La Chenal.

‘I kept pulling on the flasht’s round, and after about ten rattles<sup>36</sup> of effort, I succeeded in disencumbering myself of the flasht. Free, he had nothing better to do than to play the sap.<sup>37</sup> As for me, I was in the floating woods,<sup>38</sup> and yet, I take the geezer<sup>39</sup> as my witness, I hadn’t had anything in my pouch<sup>40</sup> for two sets.<sup>41</sup> I had air stems,<sup>42</sup> no doubt because I hadn’t sacked<sup>43</sup> in such a long time; after ten pipes I melted<sup>44</sup> and didn’t waste any time in balancing<sup>45</sup> myself. I came back to the air<sup>46</sup> smelling strawberries<sup>47</sup> falling on my round.

‘ – Good God, here’s the discharge!<sup>48</sup>

‘This slap<sup>49</sup> had a magical effect, and the burner<sup>50</sup> reappeared. It could have been salty<sup>51</sup> and, as it was summer, the burner should have been above me. It was on my left and was approaching at full speed. Five or six rattles later, it was between my legs and my radish<sup>52</sup> was ready.

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<sup>25</sup> Bowl: movement.

<sup>26</sup> Flasht: cat.

<sup>27</sup> To tuss: to crush.

<sup>28</sup> It was not love: it was not pleasant.

<sup>29</sup> To explode: to be furious.

<sup>30</sup> To leed: to leave rapidly.

<sup>31</sup> Blow: idea.

<sup>32</sup> Balooka: fool.

<sup>33</sup> To make flowers: to excrete.

<sup>34</sup> Tulip: excrement.

<sup>35</sup> Piston: anus.

<sup>36</sup> Rattle: minute.

<sup>37</sup> Play the sap: to flee.

<sup>38</sup> To be in the floating woods: to be drunk.

<sup>39</sup> Geezer: God.

<sup>40</sup> Pouch: the stomach.

<sup>41</sup> Set: day.

<sup>42</sup> To have air stems: to tremble on one’s legs.

<sup>43</sup> To sack: to eat.

<sup>44</sup> To melt: to fall, to cave in.

<sup>45</sup> To balance: to sleep.

<sup>46</sup> To come back to the air: to awaken.

<sup>47</sup> Strawberries: large drops of rain.

<sup>48</sup> Discharge: downpour.

<sup>49</sup> Slap: word.

<sup>50</sup> Burner: sun.

<sup>51</sup> Salty: noon.

<sup>52</sup> Radish: sexual organ.

‘Ah! What sweetness my pape!<sup>53</sup> It was like a new blast<sup>54</sup> and everything blasted<sup>55</sup> inside me. I never would have socketed<sup>56</sup> this. And now I assure you it’s all finished with bloomers.<sup>57</sup> You don’t know! You don’t know.

‘After this the bloomer disappeared in a shooting.

‘I felt that I had galled<sup>58</sup> a blast, and I blasted alone, and I blasted alone for straws<sup>59</sup> and straws. I left in the direction of the burner which had returned to its place in the hat,<sup>60</sup> but after a few rattles I felt that I could never get there. I fell again on the dung and plunged myself in entirely; but it was therm<sup>61</sup> and it thermed<sup>62</sup> more and more.

‘Finally, I surfaced from the dung, but I noticed that I had galled a swan on a portfolio,<sup>63</sup> and I had my buckles<sup>64</sup> to the wind. On the dung was a gilded fatty<sup>65</sup> in complete misery.<sup>66</sup> He made me a little sign with the dish<sup>67</sup> and yelled to me:

‘– Hey Lohengrin! Proceed to the rallying-point!’

– from *Death to the Pigs and the Field of Battle*

(translated by Rachel Stella)

### THREE CHERRIES AND A SARDINE

What rises from a field of wheat does not necessarily look like a water jug  
any more than what eats thrones looks like a sleeper-car  
where from brains on fire  
gush rains of sensitive plants  
that sometimes imitate dancers pulling up their garters  
which allows the spectator hidden behind a glass artichoke smiling  
like a secret uprooted tree  
that floods the countryside  
where only fire alarms now grow  
shaped like women’s slacks  
which allows I say  
the spectator with his stockade head covered in nasturtiums  
to tear up his street  
a brothel sign in hand

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<sup>53</sup> Pape: friend, comrade.

<sup>54</sup> Blast: dance.

<sup>55</sup> To blast: to imagine.

<sup>56</sup> To socket: to imagine.

<sup>57</sup> Bloomer: woman.

<sup>58</sup> To gall: to become.

<sup>59</sup> Straw: hour.

<sup>60</sup> Hat: sky.

<sup>61</sup> Therm: warmth.

<sup>62</sup> To therm: to heat.

<sup>63</sup> Portfolio: pond covered with lily pads.

<sup>64</sup> Buckles: feathers.

<sup>65</sup> Gilded fatty: general.

<sup>66</sup> In complete misery: in formal dress.

<sup>67</sup> Dish: hand.

but if he had a child's umbrella hanging from his ear  
and ribs shaped like Ophelia  
he would sigh as easily as a breaded baritone  
guarding a field of cherry trees that died  
when the bud burst its bra  
and its transparent sap  
in the penumbra of movie theatres  
flew away with the passing of trolleys that will never become chamois  
like the smoking ruins smiling like a blocked-off street  
whose sap  
dark in mood like a stabbed tire  
or joyful like a church turned slaughterhouse  
reads the evening paper where they tell  
how the beard of a veteran from the great war  
serves as a pen-holder for his grandchildren  
who irresistibly make me think  
of an ad for chocolate offering bonus coupons to every buyer.  
Meanwhile the great battle between the coal and the coal-trimmers  
will end only in the victory of starfish  
who brush their teeth with a gooseberry taper  
eyes closed  
like a volcano pondering its sperm  
as it heads toward the sea  
and despite the scorpions who kill themselves in its flames  
doesn't hesitate to massacre several dozen grandmothers' breasts or railroad signals  
which gladly become clinkers for quilts  
shaken with convulsive jolts like hawthorn blossoms  
And eyes reddened by watermelon will see in a cloud of moustaches great soft locks swaying  
like elephants' trunks with breasts of mid-Lent  
with feet of smiles  
with legs of frenetic oscillations  
resembling  
distantly it's true  
the nervous trembling of the sources of the Nile  
where St Vitus's dance was born  
in a nutshell  
bitter as a kick in the ass  
expected since the appearance beyond the fields of turnips and tulips  
crossed like swords swearing solemn oaths  
to the moon in a jam jar worn out like a grasshopper  
that could replace a gondola  
propelled by the oarsmen's sneezes  
as easily as a flycatcher tattooed like a pope in a thermal spring where they treat  
the luminous warts that grow inside famous old skulls  
swallows the deepest sighs

that are sometimes camouflaged as milk baths  
stormy as sheep  
or sometimes as a thick brute  
who dreams of lace  
like a stringbean in the moonlight

## Jacques Rigaut, 1899–1929

‘Stoicism,’ said Baudelaire, ‘is a religion with only one sacrament: suicide!’ Although from very early on suicide assumed for him the value of unique sacrament, the religion we might impute to Jacques Rigaut has nothing to do with stoicism. Resignation was not his strong point: for him, not only pain, but even the absence of pleasure was an intolerable evil. An absolute, flagrant egotism vied with a natural generosity bordering on supreme extravagance, that of one’s own life constantly offered, to be given up at the drop of a hat. Life’s greatest gift is the freedom it leaves you to step out of it whenever you choose – a theoretical freedom, at least, but one that might be worth conquering in pitched battle against cowardice and all the entrapments of man-made necessity, whose relationship with natural necessity is too obscure, too inconsistent.

At around age twenty, Jacques Rigaut condemned himself to death and waited impatiently, from hour to hour, for ten years, for the perfect moment to put an end to his life. It was, in any case, a captivating human experiment, to which he was able to give a half-tragic, half-comic turn all his own. The shadows of Petronius, Alphonse Rabbe, Paul Lafargue, and Jacques Vaché act as signposts along the road, one also tended by a few protagonists who are annoyingly distinct from the men who called them into tangible existence: ‘Who is not Julien Sorel? Stendhal. Who is not Monsieur Teste? Valéry. Who is not Lafcadio? Gide. Who is not Juliette? Shakespeare.’ Jacques Rigaut, whose literary ambition didn’t extend beyond the desire to found a newspaper, the title of which (*The Ruckus*) says it all, every day slipped a revolver under his pillow. It was his way of bowing to the common wisdom that it’s better to ‘sleep on it’ and of trying to do away with the malefactors inside him – that is, with conventional forms of adaptation. It is again Baudelaire who said: ‘Life has but one true charm: the charm of the game. But what if we’re indifferent to whether we win or lose?’ Rigaut circled around this indifference without quite reaching it, but the game remains. Take one’s chances; and if one feels more or less poignant doubt, choose a certainty by heads or tails. He passed himself off as a ‘moral person,’ but let’s be clear about this: given the very nature of his resolution, he left no room for decorum. Eternal dandyism is in play: ‘I will make a great corpse ... Try, if you can, to arrest a man who travels wearing suicide in his lapel.’ He travelled curiously, like Chateaubriand’s yawn, down to us: ‘Imprudence: the man who yawns before his mirror. Who between them will tire of yawning? Who yawned first? From jaw to jaw, my yawn glides all the way to the beautiful American. A Negro is hungry, a young girl is bored: it is I who yawned.’ It is still about hopping into a Rolls Royce, but, make no mistake, one going backward. ‘After me, the flood’: these words suggested no idea to him other than to follow his own ascendancy, to recapture any worthwhile dead during their lifetimes, to give their fates that small turn of the handle that would divert them. Only the vehicle was still lacking. It’s Jarry’s Ten-Thousand-Mile Race applied to mental life.

Finally, on 5 November 1929, the moment came. Jacques Rigaut, after very meticulous ablutions and observing the external correctness required by that kind of departure – leave nothing askew; use cushions to prevent any possible trembling, any last concession to disorder – fired a bullet into his heart.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Papiers posthumes*, 1934.

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH: Selected texts, in *4 Dada Suicides*.

I will be serious, like pleasure. People don't know what they're saying. There is no reason to live, but there's no reason to die, either. The only way we can still show our contempt for life is to accept it. Life is not worth the bother of leaving it. Out of charity, one might spare a few individuals the trouble of living, but what about oneself? Despair, indifference, betrayal, fidelity, solitude, the family, freedom, weight, money, poverty, love, absence of love, syphilis, health, sleep, insomnia, desire, impotence, platitudes, art, honesty, dishonour, mediocrity, intelligence – nothing there to make a fuss about. We know only too well what those things are made of, no point in watching for them. Just good for bringing about a few accidental suicides. (True, there's also bodily suffering. Personally I'm feeling fine: too bad for those with liver ailments. I must have a soft spot for victims, but I cannot hold it against people when they decide they can't endure cancer.) And besides, the thing that frees us, that eliminates any chance of suffering, is that revolver with which we'll kill ourselves this very evening if we damn well feel like it. Contrariness and despair, moreover, are never more than new reasons to attach oneself to life. Suicide is very convenient: I can't stop thinking about it: it's too convenient: I haven't killed myself. One regret subsists: I would hate to leave without having compromised myself; I would like to take Notre Dame, love, or the Republic along with me.

Suicide must be a vocation. Circulating blood demands a justification for its endless circuit. Fingers get impatient with squeezing only into the palm of one's hand. One itches for the kind of action that turns back on its actor, if the poor wretch forgot to set a goal for it. Desires without images. Desire for the impossible. Here stands the limit between suffering that has both name and object, and the anonymous, autogenous kind. For the mind it's a kind of puberty, as it is often described in novels (for, of course, I was corrupted too young by having experienced a crisis at the time when the belly began), but one can get over it other than by suicide.

I have never taken much of anything seriously. As a child, I poked my tongue out at the women who approached my mother in the street to beg for alms, and I secretly pinched their brats who were crying from the cold. When my good father on his death bed tried calling me to his side to whisper his last request, I instead grabbed the maid and belted out: '*Kick your parents down the stairs, – We're gonna make whoopie and have no cares ...*' I don't believe I've ever passed up a chance to betray a friend's confidence. But there is small merit in mocking goodness, tweaking charity; it is much more comic to deprive people of their petty little existence for no reason at all, for a lark. Children have no illusions about this, and know how to milk all the pleasure out of sending an anthill scattering in panic, or squashing two flies in the act of fornicating. During the war I tossed a grenade into a hut where two buddies of mine were getting ready to go on leave. What a guffaw to see the face of my mistress, who was expecting a caress, go all horrified when I socked her Western-style and sent her body crumpling a few paces back. And what a sight it was, all those people fighting to get out of the Gaumont-Palace movie theatre after I'd set it on fire! Tonight, you know, there's nothing to fear: it's my fancy to be serious. – Obviously, there's not a word of truth in this story and I'm really the best-behaved little boy in Paris; but I've so often enjoyed imagining that I'd accomplished or was going to accomplish similarly honourable exploits that it isn't a lie, either. Regardless, I've laughed at quite a few things! There is only one thing in the world that I haven't been able to laugh at: pleasure. If I were still able to feel shame or pride, you can be sure I wouldn't make such an embarrassing confession. Some other

time I'll explain to you why I never lie: one does not keep secrets with one's servants. Getting back to pleasure, which tries to catch you out and drag you along, with two little notes of music, the image of flesh and many other things besides: as long as I haven't gotten over the taste for pleasure, I will be susceptible to the giddiness of suicide. This I know.

The first time I killed myself, it was to get back at my mistress. That virtuous creature suddenly refused to sleep with me, yielding to remorse, she claimed, at cheating on her lover, who was also her boss. I don't really know if I loved her, and I suspect that two weeks away from her would have drastically reduced my craving; but her refusal exasperated me. How could I reach her? Did I mention that she still felt a deep and abiding tenderness for me? I killed myself to get back at my mistress. That suicide becomes forgivable when you take into account my extreme youth at the time of the incident.

The second time I killed myself was out of laziness. Poor, and having an anticipatory horror for any kind of work, I killed myself one day without conviction, as I had lived. That death can't be held against me either, since as you see, today I'm the picture of health.

The third time ... I'll spare you the story of my other suicides, if you'll agree to listen to only one more: I had just gone to bed, after an evening when, to be sure, I was no more besieged by idleness than on other evenings. I made my decision, and at the same time – I remember this vividly – I uttered the only possible reason: *Oh, to hell with it!* I got up and went looking for the only weapon in the house, a little revolver that one of my grandfathers had owned, loaded with equally ancient bullets. (You will soon see why I've made sure to include this detail.) Having been naked in my bed, I was now naked in my room. It was chilly. I rushed to get under the covers. I cocked the hammer; I felt the cold steel in my mouth. It is likely that I felt my heart beating at that moment, the way I felt it beat when hearing the whistle of a grenade before it exploded: when in the presence of something irrevocable that is yet to happen. I pulled the trigger, the hammer clicked, the shot did not fire. I then laid my weapon on the nightstand, probably with a nervous laugh. Ten minutes later, I was fast asleep. I believe I've just said something quite important, provided that ... of course! It goes without saying that I didn't for an instant think of firing a second shot. The main thing was that I had resolved to die, not whether or not I actually died.

A man free of cares or boredom might consider suicide the most disinterested gesture there is, so long as he feels no curiosity about death! I have absolutely no idea of how and when I came upon these thoughts, and that doesn't bother me in the least. But all the same, here is a supremely absurd act, and the passing whim of its explosion, and nonchalance that transcends sleep, and the purest form of compromise.

## Jacques Prévert, 1900–1977

While studying in children aged three to thirteen the successive kinds of respect that they accord the rules of the game of marbles, Jean Piaget, author of such remarkable works as *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932), was able to identify three stages, which correspond to fundamentally different modes of conduct and follow each other in invariable succession: obedience to *motor* rules pure and simple, corresponding before the age of seven to preverbal motor intelligence that is basically independent of any social relation; obedience to the *coercive rule*, corresponding from ages seven to eleven to the unilateral respect shown by a child who receives orders without any possibility of talking back; obedience to the *rational* rule after age eleven, a constituted and constituent rule based on mutual respect. Insofar as the social interaction of adults tends to reproduce on a larger scale the mechanism of the game of marbles, versions of which have been played in all cultures and in all centuries, we have to recognize that only rare individuals reach the degree of awareness that marks the third stage, and that the vast majority is arrested in the second (blind submission to the evil chief, whether called Hitler or Stalin; fanatical observance of the rules in lieu of awareness of those rules; a need to be approved by the ‘grown-up,’ which in desperate cases is equivalent to what schoolchildren, with regard to the teacher, used to label a ‘brown-noser’: overachieving, tattling, etc.).

Jacques Prévert seems to have accomplished the leapfrog exploit – that is indeed the term – of passing directly from the first stage to the third; and he has not only accomplished it but has remained able to jump in both directions at will. With one foot on the *id* and the other on the *ego*, the latter entirely distinct from the false *superego* – or rather, as he himself says, ‘one foot on the right bank, one on the left, and the third in the behinds of imbeciles’ – he knows the shortcut that can make the entire process appear to us in a flash, shining with childhood, and that can keep the reservoir of revolt forever stocked.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Paroles*, 1947.

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### ATTEMPT TO DESCRIBE A DINNER OF HEADS IN PARISFRANCE

Those who piously ...  
Those who copiously ...  
Those who flagulate  
Those who inaugurate  
Those who believe  
Those who believe they believe  
Those who behhhh-behhhh



Those who have feathers  
 Those who nibble  
 Those who andromachus  
 Those who dreadnought  
 Those who capital-letter  
 Those who sing in time  
 Those who brush till it shines  
 Those who have a pot belly  
 Those who lower their gaze  
 Those who can carve a chicken  
 Those who are bald inside their heads  
 Those who bless the mob  
 Those who distribute kicks in the rear  
 Those who stand to honour the dead  
 Those who bayonet ...  
 Those who give heavy artillery to children  
 Those who feed children to heavy artillery  
 Those who float and never sink  
 Those who don't think two plus two makes five  
 Those whom their giant wings keep from flying  
 Those who in dreams plant bits of broken glass in the Great Wall of China  
 Those who don a wolf's face when eating lamb  
 Those who steal eggs and don't have the nerve to cook them  
 Those who have fifteen thousand seven hundred and seventy-two feet of Mont Blanc, nine hundred and eighty-four of Eiffel Tower, a chest width of ten inches, and who are proud of it  
 Those who suckle at the motherland's bosom  
 Those who run, steal, and avenge us – all of these and many more besides proudly entered the President's palace, making the gravel crunch; all of them jostled and hurried, for there was going to be a great dinner of heads and everyone had donned the one he liked best.  
 One the head of a clay pipe, another the head of a British admiral; there were some with stink-bomb heads, Gallifet heads, animals that are sick in the head heads, Auguste Comte heads, Rouget de Lisle heads, Saint Theresa heads, headcheese heads, toe-cheese heads, monseignor heads, and milkman heads.  
 Some, for everyone's amusement, carried on their shoulders charming calves' faces, and these faces were so beautiful and so sad, with little sprigs of parsley stuck in their ears like the seaweed in rocky hollows, that no one even noticed them.  
 A mother with a death's-head laughingly showed her orphan-headed daughter to an old diplomat, a family friend, who had on the head of Soleilland.  
 It was truly quite delightfully charming and in such impeccable taste that when the President arrived with a sumptuous Dove's-egg head,<sup>1</sup> the place went wild.  
 'It's easy once you've thought of it,' the President says while unfolding his napkin, and in the face of so much spite and simplicity the guests can no longer contain themselves; through

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<sup>1</sup> Untranslatable pun: *oeuf de colomb* suggests both a dove's egg and the locution '*c'est comme l'oeuf de Colomb*' or 'it's easy once you've thought of it' – as the President himself remarks in the next paragraph. [*trans.*]

cardboard crocodile's eyes a fat businessman sheds real tears of joy, a slightly smaller one gnaws at the table, beautiful women oh-so-gently massage their breasts, and the admiral, carried away by his enthusiasm, downs his flute of champagne from the wrong side, chomps the stem, and with perforated intestine dies on his feet, gripping the bulwarks of his chair and crying: 'Women and children first!'

By a strange coincidence, the seafarer's wife, on her maid's advice, had that very morning made herself an astounding war-widow's head, with two long pleats of bitterness on either side of the mouth, and two neat, grey pockets of sorrow beneath blue eyes.

Standing on her chair, she shouts at the President, loudly demanding her war-widow's pension and the right to wear the deceased's sextant as a brooch on her evening gown.

Having calmed down a bit, she then lets her lonely-woman's gaze wander over the table and, seeing some herring fillets among the hors d'oeuvres, she automatically serves herself while sobbing, then serves herself some more, thinking of the admiral who didn't eat that many of them in life even though he loved them so. Stop. It's the chief of protocol who says that they have to stop eating, for the President is about to speak.

The President has risen. He has cracked the top of his shell with his knife so that he won't be so warm, not quite so warm.

He speaks, and the silence is such that you can hear the flies buzzing about and you can hear them buzzing about so clearly that no one can even hear the President talking, and that's too bad because it so happens he's talking about flies, about their indisputable usefulness in every sphere and in the colonial sphere in particular.

... for without flies no flyswatters, and without flyswatters no Bey of Algiers, no consul ... no affront to be avenged, no olive trees, no Algeria, no crushing heat, gentlemen, and crushing heat means health for travellers, furthermore ...

but when flies get bored they die and all those stories of the good old days, all those statistics fill them with deep sadness; they begin by letting one leg fall from the ceiling, then the other, and they drop like flies into the plates below, onto shirt fronts – dead, as the song goes.

– first published in *Commerce*

## Salvador Dalí, 1904–1989

If humour, refutation of reality, grandiose affirmation of the pleasure principle, is indeed the product of a sudden transfer of the psychic accent from the *ego* onto the *superego*, and if the *superego* is indeed the intermediary necessary for the humorous attitude to be triggered, then we can expect the latter to play a functional role, to behave more or less consistently in mental states that are determined by a progressive arrest of the personality in the stage of the *superego*. These states exist: they are the ‘paranoiac’ states that correspond, in Kraepelin’s definition, to ‘the insidious development of a permanent and unshakable delusional system, resulting from internal causes, which is accompanied by perfect preservation of clear and orderly thinking, willing, and acting.’ Furthermore, we know, thanks to Bleuler, that paranoiac delusion originates in a chronic emotional state (based on a complex) that favours the coherent development of certain errors to which the subject shows a passionate attachment. In the final analysis, paranoia supposes an emotional investment in the ‘morbid circle of ideas’ characterized by the constancy of its reactions and a deviation of the logical function from its usual paths.

Like the paranoid, artists display a fair number of these predispositions, which come from their fixation on the period of secondary narcissism (reincorporation of a certain portion of the *libido* – and, consequently, of part of the external world – into the *ego*, this portion of the *libido* having already been projected onto objects endowed with subjective value; in other words, essentially onto parental objects, whence alleviation of repressive constraints, conciliation with the self-punitive mechanism of the *superego*). It is no doubt the artist’s ability to *reproduce* and objectify, through painting or other means, the external objects whose constraints he endures that allows him to escape more or less from the tyranny of these objects and avoid tipping into actual psychosis. *Sublimation*, which operates in such cases, seems to be the simultaneous product, brought on by a trauma, of the need for (anal-sadistic) narcissistic fixation and of the social instincts (erotization of fraternal objects) that one must observe during such a period.

Salvador Dalí’s great originality is to have been capable of participating in this process at once as an actor and as a spectator; to have served as both judge and judged in the trial brought by pleasure against reality. *Paranoia-critical* activity, as he has defined it, consists of ‘a spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the interpretive and critical association of delirious phenomena.’ Dalí has maintained the balance within and without himself between a lyrical state based on pure intuition, such that he can stand to go only from climax to climax (conception of artistic pleasure eroticized to the maximum), and a speculative state based on reflection, which metes out satisfactions of a more moderate nature, but which is peculiar and fine enough to allow the pleasure principle to find its place. It goes without saying that with Dalí we’re dealing with a latent paranoia of the most benign sort, a paranoia with isolated delusional forms (to borrow Kraepelin’s terminology), whose evolution is immune to confusional accidents. In him, an intelligence of the highest order excels in reestablishing the connections between these forms immediately after the fact, by progressively rationalizing the distance covered. The actual visionary experiences, the meaningful tricks of memory, the ultrasubjective erroneous interpretations

that form the clinical portrait of paranoia furnish him with the raw materials for his work; he views and presents them as the mother lode. But starting with them, he undertakes a methodical effort of organization and exploitation, which tends to gradually reduce the hostile aspects of daily life and overcome this hostility on a *universal scale*. Indeed, Dalí never forgets that the human drama mainly emanates from, and is exacerbated by, the contradiction between natural necessity and logical necessity – two necessities that manage to fuse only in rare flashes and that in the dazzling glare of that flash reveal the country (no sooner lit than dark again) of ‘objective chance’: ‘Paranoia-critical activity is a force that organizes and produces objective chance.’

The external object, which for Dalí, as we have seen, is arrested in the stage of the *superego* and is wholly satisfied to remain there, is endowed with a symbolic life that overshadows all others and that makes it the concrete vehicle of humour. This object is, in fact, diverted from its conventional meaning (utilitarian or otherwise) to be bound tightly to the *ego*, in relation to which it has a constituent value. ‘Be assured that Salvador Dalí’s famous melted watches are nothing other than the tender, extravagant, solitary paranoia-critical camembert of time and space.’ In New York, Dalí exhibited a red-painted telephone whose handset was formed by a live lobster (in which we can progressively trace the self-punishing mechanism of ear-cropping – since Van Gogh, for instance – back to its artistic obviation). His attitude toward what he calls the ‘foreign bodies’ of space is indicative of the infantile lack of distinction – a state in which he remains – between familiarity with objects and familiarity with living creatures, and is characteristic of the ‘moral aerodynamism’ that has allowed him to realize this rare, spectacular fantasy: ‘Rent a clean little old lady in the final stages of decrepitude and exhibit her dressed as a toreador, after having placed atop her previously shaven head a herb omelette, which the little old lady’s constant trembling will make jiggle. One could also place a twenty-franc coin on top of the omelette.’<sup>1</sup>

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## THE NEW COLOURS OF SPECTRAL SEX APPEAL

### *The weight of ghosts*

For some time now, and increasingly so with each passing year, the idea of ghosts has been turning suave, growing heavy and rounded with its persuasive weight, with the plump stereotype and the analytic, nutritive contour that is characteristic of sacks of potatoes seen against the light, which, as everyone knows, are precisely the ones that François Millet, who unwittingly painted the most important ghosts, had the insistent indulgence to transmit to us by capturing them in his immortal, majestically executed canvases, with all the emotional baseness a painter can be capable of and all the concrete and unique shiftiness thanks to which every one of us has, and has had for some time now, the luxury of being horrified.

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<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that the present article applies only to the early Dalí, who disappeared in around 1935 to make way for the personality better known as Avida Dollars, fashionable portraitist recently converted to the Catholic faith and to ‘the artistic ideals of the Renaissance,’ who today boasts of receiving congratulations and encouragements from the Pope (December 1949).

The reasons for the alarming increase in weight, the compact heaviness, the realistic and extra-soft sagging of today's ghosts derive only from the primary and original notion of the materialization of the idea of ghosts, which, as we shall quickly see, resides in the feeling of 'virtual volume.'

*The reason for the obesity of ghosts*

The ghost materializes through the 'simulacrum of volume.' – The simulacrum of volume is the envelope. – The envelope hides, protects, transfigures, incites, tempts, gives a misleading notion of volume. – It makes one ambivalent about volume and causes it to become highly suspect. – It favours the emergence of wild theories about volume. – It provokes the intoxication of ideal knowledge of volume. The envelope dematerializes the content, the volume; weakens the objectivity of volume; makes the virtual volume distressing.

Fat is the distressing element in the concrete volume of meat, and we know that human libido makes distress anthropomorphic, that it personifies the distressing volume, that it transforms the distressing volume into concrete flesh, that it transforms metaphysical distress into concrete fat.

For what is the terrifying fat of the flesh?

Isn't it precisely what envelopes, hides, protects, transfigures, incites, tempts, gives a misleading notion of volume? It makes volume highly suspect, it favours the emergence of wild theories about volume, it provokes intoxications of nutritive, ideal knowledge of volume, it provokes gelatinous representations of volume, extra-fine, 'virtual,' distressing representations of volume.

The worst occurs, then, when behind the linens of ghosts who have still 'kept their figure,' the 'virtual' volumes begin to take on that increasingly serious demeanour that forms the weight – which cannot be mistaken – of reality and substantial fat. But even worse is the moment when this same linen, as it falls, leaves uncovered volumes in its place, which are made suspect by virtue of their analytical, heavy, massive, and endearing appearance (characteristic of the deplorably obese state of our ghosts today) – leaves uncovered, I say, the minuscule albeit monumental nurse who has recently begun appearing in my paintings, and who remains immobile despite a torrential spring shower, sitting in the posture of a person knitting, in a puddle of water, skirts unpleasantly and utterly drenched, back arched, Hitlerian, soft, and tender. This small, large, and authentic ghost of a nurse sits still, while in the land where things get wet, between the Boecklin cypress and the Boecklin storm cloud, the 'iridescent spectre' surges, more beautiful and terrifying than the white death's-head truffle: the rainbow.

It is here that the poverty of supposed synonyms runs up against the most irreducibly specific antagonisms; for, how can we not see as specifically different, on the one hand, the considerable volume of the nurse sitting in water, and on the other, the illusionistic and ephemeral virtuality of the sun's rays broken down by water?

*'Sex appeal' will be 'spectral.'*

I am proud to have predicted in 1928, at the height of functionalistic and practical anatomy and amid the most mocking scepticism, the imminence of the round, salivary muscles, terribly gluey with biological afterthoughts, of Mae West. I hereby announce that all the new sexual attractiveness of women will come from the potential use of their spectral resources and capabilities; in other words, from their possible carnal, luminous dissociation and decomposition. The iridescent spectre stands in opposition to the ghost (still depicted by the nostalgic small-town pharmacist whom that other prosaic and diabetic ghost called Greta Garbo so desperately resembles).

The spectral woman will be the woman who can be dismantled.

*How does one become spectral?*

*Utopian anticipations* – Woman will become spectral by the disarticulation and distortion of her anatomy. The ‘body that can be dismantled’ is the aspiration and verification of female exhibitionism, which will become furiously analytical. It will allow her to show each part separately, to isolate (in order for each to be fed discretely) anatomical parts mounted *on claws*, atmospheric and spectral like the spectral anatomy of the praying mantis, also mounted *on claws*. This will soon be realized through the perverse refinement of aerodynamic costumes and irrational gymnastics. Corsets of all types will be updated to meet extra-fine ends; new and uncomfortable anatomical parts – artificial ones – will be used to accentuate the atmospheric feeling of a breast, buttock, or heel (false breasts, extremely soft and well moulded, though slightly drooping and growing out of the back, will be indispensable city wear). Spectral smiles will be artificially provoked by the vibratory metallic fibres on hats. But, until further notice, the indisputable model, the sensational forebear of spectral costumes will always be Napoleon’s. I especially wish to draw attention to Napoleon’s *good* trousers (good to eat), which render obvious and suave the superfine, tender, and confused volumes that you know as well as I do, and this thanks to the following elements: abdomen and thighs that can be ‘dismantled,’ that are set apart, isolated, atmospheric and spectral, superfinely white and framed in black, as well as the ghostly silhouette of the rest of his costume (hat included), which is quite familiar to everyone.

*Large automobiles will become serene.*

Through the dazzling and extra-rapid luminosity of the spectral sex appeal of people flayed alive, the monumental prosaicness of large automobiles, ironing boards, and tender nurses will become ghostly and serene.

– first published in *Minotaure*

## Jean Ferry, 1906–1974

Apart from the following story, which from the first seemed to me to epitomize the malaise of the post-1940s and to reflect its 'new shivers' on us, Jean Ferry's lyrical texts revolve around the idea of the *lost man*. The boat has left without warning, the passengers are scattered who knows where. The island is deserted, even though at night it gives signs of being inhabited. Here, it's not man who moves about, but the earth. The sensory world is the infinite extension of the pitfalls that, before this, man had encountered only occasionally: 'Have you ever found yourself, in the dark, setting your foot down on the last step of the staircase – the one that doesn't exist? ... Well, here it's always like that. The matter from which that absent stair is made constitutes matter itself.' Because of the earth's roundness, Genghis Khan, in the fever of possession and destruction, hastened his own overthrow by invading lands that he had already razed and conquered. Not only is it impossible to know from *where* we come, but also from *whom* we come: nothing in common, in any case, with those who pass for being the 'authors of our days' – which days? Better to invent a genealogy based on pure whim and the leanings of our hearts, but what if *they* don't agree? (On this score, we can see the unbridled expression of one of the child's major protests and demands: he is *other* than who they say he is, he was *kidnapped* at birth. Be horrified if you like, this is the point we have reached: it is now the parents' turn not to be 'recognized' by their children.) The important thing is that man is lost in time, in the moment that immediately precedes him – which only attests, by reflection, to the fact that he is lost in the moment that follows.

In Jean Ferry's work, one of the great resources of humour is that his fatigue, which he makes no bones about feeling, never loses an opportunity to climb up on stage, parading before our eyes all the treasures of energy. It acts as an extraordinary springboard for this energy, and puts me in mind of those two 'eccentrics' who used to do a skit some thirty years ago at the Olympia called 'The Deflating Man.' In the skit, they were two masons building a house, of which not one stone finally remained standing. One mason constantly had to prop up the other, who, if left alone, eyes glazed and distant, slowly began to pivot on himself and collapse until he was completely flattened on the ground, no thicker than his clothes. Never since have I seen anything so irresistibly funny and disturbing. I believe that in Jean Ferry, these two characters are just as closely allied. They even have a joint letterhead that reads: 'Jean Ferry – Authorship of scenarios in all genres. – Fast, conscientious work. – Psychological constructions a speciality. – Large selection of paradoxes, brash ideas, etc. – Always in stock: strong, human subjects. – Poetic details: upon request. – Touches of humour: depending on size.' Without entirely losing sight of Jean Ferry no. 2, who is 'even more worn out than usual,' and ever ready to come to his aid, Jean Ferry no. 1, over a period of ten years, pursued and brought to partial fruition one of the most arduous tasks ever conceived: deciphering the enigma of Raymond Roussel.

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## THE URBANE TIGER

Of all the music hall attractions that present needless dangers to both the audience and the performers, none fills me with such supernatural horror as the old routine called 'The Urbane Tiger.' For those who have never seen it – since the new generations know nothing about the great vaudevilles of yesterday afternoon – I'll describe how this number works. What I cannot explain, nor try to communicate, is the state of terrified panic and abject disgust in which the spectacle plunges me, as if into fishy and horrendously cold waters. I should simply not go into theatres where this routine is on the bill (which is less and less frequent, moreover). Easier said than done. For reasons I've never been able to clarify, 'The Urbane Tiger' is never announced, and I never expect it – or rather, I do: an obscure, barely conscious sense of danger overlays any pleasure I might take in the other performances. Though sometimes a sigh of relief might free my heart after the final attraction, at others I recognize all too well the fanfare that introduces the sketch – always played, as I said, as if it were impromptu. As soon as the orchestra starts in on that brassy, oh-so-characteristic waltz, I know what is about to happen; a crushing weight settles on my chest, and I feel the live wire of dread between my teeth like a sour, low-voltage current. I want to leave, but I don't dare. Besides, nobody moves, no one else shares my anxiety, and I know that the beast is already on his way. I'm also aware that the arms of my chair would afford, oh, precious little protection ...

First, the theatre is plunged into total darkness. Then a projector goes on at the proscenium, and the beam from this pitiful beacon alights on an empty box, most often near, very near my seat. From there, the beam moves to the far end of the promenade gallery to find a door leading to the wings; and as the horn section dramatically attacks the *Invitation to the Dance*, they enter.

The tamer is a very fetching redheaded beauty, though a bit tired-looking. Her only defence is a black ostrich fan, with which she at first conceals the lower half of her face; only her large green eyes appear above the dark fringes of the undulating waves. With bare arms made iridescent by the light and bathed in fog from a winter's dusk, the tamer is tightly sheathed in a romantic and very low-cut evening gown, a strange gown with heavy reflections, of deepest black. This gown is made of an incredibly supple and delicate fur. Crowning all this is the cascading eruption of a flaming head of hair spangled with gold stars. The whole thing is at once oppressive and vaguely comic. But who would think of laughing? Moving aside her fan to reveal pure lips frozen in a smile, the tamer, followed by the beam of the projector, steps toward the empty box – on the tiger's arm, as it were.

The tiger walks more or less like a human on his two hind legs. He is dressed as a dandy, with refined elegance, and this costume is so well tailored that one can hardly make out the animal's body beneath the large trousers with feet, the brace of flowers around his neck, the blindingly white dicky with its flawless pleats, and the frock coat fitted by a masterful hand. But his head remains, with its horrendous grimace, its mad eyes rolling in purple sockets, the furious bristling of its whiskers, and the teeth that sometimes gleam under curled lips. The tiger advances very stiffly, holding in the crook of his left arm a light grey hat. The tamer walks with measured steps, and if her back sometimes arches a bit, if her bare arm contracts, causing a muscle to swell unexpectedly beneath the tawny velvet of her skin, it is because she has just made a violent, hidden effort to prop up her beau, who was about to fall face forward.

There they are at the door to their loge, which the urbane tiger swats open before stepping aside to let the lady pass. And when she has gone to sit and casually rest her elbows on the faded



plush, the tiger lets himself drop into a chair beside her. Here, normally, the room erupts into blissful applause. And I look at the tiger, and I want so much to be somewhere else that I could cry. The tamer regally greets the public with a slight nod of her blazing curls. The tiger goes to work, manipulating accessories purposely placed near his seat in the box. He pretends to scan the audience with opera glasses, lifts the lid from a box of chocolates and pretends to offer some to his neighbour. He pulls out a silk handkerchief, which he pretends to sniff; he pretends, to the hilarity of everyone present, to consult the programme. Then he acts gallant, leans toward the tamer and pretends to murmur some love declaration in her ear. The tamer pretends to be shocked, and flirtatiously places the fragile screen of her feathered veil between the pale, beautiful satin of her cheek and the beast's stinking muzzle studded with sabre blades. At that, the tiger pretends to be overcome by despair, and he wipes his eyes with the back of his furry paw. And throughout this lugubrious pantomime, my heart pounds with agonizing thuds inside my breast, for only I see, only I know that this whole tasteless parade holds up only by a miracle of will; that we are all in a frightfully unstable state of balance, which anything could upset. What would happen if, in the box next to the tiger's, that little man who looks like a humble office employee, that little man with his pale face and tired eyes, stopped wishing for one instant? For he is the real tamer; the woman is just a figurehead. Everything depends on him. It's he who makes the tiger into a marionette, a mechanism bound more securely than if he were wrapped in steel cables.

But what if that little man suddenly let his attention stray? What if he died? No one suspects the danger that could break loose at any moment. And I know, I imagine, I imagine – no, it's better not to imagine what the lady in fur would look like if ... It's better to watch the end of the routine, which always delights and reassures the public. The tamer asks if someone in the audience would kindly let her borrow a small child. Who could refuse anyone so charming? There is always some witless idiot to hand up toward the fiendish box a delighted infant, whom the tiger gently cradles in the hollow of his folded paws, leaning over the little hunk of flesh with his alcoholic's eyes. To thunderous applause, the lights go up in the hall, the baby is restored to its rightful owner, and the two partners wave before exiting by the same path that brought them.

Once they've disappeared through the door – and they never come back to take a bow – the orchestra erupts into its noisiest fanfares. Shortly afterward, the little man collapses and mops his brow. And the orchestra plays ever more loudly to cover the growls of the tiger, who returns to his normal state once he is back in his cage. He roars as if from hell, rolls over and over while shredding his beautiful clothes, which they have to have remade for each performance. There are cries, tragic howls of desperate rage, furious leaps against the cage bars. On the other side of those bars, the false tamer undresses quickly so as not to miss the last metro. The little man is waiting for her in a café near the station, the one called the Never-Never.

The tempest unleashed by the tiger entangled in his scraps of cloth, muffled though it might be, threatens to create an unfavourable impression on the audience. That is why the orchestra is playing the overture from *Fidelio* with all its might; that is why the director, in the wings, is hurrying the unicycle clowns onstage.

I hate the routine of the urbane tiger, and I will never understand the pleasure that the public takes in it.

## Leonora Carrington, 1917–2011

Michelet, who so beautifully did justice to the *Witch*, highlights among her gifts two that are invaluable, because granted only to women: ‘the illuminism of lucid madness’ and ‘the sublime power of *solitary conception*.’ He also defends her against the Christian-motivated reputation she has acquired of being old and ugly. ‘At the word *Witch*, we imagine the horrible old crones from *Macbeth*. But the cruel trials witches suffered teach us the opposite. Many perished precisely because they were young and beautiful.’

Who today could answer that description better than Leonora Carrington? The respectable persons who invited her to dine in an elegant restaurant a dozen or so years ago have still not gotten over their embarrassment at noticing that, all the while taking part in the conversation, she had removed her shoes and was patiently slathering her feet with mustard. Of all those whom she invited to her home in New York, I believe I was the only one to try certain dishes on which she had spent hours and hours of meticulous preparation, an English cookbook from the sixteenth century in hand – compensating by sheer intuition for the lack of certain ingredients that had become unobtainable or exceedingly rare since then. (I will admit that a hare stuffed with oysters, to which she obliged me to do honour for the benefit of all those who had preferred to content themselves with its aroma, induced me to space out those feasts a bit.)

Over these and many other exploits by which she no doubt means to ‘don and remove the mask that can save [her] from the hostility of conformism’ reigns a smooth, mocking gaze, its effect heightened by its discordance with a throaty voice. Curiosity, here brought to its most ardent point, finds practically no outlet save in the *forbidden*. From one of those journeys that offer little hope of return, and that she related with devastating precision in *Down Below*, Leonora Carrington has retained a nostalgia for the shores that she once approached and that she has not despaired of reaching anew, this time without brooking any resistance, as if granted a permit to travel in either direction at will. There is proof enough of this in the admirable canvases she has painted since 1940, no doubt the most laden with the modern ‘marvellous,’ which are penetrated by an occult light and which can teach us much about her vision, both physical (‘The duty of the right eye is to plunge into the telescope, whereas the left eye interrogates the microscope’) and mental (‘Reason must know the heart’s reasons and every other reason’).

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### THE DEBUTANTE

When I was a debutante, I often went to the zoo. I went so often that I knew the animals better than I knew girls of my own age. Indeed it was in order to get away from people that I found myself at the zoo every day. The animal I got to know best was a young hyena. She knew me too.

She was very intelligent. I taught her French, and she, in return, taught me her language. In this way we passed many pleasant hours.

My mother was arranging a ball in my honour on the first of May. During this time I was in a state of great distress for whole nights. I've always detested balls, especially when they are given in my honour.

On the morning of the first of May 1934, very early, I went to visit the hyena.

'What a bloody nuisance,' I said to her. 'I've got to go to my ball tonight.'

'You're very lucky,' she said. 'I'd love to go. I don't know how to dance, but at least I could make small talk.'

'There'll be a great many different things to eat,' I told her. 'I've seen truckloads of food delivered to our house.'

'And you're complaining,' replied the hyena, disgusted. 'Just think of me, I eat once a day, and you can't imagine what a heap of bloody rubbish I'm given.'

I had an audacious idea, and I almost laughed. 'All you have to do is to go instead of me!'

'We don't resemble each other enough, otherwise I'd gladly go,' said the hyena rather sadly.

'Listen,' I said. 'No one sees too well in the evening light. If you disguise yourself, nobody will notice you in the crowd. Besides, we're practically the same size. You're my only friend, I beg you to do this for me.'

She thought this over, and I knew that she really wanted to accept.

'Done,' she said all of a sudden.

There weren't many keepers about, it was so early in the morning. I opened the cage quickly, and in a very few moments we were out in the street. I hailed a taxi; at home, everybody was still in bed. In my room I brought out the dress I was to wear that evening. It was a little long, and the hyena found it difficult to walk in my high-heeled shoes. I found some gloves to hide her hands, which were too hairy to look like mine. By the time the sun was shining into my room, she was able to make her way around the room several times, walking more or less upright. We were so busy that my mother almost opened the door to say good morning before the hyena had hidden under my bed.

'There's a bad smell in your room,' my mother said, opening the window. 'You must have a scented bath before tonight, with my new bath salts.'

'Certainly,' I said.

She didn't stay long. I think the smell was too much for her.

'Don't be late for breakfast,' she said and left the room.

The greatest difficulty was to find a way of disguising the hyena's face. We spent hours and hours looking for a way, but she always rejected my suggestions. At last she said, 'I think I've found the answer. Have you got a maid?'

'Yes,' I said, puzzled.

'There you are then. Ring for your maid, and when she comes in we'll pounce upon her and tear off her face. I'll wear her face tonight instead of mine.'

'It's not practical,' I said. 'She'll probably die if she hasn't got a face. Somebody will certainly find the corpse, and we'll be put in prison.'

'I'm hungry enough to eat her,' the hyena replied.

'And the bones?'

'As well,' she said. 'So, it's on?'

'Only if you promise to kill her before tearing off her face. It'll hurt her too much otherwise.'

‘All right. It’s all the same to me.’

Not without a certain amount of nervousness I rang for Mary, my maid. I certainly wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t hate having to go to a ball so much. When Mary came in I turned to the wall so as not to see. I must admit it didn’t take long. A brief cry, and it was over. While the hyena was eating, I looked out the window. A few minutes later she said, ‘I can’t eat any more. Her two feet are left over still, but if you have a little bag, I’ll eat them later in the day.’

‘You’ll find a bag embroidered with fleurs-de-lis in the cupboard. Empty out the handkerchiefs you’ll find inside, and take it.’ She did as I suggested. Then she said, ‘Turn round now and look how beautiful I am.’

In front of the mirror, the hyena was admiring herself in Mary’s face. She had nibbled very neatly all around the face so that what was left was exactly what was needed.

‘You’ve certainly done that very well,’ I said.

Towards evening, when the hyena was all dressed up, she declared, ‘I really feel in tip-top form. I have a feeling that I shall be a great success this evening.’

When we had heard the music from downstairs for quite some time, I said to her, ‘Go on down now, and remember, don’t stand next to my mother. She’s bound to realize that it isn’t me. Apart from her I don’t know anybody. Best of luck.’ I kissed her as I left her, but she did smell very strong.

Night fell. Tired by the day’s emotions, I took a book and sat down by the open window, giving myself up to peace and quiet. I remember that I was reading *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift. About an hour later, I noticed the first signs of trouble. A bat flew in at the window, uttering little cries. I am terribly afraid of bats. I hid behind a chair, my teeth chattering. I had hardly gone down on my knees when the sound of beating wings was overcome by a great noise at my door. My mother entered, pale with rage.

‘We’d just sat down at table,’ she said, ‘when that thing sitting in your place got up and shouted, “So I smell a bit strong, what? Well, I don’t eat cakes!” Whereupon it tore off its face and ate it. And with one great bound, disappeared through the window.’

– from *The Oval Lady*

(translated by Katherine Talbot and Marina Warner)

## Gisèle Prassinos, 1920–2015

It is still befitting to erect on the horizon of black humour what Dalí called the ‘imperial monument to the child-woman.’ I’d bet fourteen of my teeth, as Shakespeare’s nurse would say, that she was not yet fourteen years old the first time we were given the chance to hear her read, and she was also Queen Mab, ‘the fairies’ midwife’; she was therefore of no specific age, even though she seemed to be a generation younger than the authors who immediately precede her in these pages. Queen Mab hasn’t changed much since Shakespeare’s day, and it’s still her role to flit athwart men’s noses as they lie asleep. She is the ‘young chimera’ of Max Ernst or the ambiguous school-girl who, under the title ‘Automatic Writing,’ adorns one cover of *La Révolution surréaliste*. Since pity has definitively packed up and gone, the ‘little old lady’ on whom Salvador Dalí’s ‘moral aerodynamism’ likes to exert itself is in for a rough time. ‘There she is, naked. Her body is shot through with violet knitting needles that she has intentionally stuck there because they look good; and to each needle she has tied a small green ribbon. She has no thighs, only empty space between her groin and her knees. To hold everything up, she has her legs hanging from bits of string. Finally, she gets back into bed; her eyes, out of their sockets, fall at her feet. She has turned off the little kitty’s belly. So it’s very dark.’ Very dark: she’s a child laughing, scared in the night; she is all the primitive peoples who look up to see if their ancestors, who appear a bit tired, and whom they’ve just made climb up a tree that they’re about to shake after having removed the ladder, are going to fall. It’s *permanent revolution* in beautiful, coloured one penny images – they no longer exist – but Gisèle Prassinos’s tone is unique: all the poets are jealous of it. Swift lowers his eyes, Sade shuts his candy box.

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### A CONVERSATION

*In a wheatfield,*

*The man is wearing an ochre lace tunic stained with red.*

*The horse is naked. Hanging from its tail is a matchbox, from which a grasshopper’s antennae are jutting.*

*The man is sitting on a white cushion with green designs.*

*The horse is on the man.*

THE MAN: Have we scorned the green diamond?

THE HORSE: I believe we were forced to by law. Now that the law has been diminished, my mind requires that the candles be lowered.

THE MAN: Remember, old seal, that man does not have the right to satisfy employees and that even the telephone refuses to pay taxes.

THE HORSE: To understand is to diminish.

THE MAN: Not so, since we haven't yet tried our luck. We could do it: it's easier.

THE HORSE: No, no, don't believe in those concrete things, for despite their dignity they must exhaust their chatter. Outrage them, feed them cowardly stupidities, and you'll see how they follow us.

THE MAN: Why should I? Don't I already have enough crudeness to keep me busy with that millionaire's tail?

THE HORSE: The love I've loved has always appreciated me!

THE MAN: Yes, me too.

THE HORSE: We have reached the same summits.

## SUCCESSION OF LIMBS

'He absolutely wants to walk,' said a woman to her neighbour. 'He says that he's already learned to walk and that you can go three miles an hour with feet like his. The other day, while I was cooking my peas, he escaped from my hands and began running all over the house. I was afraid he'd slip under the rugs; but since his feet don't reach the ground, I didn't try to stop him. It made me happy to see my child standing for the first time.' The woman let herself go on endlessly about the gait of her child, whom she found admirable.

'But he's still too little to walk,' the neighbour answered with a loud laugh. 'Mine was running much later than that and he's walked on stones twice since then.'

'He really is too little, too little,' the neighbour repeated, and the mother nodded her head and often glanced over at the kitchen, to keep an eye on something. 'He's not at the age,' the neighbour continued, 'when you can put a child on the ground. His legs could split apart, and I don't know if the surgeon could come. He's still so young!'

'He's still so little and young, Madam,' the mother said. 'But he told me that if I didn't put him on the ground this afternoon, he would go rolling all by himself in the Botanical Gardens. He even threatened to take money from the box to buy bread for the geese. This morning he woke me up before seven o'clock to remind me to wash his white beret, and I couldn't get back to sleep. But I won't put him down until next week. Besides, it'll be Easter Sunday and I'll send him to mass. It will be good to walk to church for the first time.'

'Oh, Madam!' said her neighbour. 'There are too many stones at the church entrance. Mine has only walked on stones twice. I'm warning you, Madam, you're trying to make him perform miracles, but you won't succeed: your child is still much too little.'

And with that the neighbour slammed her door, cracking two panes. Tiny shards of glass scattered across to the facing kitchen, into which the woman had disappeared, crying. She busied herself in the kitchen, cooked her peas, and watched the time. Her husband would come home exactly at noon. It was eleven o'clock: 'Still an hour to wait,' the woman told herself, blushing. Finally, when the clock struck noon, a fat man dressed in red flannel entered the kitchen. He went to kiss his wife and, out of negligence, leaned her against the stove, which was burning hot. Still she said nothing. He sat at the table and she served him:

'You're not eating,' said the man.

'No, no,' cried the woman. 'Our boy will be walking soon. What do you think about ... I mean, do you think we should send him to church for Easter?'

The man suddenly became ridiculous: 'In three weeks,' he said, 'he'll come help me on the site. I can let him cut holes in the doors where the locks go.' No one answered, and the man went away happy.

That evening he returned, ate the same way, and they went to bed.

The woman could not sleep. She got up often and tried to catch the mosquitoes that were buzzing around the room, then went to the kitchen. She came back sobbing to shake her husband's shoulders. He answered her with a kiss, and so she got back into bed.

On the day before Easter, the woman went to the cobbler's to order green shoes, size 9. 'Your husband must have grown,' said the store clerk, looking at the order slip.

'Yes, yes,' the woman said. 'So I've been told.'

That night, she again slept very poorly. In the morning she got up earlier than usual to lay out some clothes and the palms for blessing. At eight o'clock she went to wake her husband. He got up and the two of them went into the kitchen together. Moving the stove, they uncovered a small white-pine crate pleasantly decorated with artistic decals. From two wide holes in the lid protruded two enormous shapes wrapped in striped socks.

They lifted the crate together and set it on the sofa. Then the woman took a pair of yellow shoes and put them on over the striped socks. She took the crate tenderly into her arms, set it down at her doorstep; then, as she was not strong enough, she called to her husband, who came in his suspenders.

He took a running start and gave the little crate a swift kick, sending it flying down the stairs.

## Jean-Pierre Duprey, 1930–1959

‘Let there be darkness!’ These words, which open Alfred Jarry’s *L’Amour absolu*, antithetically borrowing from Genesis its most sudden and devastating effect, appear to be the very kernel around which the still-unpublished works of Jean-Pierre Duprey crystallize. It indeed seems that ‘darkness’ could have emerged from the primordial chaos just as easily as light, and the fact is that the blackest night is populated with animals that see only in the dark and that we may in no way consider inferior to diurnal beasts. Moreover, it is more or less a given that nothing is less favourable to clairvoyance than the bright sun: physical light and mental light coexist on very poor terms. The idea of the preeminence of light over shadow doubtless can be taken as a relic of oppressive Greek philosophy. In this regard, I ascribe major importance and great liberating value to the objection made by Stéphane Lupasco to the Hegelian dialectical system, which was derived much more than necessary from Aristotle: ‘A dialectics that is the exact inverse of Hegel’s ... is not only possible but real. In it, the value of negation and diversification – in other words, what he calls the antithesis – virtualizes, by becoming real, both the contradictory value of affirmation and identity that constitute his thesis, and a third dialectic, in which neither one could triumph over the other and which therefore progressively deepens a relative contradiction.’<sup>1</sup>

Jean-Pierre Duprey is one of the arches – and by no means the smallest – that uphold this view, this arch being pure intuition. Every spiritual age, in retrospect, is distinguished both by the particular movements of speculative thought that its contemporaries choose to heed (as, it seems, they have chosen Lupasco’s recent interventions), and, on the artistic level, by eruptive phenomena that occur even in the very young – naturally without the slightest intercommunication to explain their concordance.

The years separating the first and second editions of the present anthology, whatever historical stagnation they might have witnessed, are nonetheless among those that count the most heavily in emotional terms, because it was during these years that the *future*, in its most concrete and basic form, turned uncertain. What will become of this approximate future or non-future? For once, it’s the pulse of the entire human race that we must take; and how better to do that than by entering into contact with, and calling upon, a body of work that would be the newest and most *inspired* to date?

On the eve of 1950, I can say without hesitation that this privileged opus is by Jean-Pierre Duprey, even though it is (or because it is) the most ‘difficult’ that these last haggard years have given us. It is worth venturing into his underbrush. It is neither my fault nor his that the composition of black humour today, in contrast to ten years ago, requires us to exaggerate the dose of pure black. Duprey’s genius is to offer us a spectrum of blackness that is every bit as diverse as the solar spectrum. No less secret than in *Igitur* – ‘He leaves the room and becomes lost in the stairways (*instead of sliding down the banister*)’ – humour here smoulders under the ashes

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<sup>1</sup> Stéphane Lupasco, *Logique et Contradiction* (1947). For artists, this work will have the enormous additional interest of establishing and clarifying the ‘extremely enigmatic’ connection that exists between logical values and their contradiction, on the one hand, and actual data, on the other.



(‘And things happened in the same order, after they had drowned the sea and buried the earth; fire having burned, the air disappeared in the smoke of the new fire regenerated by all of this’).

The lamp of presence tends to conceal from us the real Duprey, Prince of the realm of Doubles, in guises that are, moreover, very seductive. About his main self, the others tell us very little – except that he lives with his wife, ‘Ueline the Black,’ in a house located in the heart of a forest full of wolves.

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## THE SACRILEGIOUS FOREST

### ACT II

#### SCENE 4

*Same setting, but the Night has become green. Two men are sitting.*

NUMBER 1: We are at green midnight, on August third of the year zero, and later on, when the rooster spits three times ...

NUMBER 2: ... The rooster is no more, for the spider has replaced him. She sings better and louder with all those legs, which are her trunks ... She sneezes for real! ...

NUMBER 1: When the spider spits three times, when she spins the web of her voice thickened by her trumpet crutches, the world will change its meaning and the earth its name. And already I’ve heard that an advance guard from the army of corpses has set fire to the graves and is proclaiming the coming of freedom by casket ...

NUMBER 2: And the forest prowlers will see their heads flying above them in projectiles that *they didn’t* launch. They’ll see them, all right, for their severed necks ablaze with their own blood will be large gaping eyes ... My anger stands witness, for I’m seeing red.

NUMBER 1: Bodies hang like useless bells ... The trees will always bear fruit.

NUMBER 2: But the thousand-fingered spider will have a lot to spin, and shrouds will be very scarce. Our master Estern, who can make a single blow of two stones, grants us the freedom to be his dogs. At his signal, we shall bark with a single, common, toothless mouth, and the battle will surely be won!

*He stands and draws his dagger.*

NUMBER 2: I must still sew the trees for our Mistress’s veil, for I have proclaimed myself tailor ...

*He plunges his dagger into the trunk of a tree.*

NUMBER 2: The leaves cry out and branches bleed ... But this wood alcohol tastes like nothing. I’m thirsty!

*He drinks.*

NUMBER 1: Still, the hour is getting late; and since Estern, our lord and master and doctor-of-esternity, grants us this under pain of death, let us be his dogs! But someone is coming. I can clearly hear the silence of his steps through my two hands, sculpted as stumps of deaf pork and pierced by donkey’s antennas ... through my two front paws, rather, which are like two extra ears! ... That explains why I hear two double steps ...

... But let’s fix our masks!

*Numbers 3 and 4 appear, wearing the same dog masks.*

NUMBER 3: I salute you with all my teeth, and may leprosy complete your disguises! My comrade, who is a woman despite appearances, has come from afar to announce great news. At the hour determined by an exact number which is XII – and this hour shall vary no more – at the crossroads of missing spaces, the knight Sagittarius will appear, he whose steed, the steed of the spectre, tramples a discus sun! ... The result has not been foretold, but I predict the imminent end of these hostilities for peace ...

Moreover, the battle rages, and the fury of corpses at liberty guides the fair and ill wind.

*He throws down his weapons. The female Number 4 comes closer.*

NUMBER 4: A hearty greeting, as is the custom and manner of dogs! I would thus be greatly obliged to you ...

*She then tears off her mask ... to appear with the authentic features of THE BLACK ONE, Estern's wife ...*

THE BLACK ONE: Stand! Or rather, sit, following the ways of my dogs and crutch-handled serpents! Crutches you shall be! And since you owe me the obedience of freedom, I shall sew your bones together with the thread of your lives, if ...

... But I prefer to close the book in whose centre I have inscribed your names, or else see you drunk on blood from your own swollen veins!

*They remain petrified, but FINISHED. One has hardened like the stone on which he is sitting – rigid, but with head bowed. His companion has collapsed the height of his six-and-a-half feet, which he doesn't reach – far from it. Number 3 is nowhere to be found.*

THE BLACK ONE: But their lips were old, their veins arid! Their limbs were made of wood, crosses trailing behind them; and their eyes, blind eggs! ... They're dead, but that only makes for more stones, and we shall have plenty when we rebuild our castle.

*With her toe, she nudges the sprawled corpse that does not move. She glances around her, seeking with her eye the Eye that has seen all or seen nothing ... and exits.*

## SCENE 7

*Inanimate. THEY REVIVE and their bodies hold them up. Number 1 is unmasked. Both rub their aching limbs.*

NUMBER 1: Death has no importance, since it's only a kind of genuflection. But I banged my arm on something and I have a pain in my head, which opened onto an abyss inside me ...

NUMBER 2: ... Just like my handle or, if you prefer, my arms! ... They show me a floating void inside the vase of my body; and I would rather see wounds in my fingers or elsewhere! Still, I'm neither bleeding nor perspiring ...

... But I'm limping! And my left paw seems to be too short ...

*He tears off his mask and reappears with the features of the raving-madman-who-is-lame.*

THE MADMAN: ... I lack a sign! My clubfoot bears witness.

NUMBER 1: Vampire's dream ... Sea glass and triple death in my eyes! The wind will build us a public edifice and the sky of that gathering storm will be our arsenal. Come! mad if you like, but come!

*He drags him off and the voice identified with the figure 1 and with the number of the same amount heads off behind them and fades away ...*

VOICE OF NUMBER 1: We're late, but too bad! ... Let us bite the dead and make the living impenetrable signs, to which I will nonetheless ascribe a clearly negative meaning. The battle rages ... But here we leave behind our dog insignia ...

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