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The Trouble with Being Bom

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The Trouble

with

Being Born

Translated from the French by

RICHARD HOWARD

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1

Three in the morning. I realize this second, then this one, then

the next: I draw up the balance sheet for each minute. And why

all this? Because I tm bom. It is a special type of sleeplessness

that produces the indictment of birth.

"Ever since I was bom”—that since has a resonance so dreadful to

my ears it becomes vinendurable.

There is a kind of knowledge that strips whatever you do of

weight and scope: for such knowledge, everything is without

basis except itself Pure to the point of abhorring even the notion

of an object, it translates that extreme science according to which

doing or not doing something comes down to the same thing

and is accompanied by an equally extreme satisfaction: that of

being able to rehearse, each time, the discovery that any gesture

performed is not worth defending, that nothing is enhanced by

the merest vestige of substance, that "reality” falls within the

province of lunacy. Such knowledge deserves to be called

posthumous: it functions as if the knower were alive and not

alive, a being and the memory of a being. "It’s already in the

past,” he says about all he achieves, even as he achieves it,

thereby forever destitute of the present.

We do not rush toward death, we flee the catastrophe of birth,

survivors struggling to forget it. Fear of death is merely the

projection into the future of a fear which dates back to our first

moment of life.

We are reluctant, of course, to treat birth as a scourge; has it

not been inculcated as the sovereign good—have we not been

told that the worst came at the end, not at the outset of our

lives? Yet evil, the real evil, is behind, not ahead of us. What

escaped Jesus did not escape Buddha: ' If three things did not

exist in the world, O disciples, the Perfect One would not appear

in the world. . . And ahead of old age and death he places

the fact of birth, source of every infirmity, every disaster.

We can endure any truth, however destructive, provided it

replaces everything, provided it affords as much vitality as the

hope for which it substitutes.

s

I do nothing, granted. But I see the hours pass—which is better

than trying to fill them.

s

No need to elaborate works —merely say something that can be

murmured in the ear of a drunkard or a dying man.

§

Nothing is a better proof of how far humamty has regressed than

the impossibility of finding a single nation, a single tribe, among

whom birth still provokes mourning and lamentations.

To defy heredity is to defy billions of years, to defy the first cell.

There is a god at the outset, if not at the end, of every joy.

Never comfortable in the immediate, I am liurd only by what

precedes me, what distances me from here, the numberless

moments when I was not: the non-bom.

Physical need of dishonor. How I should have liked to be the

executioner’s son!

What right have you to pray for me? I need no intercessor, I

shall manage alone. The prayers of a wretch I might accept, but

no one else’s, not even a saint’s. I cannot bear your bothering

about my salvation. If I apprehend salvation and flee it, your

prayers are merely an indiscretion. Invest them elsewhere; in any

case, we do not serve the same gods. If mine are impotent, there

is every reason to believe yours are no less so. Even assuming

they are as you imagine them, they would still lack the power to

cure me of a horror older than my memory.

What misery a sensation is! Ecstasy itself, perhe^s, is nothing

more.

Unmaking, decreating, is the only task man may take upon

himself, if he aspires, as everything suggests, to distinguish

himself from the Creator.

$

I know that my birth is fortuitous, a laughable accident, and yet,

as soon as I forget myself, I behave as if it were a capital event,

indispensable to the progress and equilibrium of the world.

§

To have committed every crime but that of being a father.

As a general rule, men expect disappointment: they know they

must not be impatient, that it will come sooner or later, that it

will hold off long enough for them to proceed with their

undertakings of the moment. The disabused man is diflfctent: for

him, disappointment occurs at the same time as the deed; he has

no need to await it, it is present. By fireeing himself fiom

succession, he has devoured the possible and rendered the future

superfluous. "I cannot meet you in your future,’ he says to the

others. "We do not have a single moment in common.” Becatise

for him the whole of the future is already here.

When we perceive the end in the beginning, we move faster

than time. Illumination, that lightning disappointment, affords a

certitude which transforms disillusion into deliverance.

I disentangle myself from appearances, yet I am snarled in them

nonetheless; or rather: I am halfway between these appearances

and that which invalidates them, that which has neither name

nor content, that which is nothing and everything. I shall never

take the decisive step outside them; my nature forces me to drift,

to remain forever in the equivocal, and if I were to attempt a

clean break in one direction or the other, I should perish by my

salvation.

§

My faculty for disappointment surpasses understanding. It is

what lets me comprehend Buddha, but also what keeps me from

following him.

§

What we can no longer commiserate with coimts for nothing—

no longer exists. We realize why our past so quickly stops being

'ours” and turns into history, something which no longer

concerns anyone.

§

In the deepest part of yourself, aspire to be as dispossessed, as

lamentable as God.

True contart between beings is established only by mute

presence, by apparent non-communication, by that mysterious

and wordless exchange which resembles inward prayer.

§

What I know at sixty, I knew as well at twenty. Forty years of a

long, a superfluous, labor of verification.

I am for the most part so convinced that everything is lacking in

basis, consequence, justification, that if someone dared to

contradict me, even the man I most admire, he would seem to

me a charlatan or a fool.

§

Even in childhood I watched the hours flow, independent of any

reference, any action, any event, the disjunction of time from

what was not itself, its autonomous existence, its special status,

its empire, its tyranny. I remember quite clearly that afternoon

when, for the first time, confronting the empty universe, I was

no more than a passage of moments reluaant to go on playing

their proper parts. Time was coming unstuck from being —at my

expense.

Unlike Job, I have not cursed the day I was bom; all the other

days, on the contrary, I have covered with my anathemas. . . .

If death had only negative aspects, dying would be an

immanageable action.

Everything exists; nothing exists. Either formula affords a like

serenity. The man of anxiety, to his misfortune, remains between

them, trembling and perplexed, forever at the mercy of a nuance,

incapable of gaining a foothold in the security of being or in the

absence of being.

Here on the coast of Normandy, at this hour of the morning, I

needed no one. The very gulls’ presence bothered me: I drove

them oflf with stones. And hearing their supematoral shrieks, I

realized that that was just what I wanted, that only the Sinister

could soothe me, and that it was for such a confrontation that I

had got up before dawn.

"In this our life ”—to be in life: suddenly I am struck by the

strangeness of such an expression, as if it applied to no one.

Whenever I flag and feel sorry for my brain, I am carried away

by an irresistible desire to proclaim. That is the moment I realize

the paltry depths out of which rise reformers, prophets, and

saviors.

I long to be free—desperately free. Free as the stillborn are free.

s

If there is so much discomfort and ambiguity in lucidity, it is

because lucidity is the result of the poor use to which we have

put our sleepless nights.

Our obsession with birth, by shifting us to a point bfore our

past, robs us of our pleasure in the future, in the present, and

even in the past.

§

C 9 }

Rare are the days when, projeaed into post-history, I fail to

witness the gods’ hilarity at leaving behind the human episode.

What we need is an alternate vision, when that of the Last

Judgment no longer satisfies anyone.

§

An idea, a being, anything which becomes incarnate loses

identity, turns grotesque. Frustration of all achievement. Never

quit the possible, wallow in eternal trifling, forget to be

bom.

The real, the unique misfortune: to see the light of day. A

disaster which dates back to aggressiveness, to the seed of

expansion and rage within origins, to the tendency to the worst

which first shook them up.

§

When we see someone again after many years, we should sit

down facing each other and say nothing for hours, so that by

means of silence our consternation can relish itself.

Days of miraculous sterility. Instead of rejoicing over them,

proclaiming victory, transforming this drought into a celebra¬

tion, seeing it as an illustration of my fulfillment, my maturity,

in short my detachment, I let myself be invaded by spite and

resentment: so tenacious is the old Adam in us, the bustling

canaiUe, unfit for self-effacement.

§

[ xo ]

I am enraptured by Hindu philosophy, whose essential endeavor

is to surmount the self; and everything I do, everything I think

is only myself and the seifs humiliations.

§

While we are performing an action, we have a goal; performed,

the action has no more reality for us than the goal we were

seeking. Nothing of much consequence here—no more than a

game. But some of us are conscious of this game in the course of

the action: we experience the conclusion in the premises, the

achieved in the virtual—^we undermine "seriousness” by the very

fact that we exist.

The vision of non-reality, of universal default, is the product

of an everyday sensation and a sudden frisson. Everything is a

game —^without such a revelation, the sensation we haul through

our usual lives would not have that characteristic stamp our

metaphysical experiences require to be distinguished from their

imitations, our discomforts. For every discomfort is only an

abortive metaphysical experience.

§

When we have worn out the interest we once took in death,

when we realize we have nothing more to gain from it, we fall

back on birth, we turn to a much more inexhaustible abyss.

§

At this very moment, I am suffering—^as we say in French, fai

mol. This event, crucial for me, is nonexistent, even inconceiva¬

ble for anyone else, for everyone else. Except for God, if that

word can have a meaning.

$

C ]

Wc hear on all sides, that if everything is pointless, to do well

whatever it is you’re doing is not. Yet it is, even so. To reach

this conclusion, and to endure it, you need ply no trade, or at

most, a king’s—say, Solomon’s.

$

I react like everyone else, even like those I most despise; but I

make up for it by deploring every action I commit, good or bad.

§

When are my sensations? They have melted into . . . me, and

what is this me, this self, but the sum of these evaporated

sensations?

Extraordmary and ««//—these two adjectives apply to the sexual

act, and, consequently, to everything resulting from it, to life first

of all.

Lucidity is the only vice which makes us free—free in a desert.

As the years pass, the number of those we can communicate with

diminishes. When there is no longer anyone to talk to, at last we

will be as we were before stooping to a name.

Once we reject lyricism, to blacken a page becomes an ordeal:

what’s the use of writing in order to say exactly what we had to

say?

[ ]

§

Wc cannot consent to be judged by someone who has suffered

less than ourselves. And since each of us regards himself as an

unrecognized Job . . .

§

I dream of an ideal confessor to tell everything to, spill it all: I

dream of a blase saint.

After all the ages of dying, the living must have learned the

trick; how else explain how the insect, the rodent, and man

himself have managed, after a little fuss, to do it so properly.?

Paradise was unendurable, otherwise the first man would have

adapted to it; this world is no less so, since here we regret

paradise or anticipate another one. What to do.? where to go.? Do

nothing and go nowhere, easy enough.

Health is certainly a good thing; but those who possess it have

been denied the opportunity of realizing it, for self-conscious

health is either compromised or about to be. Since no orle

delights in his absence of infirmities, we may speak without

exaggeration of a jmt punishment of the healthy.

s

Some have misfortunes; others, obsessions. Which are worse off?

s

[ ^3 ]

Don’t be fair to me: I can do without everything but the tonic of

injustice.

§

”A11 is suffering”—modernized, the Buddhist expression runs:

"All is nightmare.”

Thereby, nirvana, whose mission now is to end a much more

widespread torment, is no longer a recourse reserved to the few

but becomes as universal as nightmare itself.

§

What is that one crucifixion compared to the daily kind any

insomniac endures?

I was walking late one night along a tree-lined path; a chestnut

fell at my feet. The noise it made as it burst, the resonance it

provoked in me, and an upheaval out of all proportion to this

insignificant event thrust me into miracle, into the rapture of the

definitive, as if there were no more questions—only answers. I

was drunk on a thousand unexpected discoveries, none of which

I could make use of. . . .

This is how I nearly reached the Supreme. But instead I went

on with my walk.

We tell our troubles to someone only to make him suffer, to

make him assume them for himself. If we wanted to win him

over, we would admit none but abstract worries, the only kind

those who love us are eager to hear.

§

[ H }

I do not forgive myself for being bom. It is as if, creeping into

this world, I had profaned a mystery, betrayed some momentous

pledge, committed a fault of nameless gravity. Yet in a less

assured mood, birth seems a calamity I would be miserable not

having known.

§

Thought is never innocent, for it is pitiless, it is aggressive, it

helps us btirst our bonds. Were we to suppress what is evil and

even demonic in thought, we should have to renounce the very

concept of deliverance.

§

The surest way of not being deceived is to undermine one

certainty after the next. Yet the fact remains that everything that

matters was accomplished outside doubt.

For a long time—^always, in fact—I have known that life here on

earth is not what I needed and that I wasn’t able to deal with it;

for this reason and for this reason alone, I have acquired a touch

of spiritual pride, so that my existence seems to me the

degradation and the erosion of a psalm.

Our thoughts, in the pay of our panic, are oriented toward the

future, follow the trail of all fear, open out onto death. And we

invert their course, we send them backward when we direct them

toward birth and force them to linger upon it. Thereby they lose

even that vigor, that unappeasable tension which underlies the

horror of death and which is useful to our thoughts if they

[ ]

would grow, develop, gather force. Hence we see why, by taking

a contrary trajectory, they lack spirit and are so weary, when at

last they come up against their initial frontier, that they no

longer have the energy to look beyond, toward the "never-bom.”

§

It is not my beginnings, it is the beginning that matters to me. If

I bump into my birth, into a minor obsession, it is because I

cannot grapple with the first moment of time. Every individual

discomfort leads back, ultimately, to a cosmogonic discomfort,

each of our sensations expiating that crime of the primordial

sensation, by which Being crept out of somewhere. . . .

§

Though we may prefer ourselves to the universe, we nonethdess

loathe ourselves much more than we suspect. If the wise man is

so rare a phenomenon, it is because he seems unshaken by the

aversion which, like all beings, he must feel for himself

§

No difference between being and non-being, if we apprehend

them with the same intensity.

§

Nescience is the basis of everything, it creates everything by an

action repeated every moment, it produces this and any world,

since it continually takes for real what in fact is not. Nescience is

the tremendous mistake that serves as the basis of all our truths,

it is older and more powerful than all the gods combined.

§

[ .6 ]

This is how wc recognize the man who has tendencies toward an

inner quest: he will set failure above any success, he will even

seek it out, unconsciously of course. This is because failure,

always essential, reveals us to ourselves, permits us to see

ourselves as God secs us, whereas success distances us from what

is most inward in ourselves and indeed in everything.

§

There was a time when time did not yet exist. . . . The rejection

of birth is nothing but the nostalgia for this time before time.

§

I think of so many friends who are no more, and I pity them. Yet

they arc not so much to be pitied, for they have solved every

problem, beginning with the problem of death.

s

In the fact of being bom there is such an absence of necessity

that when you think about it a little more than usual, you are

left—ignorant how to reaa—with a foolish grin.

§

Two kinds of mind: daylight and nocturnal. They have neither

the same method nor the same morality. In broad daylight, you

watch yourself; in the dark, you speak out. The salutary or

awkward consequences of what he thinks matter little to the man

who questions himself at hours when others are the prey of

sleep. Hence he meditates upon the bad luck of being bom

without concern for the harm he can cause others or himself.

After midnight begins the intoxication of pernicious tmths.

s

[ n }

As the years accumulate, we form an increasingly somber image

of the future. Is this only to console ourselves for being excluded

ftom it? Yes in appearance, no in &ct, for the future has always

been hideous, man being able to remedy his evils only by

aggravating them, so that in each epoch existence is much more

tolerable before the solution is found to the difficulties of the

moment.

$

In major perplexities, try to live as if history were done with and

to react like a monster riddled by serenity.

If I used to ask myself, over a coffin; "What good did it do the

occupant to be bom?”, I now put the same question about

anyone alive.

$

The emphasis on birth is no more than the craving for the

insoluble carried to the point of insanity.

Regarding death, I ceaselessly waver between "mystery” and

"inconsequentiality”—between the Pyramids and the Morgue.

$

It is impossible to fiel that there was a time when we did not

exist. Hence our attachment to the personage we were before

being bom.

§

[ ]

"Meditate but one hour upon the seifs nonexistence and you

will feel yourself to be another man,” said a priest of the

Japanese Kusha sect to a Western visitor.

Without having frequented the Buddhist monasteries, how

many dmes have I not lingered over the world’s unreality, and

hence my own? I have not become another man for that, no, but

there certainly has remained with me the feeling that my identity

is entirely illusory, and that by losing it I have lost nothing,

except something, except everything.

Instead of clinging to the fact of being bom, as good sense bids, I

take the risk, I turn back, I retrogress increasingly toward some

unknown beginning, I move from origin to origia Some day,

perhaps, I shall manage to reach origin itself, in order to rest

there, or be wrecked.

X insults me. I am about to hit him. Thinking it over, I refrain.

Who am I? which is my real self: the self of the retort or that

of the refraining? My first reaaion is always energetic; the

second one, flabby. What is known as "wisdom” is ultimately

only a perpetual "thinking it over,” i.e., non-action as first

impulse.

If attachment is an evil, we must look for its cause in the scandal

of birth, for to be bom is to be attached. Detachment then

should apply itself to getting rid of the traces of this scandal, the

most serious and intolerable of all.

§

[ ^9 ]

Amid anxiety and distress, sudden calm at the thought of the

foetus one has been.

§

At this precise moment, no reproach proceeding from men or

gods can affect me: I have as good a conscience as if I had never

existed.

It is a mistake to believe in a direct relation between suffering

reverses and being dead set against birth. Such opposition has

deeper, more distant roots, and would occur even if one had only

the shadow of a grievance against existence. In feet it is never

more virulent than in cases of extreme good fortune.

§

Thracians and Bogomils—I cannot forget that I have haunted

the same whereabouts as they, nor that the former wept over the

newborn and the latter, in order to justify God, held Satan

responsible for the infamy of Creation.

§

During the long nights in the caves, how many Hamlets must

have murmured their endless monologues—for it is likely that

the apogee of metaphysical torment is to be located well before

that universal insipidity which followed the advent of Philoso¬

phy.

The obsession with birth proceeds from an exacerbation of

memory, from an omnipresence of the past, as well as from a

[ ao ]

craving for the impasse, for the first impasse. —^No openness,

hence no joy from the past but solely from the present, and from

a future emancipated from time.

$

For years, in fact for life, to have meditated only on your last

moments, only to discover, when at last you approach them, that

it was of no use, that the thought of death helps in everything

save in dying!

§

It is oxir discomforts which provoke, which create consciousness;

their task accomplished, they weaken and disappear one after the

other. Consciousness however remains and survives them,

without recalling what it owes to them, without even ever

having known. Hence it continually proclaims its autonomy, its

sovereignty, even when it loathes itself and would do away with

itself.

§

According to the Rule of Saint Benedict, if a monk became

proud of or merely satisfied with the task he was performing, he

was to forsake it then and there.

One danger not dreaded by the man who has lived in the

thirst for unsatisfaction, in an orgy of remorse and disgust.

§

If it is true that God dislikes taking sides, I should feel no

awkwardness in His presence, so pleased would I be to imitate

Him, to be like Him, in everything, "without opinion.”

§

[ ax }

To get up in the morning, wash and then wait for some

unforeseen variety of dread or depression.

I would give the whole universe and all of Shakespeare fix a

grain of ataraxy.

$

Nietzsche’s great luck—to have ended as he did: in euphoria!

Endlessly to refer to a world where nothing yet stooped to

occurrence, where you anticipated consciousness without desiring

it, where, wallowing in the virtual, you rejoiced in the null

plenitude of a self anterior to selfhood. . . .

Not to have been bom, merely musing on that—^what happiness,

what freedom, what space!

[ 22 ]

If disgust for the world conferred sanctity of itself, I fail to see

how I could avoid canonization.

§

No one has lived so close to his skeleton as I have lived to mine:

from which results an endless dialogue and certain truths which

I manage neither to accept nor to reject.

§

It is easier to get on with vices than with virtues. The vices,

accommodating by nature, help each other, are full of mutual

indulgence, whereas the jealous virtues combat and annihilate

each other, showing in everything their incompatibility and their

intolerance.

§

It is trifling to believe in what you do or in what others do. You

should avoid simulacra and even "realities”; you should take up a

position external to everything and everyone, drive off or grind

down your appetites, live, according to a Hindu adage, with as

few desires as a "solitary elephant.”

§ ‘

I forgive X everything because of his obsolete smile.

[ 2.5 ]

s

He who hates himself is not humble.

s

In certain men, everything, absolutely everything, derives from

physiology: their body is their mind, their mind is their body.

§

Time, fertile in resources, more inventive and more charitable

than we think, possesses a remarkable capacity to help us out, to

afford us at any hour of the day some new humiliation.

§

I have always sought out landscapes that preceded God. Whence

my weakness for Chaos.

§

I have decided not to oppose anyone ever again, since I have

noticed that I always end by resembling my latest enemy.

§

For a long while I have lived with the notion that I was the most

normal being that ever existed. This notion gave me the taste,

even the passion for being unproductive: what was the use of

being prized in a world inhabited by madmen, a world mired in

mania and stupidity? For whom was one to bother, and to what

end? It remains to be seen if I have quite freed myself from this

certitude, salvation in the absolute, ruin in the immediate.

§

C -6 }

Violent men are generally sickly, "broken-down.” They live in

perpetual combustion, at the expense of their bodies, exactly like

ascetics, who in the discipline of quietude erode and exhaust

themselves, quite as much as the furious.

Write books only if you are going to say in them the things you

would never dare confide to anyone.

When Mara, the Tempter, tries to supplant the Buddha, the

latter says, among other things: "By what right do you claim to

rule over men and over the universe? Have you suffered for

knowledge?”

This is the crucial, perhaps the sole question we should ask

ourselves when we scrutinize anything, especially a thinker.

There is never too great a distinction made between those who

have paid for the tiniest step toward knowledge and those,

incomparably more numerous, who have received a convenient,

indifferent knowledge, a knowledge without ordeals.

We say: he has no talent, only tone. But tone is precisely what

cannot be invented—we’re bom with it. Tone is an inherited

grace, the privilege some of us have of making our organic

pulsations felt—tone is more than talent, it is its essence.

s

The same feeling of not belonging, of futility, wherever I go: I

pretend interest in what matters nothing to me, I bestir myself

i ^7 ]

mechanically or out of charity, without ever being caught up,

without ever being somewhere. What attracts me is elsewhere,

and I don’t know what that elsewhere is.

§

The ferther men get from God, the farther they advance into the

knowledge of religions.

§

"For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your

eyes shall be opened. . . .”

No sooner are they open than the drama begins. To look

without undentaruUng —that is paradise. Hell, then, would be the

place where we understand, where we understand too

much. . . .

5

I get along quite well with someone only when he is at his

lowest point and has neither the desire nor the strength to

restore his habitual illusions.

Pitilessly judging our contemporaries, we have every likelihood

of figuring, in the eyes of posterity, as penetrating minds. At one

stroke we renoimce the risky aspect of admiration, the marvelous

perils it supposes. For admiration is a risk, the most unforesee¬

able of all because it may happen to turn out well.

§

Ideas come as you walk, Nietzsche said. Walking dissipates

thoughts, Shankara taught.

[ ]

Both theses are equally well-founded, hence equally true, as

each of us can discover for himself in the space of an hour,

sometimes of a minute. . . .

§

No variety of literary originality is still possible unless we

torture, unless we pulverize language. It proceeds differently if

we abide by the expression of the idea as such. Here we find

ourselves in an area where requirements have not altered since

the pre-Socratics.

§

If only we could reach back before the concept, could write on a

level with the senses, record the infinitesimal variations of what

we touch, do what a reptile would do if it were to set about

writing!

Anything good we can have comes from our indolence, from our

incapability of taking action, executing our projeas and plans. It

is the impossibility or the refusal of self-realization which

sustains our 'Virtues,” and it is the will to do our utmost that

carries us to excesses, to disorders.

\_ t

That "glorious delirium” Saint Teresa of Avila speaks of,

invoking one of the phases of her union with God, is what a

desiccated mind, necessarily jealous, will never forgive the

mystics.

§

[ ^9 ]

Not one moment when I have not been conscious of being

outside Paradise.

§

Only what you hide is profound, is true. Whence the power of

base feelings.

Ama nesdri, says the Imitation of Christ. Love to be unknown. We

are happy with ourselves and with the world only when we

conform to this precept.

s

The intrinsic value of a book does not depend on the importance

of its subject (else the theologians would prevail, and mightily),

but on the manner of approaching the accidental and the

insignificant, of mastering the infinitesimal. The Ksential has

never required the least talent.

§

The feeling of being ten thousand years behind, or ahead, of the

others, of belonging to the beginnings or to the end of

humanity . . .

§

Negation never proceeds from reasoning but from something

much more obscure and old. Arguments come afterward, to

justify and sustain it. Every no rises out of the blood.

$

[ 30 ]

With the help of the erosion of memory, to mail the first

initiatives of matter and the risk of life which followed from

them . . .

§

Each time I fiul to think about death, I have the impression of

cheating, of deceiving someone in me.

There are nights that the most ingenious torturers could not

have invented. We emerge from them in pieces, stupid, dazed,

with neither memories nor anticipations, and without even

knowing who we are. And it is then that the day seems useless,

light pernicious, even more oppressive than the darkness.

§

A conscious fruit fly would have to confront exaedy the same

difliculties, the same kind of insoluble problems as man.

§

Better to be an animal than a man, an insect than an animal, a

plant than an insect, and so on.

Salvation.^ Whatever diminishes the kingdom of conscious¬

ness and compromises its supremacy.

s

I have all the defeas of other people and yet everything they do

seems to me inconceivable.

§

[ 3^ }

G)nsidering things according to nature, man was made to live

facing outward. If he would see into himself, he must close his

eyes, renounce his endeavors, quit the immediate. What is called

"inner life” is a belated phenomenon, possible only by a slowing

down of our vital activities, "the soul” being able to emerge and

elaborate itself only at the expense of the good behavior of our

organs.

§

The merest atmospheric variation jeopardizes my plans, not to

speak of my conviaions. This kind of dependency—the most

humiliating kind—^unfeilingly lays me low, even as it dissipates

what few illusions remain as to my possibilities of being free and

as to freedom itself What is the use of swaggering if you are at

the mercy of Wet and Dry? One craves a less lamentable

bondage, and gods of another kidney.

§

It’s not worth the bother of killing yourself, since you always kill

yourself too late.

§

When you know quite absolutely that everything is unreal, you

then cannot see why you should take the trouble to prove it.

§

As it leaves dawn behind and advances into the day, light

prostitutes itself and is redeemed—ethics of twilight—only at the

moment it vanishes.

§

C 3- ]

In Buddhist writings, mention is often made of ”the abyss of

birth.” An abyss indeed, a gulf into which we do not fall but

from which, instead, we emerge, to our universal chagrin.

§

At increasingly wider intervals, impulses of gratitude toward Job

and Chamfbrt—toward vociferation and vitriol . . .

Each opinion, each view is necessarily partial, truncated,

inadequate. In philosophy and in an^ahing, originality comes

down to incomplete definitions.

§

If we consider closely our so-called generous aaions, there is

none which, from some aspect, is not blameworthy and even

harmful, so that we come to regret having performed it—^so that

we must choose, finally, between abstention and remorse.

s

Explosive force of any mortification. Every vanquished desire

affords us power. We have the more hold over this world the

further we withdraw from it, the less we adhere to it.

Renunciation confers an infinite power.

My disappointments, instead of converging toward a center and

constituting if not a system at least an ensemble, are scattered,

each supposing itself unique and thereby wasted, lacking

organization.

§

C 33 }

The only successful philosophies and religions are the ones that

flatter us, whether in the name of progress or of hell. Damned or

not, man experiences an absolute need to be at the heart of

everything. It is, in fact, solely for this reason that he is man,

that he has become man. And if some day he no longer feels this

need, he must give way to some other animal prouder, madder

than himself

He detested objeaive truths, the burden of argument, sustained

reasoning. He disliked demonstrating, he wanted to convince no

one. Others are a dialectician’s invention.

The more injured you are by time, the more you seek to escape

it. To write a faultless page, or only a sentence, raises you above

becoming and its corruptions. You transcend death by the

pursuit of the indestructible in speech, in the very symbol of

nullity.

At the climax of a failure, at the moment when shame is about

to do us in, suddenly we are swept away by a fren 2 y of pride

which lasts only long enough to drain us, to leave us without

energy, to lower, with our powers, the intensity of our shame.

§

If death is as horrible as is claimed, how is it that after the

passage of a certain period of time we consider happy any being,

friend or enemy, who has ceased to live?

§

[ 34 ]

More than once, I have managed to leave my room, for if I had

stayed there I coiild not be sure of being able to resist some

sudden resolution. The street is more reassuring, you think less

about yourself there, there everything weakens and wilts,

beginning with your own confosioa

Qiaracterisdc of sickness to stay awake when everything sleeps,

when everything is at rest, even the sick man.

§

When we are young, we take a certain pleasure in our infirmities.

They seem so new, so rich! With age, they no longer surprise us,

we know them too well. Now, without anything unexpeaed in

them, they do not deserve to be endured.

§

Once we appeal to our most intimate selves, once we begin to

labor and to produce, we lay claim to gifts, we become uncon¬

scious of our own gaps. No one is in a position to admit that what

comes out of his own depths might be worthless. "Self-knowl¬

edge”? A contradiction in terms.

All these poems where it is merely the Poem that is in

question—a whole poetry with no other substance than itself.

What would we say of a prayer whose object was religion.^

The mind that puts everything in question teaches, after a

thousand interrogations, an almost total inertia, a situation which

i33 }

the inert, in faa, knows from the start, by instinct. For what is

inertia but a congenital perplexity?

§

What a disappointment that Epicurus, the sage I most need,

should have written over three hundred treatises! And what a

relief that they are lost!

”What do you do from morning to night.?”

"I endure myself.”

A remark of my brother’s apropos of the troubles and pains our

mother endured: "Old age is nature’s self-criticism.”

§

"One must be mad or drunk,” the Abbe Siey« said, to speak

well in the known languages. One must be drunk or mad, I

should add, to date, still, to use words, any word. . . .

$

The frnatic of elliptical gloom is sure to excel in any career save

that of being a writer.

§

Having always lived in fear of being surprised by the worst, I

have tried in every circumstance to get a head start, flinging

myself into misfortune long before it occurred.

s

C 36 }

We do not envy those who have the capacity to pray, whereas

we are filled with envy of the possessors of goods, of those who

know wealth and fame. Strange that we resign ourselves to

someone’s salvation and not to what fugitive advantages he may

enjoy.

§

I never met one interesting mind that was not richly endowed

with inadmissible deficiencies.

No true art without a strong dose of banality. The con¬

stant employment of the unaccustomed readily wearies us,

nothing being more unendurable than the uniformity of the

exceptional.

The trouble with using a borrowed language is that you have no

right to make too many mistakes in it. Now, it is by seeking a

certain incorrectness without however abusing it, it is by

continually approaching solecism, that writing may be given the

appearance of life.

Each of us believes, quite unconsciously of course, that he alone

pursues the truth, which the rest arc incapable of seeking out and

unworthy of attaining. This madness is so deep-rooted and so

useful that it is impossible to realize what would become of each

of us if it were someday to disappear.

§

[37 ]

The first thinker was, without a doubt, the first man obsessed by

why. An unaccustomed mania, not at all contagious: rare indeed

are those who suffer from it, who are a prey to questioning, and

who can accept no given because they were bom in consternation.

§

To be objective is to treat others as you treat an object, a

corpse—to behave with them like an undertaker.

s

This very second has vanished forever, lost in the anonymous

mass of the irrevocable. It will never return. I suffer from this,

and I do not. Everything is unique—^and insignificant.

s

Emily Bronte: everything that comes from her has the capacity to

overwhelm me. Haworth is my Mecca.

To walk along a stream, to pass, to flow with the water, without

eflfort, without haste, while death continues in us its ruminations,

its unintermpted soliloquy . . .

Only God has the privilege of abandoning us. Men can only

drop us.

§

Without the fiiculty of forgetting, our past would weigh so

heavily on our present that we should not have the strength to

[ ]

confront another moment, still less to live through it. Life would

be bearable only to frivolous natures, those in faa who do not

remember.

s

Plotinus, Porphyry tells us, had the gift of reading men’s souls.

One day, without any warning, he told his astounded disciple not

to try killing himself but rather to take a journey. Porphyry left

for Sicily: there he was cured of his melancholy but, he adds

regretfully, he thereby missed being present at his master’s death,

which occurred during his absence.

It has been a long time since philosophers have read men’s

souls. It is not their task, we arc told. Perhaps. But we must not

be surprised if they no longer matter much to us.

§

A work exists only if it is elaborated in the darkness with

attention, with all the care of the murderer plotting his crime. In

both cases, what counts is the will to strike.

Self-knowledge—the bitterest knowledge of all and also the kind

we cultivate least: what is the use of catching ourselves out,

morning to night, in the act of illusion, pitilessly tracing each act

back to its root, and losing case after case before our own

tribunal?

s

Each time I have a lapse of memory, I think of the anguish

which must afflict those who know they no longer remember

139 }

anything. But something tells me that after a certain time a

secret joy possesses them, a joy they would not agree to trade for

any of their memories, even the most stirring. . . .

To claim you are more detached, more alien to everything than

anyone, and to be merely a fanatic of indifference!

The more you are a victim of contradictory impulses, the less you

know which to yield to. To lack character —precisely that and

nothing but.

s

Pure time, time decanted, freed of events, beings, and things,

appears only at certain moments of the night, when you feel it

coming on, with the one intention of sweeping you off toward an

exemplary caustrophe.

[ 40 }

Suddenly feeling that you know as much as God about anything

and everything and quite as suddenly seeing this sensation

vanish . . .

§

Firsthand thinkers meditate upon things; the others upon

problems. We must live face to face with being, and not with the

mind.

§

"What are you waiting for in order to give up?” —Each sickness

sends us a summons disguised as a question. We play deaf, even

as we realize that the game is played out and that next time we

must have the courage, at last, to capitulate.

The older I grow, the less I react to frenzy, delirium. My taste,

among thinkers, now goes only to extinct volcanoes.

$

As a young man, I bored myself to death, but I beli^ed in

myself. If I had no suspicion of the dreary creature I was to

become, I knew nonetheless that, whatever happened. Perplexity

[ 43 ]

would not desert me, that it would keep watch over my years

with all the real and exactitude of Providence.

§

If we could see ourselves as others see us, we would vanish on

the spot.

§

I once remarked to an Italian friend that the Latin peoples are

without secrecy —too open, too garrulous—and that I preferred

nations ravaged by timidity, adding that a writer who has failed

to know it in his life is worthless in his writings. "You’re right,”

he answered. "When we describe our experiences in our books,

there is a lack of intensity, and of extension, for we have already

told them a hundred times before.” Whereupon we talked about

the literanire of femininity, of its absence of mystery in countries

where the salon and the confessional prevail.

§

We should never deprive ourselves, I forget who once remarked,

of the "pleasures of piety.” Has religion ever been justified more

delicately?

§

This craving to revise our enthusiasms, to change idols, to pray

elsewhere . . .

$

To stretch out in a field, to smell the earth and tell yourself it is

the end as well as the hope of our dejections, that it would be

futile to search for anything better to rest on, to dissolve

into. . . .

When I happen to be busy, I never give a nwment’s thought to

the "meaning” of anything, particularly of whatever it is I am

doing. A proof that the secret of everything is in action and not

in abstention, that &tal cause of consciousness.

What will be the physiognomy of painting, of poetry, of music,

in a hundred years? No one can teE As after the fall of Athens,

of Rome, a long pause will intervene, caused by the exhaustion

of the means of expression, as well as by the exhaustion of

consciousness itself. Humanity, to rejoin the past, mtist invent a

second naivete, without which the arts can never begin again.

In one of the chapels of this ideally ugly church, we find the

Virgin standing with her Son above the gbbe: an aggressive sect

which has imdermined and conquered an empire and inherited

its flaws, beginning with gigantism.

$

It is written in the Zohar "When man appeared, thereupon

appeared the flowers.” I suspert they were there long before him,

and that his advent plunged them all into a stupefaction from

which they have not yet recovered.

§

[ 4JJ ]

Impossible to read a line by Kleist without thinking that he

committed suicide: as if his suicide had preceded his works.

In the Orient, the oddest, the most idiosyncratic Western

thinkers would never have been taken seriously, on account of

their contradictions. This is precisely why we are interested in

them. We prefer not a mind but the reversals, the bio^aphy of a

mind, the incompatibilities and aberrations to be found there, in

short those thinkers who, unable to conform to the rest of

humanity and still less to themselves, cheat as much by whim as

by &tality. Their distinctive sign.^ A touch of fakery in the tragic,

a hint of dalliance even in the irremediable.

§

If, in her Foundations, Teresa of Avila lingers over the subject of

mebncholia, it is because she recognizes it as incurable.

Physicians, she says, cannot deal with it, and the mother superior

of a convent, faced with such sufferers, has but one recourse: to

inspire them with the dread of authority, to threaten them, to

frighten them. The saint’s method remains the best: only kicks,

slaps, and a good beating will be effective in the case of a

"depressive.” Moreover, such treatment is precisely what the

"depressive” himself resorts to when he decides to end it all: he

merely employs more thorough means.

In relation to any act of life, the mind acts as a killjoy.

§

[ 46 }

Easy to imagine the elements, bored with their exhausted theme,

disgusted by their invariable and utterly predictable combina¬

tions, seeking some diversion: life would be merely a digression,

merely an anecdote. . . .

s

Anything that can be done seems to me pernicious and at best

futile. If need be I can rouse myself but not act. I understand all

too well Wordsworth’s description of Ojleridge: eternal activity

without action.

Whenever something still seems possible, I have the sense I

have been bewitched.

§

The one sincere confession is the one we make indirectly—when

we talk about other people.

§

We do not adopt a belief because it is true (they are all true), but

because some obscure power impels us to do so. When this

power leaves us, we suffer prostration and collapse, a tete-a-tete

with what is left of ourselves.

5

'The quality of every perfect form is to release the mind

immediately, whereas the corrupt form holds the mind prisoner,

like a bad mirror which tells us of nothing but itself.” In Kleist’s

praise—and how un-German it sounds—of limpidity, his target

[ 47 ]

was not philosophy in particular. Yet his is the best possible

critique of philosophical jargon, a pseudo-language which,

attempting to reflea ideas, merely assumes a contour at their

expense, merely denatures and darkens them, merely calls

attention to itself. By one of the most troublesome of all

usurpations, the word has taken the leading role in a realm

where it should be imperceptible.

s

\*'0 Satan, my Master, I give myself unto thee forever!” How I

regra not remembering the name of the nun who, having

written these words with a nail dipped in her own blood,

deserves to figure in an anthology of prayer and concision.

Consciousness is much more than the thorn, it is the dagger in

the flesh.

$

Ferocity occurs in all conditions save in joy. Schadenfreude,

malicious joy, is a misrepresentation. To do evil is a pleasure, not

a joy. Joy, the one true victory over the world, is pure in its

essence, hence irreducible to pleasure, which is always suspect,

both in itself and in its manifestations.

An existence constantly transfigured by failure.

The wise man consents to everything, for he identifies himself

with nothing. An opportunist without daires.

i 4S }

s

Nature’s great mistake was to have been unable to confine

herself to one "kingdom”: juxtaposed with the vegetable,

everything else seems inopportune, out of place. The sun should

have sulked at the appearance of the first insect, and gone out

altogether with the advent of the chimpanzee.

If, as we grow older, we scrutinize our own past at the expense of

"problems,” it is simply because we handle memories more

readily than ideas.

The last whose disloyalty we forgive are those we have

disappointed.

§

What other people do we always feel we could do better.

Unfortunately we do not have the same feeling about what we

ourselves do.

"I was the Prophet,” Mohammed informs us, "when Adam was

still between the water and the clay.” . . . When we have not

had the pride to found a religion—or at least to destroy

one—how do we dare show ourselves in the light of day?

§

Detachment cannot be learned: it is inscribed in a civilization.

We do not tend toward it, we discover it in ourselves. I was

[ 49 }

thinking this when I read that a missionary, after eighteen years

in Japan, had made only sixty converts, and old ones at that.

Moreover they escaped him at the last moment, dying in

Japanese fashion, without remorse, without torments, worthy

descendants of their ancestors who, to inure themselves, in the

days of the Mongol wars, let themselves be impregnated by the

nothingness of all things and by their own nothingness.

We can meditate upon eternity only in a prone positioa For a

considerable period, eternity was the Orientals’ principal con¬

cern: did they not prefer the horizontal position? Once we lie

down, time ceases to pass, to count. History is the product of a

race that staruis. As a vertical animal, man was to get into the

habit of looking ahead, not only in space but in time as well. To

which wretched origins we may trace the Future!

s

Every misanthrope, however sincere, at times reminds me of that

old poet, bedridden and utterly forgotten, who in a rage with his

contemporaries declared he would receive none of them. His

wife, out of charity, would ring at the door from time to

time. ...

A work is finished when we can no longer improve it, though we

know it to be inadequate and incomplete. We are so overtaxed

by it that we no longer have the power to add a single comma,

however indispensable. What determines the degree to which a

work is done is not a requirement of art or of truth, it is

exhaustion and, even more, disgust.

[ J50 ]

§

Whereas any sentence one has to write requires a pretense of

invention, it takes little enough attention to enter into a text,

even a difficult one. To scribble a postcard comes closer to

creative activity than to read The Phenomenology of Mind.

Buddhism calls anger "corruption of the mind,” manicheism

"root of the tree of death.” I know this, but what good does it do

me to know?

She meant absolutely nothing to me. Realizing, suddenly, after

so many years, that whatever happens I shall never see her again,

I nearly collapsed. We understand what death is only by

suddenly remembering the hce of someone who has been a

matter of indifference to us.

As art sinks into paralysis, artists multiply. This anomaly ceases

to be one if we realize that art, on its way to exhaustion, has

become both impossible and easy.

§

No one is responsible for what he is nor even for what he does.

This is obvious and everyone more or less agrees that it is so.

Then why celebrate or denigrate? Because to exist is to evaluate,

to emit judgments, and because abstention, when it is not the

effect of apathy or cowardice, requires an effort no one manages

to make.

iy }

§

Every form of haste, even toward the good, betrays some mental

disorder.

§

The least impure thoughts are those which apjjear between our

anxieties, in the intervals of our annoyance, in those deluxe

moments our misery grants itself.

§

Imaginary pains are by far the most real we suffer, since we feel a

constant need for them and invent them because there is no way

of doing without them.

§

If it is charaaeristic of the wise man to do nothing useless, no

one will surpass me in wisdom: I do not even lower myself to

useful things.

§

Impossible to imagine a degraded animal, a sub-aninul.

§

O to have been bom before man!

§

Try as I will, I cannot manage to scorn all those centuries during

which men busied themselves with nothing more than perfect¬

ing a definition of God.

§

[ }

The most effective way to avoid dejection, motivated or

gratuitous, is to take a dictionary, preferably of a language you

scarcely know, and to look up word after word in it, making sure

that they are the kind you will never use. , . .

$

As long as you live on this side of the terrible, you will find

words to express it; once you know it from inside, you will no

longer find a single one.

§

There is no limit-disappointment.

§

Grievances of every kind pass, but their source abides, and

nothing has any effect on it: unassailable and unvarying, it is our

fatum.

§

To realize, in rage and desolation alike, that nature, as Bos-

suet says, will not long grant us "this morsel of matter she

lends .”—This monel of matter: by dint of pondering it we

teach peace, though a peace it would be better never to have

known.

Paradox is not suited to burials, nor to weddings or births, in

fiict. Sinister—or grotesque—events require commonplaces; the

terrible, like the painful, accommodates only the cliche.

s

[ J53 ]

However disabused one may be, it is impossible to live without

any hope at all. We always keep one, unwittingly, and this

unconscious hope makes up for all the explicit others we have

rejected, exhausted.

§

The more laden he is with years, the more readily he speaks of

his death as a distant, quite unlikely event. Life is now such a

habit that he has become unfit for death.

§

A blind man, authentically blind for once, held out his hand: in

his posture, his rigidity, there was something that caught you,

that made you hold your breath. He was handing you his

blindness.

§

We forgive only madmen and children for being frank with us:

others, if they have the audacity to imitate them, will regret it

sooner or later.

§

To be "happy” you must constantly bear in mind the miseries

you have escaped. This would be a way for memory to redeem

itself, since ordinarily it preserves only disasters, eager—^and with

what success!—to sabotage happiness.

s

After a sleepless night, the people in the street seem automatons.

No one seems to breathe, to walk. Each looks as if he is worked

by clockwork: nothing spontaneous; mechanical smiles, spectral

[ 34 ]

gesticulations. Yourself a specter, how would you see others as

alive.^

§

To be sterile—with so many sensations! Perpetual poetry

without words.

Pure fatigue—fatigue without cause, the kind that comes like a

gift or a scourge: that is what helps me pull myself together, that

is what affords me knowledge of my ’’self.” Once it leaves me, I

am no more than an inanimate object.

§

Anything in folklore that remains alive comes from before

Christianity. —The same is true of whatever is alive in each of

us.

§

A man who fears ridicule will never go far, for good or ill: he

remains on this side of his talents, and even if he has genius, he

is doomed to mediocrity.

"Amid your most intense activities, pause a moment to 'consider’

your mind”—this advice is surely not offered to those who

"consider” their minds night and day, and who thereby have no

need to suspend their activities, for the good reason that they

engage in none.

§

[ J5J5 }

Only what has been conceived in solitude, face to face with God,

endures—^whether one is a believer or not.

§

A passion for music is in itself an avowal. We know more about

a stranger who yields himself up to it than about someone who

is deaf to music and whom we sec every day.

$

No meditation without a tendency to repetitiveness.

§

As long as God had him in tow, man advanced slowly, so slowly

he did not even realize it. Now that he no longer lives in

anyone’s shadow, he is in a rush, and deplores it—he would give

anything to regain the old cadence.

§

We have lost, being bom, as much as we shall lose, dying.

Everything.

Satiety —have just now uttered this word, and already I no

longer know apropos of what, so readily does it apply to

everything I feel and think, to everything I love and loathe, to

satiety itself.

5

I have killed no one, I have done better: I have killed the

Possible, and like Macbeth, what I need most is to pray, but like

him too, I cannot say Amen.

C }

4

To deliver blows none of which land, to attack everyone without

anyone’s noticing, to shoot arrows whose poison you alone

receive!

X, whom I have always treated as badly as I could, does not

resent me because he resents no one. He forgives every insult, he

even forgets them. How I envy him! To be like him, I should

have to live through several existences and exhaust all my

possibilities of transmigration.

In the days when I set oflf on month-long bicycle trips across

France, my greatest pleasure was to stop in country cemeteries, to

stretch out between two graves, and to smoke for hours on end. I

think of those days as the most active period of my life.

How can you control yourself, master your behavior, when you

come ftom a coimtry where people howl at funerals?

On certain mornings, no sooner have I stepped out the door than

I hear voices calling my name. Am I really me? Is it really my

name? It is, it fills all space, it is on the lips of every passerby.

Each pronounces it, even that woman in the next telephone

booth, at the post office.

Sleepless nights devour the last vestiges of our common sense,

our modesty, and would rob us of our reason, if the fear of

ridicule didn’t come to save us.

§

My curiosity and my repulsion, as well as my terror under his

oily, metallic gaze, his obsequiousness, his unvarnished cunning,

his strangely unveiled hypocrisy, his continual and obvious

dissimulations, that mixture of scoundrel and madman . . . His

insincerity is evident in each gesture, in every word. Insincerity

isn’t the right word, for to be insincere is to conceal the truth,

and to know the truth, but in him there is no trace, no notion,

no atom of truth, nor of lying either, nothing but a loathesome

covetousness, a calculating lunacy. . . .

§

Around midnight, a woman in tears comes up to me in the

street: "They’ve knifed my husband, France is disgusting, luckily

I’m from Brittany, they took away my children, they kept me on

drugs for six months. . . .’’ Not having realized at first that she

was mad, so real her agony seemed (and in a sense was), I let her

chatter on for a good half hour; talking did her good. Then I

abandoned her, telling myself that the difference between us

would be infinitesimal if I began to pour out my recriminations

to the first comer.

$

[ 6o }

A profi»sor in an Eastern European country tells me that his

mother, a peasant woman, was astonished to find out he was

suffering from insomnia. When sleep didn’t come, all she had to

do was imagine a huge wheatfield swaying in the wind and she

fell asleep at once.

With the image of a city, one would not arrive at the same

result. It is inexplicable and miraculous that any city-dweller ever

manages to close an eye.

The little tavern is frequented by the old men who live in the

home at the end of the village. They come here, sitting with a

glass in one hand, staring at each other without a word. One of

them begins telling something he thinks is funny. No one

listens, in any case no one laughs. All of them have drudged for

years to get here. In the old days, in the countryside, someone

would have smothered them under a pillow. A wise recipe,

perfeaed by each family, and incomparably more humane than

this one: gathering them together, sitting them here and curing

them of boredom by stupor.

§

According to the Bible, it is Cain who created the first city, in

order to have, as Bossuet puts it, a place wherein to elude his

remorse. What a judgment! And how many times have I not felt

its accuracy in my night walks through Paris!

§

One night, climbing the stairs in the dark, I was halted by an

invincible force rising from both within and without. Unable to

c 6i ]

take another step, I stood there nailed to the spot, petrified.

IMPOSSIBILITY —this ordinary word came, more apropos than

usual, to enlighten me as to myself, no less than as to the word

as well: it had so often come to my aid, yet never as now. At last

I understood, definitively, what it meant. . . .

§

An ancient cleaning woman, in answer to my "How’s everything

going?” answers without looking up: "Taking its course.” This

ultra-banal answer nearly brings me to tears.

The more such turns of speech, which deal with becoming,

with the passage of time, with the course of things, are worn

down, the more likely they are to acquire the quality of a

revelation. But the truth is not that they create an exceptional

state, only that you yourself were in that state without realizing

it, and that it required only a sign or a pretext for the

extraordinary to occur.

§

We lived in the country, I went to school, and—^an important

detail—I slept in my parents’ room. At night it was my father’s

habit to read aloud to my mother. Though he was a Greek

Orthodox priest, he would read anything, doubtless assuming

that at my age I wouldn’t understand. Usually I didn’t even listen

and fell asleep, unless the text was some gripping story. One

night I pricked up my ears. He was reading the scene from a

biography of Rasputin where the father, on his deathbed, calls

his son to him and says: "Go to Saint Petersburg and make

yourself master of the city, fear nothing and no oat, for God is an

old hog.”

Such an enormity in my fiither’s mouth, for whom the

C 6. }

priesthood was not a joke, impressed me as much as a

conflagration or an earthquake. But I also distinctly recall—this

was over fifty years ago—that my emotion was followed by a

strange, dare I say a perverse pleasure.

$

Having penetrated, in the course of years, quite deeply into two

or three religions, I have always retreated on the threshold of

"conversion,” lest I lie to myself. None of them was, in my eyes,

free enough to admit that vengeance is a need, the most intense

and profoimd of all, and that each man must satisfy it, if only in

words. If we stifle that need, we expose ourselves to serious

disturbances. More than one disorder—^perhaps all disorders—de¬

rive from a vengeance too long postponed. We must learn how

to explode! Any disease is healthier than the one provoked by a

hoarded rage.

s

Philosophy in the Morgue. "My nephew was obviously a failure.

If he had succeeded in making something of himself he would

have had a different ending than . . . this.” "You know,

Madame,” I replied to the monumental matron who had

addressed me, "whether one succeeds or not comes down to the

same thing.” "You’re right,” she said, after a few seconds’

thought. This unexpected acquiescence on the part of such a

woman moved me almost as much as the death of my friend.

Misfits ... It seems to me that their adventure, more than any

other, sheds a light on the future, that they alone allow us to

[63 }

glimpse and to decipher it, and that if we set their exploits aside

we utterly disqualify ourselves from describing the days to come.

§

"A pity,” you were saying, "that N has never produced

anything.”

"So what! He exists. If he had given birth to books, if he had

had the misfortune to ’realize’ himself, we wouldn’t have been

talking about him the last hour.” The advantage of being

someone is rarer than that of creating. To produce is easy; what

is difficult is to scorn the use of one’s gifts.

§

Filming a scene, there are countless takes of the same incident.

Someone watching in the street—obviously a provincial—can’t

get over it: "After this. I’ll never go to the movies again.”

One might reart similarly with regard to anything whose

underside one has seen, whose secret one has seized. Yet, by an

obnubilation which has something of the miraculous about it,

there are gynecologists who are attracted to their patients,

gravediggers who father children, incurables who lay plans,

skeptics who write. . . .

s

T, a rabbi’s son, complains that this age of unprecedented

persecutions has seen the birth of no original prayer capable of

being adopted by the community and uttered in the synagogues.

I assure him that he is mistaken to be distressed or alarmed by

the ftrt: the great disasters yield nothing on the literary or

religious level. Only the semi-misfortunes are fruitful, because

[64 }

they can be, because they are a point of departure, whereas too

perfect a hell is almost as sterile as paradise.

I was twenty. Everything was a burden. One day I collapsed on a

couch with an "I can’t take it any longer.” My mother, already

driven distracted by my sleepless nights, told me she had just had

a mass said for my "rest.” Not one but thirty thousand, I would

have liked to shout at her, thinking of the figure Charles V

inscribed in his will—^for a much longer rest, true enough.

I ran across him again, quite by chance, after twenty-five years.

Unchanged, intact, firesher than ever, he actually seems to have

retreated toward adolescence.

Where has he been hiding, and what has he done to escape

the action of the years, to avoid our wrinkles and grimaces.? And

how has he lived, if in feet he has lived at all.? Actually, a ghost.

He must have cheated, he has not performed his duty as a living

man, not played the game. A ghost, yes, and a gate-crasher. I

discern no sign of destruction on his countenance, none of those

marks which testify that one is a real being, an individual and

not an apparition. What can I say to him? I feel awkward,

embarrassed, even aftaid. So greatly are we upset by anyone vdio

escapes time, or merely deceives it.

D.C., who was writing his recollections of childhood in his

Rumanian village, having told his neighbor, a peasant named

Gsman, that he woxildn’t be left out, received a visit fix)m the

[6j5 ]

latter early the next day: "I know I’m a worthless man but all

the same I didn’t think I had hdlen so low as to be talked about

in a book.”

How superior the oral world was to ours! Beings (I should

say, peoples) live in the truth only as long as they have a honor

of the written. Once they catch the virus, they enter the

inauthentic, they lose their old superstitions to acquire a new

one, worse than all the others combined.

Incapable of getting up, nailed to my bed, I drift with the whims

of my memory, and I see myself wandering, as a child, in the

Carpathians. One day I stumbled on a dog whose master,

doubdess to be rid of it, had ded it to a tree; the animal was little

mote than a skeleton, so drained of life that it barely had the

strength to look at me, without being able to move. Yet it was

staruting, that dog. . . .

$

A stranger comes and tells me he has killed someone. He is not

wanted by the police because no one suspeas him. I am the only

one who knows he is the killer. What am I to do? I lack the

courage as well as the treachery (for he has entrusted me with a

secret—and what a secret!) to turn him in. I feel I am his

accomplice, and resign myself to being arrested and punished as

such. At the same dme, I tell myself this would be too

ridiculous. Perhaps I shall go and denotmce him all the same.

And so on, until I wake up.

The interminable is the specialty of the indecisive. They

cannot mark life out for their own, and sdll less their dreams, in

which they perpetuate their hesiudons, pusillanimides, scruples.

They are ideally qualified for nightmare.

[ 66 }

§

A film about wild animals: endless cnielty in evety latitude.

"Nature,” a torturer of genius, steeped in herself and her work,

exults with good reason: there is not a moment when what is

alive &ils to tremble, to make others tremble. Pity is a strange

luxury only the most perfidious and the fiercest creature could

invent, out of a need to pimish and torture itself—out of ferocity,

still.

§

On a poster which, at a church door, announces The Art of the

Fugue, someone has scrawled in huge letters: God is dead. This

apropos of the composer who testifies that God, in the event of

his decease, can revive precisely while we are listening to certain

cantatas, certain fugues!

We have spent a little over an hour together. He has used the

time to show off, and by dint of trying to say interesting things

about himself, has succeeded. If he had merely swaggered in

moderation, I should have found him a bore and left in a few

minutes. By exaggerating, by playing the peacock to perfection,

he has come close enough to wit to show some. The desire to

appear subtle does not destroy subtlety. A mental defective, if he

could feel the longing to astonish, would manage to deceive

us—would even catch up with intelligence.

§

X, who is older than the patriarchs, after inveighing, during a

long tete-a-tete, against this one and that, tells me: "The great

C 67 }

weakness of my life is that I’ve never hated anyone.” Our hatred

does not diminish with the years: in fact, it mounts. That of an

old man like X attains incredible proportions: now insensitive to

his former affections, he puts all his faculties at the service of his

rancors which, miraculously reinvigorated, will survive the

crumbling of his memory and even of his reason.

. . . The danger of frequenting the old is that when we find

them so far from detachment and so incapable of espousing it,

we arrogate to ourselves all the advantages they are supposed to

have and do not. And it is inevitable that our real or imaginary

advance upon them in matters of weariness or disgust should

incite to presumption.

§

Every family has its own philosophy. One of my cousins, who

died young, once wrote me: "It’s all the way it’s always been and

probably always will be until there’s nothing left any more.”

Whereas my mother ended the last note she ever sent me

with this testamentary sentence: "Whatever people try to do,

they’ll regret it sooner or later.”

Nor can I even boast of having acquired this vice of regret by

my own setbacks. It precedes me, it participates in the patrimony

of my tribe. What a legacy, such unfitness for illusion!

§

A few kilometers from the village where I was bom, there was a

hamlet, perched on a hill and inhabited solely by gypsies. In

1910 an amateur ethnologist visited the place, accompanied by a

photographer. He managed to collect the inhabitants, who

agreed to let their picture be taken, without knowing what that

meant. At the instant they were asked to hold still, an old

woman shrieked: "Watch out, they’re stealing our souls!”

[ 68 }

Whereupon they all flung themselves upon the two visitors, who

had the greatest difliculty making their escape.

These half-savage gypsies—what were they but India, their

land of origin which, under these circumstances, was speaking

through them?

In continual rebellion against my ancestry, I have spent my

whole life wanting to be something else: Spanish, Russian,

cannibal—anything, except what I was. It is an aberration to

want to be different from what you arc, to espouse in theory any

and every condition, except your own.

§

The day I read the list of nearly all the Sanskrit words that

designate the absolute, I realized that I had taken the wrong

path, the wrong country, the wrong idiom.

§

A friend, after I don’t know how many years of silence, writes

that she hasn’t much longer to live, and that she is preparing to

"enter the Unknown. . . .’’ The cliche gives me a start. I find it

hard to see what one might enter by death. Any affirmation, in

this realm, seems to me a delusion. Death is not a state, perhaps

not even a transition. Then what is it? And by what cliche, in my

turn, will I answer my friend?

I may change my opinion on the same subjea, the same event,

ten, twenty, thirty times in the course of a single day. And to

think that each time, like the worst impostor, I dare utter the

word "truth”!

C69]

$

Hale and hearty still, the woman dragged her husband after her,

a tall, hunched man, eyes staring; she dragged him as if he had

been the survivor of another age, an apoplectic and suppliant

diplodocus.

An hour later, a second encounter: a neatly dressed old

woman, extremely stooped, "advanced” toward me; her body

forming a perfect half-circle, she necessarily kept her eyes on the

ground, doubtless counting her unimaginable slow tiny foot¬

steps. It was as if she were learning how to walk, as if she were

afraid of not knowing how and where to place her feet in order

to move.

. . . Everything is good which brings me closer to Buddha.

Despite her white hair, she still paraded up and down her part of

the sidewalk, looking for customers. I would run into her often,

at three in the morning, and never felt like going home until I

had heard her tell a few anecdotes or exploits. I have forgotten

anecdotes and exploits alike, but not the readiness with which,

one night when I had begun storming against all the sleeping

"vermin” of Paris, she broke in with her forefinger pointing to

heaven and: "What about the vermin up there?'

"Everything is without basis, without substance,” and I never

repeat it to myself without feeling something like happiness.

Unfornmately there are so many moments when I ftdl to repeat

it to myself.

[ 70 ]

I read him for the shipwrecked feeling I get from anything he

writes. At first you follow, then you start going in circles, then

you ate caught up in a kind of mild unmenacing whirlpool, and

you tell yourself you’re sinking, and then you do sink. But you

don’t really drown—that would be too easy! You come back up

to the surface, you follow all over again, amazed to see he seems

to be saying something and to understand what it is, and then

you start going round and round again, and you sink once more.

. . . All of which is meant to be profound, and seems so. But

once you come to your senses you realize it’s only abstmse,

obscure, and that the distance between real profundity and the

willed kind is as great as between a revelation and a whim.

Anyone who gives himself up to writing believes—without

realizing the fact—that his work will survive the years, the ages,

time itself. ... If he felt, while he was at work on it, that it was

perishable, he would leave off where he was, he could never

finish. Activity and credulity are correlative terms.

§

"Laughter ceased, and after laughter smiles.” This apparently

naive remark by a biographer of Alexsandr Blok defines to

perfection the program of any and every downfall.

[ 73 }

$

No easy matter, to speak of God when one is neither a believer

nor an atheist: and it is undoubtedly the drama we all share,

theologians included—^no longer capable of being either one or

the other.

For a writer, progress toward detachment and deliverance is an

unprecedented disaster. He, more than anyone else, needs his

defects: if he triumphs over them, he is lost. He must be careful,

then, not to improve, for if he succeeds, he will regret it bitterly.

$

We must beware of whatever insights we have into ourselves.

Our self-knowledge annoys and |>aralyzes our daimon—^this is

where we should look for the reason Socrates wrote nothing.

§

What makes bad poets worse is that they read only poets (just as

bad philosophers read only philosophers), whereas they would

benefit much more from a book of botany or geology. We arc

enriched only by frequenting disciplines remote from our own.

This is true, of course, only for realms where the ego is rampant.

Tertullian tells us that in order to be cured, epileptics would go

"and greedily suck the blood of criminals slaughtered in the

arena.” If I were to heed my instinct, this would be the one type

of medication, no matter what the disease, which I would adopt.

§

[ 74 ]

What right have we to be annoyed by someone who calls us a

monster? The monster is unique by definition, and solitude, even

the solitude of infamy, supposes something positive, a pectiliar

election, but undeniably an election.

§

Two enemies—the same man divided.

%

"Never judge a man without putting yourself in his place.” This

old proverb makes all judgment impossible, for we judge

someone only because, in fact, we cannot put ourselves in his

place.

§

If you love your independence, you must lend yourself, in order

to protect it, to every turpitude; you must risk ignominy itself.

Nothing more abominable than the critic and, a fortiori, the

philosopher in each of us: if I were a poet, I should behave like

Dylan Thomas, who, when people would discuss his poems in

his presence, would drop to the floor in a fit of convulsions.

$

Anyone who bestirs himself commits one injustice after the next,

without a trace of remorse. Just bad humor. —Remorse is for

those who do nothing, who cannot act. It replaces action for

them, consoles them for their ineffectuality.

§

[ 7 ^ ]

Most of our troubles come from our first impulses. The slightest

enthusiasm costs more than a crime.

$

Since we remember clearly only our ordeals, it is ultimately the

sick, the persecuted, the victims in every realm who will have

lived to the best advantage. The others—the lucky ones—have a

life, of course, but not the memory of a life.

s

What a bore, someone who doesn’t deign to make an

impression. Vain people are almost always annoying, but they

make an effort, they take the trouble: they are bores who don’t

want to be bores, and we are grateful to them for that: we end by

enduring them, even by seeking them out. On the other hand,

we nim livid with fury in the presence of someone who pays no

attention whatever to the effect he makes. What are we to say to

him, and what are we to expect from him? Either keep some

vestiges of the monkey, or else stay home.

§

Not the fear of effort but the fear of success explains more than

one failure.

§

I’d like to pray with dagger-words. Unfortunately, if you pray at

all, you have to pray like everyone else. Wherein abides one of

the greatest difficulties of feith.

§

[ 7<5 ]

We dread the future only when we are not sure we can kill

ourselves when we want to.

s

Neither Bossuet, nor Malebranche, nor Fcnelon deigned to

mention the Pensees: apparently Pascal didn’t strike them as

sufficiently serious.

Fear is the antidote to boredom: die remedy must be stronger

than the disease.

If only I could reach the level of the man I would have liked to

be! But some power, increasing year by year, draws me down.

Even to get back up to my surface, I have to employ stratagems I

cannot think of without blushing.

s

There was a time when, in order to dispel any impulse of

vengeance once I had endured some affiront, I would imagine

myself quite still in my grave. And I calmed down at once. We

must not despise our corpse too much: it can be useful on

occasion.

s

Every thought derives from a thwarted sensation.

The only way to reach another person at any depth is to move

C 77 }

toward what is deepest in yourself. In other words, to take the

opposite path from the one followed by so<alled generous

minds.

§

If only I could say with that Hasidic rabbi: "The blessing of my

life is that I have never needed a thing before I possessed it!”

s

In permitting man, Nature has committed much mote than a

mistake in her calculations: a crime against herself

Fear creates comcioumesi —not natural fear but morbid fear.

Otherwise animals would have achieved a level of consciousness

higher than ours.

§

As orangutang in the strict sense of the word, man is old; as

historical orangutang, he is comparatively recent: a parvenu who

has not had time to learn how to behave in life.

s

After certain experiences, we should change names, since we

ourselves are no longer the same. Everything assumes another

aspect, starting with death. Which seems close and desirable; we

are reconciled to it, and we teach the point of calling it "man’s

best friend,” as Mozart docs in a letter to his dying father.

$

[ 78 }

Wc must suffer to the end, to the moment when we stop

believing in suffering.

§

"Truth remains hidden to the man filled with desire and hatred”

(Buddha). . . . Which is to say, to every man alive.

%

Won over by solitude, yet he remains in the world: a stylite

without a pillar.

§

"You were wrong to count on me.” Who can speak in such

terms? God and the Failure.

§

Everything we achieve, everything that comes out of us, aspires

to forget its origins, and succeeds only by opposing us. Hence

the negative sign that marks all our successes.

§

There is nothing to say about anything. So there can be no limit

to the number of books.

$

Failure, even repeated, always seems fresh; whereas success,

multiplied, loses all interest, all attraaion. It is not misfortume

but happiness—insolent happiness, it is true—which leads to

rancor and sarcasm.

$

[ 79 ]

"An enemy is as useful as a Buddha.” Exactly, for our enemy

watches over us, keeps us from letting ourselves go. By

indicating, by divulging our least weakness, he leads us straight

to our salvation, moves heaven and earth to keep us from being

unworthy of his image of us. Hence our gratitude to him should

be boundless.

We get a better hold of ourselves and of being when we have

reacted against negating, dissolving books—against their noxious

power. Fortifying books, actually, since they provoke the very

energy which denies them. The more poison they contain, the

more salutary their eflfcct, provided we read them against the

grain, as we should read any book, starting with the cate¬

chism.

The greatest favor we can do an author is to forbid him to work

during a certain period. Short-term tyrannies are necessary—^pro¬

hibitions which would suspend all intellectual activity. Uninter¬

rupted freedom of expression exposes! talent to a deadly danger,

forces it beyond its means and keeps it from stockpiling

sensations and experiences. Unlimited freedom is a crime against

the mind.

s

Self-pity is not so sterile as we suppose. Once we feel its mete

onset, we assume a thinker’s attitude, and come to think of it, we

come to think!

§

[ 8o ]

The stoic’s maxim, according to which we should submit

uncomplainingly to things which do not depend on ourselves,

takes into account only external misfortunes, which escape our

will. But how to accommodate ourselves to those which come

from ourselves? If we are the source of our ills, whom are we to

confront? Ourselves? We manage, luckily, to forget that we are

the guilty parties, and moreover existence is tolerable only if we

daily renew this lie, this act of oblivion.

§

All my life, I have lived with the feeling that I have been kept

from my true place. If the expression "metaphysical exile” had

no meaning, my existence alone would afford it one.

§

The more gifted a man is, the less progress he makes on the

spiritual level. Talent is an obstacle to the inner life.

5

To save the word "grandeur” from officialdom, we should use it

only apropos of insomnia or heresy.

§

In classical India, the sage and the saint were combined in one

and the same persoa To have any notion of such a success, we

must imagine, if we can, a fusion between resignation and

ecstasy, between a cold stoic and a disheveled mystic.

Being is suspect. Then what is to be said of "life,” which is its

deviation and stigma?

C 8x ]

When someone tells tis of an unfavorable opinion about

ourselves, instead of being distressed, we should think of all the

"evil” we have spoken of others, and realize that it is only justice

that as much should be said of ourselves. Ironically, no one is

more vulnerable, more susceptible, and less likely to acknowl¬

edge his own defects than the backbiter. Merely tell him about

the slightest reservation someone has made in his regard, and he

will lose countenance, lose his temper, and drown in his own

Seen from the outside, harmony reigns in every sect, clan, and

party; seen from the inside, discord. Conflicts in a monastery are

as frequent and as envenomed as in any society. Even when they

desert hell, men do so only to reconstruct it elsewhere.

The least conversion is experienced as an advance. Fortunately

there exist exceptions.

One of my favorites is that eighteenth-century Jewish sect in

which men went over to Christianity in order to debase

themselves; and another is that South American Indian who,

upon conversion, lamented that he must now become the prey of

worms instead of being eaten by his children, an honor he would

have enjoyed had he not abjured his tribe’s beliefs.

§

Only normal that man should no longer be interested in religion

but in religions, for only through them will he be in a position

to understand the many versions of his spiritual collapse.

C ]

s

When we recapitulate the stages of our career, it is humiliating

to realize that we have not had the disasters we deserved, the

ones we were entitled to expect.

§

In some men, the prospect of a more or less imminent end

excites energy, good or bad, and plunges them into a frenzy of

aaivity. Artless enough to try to perpetuate themselves by their

endeavor, by their work, they move heaven and earth to finish, to

conclude it: not a moment to lose.

The same perspective invites others to founder in what’s-the-

use, in a stagnant clear-sightedness, in the unimpeachable truths

of despond.

§

"My curse on the man who, in future editions of my works,

knowingly changes anything—a sentence, or only a word, a

syllable, »letter, a punctuation mark!” Is it the philosopher or

the writer in Schopenhauer who speaks this way.^ Both at once,

and this conjunction (when we think of the awful style of any

philosophical work) is extremely rare. It is not a Hegel who

would have uttered such a curse. Nor any other major

philosopher, except Plato.

s

Nothing more aggravating than a seamless, unremitting irony

which leaves you no time to breathe and still less to think;

which instead of being inconspicuous, occasional, is massive,

automatic, at the antipodes of its essentially delicate nature.

[ 83 ]

Which in any case is how it is used in Germany, a nation which,

having meditated upon it the most, is least capable of wielding

it.

Anxiety is not provoked: it tries to find a justification for itself,

and in order to do so seizes upon anything, the vilest pretexts, to

which it clings once it has invented them. A reality which

precedes its particular expressions, its varieties, anxiety provokes

itself, engenders itself, it is "infinite creation,” and as such is

more likely to suggest the workings of the divinity than those of

the psyche.

Automatic melancholy: an elegiac robot.

§

At a grave, the words: game, imposture, joke, dream, come to

mind. Impossible to think that existence is a serious phenome¬

non. Certainty of faking from the start, at bottom. Over the gate

of our cemeteries should be written: "Nothing Is Tragic.

Everything Is Unreal.”

$

I shall not soon forget the expression of horror on what was his

fiice, the dread, the extreme suffering, and the aggression. No, he

was not happy. Never have I seen a man so uncomfortable in his

coffin.

§

[ 84 ]

Look neither ahead nor behind, look into yourself, with neither

fear nor regret. No one descends into himself so long as he

remains a slave of the past or of the future.

§

Inelegant to reproach a man for his sterility, when that is his

postulate, his mode of achievement, his dream. . . .

§

Nights when we have slept are as if they had never been. The

only ones that remain in our memory are the ones when we

couldn’t close our eyes: night means sleepless night.

§

In order not to have to resolve them, I have turned all my

praaical difficulties into theoretical ones. Faced with the

Insoluble, I breathe at last. . . .

§

To a student who wanted to know where I stood with regard to

the author of Zarathustra, I replied that I had long since stopped

reading him. Why? "I find him too nahe. . . .”

I hold his enthusiasms, his fervors against him. He demol¬

ished so many idols only to replace them with others: a false

iconoclast, with adolescent aspeas and a certain virginity, a

certain innocence inherent in his solitary’s career. He observed

men only firom a distance. Had he come closer, he could have

neither conceived nor promulgated the superman, that preposter¬

ous, laughable, even grotesque chimera, a crotchet which could

occur only to a mind without time to age, to know the long

serene disgust of detachment.

[ }

Marcus Aurelius is much closer to me. Not a moment’s

hesitation between the lyricism of frenzy and the prose of

acceptance: I find more comfort, more hope even, in the weary

emperor than in the thundering prophet.

[ 86 ]

Appealing, that Hindu notion of entrusting our salvation to

someone else, to a chosen "saint,” and permitting him to pray in

our place, to do anything in order to save us. Selling our sotil to

God. . . .

"Does talent have any need of passions? Yes, of many

passions—repressed” (Joubert). Not one moralist we cannot

convert into a precursor of Freud.

s

It is always surprising to discover that the great mystics produced

so much, that they left so many treatises. Undoubtedly their

intention was to celebrate God and nothing else. This is true in

part, but only in part.

We do not create a body of work without attaching ourselves

to it, without subjugating ourselves to it. Writing is the least

ascetic of all actions.

When I lie awake far into the night, I am visited by my evil

genius, as Brutus was by his before the battle of Philippi.

§

[ ]

"Do I look like someone who has something to do here on

earth?” —That’s what I’d like to answer the busybodies who

inquire into my activities.

$

It has been said that a metaphor "must be able to be drawn.”

Whatever is original and lasting in literature for at least a

century contradicts this remark. For if anything has outlived its

usefulness it is "coherent” metaphor, one with explicit contours.

It is against such metaphor that poetry has unceasingly rebelled,

to the point where a dead poetry is a poetry afflicted with

coherence.

$

Listening to the weather report, I feel a strong response to the

words ''scattered rain.” Which certainly proves that poetry is in

ourselves and not in the expression, though scattered is an

adjective capable of setting up a certain vibration.

Once I formulate a doubt, or mote exactly, once I feel the need

to formulate a doubt, I experience a curious, disturbing

well-being. It would be far easier for me to live without a trace of

belief than without a trace of doubt. Devasting doubt, nour¬

ishing doubt!

§

There is no false sensation.

$

C 90 }

Withdraw into yourself, perceive there a silence as old as being,

even older. ...

§

If I detest man, I could not say with the same ease: I detest the

human being, for in spite of everything there is something more,

something enigmatic and engaging in that word being which

suggests qualities alien to the idea of man.

§

In the Dhammapada, it is suggested that, in order to achieve

deliverance, we must be rid of the double yoke of Good and Evil

That Good itself should be one of our fetters we are too

spiritually retarded to be able to admit And so we shall not be

delivered.

Everything turns on pain; the rest is accessory, even nonexistent,

for we remember only what hurts. Painful sensations being the

only real ones, it is virtually useless to experience others.

§

I believe with that madman Calvin that we are predestined to

salvation or damnation in our mother’s womb. We have already

lived our life before being bom.

s

A free man is one who has discerned the inanity of all points of

view; a liberated man is one who has drawn the consequences of

such discernment.

$

[ 9 ^ ]

No sanctity without an inclination to scandal. This is true not

only of saints; whoever manifests himself, in any way at all,

proves he possesses a more or less developed taste for

provocation.

§

I feel I am free but I know I am not.

I suppressed word after word from my vocabulary. When the

massacre was over, only one had escaped: Solitude. I awakened

euphoric.

§

If I have been able to hold out till now, it is because each blow,

which seemed intolerable at the time, was followed by a second

which was worse, then a third, and so on. If I were in hell. I’d

want its circles to multiply, in order to count on a new ordeal,

more trying than its predecessor. A salutary policy, with regard

to torments at least.

%

What music appeals to in us it is difficult to know; what we do

know is that music reaches a zone so deep that madness itself

cannot penetrate there.

§

We should have been excused from lugging a body: the burden

of the self was enough.

§

C 9 - ]

To recover a taste for certain things, to make my "soul” over, a

nap of several cosmic epochs would be welcome.

§

I never could understand that friend who, back from Lapland,

told me how oppressed he felt when for days on end he lived

without seeing the slightest trace of mankind.

§

The flayed man as theoretician of detachment . . . The

convulsionary as skeptic . . .

§

A burial in a Norman village. I ask for details from a farmer

watching the procession from a distance, "ffr was still young,

barely sixty. They found him dead in the field. Well, that’s how

it is. . . . That’s how it is. . . .” This refrain, which struck me

as comical at the time, has haunted me ever since. The fellow

had no idea that what he was saying about death was all that can

be said and all we know.

I like to read the way a chorus girl does: identifying myself with

the author and the book. Any other attitude makes me think of

dissecting corpses.

§

Whenever a man converts to something, anything, we envy him

at first, then we pity him, after which we despise him.

§

[ 93 ]

Wc had nothing to say to one another, and while I was

manu&cturing my phrases I felt that the earth was falling

through space and that I was falling with it at a speed that made

me dizzy.

s

Years and years to waken from that sleep in which the others

loll; then years and years to escape that awakening . . .

§

A task to be done, something I have undertaken out of necessity

or choice: no sooner have I started in than everything seems

important, everything attraas me, except that.

%

Think about those who haven’t long to live, who know that

everything is over and done with, except the time in which the

thought of their end unrolls. Deal with that time. Write for

gladiators. . . .

s

Erosion of our being by our infirmities: the resulting void is

filled by the presence of consciousness, what am I saying?—^that

void is consciousness itself.

Moral disintegration when we spend time in a place that is too

beautiful: the self dissolves upon contact with paradise. No

doubt it was to avoid this danger that the first man made the

choice he did.

§

[94 ]

All things considered, there have been more affirmations than

negations—^at least till now. So we may deny without remorse.

Beliefs will always weigh more in the scales.

§

The substance of a work is the impossible—what we have not

been able to attain, what could not be given to us: the sum of all

the things which were refused us.

§

Gogol, in hopes of a "regeneration,” journeys to Nazareth and

discovers he is as bored there as "in a Russian railroad

station”—this is what happens to us all when we look outside

ourselves for what can exist only inside.

Kill yourself because you are what you are, yes, but not because

all humanity would spit in your face!

§

Why fear the nothing in store for us when it is no diffierent from

the nothing which preceded us: this argument of the Ancients

against the fear of death is unacceptable as consolatioa Before, we

had the luck not to exist; now we exist, and it is this particle of

existence, hence of misfortune, which dreads death. Particle is

not the word, since each of us prefers himself to the universe, at

any rate considers himself equal to it.

§

When we discern the urucality of everything, we ourselves

become unreal, we begin to survive ourselves, however powerful

C 9^ ]

our vitality, however imperious our instincts. But they are no

longer anything but hilse insdnas, and &lse vitality.

$

If you ate doomed to devour yourself, nothing can keep you from

it: a trifle will impel you as much as a tragedy. Resign yourself to

erosion at all times: your fate wills it so.

To live is to lose ground.

§

To think that so many have succeeded in dying!

5

Impossible not to resent those who write us overwhelming

letters.

§

In a remote province of India, everything was explained by

dreams, and what is more important, dreams were used to cure

diseases as well. It was according to dreams that business was

conducted and matters of life and death decided. Until the

English came. Since then, one native said, "We no longer

dream.”

In what we have agreed to call "civilization,” there resides,

undeniably, a diabolic principle man has become conscious of too

late, when it was no longer possible to remedy it.

Lucidity without the corrertive of ambition leads to stagnation. It

[ 96 }

is essential that the one sustain the other, that the one combat

the other without winning, for a work, for a life to be possible.

s

We cannot forgive those we have praised to the skies, we are

impatient to break with them, to snap the most delicate chain of

all: the chain of admiration . . . , not out of insolence, but out

of an aspiration to find our bearings, to be free, to be . . .

ourselves. Which we manage only by an aa of injustice.

The problem of responsibility would have a meaning only if we

had been consulted before our birth and had consented to be

precisely who we are.

§

The energy and virulence of my taedium vitae continue to

astound me. So much vigor in a disease so decrepit! To this

paradox I owe my present incapacity to choose my final hour.

§

For our actions, for our vitality itself, the claim to lucidity is as

ruinous as lucidity itself.

§

Children turn, and must turn, against their parents, and the

parents can do nothing about it, for they are subject to a law

which decrees the relations among all the living: i.e., that each

engenders his own enemy.

§

[ 97 }

So carefully have we been taught to cling to things that when we

would be fixe of them, we do not know how to go about it. And

if death did not come to our aid, our stubbornness in subsisting

would make us find a recipe for existence beyond wearing out,

beyond senility itself.

§

Everything is wonderfully clear if we admit that birth is a

disastrous or at least an inopportune event; but if we think

otherwise, we must resign ourselves to the unintelligible, or else

cheat like everyone else.

$

In a Gnostic work of the second century of our era, we read:

"The prayer of a melancholy man will never have the strength to

rise unto God.” . . . Since man prays only in despondency, we

may deduce that no prayer has ever reached its destination.

He was above all others, and had had nothing to do with it: he

had simply to desire. . . .

§

In ancient China, women suffering from anger or grief would

climb onto platforms specially construaed for them in the street,

and there would give free rein to their fiiry or their lamentations.

Such confessionals should be revived and adopted the world

over, if only to replace the obsolete ones of the Church, or the

ineffectual ones of various therapeutics.

s

[98 ]

This philosopher lacks keeping or, to vise the jargon, "internal

form.” He is too fabricated to be alive or even "real”—a sinister

puppet. What bliss to know I shall never open his books again!

No one exclaims he is fi:eling well and that he is free, yet this is

what all who know this double blessing should do. Nothing

condemns us mote than our incapacity to shout our good luck.

To have fuled in everything, always, out of a love of

discouragement!

The sole means of protecting your solitude is to oflfend everyone,

beginning with those you love.

A book is a postponed suicide.

Say what we will, death is the best thing nature has found to

please everyone. With each of us, everything vanishes, every¬

thing stops forever. What an advantage, what an abuse! Without

the least effort on our part, we own the universe, we drag it into

our own disappearance. No doubt about it, dying is im¬

moral. . . .

[ 99 ]

7

If instead of expanding you, putting you in a state of energetic

euphoria, your ordeals depress and embitter you, you can be sure

you have no spiritual vocation.

To live in expectation, to count on the future or on a simulacrum

of the future: we are so accustomed to it that we have conceived

the idea of immortality only out of a need to wait out eternity.

%

Every friendship is an inconspicuous drama, a series of subtle

wounds.

Luther Dead by Lucas Fortnagcl. A plebeian, aggressive, terrify¬

ing mask, as of some sublime hog . . . which perfectly renders

the features of the man we cannot suflBiciently praise for having

declared: "Dreams arc liars; if you shit in your bed, that’s true.”

$

The more you live, the less useful it seems to have lived.

$

[ ^03 }

At twenty, those nights when for hours at a time I would stand,

forehead pressed against the pane, staring into the dark. . . .

§

No autocrat wields a power comparable to that enjoyed by a poor

devil planning to kill himself

§

Educating yourself not to leave traces is a moment-by¬

moment war against yourself, solely to prove that you could, if

you chose, become a sage. . . .

To exist is a state as little conceivable as its contrary. No, still

more inconceivable.

s

In Antiquity, "books” were so costly that one could not

accumulate them unless one was a king, a tyrant, or . . .

Aristotle, the first to possess a library worthy of the name.

One more incriminating item in the dossier of a philosopher

already so catastrophic in so many regards.

s

If I were to conform to my most intimate conviaions, I should

cease to take any action whatever, to react in any way. But I am

still capable of sensations. . . .

s

A monster, however horrible, secretly attracts us, pursues us.

[ 104 }

haunts us. He represents, enlarged, our advantages and our

miseries, he proclaims w, he is our standard-bearer.

§

Over the centuries, man has slaved to believe, passing from

dogma to dogma, illusion to illusion, and has given very little

time to doubts, short intervals between his epochs of blindness.

Indeed they were not doubts but pauses, moments of respite

following the fatigue of faith, of any faith.

Innocence being the perfea state, perhaps the only one, it is

incomprehensible that a man enjoying it should seek to leave it.

Yet history from its beginnings down to ourselves is only that

and nothing but that.

I draw the curtains, and I wait. Actually, I am not waiting for

anything, I am merely making myself absent. Scouted, if only for

a few minutes, of the impurities which dim and clog the mind, I

accede to a state of consciousness from which the self is

evacuated, and I am as soothed as if I were resting outside the

universe.

In one medieval exorcism, all the parts of the body, even the

smallest, are listed from which the demon is ordered to depart: a

kind of lunatic anatomy treatise, fascinating for its hypertrophy

of precision, its profusion of unexpeaed details. A scrupulous

incantation. Leave the naik! Fanatic but not without poetic effect.

For authentic poetry has nothing in common with "poetry.”

[ ^ 0.5 ]

§

In all our dreams, even if they deal with the Flood, there is

always, if only for a fraction of a second, some minuscule

incident we witnessed the day before. This regularity, which I

have verified for years, is the only constant, the only law or

semblance of law I have been able to discern in night’s incredible

chaos.

§

The dissolving power of conversation. One realizes why both

meditation and action require silence.

§

The certainty of being only an accident has accompanied me on

all occasions, propitious or injurious, and if it has saved me from

the temptation to believe myself necessary, it has not on the

other hand entirely cured me of a certain vainglory inherent in

the loss of illusions.

§

Rare to come upon a free mind, and when you do, you realize

that the best of such a mind is not revealed in its works (when

we write we bear, mysteriously, chains) but in those confidences

where, released from conviction and pose, as from all concern

with rigor or standing, it displays its weaknesses. And where it

behaves as a heretic to itself.

If the foreigner is not a creator in the matter of language, it is

because he wants to do as well as the natives: whether or not he

succeeds, this ambition is his downfall.

[ xo6 }

§

I begin a letter over and over again, I get nowhere: what to say

and how to say it? I don’t even remember whom I was writing

to. Only passion or profit find at once the right tone.

Unfortunately detachment is indifference to language, insensitiv¬

ity to words. Yet it is by losing contact with words that we lose

contact with human beings.

$

Everyone has had, at a given moment, an extraordinary

experience which will be for him, because of the memory of it he

preserves, the crucial obstacle to his inner metamorphosis.

$

I know peace only when my ambitions sleep. Once they waken,

anxiety repossesses me. Life is a state of ambition. The mole

digging his tunnels is ambitious. Ambition is in eflfea every¬

where, and we see its traces on the faces of the dead themselves.

Going to India because of the Vedanta or Buddhism is about the

same as going to France because of Jansenism. Moreover the

latter is more recent, since it vanished only three centuries aga

Not the slightest trace of reality anywhere—except in my

sensations of unreality.

§

Existence would be a quite impracticable enterprise if we stopped

granting importance to what has none.

C ^07 ]

§

Why docs the Gita rank "renunciation of the fruit of aaions” so

high? Because such renunciation is rare, impracticable, contrary

to our nature, and because achieving it is destroying the man one

has been and one is, killing in oneself the entire past, the work

of millennia—in a word, freeing oneself of the Species, that

hideous and immemorial riffraff.

We should have abided by our larval condition, dispensed with

evolution, remained incomplete, delighting in the elemental

siesta and calmly consuming ourselves in an embryonic ecstasy.

§

Tmth abides in the individual drama. If I suffer authentically, I

suffer much more than an individual, I transcend the sphere of

my selfhood, I rejoin the essence of others. The only way to

proceed toward the universal is to concern ourselves exclusively

with what concerns ourselves.

When we are fixated on doubt, we take more pleasure in

lavishing speculations upon it than in practicing it.

If you want to know a nation, frequent its second-order writers:

they alone reflect its true nature. The others denounce or

transflguie the nullity of their compatriots, and neither can nor

will put themselves on the same level They are suspect

witnesses.

[ xq8 }

§

In my youth there would be weeks during which I never closed

my eyes. I lived in the unlived world, I had the sense that Time,

with all its moments, had concentrated itself within me, where it

culminated, where it triumphed. I moved it onward, of course, I

was its promoter and bearer, its cause and substance, and it was

as an agent and accomplice that I participated in its apotheosis.

When sleep departs fixim us, the unheard-of becomes everyday,

easy: we enter it without preparations, inhabit it, wallow in it.

Astounding, the number of hours I have wasted on the

"meaning” of what exists, of what happens. . . . But that

"what” has no meaning, as all serious minds know. Hence they

devote their time and their energy to more useful undertakings.

My af&nities with Russian Byronism, from Pechorin to Stavro-

gin, my boredom and my passion for boredom.

§

X, whom I do not particularly appreciate, was telling a story so

stupid that I wakened with a start: those we don’t like rarely

shine in our dreams.

For lack of occupation, the old seem to be trying to solve

something very complicated, devoting to it all the capacities they

still possess. Perhaps this is why they do not commit suicide en

masse, as they ought were they even a trifle less absorbed.

[ 109 }

§

Love at its most impassioned does not bring two human beings

so close together as calumny. Inseparable, slanderer and slan¬

dered constitute a "transcendent” unity, forever welded one to

the other. Nothing can separate them. One inflicts harm, the

other endures it, but if he endures it, it is because he is

accustomed to doing so, can no longer do without it, even insists

upon it. He knows that his wishes will be gratified, that he will

never be forgotten, that whatever happens he will be eternally

present in the mind of his indefatigable benefactor.

The monk-errant, the wandering friar—so far, the supreme

achievement. To reach the point of no longer having anything to

renounce! Such must be the dream of any disabused mind.

§

Sobbing negation—the only tolerable form of negation.

Lucky Job, who was not obliged to annotate his lamentations!

s

Late at night I feel like falling into a frenzy, doing some

unprecedented thing to release myself, but I don’t see against

whom, against what. . . .

§

Mme d’Heudicourt, Saint-Simon observes, had never spoken

good of anyone in her life without adding some crushing "but’s.”

[ ]

A wonderful definition, not of backbiting but of conversation in

general.

§

Everything that lives makes noise. What an argument for the

mineral kingdom!

§

Bach was quarrelsome, litigious, self-serving, greedy for titles

and honors, etc. So what! A musicologist listing the cantatas

whose theme is death has remarked that no mortal ever had such

a nostalgia for it. Which is all that counts. The rest has to do

with biography.

s

The misfortune of being incapable of neutral states except by

reflection and effort. What an idiot achieves at the outset, we

must struggle night and day to attain, and only by fits and starts!

I have always lived with the vision of a host of moments

marching against me. Time will have been my Bimam Wood.

§

Painful or wounding questions asked by the uncouth distress and

anger us, and may have the same effect as certain techniques of

Oriental meditation. Who knows if a dense, aggressive stupidity

might not provoke illumination? It is certainly worth as much as

a rap on the head with a stick.

§

[ XXX }

Knowledge is not possible, and even if it were, would solve

nothing. Such is the doubter’s position. What does he want,

then—^what is he looking for.^ Neither he nor anyone will ever

know. Skepticism is the rapture of impasse.

Besieged by others, I try to make my escape, without much

success, it must be confessed. Yet I manage to wangle myself,

day by day, a few seconds’ audience with the man I would have

liked to be.

By a certain age, we should change names and hide out

somewhere, lost to the world, in no danger of seeing friends or

enemies again, leading the peaceful life of an overworked

malefactor.

We cannot reflect and be modest. Once the mind is set to work,

it replaces God and anything else. It is indiscretion, encroach¬

ment, profanation. It does not build, it dislocates. The tension its

methods betray reveals its brutal, implacable charaaer: without a

good dose of ferocity, we could not follow a thought to its

conclusion.

§

Most subverters, visionaries, and saviors have been cither

epileptics or dyspeptics. There is unanimity as to the virtues of

epilepsy; gastric upheavals are regarded, on the other hand, as

less meritorious. Yet nothing is more conducive to subversion

than a digestion which refuses to be forgotten.

[ }

s

My mission is to suffer for all those who suffer without knowing

it, I must pay for them, expiate their unconsciousness, their luck

to be ignorant of how unhappy they are.

Each time Time torments me, I tell myself that one of us must

back down, that it is impossible for this cruel confrontation to go

on indefinitely.

When we are in the depths of depression, everything which

feeds it, affords it further substance, also raises it to a level where

we can no longer follow and thereby renders it too great,

excessive: scarcely surprising that we should reach the point of

no longer regarding it as our own.

A foretold misfortune, when at last it occurs, is ten, is a hundred

times harder to endure than one we did not expect. All during

our apprehensions, we lived through it in advance, and when it

happens these past torments are added to the present ones, and

together they form a mass whose weight is intolerable.

Obviously Gtxl was a solution, and obviously none so satis&c\*

tory will ever be found again.

I shall never utterly admire anyone except a man dishonored—

[ ^^3 ]

and happy. There is a man, I should say, who defies the opinion

of his fellows and who finds consolation and happiness in

himself alone.

The man of the Rubicon, after Pharsalus, had forgiven too many.

Such magnanimity seemed offensive to those of his friends who

had betrayed him and whom he had humiliated by treating them

without rancor. They felt diminished, flouted, and punished him

for his clemency or for his disdain: he had refused to stoop to

resentment! Had he behaved as a tyrant, they would have spared

him. But they could not forgive him, since he had not deigned to

frighten them enough.

Everything that is engenders, sooner or later, nightmares. Let us

try, therefore, to invent something better than being.

§

Philosophy, which had made it its business to undermine beliefs,

when it saw Christianity spreading and on the point of

prevailing, made common cause with paganism, whose supersti¬

tions seemed preferable to the triumphant insanities. By

attacking and demolishing the gods, philosophy had intended to

free men’s minds; in reality, it handed them over to a new

servitude, worse than the old one, for the god who was to replace

the gods had no particular weakness for either tolerance or irony.

Philosophy, it will be objected, is not responsible for the

advent of this god, indeed this was not the god philosophy

recommended. No doubt, but it should have suspected that we

do not subven the gods with impunity, that others would come

[ ”4 ]

to take their place, and that it had nothing to gain by the

exchange.

$

Fanaticism is the death of conversation. We do not gossip with a

candidate for martyrdom. What are we to say to someone who

refuses to penetrate our reasons and who, the moment we do not

bow to his, would rather die than yield? Give us dilettantes and

sophists, who at leas^espouse reasons. . . .

We invest ourselves with an abusive superiority when we tell

someone what we think of him and of what he docs. Frankness is

not compatible with a delicate sentiment, nor even with an

ethical exigency.

More than all others, our relatives are ready to doubt our merits.

It is a universal rule: Buddha himself did not escape it—one of

his cousins opposed him the most, and only afterward Mara, the

devil.

§

For the victim of anxiety, there is no difference between success

and fiasco. His reaction to the one is the same as to the other:

both trouble him e<]ually.

When I torment myself a little too much for not working, I tell

myself that I might just as well be dead and that then I would be

working still less. . . .

C }

Rather in a gutter than on a pedestal.

§

The advantages of a state of eternal potentiality seem to me so

considerable that when I begin listing them, I can’t get over the

fact that the transition to Being could ever have occurred.

s

Existence = Torment The equation seems obvious to me, but

not to one of my friends. How to convince him? I cannot lend

him my sensations; yet only they would have the power to

persuade him, to give him that additional dose of ill-being he has

so insistently asked for all this time.

If we sec things black, it is because we weigh them in the dark,

because thoughts are generally the fruit of sleeplessness,

consequently of darkness. They cannot adapt to life because they

have not been thought with a view to life. The notion of the

consequences they might involve doesn’t even occur to the mind.

We are beyond all human calculation, beyond any notion of

salvation or perdition, of being or non-being, we are in a

particular silence, a superior modality of the void.

Not yet to have digested the affront of being bora

To expend oneself in conversations as much as an epileptic in his

fits.

[ ^^<5 ]

§

In order to conquer panic or some tenacious anxiety, there is

nothing like imagining your own burial. An efFeaive method,

readily available to all. In order not to have to resort to it too

often in the course of a day, best to experience its benefit straight

oflf, when you get up. Or else use it only at exceptional moments,

like Pope Innocent IX, who, having commissioned a painting in

which he was shown on his deathbed, glanced at it each time he

had to make some important decision

There is no negator who is not famished for some catastrophic

yes.

§

We may be sure that man will never reach depths comparable to

those he knew during the ages of egoistic colloquy with his God.

§

Not one moment when I am not external to the universe!

. . . No sooner have I lamented over myself, pitying my

wretched condition, than I realize that the terms in which I

described my misformne were precisely those which define the

first charaaeristic of the "supreme being.”

Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel—three enslavers of the mind. The

worst form of despotism is the system, in philosophy and in

everything.

§

[ ”7 }

God is what survives the evidence that nothing deserves to be

thought.

§

When I was young, no pleasure compared with the pleasure of

making enemies. Now, whenever I make one, my first thought is

to be reconciled, so that I won’t have to bother about him.

Having enemies is a heavy responsibility. My burden is

sufficient, I no longer can carry that of others as well.

$

Joy is a light which devours itself, inexhaustibly; it is the sun

early on.

§

A few days before he died, Claudel remarked that we should not

call God infinite but inexhaustible. As if it did not come down to

the same thing, or just about! All the same, this concern for

exaaitude, this verbal scruple at the moment that he was writing

that his "lease” on life had nearly expired, is more inspiring than

a "sublime” word or gesture.

s

The unusual is not a criterion. Paganini is more surprising and

more unprediaable than Bach.

We should repeat to oiurselves, every day: I am one of the

billions dragging himself across the earth’s surface. One, and no

more. This banality justifies any conclusion, any behavior or

aaion: debauchery, chastity, suicide, work, crime, sloth, or

£ ii8 ]

icbcllioa . . . Whence it follows that each man is right to do

what he does.

§

Tsimtsum. This silly-sounding word designates a major concept

of the Cabbala. For the world to exist, God, who was everything

and everywhere, consented to shrink, to leave a vacant space not

inhabited by Himself: it is in this "hole” that the world

occurred.

Thus we occupy the wasteland He conceded to us out of pity

or whim. For us to exist. He contracted. He limited His

sovereignty. We are the product of His voluntary reduction, of

His effacement, of His partial absence. In His madness He has

actually amputated Himself for us. If only He had had the good

sense and the good taste to remsun tMe\ -

In the "Gospel According to the Egyptians,” Jesus proclaims:

"Men will be the victims of death so long as women give birth.”

And he specifies: "I am come to destroy the works of woman.”

When we frequent the extreme truths of the Gnostics, we

should like to go, if possible, still further, to say something never

said, which petrifies or pulverizes history, something out of a

cosmic Neronianism, out of a madness on the scale of matter.

To express an obsession is to project it outside yourself, to hunt

it down, to exorcise it. Obsessions are the demons of a world

without &ith.

§

[ "9 }

Man accepts death but not the hour of his death. To die any

time, except when one has to die!

§

Once we step into a cemetery, a feeling of utter mockery does

away with any metaphysical concern. Those who look for

"mystery” everywhere do not necessarily get to the bottom of

things. Most often "mystery,” like "the absolute,” corresponds

only to a mannerism of the mind. It is a word we should use

only when we cannot do otherwise, in really desperate cases.

§

If I recapitulate my plans which have remained plans and those

which have worked out, I have every reason to regret that these

latter have not suffered the fate of the former.

$

"He who is inclined to lust is merciful and tender-hearted; those

who ate inclined to purity are not so” (Saint John Climacus). It

took a saint, neither more nor less, to denounce so distinctly and

so vigorously not the lies but the very essence of Christian

morality, and indeed of all morality.

We are not afraid to accept the notion of an uninterrupted sleep;

on the other hand an eternal awakening (immortality, if it were

conceivable, would be just that) plunges us into dread.

Unconsciousness is a country, a fatherland; consciousness, an

exile.

§

[ }

Any profound impression is voluptuous or funereal—or both at

once.

No one has been so convinced as I of the futility of everything;

and no one has taken so tragically so many futile things.

§

Ishi, the last American Indian of his tribe, after hiding for years

in terror of the White Men, reduced to starvation, surrendered of

his own free will to the exterminators of his people, believing

that the same treatment was in store for himself. He was made

much of. He had no posterity, he was traly the last.

Once humanity is destroyed or simply extinguished, we may

imagine a sole survivor who would wander the earth, without

even having anyone to surrender to. .. .

Deep in his heart, man aspires to rejoin the condition he had

befoft cctfisciousncss. History is merely the detour he takes to gat

there.

Only one thing matters: learning to be the loser.

§

Every phenomenon is a corrupt version of another, larger

phenomenon: time, a disease of eternity; history, a disease of

time; life, again, a disease of matter.

Then what is normal, what is healthy? Eternity? Which itself

is only an infirmity of God.

[ }

Without the notion of a failed universe, the speaacle of injustice

in every system would put even an abulic into a straitjacket.

§

Annihilating affords a sense of power, flatters something obscure,

something original in us. It is not by erecting but by pulverizing

that we may divine the secret satisfactions of a god. Whence the

lure of destruction and the illusions it provokes among the

frenzied of any era.

§

Each generation lives in the absolute: it behaves as if it had

reached the apex if not the end of history.

§

Any and every nation, at a certain moment of its career, considers

itself chosen. It is at this moment that it gives the best and the

worst of itself.

§

No accident that the Trappist order was founded in France rather

than in Italy or Spain. Granted the Spanish and the Italians talk

ceaselessly, but they do not hear themselves talk, whereas the

Frenchman relishes his eloquence, never forgets he is talking, is

C ]

consummately conscious of the Act. He alone could regard

silence as an ordeal, as an arjkair.

§

What spoils the French Revolution for me is that it all happens

on stage, that its promoters are bom actors, that the guillotine is

merely a decor. The history of France, as a whole, seems a

bespoke history, an aOa/ history; everything in it is perfect from

the theatrical point of view. It is a performance, a series of

gestures and events which are watched rather than suffered, a

speaacle that takes ten centuries to put on. Whence the

impression of frivolity which even the Terror affords, seen from

a distance.

§

Prosperous societies are fer more fragile than the others, since it

remains for them to achieve only their own ruin, comfort not

being an ideal when we possess it, still less of one when it has

been around for generations. Not to mention the fact that nature

has not included well-being in her calculations and could not do

so without perishing herself.

If all peoples turned apathetic at once, there would be no more

conflicts, no more wars, no more empires. But unfortunately

there are young peoples, and indeed young people—a major

obstacle to the philanthropists’ dreams: to bring it about that all

men might reach the same degree of lassitude or ineffectual¬

ity. .. .

s

[ }

Wc must side with the oppressed on every occasion, even when

they are in the wrong, though without losing sight of the &ct

that they ate molded of the same clay as their oppressors.

s

Characteristic of dying regimes: to permit a confused mixture of

belief and doctrines, and to give the illusion, at the same time,

that the moment of choice can be indefinitely postponed . . .

This is the source—the sole source—of the charm of

pre-revolutionaty periods.

Only false values prevail, because everyone can assimilate them,

counterfeit them (false thereby to the second degree). An idea

that succeeds is necessarily a pseudo-idea.

$

Revolutions ate the sublime of bad literature.

The unfortunate thing about public misfortunes is that everyone

regards himself as qualified to talk about them.

§

The right to suppress everyone that bothers us should rank first

in the constitution of the ideal State.

The only thing the young should be taught is that there is

virtually nothing to be hoped for from life. One dreams of a

Catalogue of Disapprnntmmts which would include all the

[ «7 ]

disillusionmcnts reserved for each and every one of us, to be

posted in the schools.

§

According to the Princess Palatine, Mme de Maintenon was in

the habit of repeating, during the years after the king’s death

when she had no further role to play: "For some time now, there

has prevailed a spirit of vertigo which is spreading everywhere.”

This "spirit of vertigo” is what the losers have always noticed,

correttly moreover, and we might well reconsider all history

from the perspective of this formula.

§

Progress is the injustice each generation commits with regard to

its predecessor.

The surfeited hate themselves—not secretly but publicly, and

long to be swept away, one way or another. They prefer, in any

case, that the sweeping be accomplished with their own

cooperatioa This is the most curious, the most original aspect of

a revolutionary situatioa

A nation generates only one revolution. The Germans have

never repeated the exploit of the Reformation, or rather, they

have repeated but not equaled it. France has remained an eternal

tributary of ’89. Equally true of Russia and of all nations, this

tendency to plagiarize oneself in regard to revolutions is at once

reassuring and distressing.

§

C ^^8 }

Romans of the decadence enjoyed only what they called Greek

leisure (otitm graecum), the thing they had most despised in the

period of their vigor. The analogy with today’s civilizations is so

flagrant it would be indecent to insist on it.

Alaric claimed that a "demon” drove him against Rome. Every

exhausted civilization awaits its barbarian, and every barbarian

awaits his demon.

s

The West: a sweet-smelling rottenness, a perfumed corpse.

§

All these nations were great because they had great prejudices.

They now have none. Are they nations still? At most,

disintegrated crowds.

The white race increasingly deserves the name given by the

American Indians: palefaas.

s

In Europe, happiness stops at Vienna. Beyond, misery upon

misery, since the beginning.

s

The Romans, the Turks, and the British could found lasting

empires because, refraaory to all doctrine, they imposed none

upon the subject nations. They would never have managed to

wield so long a hegemony had they been afflicted with some

[ zap ]

messianic vice. Unhoped-for oppressors, administrators, and

parasites, lords without convictions, they had the art of

combining authority and indifference, rigor and abandon. It is

this art, the secret of the true master, which the Spaniards of old

lacked, as it is lacking in the conquerors o£ our own day.

So long as a nation keeps the awareness of its superiority, it is

fierce and respected; once it loses that awareness, a nation

becomes humanized, and no longer counts.

§

When I rage against the age, I can calm myself merely by

thinking of what will happen, of the retrospective jealousy of

those who come after us. In certain respects, we belong to the

old humanity, the humanity that could still regret paradise. But

those who come after us will not even have the recourse of that

regmt, they will not even have an idea of it, not even the word!

§

My vision of the future is so exact that if I had children, I should

strangle them here and now.

When we think of the Berlin salons in the Romantic period, of

the role played in them by a Henrietta Herz or a Rachel Levin,

of the ftiendship between the latter and Crown Prince Louis-Fer-

dinand; and when we then think that if such women had lived in

this century they would have died in some gas chamber, we

cannot help considering the belief in progress as the falsest and

stupidest of superstitions.

i ‘30 }

§

Hesiod was the first to elaborate a philosophy of history. And

also launched the notion of decadence. By doing so, what a light

he casts on historical process! If, at the very outset, in the heart

of the post-Homeric world, he decided that humanity was in its

iron age, what would he have said a few centuries later—what

would he say today?

Except in periods clouded over by frivolity or utopia, man has

always believed himself on the threshold of the worst. Knowing

what he knew, by what miracle could he have unceasingly varied

his desires and his terrors?

When, just after the First World War, electricity was installed in

the village where I was bom, there was a general murmur of

protest, then mute desolation. But when elearicity was installed

in the churches (there were three), everyone was convinced the

Antichrist had come and, with him, the end of time.

These Girpathian peasants had seen clearly, had seen far:

Emerging from prehistory, they knew already, in that day and

age, what "civilized” men have known only recently.

It is my prejudice against everything that turns out well that has

given me a taste for reading history.

Ideas are unsuited to a final agony; they die, of course, but

without knowing how to die, whereas an event exists only with a

view to its end. A sufficient reason to prefiir the company of

historians to that of philosophers.

§

[ ^ 3 ^ ]

During his famous embassy to Rome in the second century B.C,

Cameades took advantage of the occasion to speak the first day in

favor of the idea of justice, and on the following day against it.

From that moment, philosophy, hitherto nonexistent in that

country of healthy condua, began to perpetrate its ravages.

What is philosophy, then? The worm in the fruit. . . .

Cato the Censor, who had been present at the Greek’s

dialectical performances, was alarmed by them and asked the

Senate to satisfy the Athenian delegation as soon as possible, so

harmful and even dangerous did he consider their presence.

Roman youth was not to frequent minds so destruaive.

On the moral level, Cameades and his companions were as

formidable as the Carthaginians on the military. Rising nations

fear above all the absence of prejudices and prohibitions, the

intellectual shamelessness which constitutes the allure of declin¬

ing civilizations.

§

Hercules was punished for having succeeded in all his undertak¬

ings. Similarly Troy, too happy, had to perish.

Pondering this vision shared by the tragic poets, we cannot

help thinking that the so-called free world, upon which every

fortune has been lavished, will inevitably suffer Ilion’s fate, for

the jealousy of the gods survives their disappearance.

"The French don’t want to work any more, they all want to

write” my concierge told me, unaware that she was then and

there passing judgment on all old civilizations.

$

C ^ 3 ^ }

A society is doomed when it no longer has the force to be

limited. How, with an open mind—too open—can it protect

itself against the excesses, the mortal risks of freedom?

Ideological disputes reach the point of paroxysm only in

countries where men have fought each other over words, where

they have gone to death for words . . . , in the countries, in

short, which have known wars of religion.

§

A nation which has exhausted its mission is like an author who

repeats himself—no, who has nothing left to say. For to repeat

yourself is to prove that you still believe in yourself, and in what

you have said. But a declining nation no longer has even the

strength to mouth its old mottoes, which once had assured it its

preeminence and its pride.

§

French has become a provincial language. The natives don’t

mind. Only the foreigner is inconsolable on its account—^he

alone goes into mourning for Nuance. . . .

Themistocles, by a unanimously approved decree, had the

interpreter of Xerxes’ ambassadors put to death "for having

dared use the Greek language to express the orders of a

barbarian.”

A people commits such an act only at the peak of its career. It

is decadent, it is dying, when it no longer believes in its

[ ^33 ]

language, when it stops believing that its language is the

supreme form of expression, the language.

§

A nineteenth-century philosopher maintained, in his innocence,

that La Rochefoucauld was right for the past, but that he would

be invalidated by the future. The idea of progress dishonors the

intellea.

§

The further man proceeds, the less he is in a position to solve his

problems, and when, at the apex of his blindness, he will be

convinced he is on the point of success, then the unheard-of will

occur.

I would bestir myself, at best, for the Apocalypse, but for a

revolution ... To collaborate with an ending or a genesis, an

ultimate or initial calamity, yes, but not with a change for some

better or worse. . . .

s

We have convictions only if we have studied nothing thor¬

oughly.

In the long run, tolerance breeds more ills than intolerance. If

this is true, it constitutes the most serious accusation that can be

made against man.

$

[ ^34 ]

Once the animals no longer need to fear each other, they fall into

a daze and take on that dumbfounded look they have in zoos.

Individuals and nations would afford the same spectacle if some

day they managed to live in harmony, no longer trembling

openly or in secret.

With sufficient perspective, nothing is good or bad. The

historian who ventures to judge the past is writing journalism in

another century.

§

In two hundred years (let us be precise!), the survivors of the

overly fortunate nations will be put on reservations and visited,

contemplated with disgust, commiseration, or stupor, and with a

malicious admiration as well.

§

Monkeys living in groups reject, apparently, those which in

some fashion have consorted with humans. How one regrets that

Swift never knew such a detail!

§

Are we to execrate our age—or all ages?

Do we think of Buddha withdrawing from the world on

account of his contemporaries}

§

If humanity has such love for saviors, those fanatics who so

shamelessly believe in themselves, it is because humanity

supposes they believe in it.

[ }

§

The strength of this Statesman is to be visionary and cynical A

dreamer without scru^.

The worst crimes are committed out of enthusiasm, a morbid

state responsible for almost all public and private disasters.

The future appeals to you? All yours! Myself I prefer to keep to

the incredible present and the incredible past. I leave it to you to

face the Incredible itself.

s

"You’re against everything that’s been done since the last war,”

said the very up-to-date lady.

"You’ve got the wrong date: I’m against everything that’s

been done since Adam.”

§

Hitler is without a doubt the most sinister character in history.

And the most pathetic. He managed to achieve precisely the

opposite of what he wanted, he destroyed his ideal point by

point. It is for this reason that he is a monster in a class by

himself—that is, a monster twice over, for even his pathos is

monstrous.

§

All great events have been set in motion by madmen, by

mediocre madmea Which will be true, we may be sure, of the

"end of the world” itself

[ ^36 ]

§

The Zohar teaches that those who do evil on earth were no

better in heaven, that they were impatient to leave it, and,

rushing to the mouth of the abyss, that they "arrived ahead of

the time when they were to descend into this world.”

One readily discerns the profundity of this vision of the

pre-existence of souls, and its usefulness when we are to explain

the assurance and the triumph of the "wicked,” their solidity and

their competence. Having prepared their endeavors so far ahead,

it is not astonishing that they should possess the earth: they

conquered it before they were here . . . , an eternity ago, and

for all eternity, as a matter of fact.

What distinguishes the true prophet from the rest is that he

stands at the origin of movements and doctrines which exclude

and oppose each other.

s

In a metropolis as in a hamlet, what we still love best is to watch

the fell of one of our kind.

The appetite for destruction is so deeply anchored within us that

no one manages to extirpate it. It belongs to our constitution, for

the very basis of our being is demoniac.

The sage is a pacified, withdrawn destroyer. The others are

destroyers in practice.

§

C ^37 }

Misfortune is a passive, endured state, while malediction

supposes an election a rebours, consequently a notion of mission,

of inner power, which is not implied in misfortune. An accursed

individual or nation necessarily outclasses an unfortunate individ¬

ual or nation.

Strictly speaking, history does not repeat itself, but since the

illusions man is capable of are limited in number, they always

return in another disguise, thereby giving some ultradecrepit

filth a look of novelty and a tragic glaze.

§

I read some pages on Jovinian, Saint Basil, and several others.

The conflict, during the first centuries of Christianity, between

orthodoxy and heresy seems no more insane than the one to

which modem ideologies have accustomed us. The modalities of

the controversy, the passions at work, the follies and the

absurdities, are almost identical. In both cases, everything turns

on the imrcal and the unverifiable, which form the very basis of

either religious or political dogmas. History would be tolerable

only if we escaped both kinds. True, it would then cease

altogether, for the great good of everyone—those who endure it

as well as those who make it.

§

What makes destruction suspect is its fiicility: anyone who

comes along can excel in it. But if to destroy is easy, to destroy

oneself is less so. Superiority of the outcast over the agitator or

the anarchist.

%

i ^58 }

Had I lived in the early period of Qiristianity, I too, I fear,

would have yielded to its seduction. And I hate that sympathizer,

that hypothetical fanatic: I cannot forgive myself that conversion

of two thousand years ago. . . .

Tom between violence and disillusionment, I seem to myself a

terrorist who, going out in the street to perpetrate some outrage,

stops on the way to consult Ecclesiastes or Epictetus.

According to Hegel, man will be completely free only "by

surrounding himself with a world entirely created by himself.”

But this is precisely what he has done, and man has never

been so enchained, so much a slave as now.

$

Life would become endurable only among a humanity which

would no longer have any illusions in reserve, a humanity

completely disabused and delighted to be so.

§

Everything I have been able to feel and to think coincides with

an exercise in anti-utopia.

Man will not last. Ambushed by exhaustion, he will have to pay

for his too-original career. For it would be inconceivable and

contra naturam that he drag on much longer and come to a good

end. This prospect is depressing, hence likely.

$

[ '39 }

"Enlightened despotism”: the only regime that can attract a

disabused mind, one incapable of being the accomplice of

revolutions since it is not even the accomplice of history.

§

Nothing more painful than two contemporary prophets. One must

withdraw, must disappear if he is unwilling to expose himself to

ridicule. Unless both are thus exposed, which would be the most

equitable solution.

§

I am stirred, even overwhelmed each time I happen upon an

innocent person. Where does he come from? What is he after?

Doesn’t such an apparition herald some. disaster? It is a very

special disturbance we suffer in the presence of someone there is

no way of calling our kind.

Wherever civilized men appeared for the first time, they were

regarded by the natives as devils, as ghosts, specters. Never as

living mm! Unequaled intuition, a prophetic insight, if ever there

was one.

If everyone had seen through everything, if everyone had

"understood,” history would have ceased long since. But we arc

fundamentally, biologically unsuited to "understand.” And even

if everyone understood except for one, history would be

perpetuated because of that one, because of his blindness.

Because of a single illusion!

§

[ S40 ]

X maintains wc are at the end of a "cosmic cycle” and that soon

everything will fell apart. And he does not doubt this for one

moment.

At the same time, he is the father of a—^numerous—femily.

With certitudes like his, what aberration has deluded him into

bringing into a doomed world one child after the next? If we

foresee the End, if we are sure it will be coming soon, if we even

anticipate it, better to do so alone. One does not procreate on

Patmos.

§

Montaigne, a sage, has had no posterity. Rousseau, an hysteric,

still stirs nations. I like only the thinkers who have inspired no

tribune of the people.

§

In 1441, the Council of Florence decreed that pagans, Jews,

heretics, and schismatics will have no part in "eternal life” and

that all, unless they embrace, before dying, the true religion, will

go straight to hell.

In the days when the Church professed such enormities it was

truly the Church. An institution is vital and strong only if it

rejects everything which is not itself. Unfortunately the same is

true of a nation or of a regime.

§

A serious, honest mind understands—and can understand—noth¬

ing of history. History in return is marvelously suited to delight

an erudite cynic.

§

C 3

Extraordinary pleasure at the thought that, being human, one is

bom under an accursed star, and that whatever one has

undertaken and whatever one is going to undertake will be

fondled by mischance.

s

Plotinus befriended a Roman senator who had freed his slaves,

renounced his wealth, and who ate and slept at the houses of

friends, for he no longer owned anything. This senator, from the

"official” point of view, was deranged, and his case would be

regarded as distressing, which indeed it was: a saint in the Senate.

. . . His presence, even his possibility—what an omen! The

hordes were not far. . . .

A man who has completely vanquished selfishness, who retains

no trace of it whatever, cannot live longer than twenty-one days,

according to one modem Vedantist school. No Western

moralist, not even the grimmest, would have dared venture an

observation on human nature so startling, so revealing.

We invoke "progress” less and less and "mutation” more and

more, and all that we allege to illustrate the latter’s advantages is

merely one symptom after another of an unrivaled catastrophe.

§

We can breathe—^and brawl—only in a corrupt regime. But we

realize as much only after having contributed to its destruction,

and when nothing is left but our capacity to regret it.

s

i }

What wc call the creative instinct is merely a deviation, merely a

perversion of our nature: we have not been brought into the

world in order to innovate, to revolutionize, but to enjoy our

semblance of being, in order to liquidate it quietly and to vanish

afterward without a fuss.

The Aztecs were right to believe the gods must be appeased, to

offer them human blood every day in order to keep the universe

from sinking back into chaos.

Wc long since ceased to believe in the gods, and we no longer

offer them sacrifices. Yet the world is still here. No doubt. Only

we no longer have the good luck to know why it does not

collapse on the spot.

We pursue whatever we pursue out of torment—a need for

torment. Our very quest for salvation is a torment, the subtlest,

the best camouflaged of all.

If it is true that by death we once more become what we were

before being, would it not have been better to abide by that pure

possibility, not to stir from it.? What use was this detour, when

we might have remained forever in an unrealized plenitude?

$

Once my body gives me the slip, how, I wonder, with such

carrion on my hands, will I combat the capitulation of my

organs?

The ancient gods ridiculed men, envied them, hunted them

down on occasion, harried them. The God of the Gospels was

less paocking and less jealous, and mortal men did not even

enjoy, in their miseries, the consolation being able to accuse

Him. Which accounts for the absence or the impossibility of a

Christian Aeschylus. A good God has killed tragedy. Zeus

deserved differently of literature.

$

[ m }

Haunted, obsessed by abdication, as far back as I can remember.

But abdication of what? If I once longed to be "someone,” it was

only for the satis&aion of someday being able to say, like

Charles V at Yuste: "I am no longer anything.”

§

Some of the Provincial Letters were rewritten as many as

seventeen times. Astounding that Pascal could have expended so

much time and energy whose interest seems minimal to us now.

Every polemic dates—every polemic with men. In the Pensies, the

debate was with God. This still concerns us somewhat.

Saint Seraphim of Sarov, in his fifteen years of complete

seclusion, opened his cell door to no one, not even to the bishop

who occasionally visited the hermitage. "Silence,” he would say,

"brings man closer to God and makes him, on earth, like unto

the angels.”

What the saint should have added is that silence is never

deeper than in the impossibility of prayer. . . .

§

Modem man has lost the sense of fate and thereby the savor of

lamentation. In the theater we should reinstate the choms at

once, and at funerals, the mourners. . . .

In anxiety, a man clings to whatever can reinforce, can stimulate

his providential discomfort: to try to cure him of it is to destroy

his equilibrium, anxiety being the basis of his existence and his

prosperity. The cunning confessor knows it is necessary, knows

C }

that we cannot do without anxiety once we have known it. Since

he dares not proclaim its benefits, he employs a detour—he

vaunts remorse, an admitted, an honorable anxiety. His custom¬

ers are grateful; hence he manages to keep them readily enough,

whereas his lay colleagues struggle and grovel to keep theirs.

You once told me death did not exist. Agreed, provided you add

that nothing exists. To grant reality to anything and to deny it to

what seems so manifestly real is sheer extravagance.

§

When we have committed the folly of confiding a secret to

someone, the only way of being sure he will keep it to himself is

to kill him on the spot.

$

’’Sicknesses, some by day, others by night, in their fiishion, visit

men, bearing suffering to mortals—in silence, for wise Zeus has

denied them speech” (Hesiod).

Fortunately, for, being mute, they are already excruciating—

what would they be if they were garrulous as well.^ Can we

imagine even one procUuming itseip Instead of symptoms,

declarations! Zeus, for once, has shown signs of delicacy.

§

In periods of sterility, one should hibernate, sleep day and night

to preserve one’s strength, instead of wasting it in mortification

and rage.

§

[ H9 }

Wc can admire someone only if he is three-quarters irresponsi¬

ble—admiration has nothing to do with respect.

§

The not at all negligible advantage of having greatly hated men

is that one comes to endure them by the exhaustion of this very

hatred.

Once the shutters are closed, I stretch out in the dark. The outer

world, a hiding murmur, dissolves. All that is left is myself and

. . . there’s the rub. Hermits have spent their lives in dialogue

with what was most hidden within them. If only, following their

example, I could give myself up to that extreme exercise, in

which one unites with the intimacy of one’s own being! It is this

self-interview, this inward transition which matters, and which

has no value unless continually renewed, so that the self is finally

absorbed by its essential version.

Even in God’s company, discontent was brewing, as the revolt of

the angels testifies—the first on record. Apparently on every level

of creation, no one is forgiven his superiority. We might even

conceive of an envious flower.

s

The vimies have no focc. Impersonal, abstract, conventional,

they wear out flister than the vices, which, more powerfully

charged with vitality, define themselves and become accentuated

with age.

§

[ }

"Everything is filled with gods,” said Thales, at the dawn of

philosophy; at the other end, at this twilight we have come to,

we can proclaim, not only out of a need for symmetry but even

more out of respect for the evidence, that "everything is emptied

of gods.”

I was alone in that cemetery overlooking the village when a

pregnant woman came in. I left at once, in order not to look at

this corpse-bearer at close range, nor to ruminate upon the

contrast between an aggressive womb and the time-worn

tombs—between a false promise and the end of all promises.

§

The desire to pray has nothing to do with faith. It emanates from

a special despondency, and lasts as long, even while the gods and

their very memory may vanish away forever.

§

"No language can hope for anything but its own defeat”

(Gregory Palamas).

So radical a condemnation of all literature could come only

fix)m a mystic—from a professional of the Inexpressible.

In Antiquity, one resorted readily, especially among the philoso¬

phers, to voluntary asphyxia—one held one’s breath until . . .

one died. So elegant and yet so practical a mode of being done

with it has completely disappeared, and it is anything but certain

it can ever reappear.

$

[ ^. 5 / }

It has been said and said again: the concept of destiny, which

supposes change, history, does not apply to an immutable being.

Hence we cannot speak of God’s "destiny.”

Doubtless we cannot, in theory. In practice, we do nothing

but, particularly in the periods when beliefs are dissolving, when

faith is shaky, when nothing seems able to withstand time, when

God Himself is swept into the general deliquescence.

§

Once we begin to want, we fall under the jurisdiction of the

Devil.

§

Life is nothing; death, everything. Yet there is nothing which is

death, independent of life. It is precisely this absence of

autonomous, distinct reality which makes death universal; it has

no realm of its own, it is omnipresent, like everything which

lacks identity, limit, and bearing: an indecent infinitude.

Euphoria. Incapable of articulating my habitual moods and the

refleaions they engender, impelled by some unknown power, I

exulted without motive, and it is just such jubilation, of

unknown origin, I reminded myself, which is the experience of

those who do and strive, those who produce. They neither can nor

will reflect on what denies them. And if they did, it would be of

no consequence, as was the case for me that memorable day.

§

Why embroider upon what excludes commentary.? A text

explained is no longer a text. We live with an idea, we don’t

[ ^ 5 ^ }

dissect it; we struggle with it, we don’t describe the stages of the

conflia. The history of philosophy is the negation of philosophy.

A suspect scruple led me to wonder exactly what it was by which

I was fatigued, and I began drawing up the list: though

incomplete, it appeared so long, and so depressing, that I

decided to fall back on futile in itself, a flattering formula which,

thanks to its philosophical ingredient, might restore a plague

victim.

Destruaion and explosion of syntax, victory of ambiguity and

approximation. All very well. But just try to draw up a will, and

you’ll see if the defunct rigor was so contemptible.

An aphorism? Fire without flames. Understandable that no one

tries to warm himself at it.

s

Even if I were to lose my reason, I could never bring myself to

that "uninterrupted prayer” advocated by the Hesychasts. All I

understand about piety is its excesses, its suspect outrages, and

askesis would not interest me a moment if one did not encounter

there all those things which are the lot of the bad monk:

indolence, gluttony, the thirst for desolation, greed, and aversion

for the world, vacillation between tragedy and the equivocal,

hope of an inner collapse. . . .

§

C ]

I forget which Father recommends manual labor against acedia.

Admirable advice, which I have always followed spontaneously:

no depression, that secular acedia, can resist puttering.

§

Years now without coffee, without alcohol, without tobacco.

. . . Luckily, there is anxiety, which usefully replaces the

strongest stimulants.

§

The worst reproach to be made against police states is that they

oblige—for prudence’s sake—the destruction of letters and

diaries, i.e., what is least false in literature.

$

To keep the mind alert, slander turns out to be as effcaive as

disease: the same vigilance, the same fixed attention, the same

insecurity, the same flagellating hysteria, the same mortal

enrichment.

I am nothing, obviously, but since for so long I wanted to be

something, I fail to smother that aspiration, that will: it exists

because it has existed, it belabors me and prevails, though I

reject it. Try as I do to relegate it to my past, it kicks up again

and torments me: never having been satisfied, it has maintained

itself intact, and has no intention of yielding to my orders.

Caught between my will and myself, what can I do.^

5

[ ^34 ]

In his Ladder of Paradix, Saint John Climacus notes that a proud

monk has no need to be persecuted by the Devil—he is himself

his own devil.

I think of X, whose life in the monastery was a feilure. No

one was better constituted to distinguish himself in the world

and to shine there. Unsuited to humility, to obedience, he chose

solitude and bogged down in it. There was nothing in him to

become, according to the same saint’s expression, "the lover of

God.” Out of irony one can neither create one’s own salvation

nor help others create theirs; one can merely disguise one’s

woimds, if not one’s distastes.

It is a great force, and a great fortime, to be able to live without

any ambition whatever. I aspire to it, but the very fact of so

aspiring still participates in ambition.

§

The blank time of meditation is, in truth, the only "full” time.

We should never blush to accumulate vacant moments—^vacant

in appearance, filled in fact. To meditate is a supreme leisure,

whose secret has been lost.

§

Noble gestures are always suspect. Each time, we regret having

committed them. Something false about them, something

theatrical, attitudinizing. It is true that we regret ignoble gestures

almost as much.

§

{ UJ5 ]

If I reflect on any moment of my life, the most feverish or the

most neutral, what remains?—and what difference is there now

between them? Everything having become the same, without

relief and without reality, it is when I felt nothing that I was

closest to the truth, I mean to my present state in which I am

recapitulating my experiences. What is the use of having felt

anything at all? There is no "ecstasy” which cither memory or

imagination can resuscitate!

No one, before his last moment, manages to use up his death

altogether; even for the bom moribund, death has a touch of

novelty.

§

According to the Gibbala, God created souls at the beginning,

and they were all before him in the form they would later take in

their incarnation. Each soul, when its time has come, receives the

order to join the body destined for it, but each to no avail

implores its Creator to spare it this bondage and this corruptioa

The more I think of what could not have failed to happen

when my own soul’s turn came, the more I realize that if there

was one soul which more than the rest must have resisted

incarnation, it was mine.

§

We dismiss the skeptic, we speak of an "automatism of doubt,”

while we never say of a believer that he has fallen into an

"automatism of faith.” Yet faith is much mote mechanical than

doubt, which has the excuse of proceeding from surprise to

surprise—inside perplexity, it is true.

[ }

§

That faint light in each of us which dates back to before our

birth, to before all births, is what must be proteaed if we want

to rejoin that remote glory from which we shall never know why

we were separated.

I have never known a single sensation of fulfillment, of true

happiness, without thinking that it was the moment when—now

or never—I should disappear for good.

A moment comes when it seems futile to have to choose

between metaphysics and amateurism, between the unfithom\*

able and the anecdote.

To measure accurately the decline Christianity represents in

relation to paganism, we need merely compare the pathetic

remarks of the Church Fathers on suicide with the opinions

oflfcrcd on the same subject by a Pliny, a Seneca, and even a

Qcera

What is the point of what we say? Is there any meaning to this

series of propositions which constitutes our talk? And do these

propositions, taken one by one, have any object? We can talk

only if we set aside this question, or if we raise it as infiequently

as possible.

§

[ ]

"To hell with everything —if these words have been uttered,

even only once, coldly, with complete awareness of what they

mean, history is justified and, with it, all of us.

s

"Woe unto you, when all men speak well of you!” Christ was

here foretelling his own end. All men now speak well of him,

even the most hardened unbelievers—they above all. Jesus knew

perfealy well that he would one day succumb to universal

approbation.

Christianity is lost if it does not suffer persecutions as pitiless

as those it was subjected to at its beginning. It must provoke

enemies at all costs, prepare great calamities for itself Only a

new Nero might still be able to save it.

§

I believe speech to be a recent invention, and find it hard to

imagine a dialogue that dates back beyond ten thousand years.

And even harder, a dialogue that will occur in not ten thousand

but even a thousand years from now.

In a work of psychiatry, only the patients’ remarks interest me;

in a work of criticism, only the quotations.

§

No one can do anything for this Polish woman, who is beyond

sickness and health, even beyond living and dying. A phantom

cannot be cured, still less an enlightened mind. We can cure only

those who belong to the earth and still have their toots in it,

however superficial.

[ ]

§

The periods of sterility we pass through coincide with an

exacerbation of our discernment—^with the eclipse of the

madman in us.

To proceed to the extremities of one’s art and, even further, of

one’s being: such is the law of any man who regards himself to

any degree as chosen.

§

It is because of speech that men give the illusion of being free. If

they did—without a word—^what they do, we would take them

for robots. By speaking, they deceive themselves, as they deceive

others: because they say what they are going to do, who could

suspect they are not masters of their actions?

Deep inside, each man feels—and believes—himself to be

immortal, even if he knows he will perish the next moment. We

can understand everything, admit everything, realize everything,

except our death, even when we ponder it unremittingly and

even when we are resigned to it.

In the slaughterhouse that morning, I watched the cattle being

led to their death. Almost every animal, at the last moment,

refused to move forward. To make them do so, a man hit them

on the hind legs.

This scene often comes to mind when, ejected from sleep, I

lack the strength to confront the daily torture of Time.

[ ^.59 }

§

I pride myself on my capacity to perceive the transitory character

of everything. An odd gift which has spoiled all my joys; better:

all my sensations.

§

Everyone expiates his first moment.

§

For an instant, I think I experienced what absorption into

Brahma might signify for an adept of the Vedanta. How much I

longed for that instant to be extensible—infinitely!

§

I sought in doubt a remedy for anxiety. The remedy ended by

making common cause with the disease.

s

"If a doctrine spreads, it is because heaven has so desired”

(Confucius).

... As I should like to believe each time that, faced with

some victorious aberration, my rage borders on apoplexy.

§

The number of fanatics, extremists, and degenerates I have been

able to admire! A relief bordering on orgasm at the notion that

one will never again embrace a cause, any cause . . .

§

An acrobat? An orchestra conductor caught up by the Idea? He

[ ^<5o ]

tushes in, then calms down, alternates the allegro with the

andante, a master of himself like the fakirs or the swindlers.

While he is talking, he seems to be seeking something, but one

never knows what: an expert in the art of counterfeiting the

thinker. If he were to say a single thing that was perfectly clear,

he would be lost. Since he is as ignorant as his hearers of what

he wants to say or what he wants, he can go on for hotirs

without exhausting the amazement of the puppets listening to

him.

§

A privilege to live in conflict with one’s times. At every moment

one is aware one does not think like the others. This state of

acute dissimilarity, however indigent or sterile it appears,

nonetheless possesses a philosophical status which one would be

at a loss to seek in cogitations attuned to events.

§

"There’s no help for it,” the nonagenarian kept repeating to

whatever I said, to whatever I shouted into her ear concerning

the present, the future, the march of events. . . .

In the hope of getting some other response from her, I went

on with my apprehensions, my grievances, my complaints.

Obtaining only the sempiternal "No help for it,” I came to the

end of my patience and left, irritated with myself, irritated with

her. What folly, to confide in an idiot!

Outside, complete reversal: "But the old woman’s right. How

could I fail to realize right away that her refrain had a truth in it,

doubtless the most important truth of all, since everything that

happens proclaims it and everything in ourselves rejects it?”

[ x6x ]

Two kinds of intuitions: original (Homer, Upanishads, folklore)

and belated (Mahayana Buddhism, Roman stoicism, Alexandrian

gnosis). First flashes and fading glows. The wakening of

consciousness and the lassitude of being awakened.

§

If it is true that what perishes has never existed, birth, source of

the perishable, exists as little as the rest.

Beware of euphemisms! They aggravate the horror they are

supposed to disguise. To use, as the French do, "the disappeared”

instead of the deceased or the dead man, seems to me preposterous,

even insane.

When man forgets he is mortal, he feels inclined to do great

things, and sometimes succeeds. This oblivion, fruit of excess, is

at the same time the cause of his woes. "Mortal, think as a

mortal.” Antiquity invented a tragic modesty.

%

Of all the equestrian statues of Roman emperors, the only one to

survive the barbarian invasions and the erosion of the ages is that

£ ^.5 }

of Marcus Aurelius—the least "emperor” of all and the one who

would have adapted himself to any other condition.

Getting up with my head full of plans, I would be working, I

was sure of it, all morning long. No sooner had I sat down at my

desk than the odious, vile, and persuasive refrain: "What do you

expect of this world?” stopped me short. And I returned, as

usual, to my bed with the hope of finding some answer, of going

back to sleep. . . .

s

We make choices, decisions, as long as we keep to the sur&ce of

things; once we reach the depths, we can neither choose nor

decide, we can do nothing but regret the sur&ce. . . .

The fear of being deceived is the vulgar version of the quest for

Truth.

§

When you know yourself well and do not despise yourself

utterly, it is because you are too exhausted to indulge in extreme

feelings.

§

It is a withering process to follow a doctrine, a belief, a

system—for a writer especially; unless he lives, as often happens,

in contradiction with the ideas to which he appeals. This

contradiction, or this treason, stimulates him and keeps him in a

[ x66 }

state of insecurity, embarrassment, shame—conditions favorable

to production.

$

Paradise was the place where everything was known but where

nothing was explained. The universe before sin—before commen¬

tary . . .

s

I have no faith, luckily. If I had, I should live in constant fear of

losing it. Hence, &r from helping me, it would do nothing but

injure me.

$

An impostor, a \*\*humbug,” conscious of being so and therefore a

self-spectator, is necessarily more advanced in knowledge than a

steady mind full of merits and all of a piece.

§

Anyone possessing a bcxly is entitled to be called a reprobate. If

he is afflicted with a "soul” as well, there is no anathema to

which he cannot lay claim.

$

How are we to speak to someone who has lost everything? What

language shall we use? The most difruse, the vaguest, will always

be the most efflxtive.

$

Supremacy of regret: the actions we have not pe r formed

constitute, by the very fict that they pursue us and that we

continually think about them, the sole contents of our conscious¬

ness.

Sometimes I wish I were a carmibal—less for the pleasure of

eating someone than for the pleasure of vomiting him.

No longer wanting to be a man . . . , dreaming of another

form of failure.

§

Each time you find yourself at a turning-point, the best thing is

to lie down and let the hours pass. Resolutions made standing up

are worthless: they are dictated either by pride or by fear. Prone,

we still know these two scourges, but in a more attenuated, more

intemporal form.

§

When someone complains that his life has come to nothing, we

need merely remind him that life itself is in an analogous

situation, if not worse.

§

Works die: fragments, not having lived, cannot die either.

§

Horror of the accessory paralyzes me. Now, the accessory is the

essence of communication (and hence of thought), it is the flesh

C ]

and blood of speech and writing. Trying to renounce it is like

fornicating with a skeleton.

§

The satisfaction we take from performing a task (especially when

we have no belief in the task and even disdain it) shows to what

degree we still belong to the rabble.

§

My merit is not to be totally ineffectual but to have wanted to be.

§

If I do not deny my origins, it is because it is ultimately better to

be nothing at all than a pretense of something.

§

A mixture of automatism and whim, man is a robot with defects,

a robot out of order. If only he remains so, and is not some day

put right!

§

What every man, whether he has patience or not, has always

expected is, of course, death. But he knows this only when death

comes . . . , when it is too late to be able to enjoy it.

§

Man certainly began praying long before he knew how to speak,

for the pangs he must have suffered upon leaving animality,

upon denying it, could not have been endured without grunts

and groans, prefigurations, premonitory signs of prayer.

C ^69 }

§

In art and in everything, the commentator is generally better

informed and more lucid than the subject of commentary. This is

the advantage the murderer has over his victim.

§

"Let us offer our thanks to the gods, who keep no one in this life

by force.” Seneca (whose style, according to Caligula, lacks

cement) is open to the essential, and this not so much because of

his alHliation with stoicism as because of his eight-years’ exile in

Corsica, particularly desolate at the time. This ordeal conferred

upon a frivolous writer a dimension he would not have acquired

in the normal course of events; it relieved him of the aid of a

sickness.

§

Mine still, this moment passes by, escapes me, and is buried

forever. Am I going to commit myself with the next.^ I make up

my mind: it is here, it belongs to me—and already is long since

pst. From morning to night, fabricating the past!

§

After having, to no avail, tried everything among the mystics, he

had only one recourse: to foxmder in wisdom. . . .

Once you ask yourself so-called philosophical questions and

employ the inevitable jargon, you assume a superior, aggressive

manner, and this in a realm where, the insoluble being de rigueur,

humility should be also. This anomaly is merely apprent: the

[ ]

more formidable the questions you confront, the more you lose

your head: ultimately you bestow on yourself the dimensions

they possess. If the pride of theologians "stinks” even more than

that of the philosophers, it is because one docs not concern

oneself with God with impunity: one reaches the point of

arrogating to oneself certain of His attributes—^thc worst, of

course.

At peace with itself and the world, the mind atrophies. It

flourishes at the slightest contrariety. Thought is really no more

than the shameless exploitation of our embarrassments and our

disgraces.

s

This body, once loyal, disavows me, no longer follows me, has

ceased to be my accomplice. Rejected, betrayed, discarded, what

would become of me if old infirmities, to prove their allegiance,

didn’t come to keep me company at every hour of the day and

night?

"Distinguished” people do not invent in matters of language.

On the contrary, the ones who excel there arc those who

improvise out of boastfulness or who wallow in a sentimental

coarseness. Such men arc "natures,” they live on the level of

words. Is verbal genius, then, the concomitant of low haunts? In

any case, it requires a certain minimum of odium.

We should keep to a single langtugc, and deepen our knowledge

[ ]

of it at every opportunity. For a writer, gossiping with a

concierge in his own is much more profitable than arguing with

a scholar in a foreign tongue.

§

". . . the feeling of being everything and the evidence of being

nothing.” I happened across this phrase in my youth, and was

overwhelmed by it. Everything I felt in those days, and

everything I would feel from then on, was summed up in this

extraordinary banal formula, the synthesis of expansion and

failure, ecstasy and impasse. Most often it is not in a paradox but

in a truism that a revelation appears.

s

Poetry excludes calculation and premeditation: it is incomple¬

tion, forebcxling, abyss. Neither a singsong geometry, nor a

succession of bloodless adjectives. We are too deeply wounded

and too despondent, too weary and too barbarous in our

weariness, to appreciate, yet, the craft.

%

We cannot do without the notion of progress, yet it does not

deserve our attention. It is like the "meaning” of life. Life must

have one. But is there any which docs not turn out, upon

examination, to be ludicrous.?

Trees are massacred, houses go up—ftices, faces everywhere. Man

is spreacting. Man is the cancer of the earth.

§

[ ]

There is something enveloping and voluptuous about the notion

of fatality: it keeps you warm.

A troglodyte that will have passed through all the nuances of

satiety. . . .

The pleasure of slandering yourself greatly exceeds that of being

slandered.

§

Better than anyone I know the danger of being bom with a thirst

for everything. A poisoned gift, a vengeance of Providence. Thus

encumbered, I could get nowhere, on the spiritual level, of

course, the only one that matters. Anything but accidental, my

failure is identified with my essence.

§

The mystics and their "collected works.” When one addresses

oneself to God, and to God alone, as they claim to do, one

should be careful not to write. God doesn’t read. . . ,

Each time I think of the Essential, I seem to glimpse it in silence

or explosion, in stupor or exclamation. Never in speech.

When you meditate all day on the inopportuneness of birth,

everything you plan and everything you perform seems pathetic.

[ m }

futile. You are like a madman who, cured, does nothing but

think of the crisis firom which he has emerged, the "dream” he

has left behind; he keeps harking back to it, so that his cure is of

no benefit to him whatever.

$

The appetite for torment is for some what the lure of gain is for

others.

$

Man started out on the wrong foot. The misadventure in

Paradise was the first consequence. The rest had to follow.

§

I shall never understand how we can live knowing that we are

not—to say the least!—eternal.

The ideal being? An angel ravaged by humor.

When, after a series of questions about desire, disgust, and

serenity, Buddha was asked: "What is the goal, the final

meaning of nirvana.^” he did not answer. He smiled. There has

been a great deal of commentary on that smile, instead of seeing

it as a normal reaction to a pointless question. It is what we do

when confronted by a child’s why. We smile, because no answer

is conceivable, because the answer would be even more

meaningless than the question. Children admit no limits to

anything; they always want to see beyond, to see what there is

[ m ]

afterward. But there is no afterward. Nirvana is a limit, the limit.

It is liberation, supreme impasse. . . .

$

Existence might well have had some attraction before the advent

of noise—^let us say, before the neolithic age. When will he

come, the man who can rid us of all men.?

For all we tell ourselves about not oudiving a stillborn babe,

instead of clearing out at the first opportunity, we cling, with

lunatic energy, to one day more.

§

Lucidity does not extirpate the desire to live—for from it, lucidity

merely makes us unsuited to life.

$

God: a disease we imagine we are cured of because no one dies of

it noways.

§

Unconsciousness is the secret, the "vital principle” of life. ... It

is the sole recourse against the self, against the disease of being

individualized, against the debilitating efifect of the state of

consciousness, a state so formidable, so demanding, that it must

be reserved for athletes alone.

Any success, in any realm, involves an inner impoverishment. It

[ ]

makes us forget what we are, it deprives us of the torment of our

limits.

s

I have never taken myself for a being. A non-citizen, a marginal

type, a nothing who exists only by the excess, by the

superabundance of his nothingness.

§

To have foundered somewhere between the epigram and the

sigh!

§

Suffering opens our eyes, helps us to see what we would not have

seen otherwise. Hence it is useful only to knowledge and, except

for that, serves only to poison existence. Which, one may add in

passing, favors knowledge further. "He has suffered—hence he

has understood.” This is all we can say of a victim of disease,

injustice, or of any kind of misfortune. Suffering improves no one

(except those who were already goaf), it is forgotten as all things

are forgotten, it does not enter into "humanity’s patrimony” nor

preserve itself in any way at all—it wastes itself as everything is

wasted. Once again, it serves only to open our eyes.

Man has said what he had to say. He should rest now. But

refuses, and though he has entered into his "survivor” phase, he

fidgets as if he were on the threshold of an astonishing career.

§

[ ]

A cry means something only in a created universe. If there is no

creator, what is the good of calling attention to yotirself?

§

Nerval: "Having reached the Place de la Concorde, my thought

was to kill myself.” Nothing in all French literature has haunted

me as much as that.

In everything, only the beginning and the outcome matter, doing

and undoing. The way toward being and the way out of

being—that is breathing, whereas being as such is merely an

asphyxiator.

With the passage of time, I am convinced that my first years

were a paradise. But I am undoubtedly mistaken. If there was

ever a paradise, I must look for it earlier than all my years.

s

A golden rule: to leave an incomplete image of oneself . . .

The more man is man, the more he loses in reality: it is the price

he must pay for his distinct essence. If he managed to achieve the

limits of his singularity, if he were to become man totally,

absolutely, there would no longer be anything in him which

would suggest any kind of existence at all.

§

C m ]

Silence in the face of the decrees of fate, the rediscovery, after

centuries of thundering prayer, of the ancient Be still —there is

our aspiration, there our struggle, if such a word is appropriate to

a foreseen and accepted defeat.

§

Every success is ignominious; we never get over it—in our own

eyes, of course.

§

The pangs of truth about ourselves are more than we can endure.

How pitiable the man (if such a being exists) who no longer lies

to himself!

I shall no longer read the sages—they have done me too much

harm. I should have surrendered to my instincts, let my madness

flourish. I have done just the opposite, I have put on the mask of

reason, and the mask has ended by replacing my face and

usurping all the rest.

§

In my moments of megalomania, I tell myself that it is

impossible my diagnoses should be mistaken, that I have only to

be patient, to wait until the end, until the advent of the last man,

the one being in a position to substantiate me. . . .

§

The notion that it would have been better never to exist is

among those which meet with the most opposition. Every man,

incapable of seeing himself except from inside, regards himself as

[ ^78 ]

necessary, even indispensable, every man feels and perceives

himself as an absolute reality, as a whole, as the whole. The

moment we identify ourselves entirely with our own being, we

react like God, we are God.

It is only when we live at once within and on the margins of

ourselves that we can conceive, quite calmly, that it would have

been preferable that the accident we are should never have

occurred.

§

If I followed my natural inclination, I should blow up the world.

And it is because I lack the courage to follow it that, out of

penitence, I tty to stupefy myself with the company of those who

have found peace.

s

A writer has left his mark on us not because we have read him a

great deal but because we have thought of him mote than is

warranted. I have not frequented Baudelaire or Pascal particu¬

larly, butJ^lwuK jnot stopped\_ drinking of dieir mi^ries, which

have accompanied me everywhere as feithfiilly as my own.

At each age, more or less distinct signs warn us that it is time to

decamp. We hesitate, we procrastinate, convinced that, once old

age has come at last, these signs will become so clear that any

further vacillation would be unsuitable. Clear they are, indeed,

but we lack sufficient vigor to perform the one decent action a

living man can commit.

s

C ^79 }

The name of an actress famous in my childhood suddenly occurs

to me. Who still remembers her.? Much more than any

philosophical meditation, it is details of this sort which reveal

the scandalous reality and unreality of time.

s

If we manage to last in spite of everything, it is because our

infirmities are so many and so contradiaory that they cancel each

other out.

The only moments I think of with relief are those when I sought

to be nothing for anyone, when I blushed at the notion of

leaving the slightest trace in the memory of a single human

being. . . .

§

Indispensable condition for spiritual fulfillment: to have always

placed the wrong bet.

If we hope to see the number of our disappointments or our

frenzies diminish, then on every occasion we must remember

that we are here to make each other wretched, and that to rebel

against this state of affairs is to undermine the very foundations

of communal life.

A disease is ours only from the moment we ate told its name, the

moment when the rope is put around our neck. . . .

§

[ iSo }

All my thoughts are turned K>ward resignation, and yet not a day

passes when I &il to concoct some ultimatum to God or to

anyone. . . .

$

When every man has realized that his birth is a defeat, existence,

endurable at last, will seem like the day after a stirrender, like the

relief and the repose of the conquered.

$

As long as we believed in the Devil, everything that happened

was intelligible and clear; now that we no longer do, we must

look for a new explanation for each event, an accoimting that

will be as laborious as it is arbitrary, one which intrigues

everyone and satisfies no one.

§

The Truth we do not always pursue; but when we do so

passionately, violently, we hate whatever is expmston, whatever

derives from words and forms, all the noble lies, even further

ftom the truth than the vulgar ones^

§

Only what proceeds from emotion or from cynicism is real. All

the test is ”talent.”

Vitality and rejection go hand in hand. Indulgence, a sign of

anemia, suppresses laughter, since it bows before all forms of

dissimilarity.

§

[ xSx ]

Our physiological miseries help us to envisage the future with

some confidence: they dispense us ftom tormenting ourselves

overmuch, they do their best so that none of our long-range

projects has time to wear out all our available energies.

The Empire was falling, the Barbarians were on the move. . . .

What was to be done, except to escape the age? Happy moment,

when there was still somewhere to go, when the empty places

were accessible and welcoming! We have been dispossessed of

everything, even the desert.

s

For the man who has got in the nasty habit of unmasking

appearances, event and misunderstanding are synonyms. To make

for the essential is to throw up the game, to admit one is

defeated.

X is undoubtedly right to compare himself to a "volcano,” but

wrong to go into details.

§

The poor, by thinking unceasingly of money, reach the point of

losing the spiritual advantages of non-possession, thereby sinking

as low as the rich.

The early Greeks regarded the psyche as no more than air, wind,

or at best smoke, and one readily agrees with them every time

C ]

one wearies of foraging in one’s own ego or that of others,

searching for strange and, if possible, suspect depths.

§

The final step toward indifference is the destruction of the very

notion of indifference.

Walking in a forest between two hedges of ferns transfigured by

autumn—that is a triumph. What are ovations and applause

beside it.?

§

To deprecate your own kind, to vilify and pulverize them, to

attack their foundations, to undermine your very basis, to destroy

your point of departure, to punish your origins . . . , to curse

all those non-elect, lesser breeds, tom between imposture and

elegy, whose sole mission is not to have one . . .

§

Having destroyed all my connections, burned my bridges, I

should feel a certain freedom, and in fiict I do, one so intense I

am afiaid to rejoice in it.

When the habit of seeing things as they are turns into a mania,

we lament the madman we have been and are no longer.

C ^53 ]

Someone we regard highly comes closer to us when he performs

an action unworthy of him—thereby he releases us from the

calvary of veneration. And starting from that moment we feel a

true attachment to him.

Nothing is worse than the coarseness and meanness we

perpetrate out of timidity.

Faced with the Nile and the Pyramids, Flaubert thought of

nothing but Normandy, according to one witness—nothing but

the landscapes and manners of the future Madam Bovary.

Nothing but that seemed to exist for him. To imagine is to limit

oneself, to exclude: without an excessive capacity for rejection,

no plan, no work, no way of realizing anything.

What in any way resembles a victory seems to me so

dishonorable that I can do battle, in whatever circumstance, only

with the firm intention of gaining the under hand. I have passed

the stage where beings matter, and I see no reason to struggle in

known worlds.

§

[ ^87 }

Philosophy is taught only in the agora, in a garden, or at home.

The lecmre chair is the grave of philosophy, the death of any

living thought, the dais is the mind in mourning.

s

That I can still desire proves that I lack an exact perception of

reality, that I am distracted, that I am a thousand miles from the

Truth. "Man,” we read in the Dhammapada, "is prey to desire

only because he does not see things as they are.”

s

I was shaking with rage: my honor was at stake. The hours

passed, dawn was approaching. Was I going to ruin my night

because of a trifle? Try as I would to minimize the incident, the

reasons I invented to calm myself remained ineffectual. That

anyone would dare do such a thing to me! I was on the point of

opening the window and screaming like a madman, when the

image of our planet spinning like a top suddenly seized my mind.

My anger subsided at once.

s

Death is not altogether useless: after all, it is because of death

that we may be able to recuperate the prenatal space, our only

space. . . .

s

How right it was to begin the day, as men once did, with a

prayer, a call for help! Ignorant of whom to address ourselves to,

we will end by groveling before the first cracked god to come

along.

§

[ ^88 ]

Acute consciousness of having a body—^that is the absence of

health.. . . Which is as much as to say that I have never been

well.

$

Everything is deception—I’ve always known that. Yet this

certitude has afforded me no relief, except at the moments when

it was violently present to my mind. ...

The perception of the Precarious raised to the level of vision, of

mystical experience.

The only way of enduring one disaster after the next is to love

the very idea of disaster: if we succeed, there arc no further

surprises, we arc superior to whatever occurs, wc arc invincible

victims.

In very powerful sensations of pain, much mote than in very

slight ones, wc observe ourselves, wc divide into an external

wimess and the moaning, screaming sufferer. Everything which

borders on torment wakens the psychologist in each of us, as

well as the experimenter: wc want to sec how far wc can go in

the intolerable.

What is injustice compared to disease? True, wc may find it

unjust to be sick. Moreover that is how each of us reacts, without

troubling as to whether he is right or wrong. Sickness ft; nothing

[ }

more real than disease. If we call it unjust, we must dare to do as

much with Being itself—we must speak, then, of the injustice of

existing.

The Creadon, as it was, amounted to little enough; tinkered

with, it was worth still less. If only it had been left to its truth,

its primal nullity! The Messiah to come—the real one—is

understandably slow about putting in an appearance. The task

that awaits him is not going to be an easy one: how will he

manage to deliver humanity from the masua of amelioration.^

When, getting too used to ourselves, we begin to loathe

ourselves, we soon realize that we arc worse off, that self-hatred

actually strengthens self-attachment.

I do not interrupt him, I let him weigh each man’s merits,

waiting for him to tell me off. . . . His incomprehension of

others is astoxmding. Subtle and ingenuous both, he judges you

as if you were an entity or a category. Time having had no hold

over him, he cannot admit that I am outside of whatever he

forbids, that nothing of what he favors still concerns me.

Dialogue becomes pointless with someone who escapes the

procession of the years. I ask those I love to be kind enough to

grow old.

§

Panic in the face of anything—of presence, of the void, of

anything. Original panic.

[ xpo ]

God is, even if He isn’t.

§

D is incapable of assimilating Evil. He acknowledges its

existence, but cannot incorporate it into his mind. If he were to

emerge from hell he would be oblivious of his whereabouts, so

remote is he in his thinking from what falls afoul. . . . Not the

faintest trace of all he has endured in his ideas. Occasionally he

has reflexes—no more than that—the reflexes of a wounded man.

Qosed to the negative, he does not discern that all we possess is

merely a capital of non-being. Yet more than one of his gestures

reveals a demonic spirit—demonic imawares. He is a destroyer

obscured and sterilized by Good.

Curiosity to measure our progress into failure is the only reason

we have to grow older. We thought we had reached the limit,

we thought the horizon was blocked forever, we lamented in the

thrall of our discouragement. And now we realize that we can

fall sdll lower, that there is something new, that all hope is not

lost, that it is possible to sink a little further and thus to

postpone the danger of getting stuck, even paralyzed. . . .

§

"Life seems good only to the madman,” observed Hegesias, a

Cyrenaic philosopher, some twenty-three centuries ago. These

are almost the only words of his we have. . . . Of all oeuvres to

reinvent, his comes first on my list.

$

C ^9^ }

No one approaches the condition of a sa^ if he has not had the

good luck to be forgotten in his lifetime.

To think is to imdermine—to undermine oneself. Action involves

fewer risks, for it fills the interval between things and ourselves,

whereas reflection dangerously widens it.

... So long as I give myself up to physical exercise, manual

labor, I am happy, fulfilled; once I stop, I am seized by dizziness,

and I can think of nothing but giving up for good.

s

At the lowest point of ourselves, when we touch bottom and fxl

the abyss, we ate suddenly raised up—defense-reaction or absurd

pride—^by the sense of being superior to God. The grandiose and

impure aspect of the temptation to be done with it all.

A broadcast about wolves, with recordings of their howls. What

a language! The most heartrending I know, and I shall never

forget it. From now on, in moments of excessive solitude, I need

merely recall those sounds to have the sense of belonging to a

community.

From the moment defeat was in sight. Hitler spoke of nothing

but victory. He believed in it—^he behaved, in any case, as if he

believed in it—and remained to the end walled up in his

optimism, his faith. Everything was crumbling around him,

every day belied his hopes but, persisting in his trust in the

impossible, blinding himself as only the incurable can, he had

C ^9^ }

the strength to go on to the end, to invent one honor after the

next, and to continue beyond his madness, even beyond his

destiny. Which is why we can say of him—of the man who

failed so utterly—that he realized himself better than any other

mortal.

"Aprk tnoi k dUug^\* is the unavowed motto of every person: if

we admit that others survive us, it is in the hope that they will

be punished for it.

§

A zoologist who observed gorillas in their native habitat was

amazed by the uniformity of their life and their vast idleness.

Hours and hours without doing anything . . . Was boredom

unknown to them?

This is indeed a question raised by a human, a busy ape. Far

from fleeing monotony, animals crave it, and what they most

dread is to see it end. For it ends only to be replaced by fear, the

cause of all activity.

Inaction is divine; yet it is against inaction that man has

rebelled. Man alone, in nature, is incapable of enduring

monotony, man alone wants something to happen at all

costs—^something, anything. . . . Thereby he shows himself

unworthy of his ancestor the need for novelty is the characteris\*

tic of an alieiuted gorilla.

§

We come closer and closer to the Unbreathable. When we have

reached it, that will be the great Day. Alas, we arc only on the

eve. . . .

C m ]

§

A nation achieves and retains pre-eminence as long as it accepts

conventions which are necessarily clumsy, as long as it is given

over to prejudices without regarding them as such. Once it calls

them by their name, everything is unmasked, everything is

compromised

To seek to rule, to take a role, to make the law—such things

cannot be done without a powerful dose of stupidity: history, in

its essence, is stupid. ... It continues, it advances, because the

nations liquidate their prejudices one after the other. If they were

to be rid of them all at the same time, there would be nothing

left but a blessed universal disintegration.

§

One cannot live without motives. I have no motives left, and I

am living.

§

I was in perfcrt health, I felt better than ever. Suddenly I was

cold, so cold that I was sure there was no cure for it. What was

happening to me? Yet this was not the first time I had been in

the grip of such a sensation. But in the past I had endured it

without trying to imderstand This time I wanted to know, and

now. ... I abandoned one hypothesis after the next: it could

not be sickness; not the shadow of a symptom to cling to. What

was I m do? I was baffled, incapable of finding even the trace of

an explanation, when an idea occurred to me—and this was a real

relief—that what I was feeling was merely a version of the great,

final cold—that it was simply death exercising, rehearsing. . . .

§

C m ]

In paradise, objects and beings, assaulted by light from all sides,

cast no shadow. Which is to say that they lack reality, like

anything that is unbroached by darkness and deserted by death.

Our first intuitions are the true ones. What I thought of so many

things in my first youth seems to me increasingly right, and after

so many detours and distractions, I now come back to it,

aggrieved that I could have erected my existence on the ruin of

those revelations.

I remember a place I have been only if I have had the luck to

experience utter misery there.

At the street fair, watching a tumbler grimacing, shouting,

exhausting himself, I told myself that he was doing his duty,

whereas I was evading mine. . . .

To manifest oneself, to produce in any realm is the characteristic

of a more or less camouflaged fanatic. If we do not regard

ourselves as entrusted with a mission, existence is difficult;

action, impossible.

The certitude that there is no salvation is a form of salvation, in

fact it is salvation. Starting from here, we might organize our

own life as well as construct a philosophy of history: the

insoluble as solution, as the only way out. . . .

[ m ]

§

My weaknesses have spoiled my existence, but it is thanks to

them that I exist, that I imagine I exist.

Man interests me only since he has ceased to believe in himself.

While he was in his ascending phase, he deserved no more than

indifference. Now he provokes a new sentiment, a special

sympathy: compassionate horror.

For all the superstitions and shackles I have rid myself of, I

cannot regard myself as a free man, remote from everything. A

mania for desistance, having survived the other passions, refuses

to leave me: it torments me, it perseveres, it demands that I

continue renouncing, withdrawing. But from what.? What is left

to reject.? I ponder the question. My role is over, my career

finished, and yet nothing has changed in my life, I am at the

same point in it, I must still desist, still and forever.

[ ^96 }

No position is so £filse as having understood and still remaining

alive.

§

When we consider coldly that portion of duration granted to

each of us, it seems equally satis^ory and equally ludicrotis,

whether it lasts a day or a century.

"I’ve had my time’’—no expression can be uttered more

appropriately at any moment of life, including the first.

§

Death is the providence of those who will have had the taste and

the talent for fiasco—the recompense of all who have come to

nothing, who wanted not to. . . . It warrants them, it is their

way of winning. On the other hand, for the others, those who

have labored to succeed, and who have succeeded: what a denial,

what a slap in the face!

§

An Egyptian monk, after fifteen years of complete solitude,

received a packet of letters from his family and friends. He did

not open them, he flung them into the fire in order to escape the

assault of memory. We cannot sustain communion with ourself

and our thoughts if we allow ghosts to appear, to prevail. The

[ ^99 }

desert signifies not so much a new life as the death of the p>ast: at

last we have escaped our own history. In society, no less than in

the Thebaid, the letters we write, and those we receive, testify to

the feet that we arc in chains, that we have broken none of the

bonds, that we arc merely slaves and deserve to be so.

A little patience and the moment will come when nothing more

will be possible, when humanity, thrown back on itself, cannot

take a single step in any direction. Though we may manage a

general sense of this unprecedented spectacle, we should like

details, . . . And we are afiraid we will miss the festivities, not

being young enough to have the luck to attend.

Whether it is spoken by a grocer or a philosopher, the word

being, apparently so rich, so tempting, so charged with signifi¬

cance, in feet means nothing at all; incredible that a man in his

right mind can use it on any occasion whatever.

Getting up in the middle of the night, I walked around my room

with the certainty of being chosen and criminal, a double

privilege natural to the sleepless, revolting or incomprehensible

for the captives of daytime logic.

§

It is not given to everyone to have had an unhappy childhood.

Mine was much more than happy—it was ertsumed. I cannot find

a better adjective to designate what was triumphant about even

its pangs. That had to be paid for, that could not go unpunished.

[ aoo }

$

If I am so fond of Dostoevsky’s correspondence, it is because he

speaks in it of nothing but sickness and money, the only

"burning” subjects. All the rest is merely flourishes and chaff.

§

In live hundred thousand years, it appears that England will be

entirely submerged. If I were an Englishman I should lay down

my arms at once.

Each of us has his unit of time. For one it is the day, the week,

the month, or the year; for another, it is a decade, or a century.

. . . These units, still on the human scale, are compatible with

any plan, any task.

There arc some, however, who take time itself for their unit,

and sometimes raise themselves above it: for them, what task,

what plan deserves to be taken seriously? A man who sees too

far, who is contemporary with the whole future, can no longer act

or even move. . . .

s

An obsession with the precarious accompanies me in every

circumstance: mailing a letter this morning, I told myself it was

addressed to a mortal.

§

One absolute experience, apropos of anything, and you seem, in

your own eyes, a survivor.

I have always lived with the awareness of the impossibility of

[ 201 ]

living. And what has made existence endurable to me is my

curiosity as to how I would get from one minute, one day, one

year to the next.

The first condition for becoming a saint is to love bores, to

endure visits. . . .

§

To shake people up, to wake them from their sleep, while

knowing you are committing a crime and that it would be a

thousand times better to leave them alone, since when they

wake, too, you have nothing to offer them. . . .

$

Port-Royal. In that green vale, so many conflicts and lacerations

on account of a few bagatelles! Any belief, after a certain time,

seems gratuitous and incomprehensible, as does the counter¬

belief which has destroyed it. Only the stupefaction which both

provoke remains.

A poor wretch who fieb time, who is its victim, its martyr, who

experiences nothing else, who b time at each moment, knows

what a metaphysician or a poet divines only by grace of a

collapse or a miracle.

§

Those inner rumblings which come to nothing, and by which we

are reduced to the state of a grotesque volcano.

s

{ 202 ]

Each time I am gripped by a fit of rage, I begin by being

aggrieved and disgusted, then I tell myself: what luck, what a

windhill! I am still alive, I am still one of those flesh-and-blood

ghosts. . . .

There was no end to the telegram I had just received All my

pretentions, all my inadequacies were in it. Certain filings I

myself scarcely stispected were revealed, were proclaimed! What

prescience, and what detail! At the end of the interminable

indictment, no clue, no trace that permitted me to identify the

sender. Who could it be.^ And why this haste, this unaccustomed

means of communication? Who ever spoke his mind with such

rigor in his grievance? Where did he come from, this omniscient

judge who dared not name himself, this coward in possession of

all my secrets, this inquisitor who allowed no extenuating

circumstances, not even the ones granted by the most hardened

torturers? I too might have made a misstep or two, I too am

entitled to some indulgence. I cringe before the inventory of my

defects, I choke, I cannot bear this procession of truths. . . .

Cursed telegram—I tear it up, and awakem . . .

To have opinions is inevitable, is natural; to have convictions is

less so. Each time I meet someone who has convictions, I wonder

what intellectual vice, what flaw has caused him to acquire such

a thing. However legitimate this question, my habit of raising it

spoils the pleasure of conversation for me, gives me a bad

conscience, makes me hateful in my own eyes.

$

£ 303 ]

Once upon a time writing seemed important to me. Of all my

superstitions, this one seems the most compromising and the

most incomprehensible.

§

I have abused the word disgmt. But what other can I use to

indicate a state in which exasperation is continually corrected by

lassitude, and lassitude by exasperation?

§

All evening, having tried to define him, we reviewed all the

euphemisms which allow us not to pronounce, in his regard, the

word perfidy. He is not perfidious, he is merely tortuous,

diabolically tortuous, and at the same time innocent, naive, even

angelic. Imagine, if you can, a mixture of Aliosha and

Smerdyakov.

§

When you no longer believe in yourself, you stop producing or

struggling, you even stop raising (questions or answering them,

whereas it is the contrary which should have occurred, since it is

precisely at this moment that, being free of all bonds, you are

likely to grasp the truth, discern what is real and what is not. But

once your belief in your own role, or your own lot, has dried up,

you become incurious about everything else, even the "truth,”

though you are closer to it than ever before.

§

In Paradise, I would not last a "season” or even a day; then how

account for my nostalgia for it? I don’t account for it, it has

inhabited me always, it was part of me before I was.

[ ^04 ]

§

Anyone may now and then have the sense of occupying only a

point and a moment; to have such a sense day and night, hour by

hour, is less frequent, and it is from this experience, this datum,

that one turns toward nirvana or sarcasm—or toward both at

once.

Although I have sworn never to sin against blessed concision, I

am still in complicity with words, and if I am seduced by silence

I dare not enter it, I merely prowl on its peripheries.

§

We should establish a religion’s degree of truth according to

what it makes of the Devil: the more eminent the rank it accords

him, the more it testifies that it is concerned with reality, that it

rejects deceit and lies, that it Is serious, that it sets more store by

verification than by distraction or consolation.

§

Nothing deserves to be undone, doubtless because nothing

deserved to be done. Hence we become detached from every¬

thing, from the original as well as from the ultimate, from

advent as well as from collapse.

§

We know, we feel that everything has been said, that there is

nothing left to say. But we feel less that this tmth affords

language a strange, even unsettling status which redeems it.

Words are ultimately saved because they have ceased living.

[ }

§

The enormous good and the enormous harm I have drawn from

my ruminations on the condition of the dead.

The undeniable advantage of growing old is to be able to observe

at close range the slow and methodical degradation of our

organs; they are all beginning to go, some obviously, others

discreetly. They become detached from the body, as the body

becomes detached from us: it escapes us, flees us, no longer

belongs to us. It is a traitor we cannot even denounce, since it

stops nowhere and puts itself in no one’s service.

I never tire of reading about the hermits, preferably about those

said to be "weary of seeking God.” I am dazzled by the failures

of the Desert.

If, somehow, Rimbaud had been able to go on (as likely as

imagining the day after the apocalypse, or a Nietzsche scribbling

away after Ecce Homo), he would have ended by reining in,,

calming down, by glossing his own explosions, explicating

them—and himself. A sacrilege in every case, excess of

consciousness being only a form of profanation.

I have followed only one idea all the way—the idea that

everything man achieves necessarily turns against him. The idea

is not a new one, but I have lived it with a power of conviction, a

[ ao6 }

desperation which no hinaticism, no delirium has ever ap¬

proached. There is no martyrdom, no dishonor I would not suffer

for it, and I would exchange it for no other truth, no other

revelation.

§

To go still further than Buddha, to raise oneself above nirvana,

to learn to do without it . . . , to be stopped by nothing, not

even by the notion of deliverance, regarding it as a mere

way-station, an embarrassment, an eclipse . . .

My weakness for doomed dynasties, for decaying empires, for the

Montezumas of forever, for those who believe in signs, for the

lacerated and pursued, for the drunkards of the ineluctable, for

the jeopardized, the devoured, for all who are waiting for their

executioner . . .

§

I pass without stopping at the grave of that critic whose vitriolic

remarks I have so often pondered. Nor at the grave of the poet

who spent his life dreaming of his ultimate dissolution. Other

names pursue me, alien names linked to a pitiless and pacifying

wisdom, to a vision calculated to free the mind from all

obsessions, even funereal ones. Nagarjuna, Chandrakird, San-

tideva—unparalleled swashbucklers, dialecticians belabored by

the obsession of salvation, acrobats and apostles of Vacu¬

ity ..., for whom, sages among the sages, the universe was

only a word. ...

§

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No matter how many autumns I observe the spectacle of these

leaves so eager to fall, it sdll surprises me each time—a surprise

in which "a chill down the spine” would prevail were it not for

the last-minute explosion of a gaiety whose origin I cannot

account for.

There are certain moments when, remote as we are from any

faith, we can conceive of only God as our interlocutor. To

address ourselves elsewhere seems an impossibility, a madness.

Solitude, in its extreme reaches, requires a form of conversation,

also extreme.

Man gives off a special odor: of all the animals, he alone smells

of the corpse.

§

The hours would not pass; dawn seemed remote, inconceivable.

Actually it was not dawn I was waiting for but oblivion of those

refractory hours which refused to stir. Lucky the man condemned

to death, I told myself, who on the eve of his execution is at least

sure of having one good night!

Will I be able to stand another minute? will I collapse? If there

is one interesting sensation, it is the one which gives us the

foretaste of epilepsy.

§

A man who survives himself despises himself without acknowl-

[ ao8 }

edging as much, sometimes without even knowing as much.

$

When you live past the age of rebellion, and you still rebel, you

seem to yourself a kind of senile Lucifer.

If we did not bear the stigmata of life, how easy it would be to

steal away, and how well everything would go by itself!

§

Better than anyone I am able to forgive on the spot. My desire

for revenge comes late, too late, when memory of the oflense is

&ding and when, the incitation to action having become

virtually nonexistent, I have only one recourse: to deplore my

"good feelings.”

Only to the degree that our moments afford us some contact

with death do we have some chance to glimpse on what insanity

all existence is based.

§

Ultimately, it is entirely a matter of indifference whether we arc

something, even if we are God. On this, with a little pressure,

almost everyone might be brought to agree. But how does it

happen then that everyone aspires to further life, to additional

being, and that there is no one who strives to sink, to descend

toward the ideal de&ult.^

§

C aop ]

According to z belief rather widespread among certain tribes, the

dead speak the same language as the living, except that for them

words have a meaning contrary to the one they had: large means

small, near £u, black white. . . .

Does dying come down to that? Still, better than any funereal

invention, this complete reversal of language indicates what is

unwonted, dumbfounding about death. . . .

I am perfectly willing to believe in man’s future, but how is one

to manage it when still, after all, in possession of one’s faculties?

It would take their virtually complete collapse, and even

then . . . !

s

A thought which is not secretly stamped by fatality is

interchangeable, worthless, is merely thought . . .

$

In Turin, at the beginning of his madness, Nietzsche would rush

to his minor, look at himself, turn away, look again. In the train

that was taking him to Basel, the one thing he always asked for

was a mirror. He no longer knew who he was, kept looking for

himself, and this man, so eager to ptotea his identity, so thirsty

for himself, had no instrument at hand but the clumsiest, the

most lamentable of expedients.

No one more useless, and more unusable, than I: a datum I must

quite simply accept, without taking any pride in the foct

C 1

whatever. So long as this is not the case, the consciousness of my

uselessness will serve for nothing.

Whatever the nightmare, one takes a role in it, one is

the protagonist, one is something. It is at night that the

disinherited man triumphs. If we were to suppress bad dreams,

there would be mass revolutions.

$

Terror of the future is always grafted onto the thine to experience

that terror.

Suddenly I was alone with ... I felt, that afternoon of my

childhood, that a very serious event had just occurred. It was my

first aw^ening, the first indication, the premonitory sign of

consciousness. Before that I had been only a />eifig. From that

moment, I was more and less than that. Each begins with a

rift and a revelation.

Birth and chain are synonyms. To see the light of day, to see

shackles . . .

To say ’ Everything is illusory” is to court illusion, to accord it a

high degree of reality, the highest in fact, whereas on the

contrary one wanted to discredit it. The solution? To stop

proclaiming or denouncing it, serving it by thinking about it.

The very idea that disqualifies all ideas is a fetter.

[ ]

If we could sleep twenty-four hours a day, we would soon return

to the primordial slime, the beatitude of that perfect torpor

before Genesis—the dream of every consciousness sick of itself.

§

Not to be bom is undoubtedly the best plan of all. Unformnately

it is within no one’s reach.

§

No one has loved this world more than I, and yet if it had been

offered to me, even as a child, on a platter, I should have

shrieked, 'Too late, too late!”

§

"What’s wrong—^what’s the matter, with you?” Nothing, noth¬

ing’s the matter, Fve merely taken a leap outside my fate, and

now I don’t know where to turn, what to run for. . . .

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Cioron takes the unusual positionthotit is not in the pros¬

pect of death that disaster lies but in the fact of birth,

"that laughable accident." In the lucid, aphoristic style

that characterizes his work, Cioran writes of time and

death, God and religion, suicide and suffering, and the

temptation to silence.

A few of Cioron's aphorisms:

"In the fact of being born there is such an absence of

necessity that when you think about it a little more than

usual you are left...with a foolish grin." \_

" n

"As a young man, I bored myself to death, but I believed

in myself. If I hod no suspicion of the dreary creature I

was to become, I knew nonetheless that, whatever hap¬

pened, perplexity would not desert me, thotl would keep

watch over my years with all the zeal and exactitude of

Providence."