

PARIS PEASANT

BY

LOUIS ARAGON

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

SIMON WATSON TAYLOR

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EXACT CHANGE

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## INTRODUCTION

BY

SIMON WATSON TAYLOR

The surrealist movement is usually dated from 1924: in October of that year André Breton published his *Surrealist Manifesto*, which was followed, two months later, by the first issue of the newly organized group's review *La Révolution Surréaliste*. But the origins go back to 1918, the year when Breton, Aragon and Philippe Soupault first met; by March 1919 the three friends had launched the review *Littérature* which was to absorb the remaining energies of Dada and lay the foundations for surrealism.

The reasons for Aragon's parting with Breton and the surrealists in 1930 are complex. Although the linked episodes of Aragon's visit to Russia, and the threat of prosecution resulting from his supposedly seditious poem "Red Front", have been variously documented from the points of view of the par-

ties involved,\* some aspects of the drama remain obscure. There is no doubt, though, about the bitterness and finality of the break, and this in itself lends added poignancy to the remarkable assessment of his old comrade-in-arms that Breton made twenty-two years later.† Evoking the youthful Aragon of the first years of their friendship, Breton had this to say:

I still recall the extraordinary role that Aragon played in our daily strolls through Paris. The localities that we passed through in his company, even the most colourless ones, were positively transformed by a spellbinding romantic inventiveness that never faltered and that needed only a street-turning or a shop-window to inspire a fresh outpouring. Even before *Le Paysan de Paris*, a book like *Anicet* already gives an idea of these riches. No one could have been a more astute detector of the unwonted in all its forms; no one else could have been carried away by such intoxicating reveries about a sort of secret life of the city . . . Aragon was, in this sense, astounding—to himself as well as to others.

Even at this stage, he seemed to have read absolutely everything. An infallible memory enabled him to recapitulate the entire plots of countless novels. His mental agility was unparalleled, whence perhaps the noticeable laxity of his opinions and, also, a certain suggestibility. Extremely warm-hearted, and devoted in friendship. The one clear danger was his over-eagerness to please. *Sparkling . . .*

Breton's emphatic "*Etincellant*" is apposite. Aragon's spiritual effervescence, during these years from the end of the

\*"The Aragon Affair" in Maurice Nadeau's *History of Surrealism* (Macmillan, 1965; reprinted by Harvard University Press, 1989) provides a reasonably neutral account.

†In one of a series of radio interviews with André Parinaud, published under the title *Entretiens* (Gallimard, 1952; published in English as *Conversations*, Paragon House, 1993).

war to the mid-'twenties, seems to have been fuelled by the wandering existence that he chose to lead. His sudden reappearances at the surrealists' customary Parisian rendezvous were all the more impressive for being unheralded; and it would appear that he succeeded in shocking some of the younger and more sober-minded recruits to the movement with his provocative encouragement of the idea of "scandal for the sake of scandal." Breton suggests, somewhat tartly, in the course of the reminiscences already quoted, that, "however great Aragon's influence may have been at that moment on those around him, even his friends could not avoid detecting in him a certain *verbal bravado*."

This blend of incandescent exhilaration and calculated intellectual insolence may be taken as a measure of the importance to Aragon of his discovery of Isidore Ducasse, the "Comte de Lautréamont," during 1919 and 1920.\* At the beginning of 1919, Breton had copied out the *Poésies* from the sole surviving copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale, publishing the text, later that year, in the first four issues of *Littérature*. And the following year saw the appearance (thanks to Blaise Cendrars's efforts) of a new edition of the long-unobtainable *Chants de Maldoror*.

Aragon has himself emphasized, in conversation with me, the predominant influence of Ducasse-Lautréamont on his thought at the time of writing *Paris Peasant*: especially the fascination exercised on him by the apparent contradiction between *Maldoror* and the *Poésies*. Indeed, the first two sections of *Paris Peasant*, which take the Passage de l'Opéra and the Buttes-Chaumont as their central themes, are clearly swept

\*A debt that Aragon reaffirmed in an essay, "Lautréamont et nous," published in *Les Lettres Françaises*, June 1967.

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along on a wave of Maldorian lyricism, in which alternating moods of poetic tenderness, biting satire and aggressive sarcasm find expression in terms of delirious dream images, compassionate reflections on mortality, minute descriptions of scenes and objects (thirty years before Robbe-Grillet!), mock-philosophical disquisitions, humorous anecdotes.

In the same sense, "The Peasant's Dream" may be seen as a "corrective" to the preceding segment of the book, just as Ducasse's *Poésies* was intended by its author as a corrective to the *Maldoror* conceived by his *alter ego* Lautréamont. "The Peasant's Dream" not only calls a halt to the idealism implicit in the first two parts of the book; it also represents the opposite spirit to that of the automatism cherished by most of the early surrealists,\* being composed in the form of maxims, and written, a few lines or phrases at a time, as more or less disjointed reflections.

Of course, such analogies with Ducasse-Lautréamont are only approximate. *Paris Peasant* is also in direct line of descent from those Parisian fantasy-journals, Apollinaire's *La Flâneur des deux rives* and Gérard de Nerval's *Nuits d'octobre*. And equally, as the author has commented in his recent memoir *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire, ou les Incipit* (Skira, Geneva, 1969), *Paris Peasant* is

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\*Aragon did not conceal his contempt for the idea of automatism as a convenient recipe for releasing inspiration. In his *Traité du style*, published in 1928, two years after *Le Paysan de Paris*, he remarks bluntly at one point:

... The inner meaning [*le fonds*] of a surrealist text is of the greatest importance, since it is that inner meaning that gives the text a precious revelatory quality. If you write dreary idiocies following a surrealist method they will remain dreary idiocies. Without possible excuse. And especially if you belong to that lamentable category of individuals which is ignorant of the meaning of words, it is probable that the practice of surrealism will bring to light nothing more than this crass ignorance.

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the novel of what I was at that time: in which the description is reserved for places, and the story is that of the evolution of a mind, starting with a mythological conception of the world, and leading towards a materialism which is not achieved in the final pages of the book, but only *promised* within the terms of a proclamation of the failure of Hegelianism, the loftiest of all those conceptions which allowed man to advance along the path of idealism.

The book evolved piecemeal. "The Passage de l'Opéra" was written in 1924, and appeared in four instalments in Soupault's *Revue Européenne* between June and September of that year. "A Feeling for Nature at the Buttes-Chaumont" was written in 1925 and serialized in the *Revue Européenne* between March and June of that year. There were a few illustrations: a portrait of Aragon by André Masson (to whom the author later dedicated the book), some line decorations by the author, a drawing of a *garçon* at the Café Certa by Malkine... "The Peasant's Dream" was added in 1926, when the Gallimard edition of the text was in preparation.

After more than forty years of resolute silence about *Paris Peasant*, the author has at last, in *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire...*, provided an illuminating explanation of the origins of the book. The passage in question, which also throws interesting light on the reactions at the time of the other surrealists to this unorthodox enterprise, is worth quoting from at some length:

I was seeking... to use the accepted novel-form as the basis for the production of a new kind of novel that would break all the traditional rules governing the writing of fiction, one that would be neither a narrative (a story) nor a character study (a portrait), a novel that

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the critics would be obliged to approach empty-handed, without any of the weapons which customarily help them exercise their stupid cruelty, because in this instance the rules of the game would all have been swept aside. But it was not a question simply of disarming the critics: my task was more difficult than that, for I was writing this novel-that-was-not-a-novel—or at least I thought of myself as writing it—to *demoralize* my [surrealist] friends, who were so busy proclaiming themselves the mortal enemies of the novel in every form while still indulging in reading matter such as Lewis's *The Monk* or Restif de la Bretonne.

I say this after the event. I do not know (I doubt) whether the matter was so straightforward for me at the time. My original project was, in fact, rather artless. Having observed that all the mythologies of the past became transformed into romances [*romans*] as soon as people no longer believed in them, I formulated the idea of reversing the process and elaborating a novel [*roman*] that would present itself as a mythology. Naturally, a mythology of the modern. That was the spirit in which I started off writing *Le Paysan*, but there was no question of succumbing to mere philosophizing. I have always been the enemy of philosophy, or at least of philosophers. And it will be remarked that immediately following the book's introduction, with its abstract formulations, a change of manner has been deliberately imposed, and I have written precisely what must inevitably have seemed intolerable to my intimates who were also my judges: that is to say, I adopted a descriptive tone. Whence *The Passage de l'Opéra*.

I had taken the precaution of choosing a landscape that would very quickly become unverifiable for the simple reason that the passage was about to be demolished in favour of an access way to the Boulevard Haussmann. Not so that I could tell lies with greater impunity but, rather, to conceal my apprentice status as a descriptive writer and so ward off the derision that I feared my efforts might provoke.

If that is not quite what really happened, that is still the way things turned out: that is to say, what happened to me when confronted

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by my examiners was exactly what would have happened to me had I in fact so acted, so thought and so written.

I had first tried out my challenge, somewhat timidly, on the one reader, or rather listener, whose opinion I respected so entirely that a single word of disapproval would have sufficed for me promptly to tear up the twenty or so pages I had written, without the slightest feeling of shame or regret: I mean André Breton. He listened to me, I must say, with an attentiveness that boded no good. He let me get to the end of my screed, and then said simply: "Is that all?" I confessed that that was as far as I had got, though I hardly knew what to make of it myself. He started talking about something entirely different.

Our relationship had been extremely close from the very first: but André's *power* over me had become enhanced as the result of the constitution of a real surrealist group that included newcomers who were younger than us and who were constantly trying to demonstrate their orthodoxy at the expense of Philippe [Soupault], Paul [Eluard] or myself.

When, that same evening, in Breton's studio in the rue Fontaine, in front of the assembled company of a dozen or so comrades and various girl-friends, André said to me: "Why not read them what you read to me a short while ago? Do you have it with you?", I had the feeling that he had just turned his thumb down in the presence of the Roman populace. I murmured: "Do you really think that's necessary?" and he answered, with an ironic tinge in his voice, "Read it . . . it will do them good, give them something to ponder about . . ."

People tended to judge A.B. too hastily by appearances: that commanding air of his, and the impression he gave of always being in the *majority*. In fact, he was capable of reacting sharply against an automatic interpretation of his thoughts, even when the truth seemed to be established between us.

Anyhow, as far as pondering is concerned, I have never in my life unleashed such consternation. There was total silence, broken only by coughs, the scraping of chairs, exchanged glances, scowls . . . then,

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finally, a woman's voice said, ever so gently: "But, my dear friend, why do you waste your time writing stuff like that?" Upon which, the storm broke in all its mythical grandeur, the eagle beating its wings beneath the god's naked feet, the lightning-flashes illuminating the silence that had descended on the room once more, and the torrent of indignant words. I would blush to repeat them. The outburst was so utterly unexpected, so out of all proportion, that I did not even derive any pleasure from it. But could I doubt that I was now committed to pursuing my enterprise? Thus, for the first time, I found myself advancing deliberately along the conscious path of what I later came to call realism.

Was A.B. aware of this? It would seem that on that occasion he thrust me on to the path of a surrealist realism. But, later, the break between us led me to choose the *socialist* path of realism, that path from which I shall never wander.

A word about the translation. The original presented a number of fascinating problems of interpretation, of meaning; and I owe a great debt of gratitude to Monsieur Aragon for his patient elucidation, both in conversation and in correspondence, of many of these mysteries. It was agreed that references and allusions that might remain obscure for the English (or, indeed, the French) reader should be clarified by brief footnotes. These translator's notes have been gathered at the end of the present work; the intention was to be informative while avoiding pedantry, and the notes make no pretension to being exhaustive.

S. W. T.  
LONDON  
AUGUST 23RD, 1970.

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P R E F A C E

T O A

M O D E R N M Y T H O L O G Y

Every idea, these days, seems to have passed its critical phase. It is a generally accepted fact that abstract notions about mankind have all been eroded imperceptibly by the investigation they have undergone, that human light has infiltrated its rays everywhere and that as a result nothing has escaped this universal process which is subject, at the most, to revision. So we have the spectacle of the world's philosophers incapable of tackling the smallest problem without first going through the routine of recapitulating and then refuting everything that predecessors have had to say on the subject. And by that very fact their every thought is inevitably the function of some previous error, based upon it and inheriting some of its features. A curious and strangely contrary method: seemingly afraid of genius, in the one domain where the sole imperative must be genius itself, pure invention, revelation. The impression persists that those who have made thought their province are fleetingly



aware that dialectical means are inadequate and provide ineffectual guidance on the road to certainty of any kind. But this awareness has simply led them to argue about dialectical means, not about dialectics itself and still less about its objective, truth. Or if truth has by some miracle claimed their attention, they have always considered it as an end and not as a concept. Everyone wanted to join in the quarrel about the objectivity of certainty: no one dreamed of questioning the reality of certainty itself.

The characteristics of certainty vary according to the philosopher's chosen system, ranging from gross certainty to the ideal scepticism of those who are certain of nothing but their uncertainty. But however reduced may be its scope—to the consciousness of being, for example—certainty is envisaged by all these searching minds as possessing peculiar and definable characteristics which allow it to be distinguished from error. Certainty is not reality. From this fundamental belief proceeds the success of the famous Cartesian doctrine of evidence.

We are still discovering the full extent of the havoc this illusion has worked. Of all the stumbling blocks confronting the onward movement of the mind and imagination none, surely, has been more difficult to avoid than this sophism about evidence, a sophism which flattered one of mankind's most prevalent ways of thought. It is to be encountered at the roots of all logic. It is the ultimate justification for every proof which man claims of a proposition he has stated. Man invokes its authority in making deductions, and comes to conclusions on the same basis. In this way he has elaborated a changing and always evident truth, and asks himself vainly why it never seems to satisfy him.

But there exists a black kingdom which the eyes of man avoid because its landscape fails signally to flatter them. This

darkness, which he imagines he can dispense with in describing the light, is error with its unknown characteristics, error which demands that a person contemplate it for its own sake before rewarding him with the evidence about fugitive reality that it alone could give. Surely it must be realized that the face of error and the face of truth cannot fail to have identical features? Error is certainty's constant companion. Error is the corollary of evidence. And anything said about truth may equally well be said about error: the delusion will be no greater. Without this idea of evidence, error would not exist. Without evidence no one would even pause to think about error.



I had just reached this point in my thoughts when, without any warning, spring suddenly entered the world.

It happened in a flash, one Saturday evening around five: everything is bathed in a different light and yet there is still a chill in the air, impossible to say what has just taken place. The fact remains that my thoughts have insisted on changing course and are now chasing madly after an imperious preoccupation. The lid of the box has just been lifted. This new freedom exhilarates me so much that I am no longer master of myself. Pointless to undertake anything. I shall winkle no more projects out of their shells so long as this glorious weather lasts. I am the bottle-imp of my senses and of chance. I am like a gambler seated at the roulette table: go up to him and tell him to put his money in oil and he will laugh in your face. My body is the roulette wheel and I am betting on red. Everything distracts me indefinitely, except from my distraction itself. A feeling akin to nobleness of heart prompts me to exalt this surrender, and my ears are closed to the reproaches you make

me. Instead of concerning yourself with the conduct of men, start watching women walk by. They are great patches of radiance, flashes of light not yet stripped of their furs, of brilliant, restless mysteries. No, I don't want to die without having first gone up to each one, touched her at least with my hand, felt her weaken, willed that this pressure shall be enough to conquer her resistance, and then hey presto! Sometimes I have returned home late at night, after passing an infinity of these desirable shimmerings, without having attempted to take possession of a single one of these lives left rashly within my reach. Then, while undressing, I ask myself disgustedly what I'm doing in the world. What a way to live! Surely I would do better to go out again, to seek my prey, to be myself the prey of someone hidden in the very depths of darkness? The senses have at last established their hegemony over the earth. What should reason be doing here from now on? O reason, reason, abstract phantom of the waking state, I had already expelled you from my dreams, now I have reached a point where those dreams are about to become fused with apparent realities: now there is only room here for myself. In vain, reason denounces to me the dictatorship of sensuality. In vain it warns me against error crowned queen at last. Enter, Ma'am, this is my body, this is your throne. I fondle my delirium like a pretty pony. Let me dream a little about your falsehood, false duality of man.



My habits of thought have been so conditioned by innumerable tortuous processes that today I find myself unable to place complete confidence in any notion I may have of the universe without first subjecting that notion to an abstract examination. This spirit of analysis, this spirit and this need, have been

transmitted to me. And like a man tearing himself away from sleep, it costs me a painful effort to tear myself away from this mental habit, so as to think simply, naturally, in terms of what I see and touch. And yet, can the knowledge deriving from reason even begin to compare with knowledge perceptible by sense? No doubt the number of people crass enough to rely exclusively on the former and scorn the latter are sufficient in themselves to explain the disfavour into which everything deriving from the senses has gradually fallen. But when the most scholarly of men have taught me that light is a vibration, or have calculated its wavelengths for me, or offered me any other fruits of their labours of reasoning, they will still not have rendered me an account of what is important to me about light, of what my eyes have begun to teach me about it, of what makes me different from a blind man—things which are the stuff of miracles, not subject matter for reasoning.

Humanity's stupid rationalism contains an unimaginably large element of materialism. This fear of error which everything recalls to me at every moment of the flight of my ideas, this mania for control, makes man prefer reason's imagination to the imagination of the senses. And yet it is always the imagination alone which is at work. Nothing, neither strict logic nor overwhelming impression, can convince me about reality, can convince me that I am not basing reality on a delirium of interpretation. But in the case of the senses, man, after absorbing the teachings of various traditional schools, has begun to have doubts about himself; one can imagine by what play of mirrors this has been at the expense of the opposite thought process, reasoning. And there we have man a prey to mathematics. In trying to free himself from matter he has become the prisoner of the properties of matter.

Frankly, I am beginning to be convinced that, short of

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some conjuring trick, neither the senses nor reason can be apprehended separately from each other, and that doubtless they only exist functionally. Beyond its discoveries, surprises and improbabilities, reason's greatest triumph derives from the confirmation it provides of popular error. Its greatest glory is that it can give a precise sense to those instinctual utterances that pedants have always despised. Light is meaningful only in relation to darkness, and truth presupposes error. It is these mingled opposites which people our life, which make it pungent, intoxicating. We only exist in terms of this conflict, in the zone where black and white clash. And what do I care about white and black? Their realm is death.



I no longer wish to refrain from the errors of my fingers, the errors of my eyes. I know now that these errors are not just booby traps but curious paths leading towards a destination that they alone can reveal to me. There are strange flowers of reason to match each error of the senses. Admirable gardens of absurd beliefs, forebodings, obsessions and frenzies. Unknown, ever-changing gods take shape there. I shall contemplate these leaden faces, these hemp-seeds of the imagination. How beautiful you are in your sand-castles, you columns of smoke! New myths spring up beneath each step we take. Legend begins where man has lived, where he lives. All that I intend to think about from now on is these despised transformations. Each day the modern sense of existence becomes subtly altered. A mythology ravel and unravels. It is a knowledge, a science of life open only to those who have no training in it. It is a living science which begets itself and makes away with itself. I am already twenty-six years old, am I still privileged to take part in this

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miracle? How long shall I retain this sense of the marvellous suffusing everyday existence? I see it fade away in every man who advances into his own life as though along an always smoother road, who advances into the world's habits with an increasing ease, who rids himself progressively of the taste and texture of the unwonted, the unthought of. To my great despair, this is what I shall never know.

THE  
PASSAGE  
DE  
L'OPÉRA

1924

Man no longer worships the gods on their heights. Solomon's temple has slid into a world of metaphor where it harbours swallows' nests and corpse-white lizards. The spirit of religions, coming down to dwell in the dust, has abandoned the sacred places. But there are other places which flourish among mankind, places where men go calmly about their mysterious lives and in which a profound religion is very gradually taking shape. These sites are not yet inhabited by a divinity. It is forming there, a new godhead precipitating in these recreations of Ephesus like acid-gnawing metal at the bottom of a glass.

Life itself has summoned into being this poetic deity which thousands will pass blindly by, but which suddenly becomes palpable and terribly haunting for those who have at last caught

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a confused glimpse of it. It is you, metaphysical entity of places, who lull children to sleep, it is you who people their dreams. These shores of the unknown, sands shivering with anguish or anticipation, are fringed by the very substance of our minds. A single step into the past is enough for me to rediscover this sensation of strangeness which filled me when I was still a creature of pure wonder, in a setting where I first became aware of the presence of a coherence for which I could not account but which sent its roots into my heart.

The whole fauna of human fantasies, their marine vegetation, drifts and luxuriates in the dimly lit zones of human activity, as though plaiting thick tresses of darkness. Here, too, appear the great lighthouses of the mind, with their outward resemblance to less pure symbols. The gateway to mystery swings open at the touch of human weakness and we have entered the realms of darkness. One false step, one slurred syllable together reveal a man's thoughts. The disquieting atmosphere of places contains similar locks which cannot be bolted fast against infinity. Wherever the living pursue particularly ambiguous activities, the inanimate may sometimes assume the reflection of their most secret motives: and thus our cities are peopled with unrecognized sphinxes which will never stop the passing dreamer and ask him mortal questions unless he first projects his meditation, his absence of mind, towards them. But if this wise man has the power to guess their secret, and interrogates them in his turn, all that these faceless monsters will grant is that he shall once again plumb his own depths. Henceforth, it is the modern light radiating from the unusual that will rivet his attention.

How oddly this light suffuses the covered arcades which abound in Paris in the vicinity of the main boulevards and which are rather disturbingly named *passages*, as though no

one had the right to linger for more than an instant in those sunless corridors. A glaucous gleam, seemingly filtered through deep water, with the special quality of pale brilliance of a leg suddenly revealed under a lifted skirt. The great American passion for city planning, imported into Paris by a prefect of police during the Second Empire and now being applied to the task of redrawing the map of our capital in straight lines, will soon spell the doom of these human aquariums. Although the life that originally quickened them has drained away, they deserve, nevertheless, to be regarded as the secret repositories of several modern myths: it is only today, when the pickaxe menaces them, that they have at last become the true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral, the ghostly landscape of damnable pleasures and professions. Places that were incomprehensible yesterday, and that tomorrow will never know.

"Today, the Boulevard Haussmann has reached the Rue Lafitte," remarked *L'Intransigeant* the other day. A few more paces forward by this giant rodent and, after it has devoured the block of houses separating it from the Rue Le Peletier, it will inexorably gash open the thicket whose twin arcades run through the Passage de l'Opéra, before finally emerging diagonally on to the Boulevard des Italiens. It will unite itself to that broad avenue somewhere near where the Café Louis XVI now stands, with a singular kind of kiss whose cumulative effect on the vast body of Paris is quite unpredictable. It seems possible, though, that a good part of the human river which carries incredible floods of dreamers and dawdlers from the Bastille to the Madeleine may divert itself through this new channel, and thus modify the ways of thought of a whole district, perhaps of a whole world. We are doubtless about to witness a complete upheaval of the established fashions in casual strolling and prostitution, and it may well be that this thor-

oughfare, which is bound to make the boulevards and the Quartier Saint-Lazare far more easily accessible to each other, will see entirely new types of person saunter along its pavements, hitherto unknown specimens whose whole lives will hesitate between the two zones of attraction in which they are equally involved, and who will be the chief protagonists of tomorrow's mysteries.

Future mysteries will arise from the ruins of today's. Let us take a stroll along this Passage de l'Opéra, and have a closer look at it. It is a double tunnel, with a single gateway opening to the north on to the Rue Chauchat, and two gateways opening to the south on to the boulevard. Its two arcades, the western one, called the Galerie du Baromètre, and the eastern one, called the Galerie du Thermomètre, are joined by two short cuts, the first of which runs across the passage at its northern end, while the second is at the boulevard end, just behind the bookshop and café which occupy the space between the two southern gateways. If we enter the Galerie du Thermomètre through its opening between the café I have just mentioned and a bookshop, the Librairie Eugène Rey, having passed through the iron gates which at night-time bar the passage to all yearnings deemed contrary to public morals, we can see that whereas practically the whole length of the right-hand façade is taken up, at ground-floor level, by window displays of all kinds, a café, and so on, the upper storeys seem to be occupied by one single building. It is indeed a single edifice, stretching along the entire frontage: a hotel whose rooms possess precisely the atmosphere and lighting appropriate to the laboratory of pleasures which the hotel offers as its sole justification for existence.

I remember that my attention was first drawn to this establishment by the unfavourable publicity accorded it in a notice put up by the Hôtel de Monte-Carlo (whose lobby en-

trance is in the Galerie du Baromètre) on its wall forming the last sector of the Rue Chauchat: a notice proclaiming proudly that it has *no connection whatsoever with the lodging-house in the passage*. At first-floor level, this lodging-house is a place where couples book by the hour, but on the rather low-ceilinged second floor it is simply a hotel where damp, shabby rooms boasting hot and cold running water and electricity can be rented by the week or month.

Such hotels for transients of various kinds are rather pleasant to live in: an atmosphere of freedom reigns in them, and one does not have the feeling, as in most ordinary lodgings, of being spied on all the time. When I was in Berlin I used to stay at a similar place, in the Joachimstalerstrasse in Charlottenburg, where I paid for my room in advance each evening before going up, even though it already contained my baggage. Picabia, too, occasionally puts up at a hotel for transients, in the Rue Darcet, basing his affection for it on the fact that shoes are never to be seen standing outside the bedroom doors. At the present moment, I can count two friends among the second-floor tenants of the lodging-house in the Passage de l'Opéra. First, there is Marcel Noll, who brought with him from Strasbourg to Paris last year an enormous capacity to promote confusion, a quality which I find entirely admirable. Then there is Charles Baron, the brother of the poet Jacques Baron and a poet himself (more people should realize the fact), although those who do not know him well distinguish him from his brother by calling him *Baron the Boxer*, on account of some vague boxing lessons he once took, and perhaps because at that time he used to go around with a group of boxers which included at least one, Fred Bretonnel, who achieved some success in the ring; Charles Baron, who has taken this stark room so as to live there with a charming girl-friend about whom I will take the

liberty of saying only that on certain days she looks strangely like a stabbed dove.

In this romantic lodging-house, whose doors sometimes gape open, revealing interiors like the empty carapaces of weird shellfish, the way the premises are arranged reinforces the already dubious air given it by the rather commonplace uses to which a floating population is capable of putting it. Long corridors, like theatre wings, are strung with boxes, I mean rooms, all on the same side overlooking the passage. A dual system of stairways provides access to the passage at two separate points. Everything is contrived to facilitate hasty departures, to conceal from casual observers the trysts which will muffle some huge secret behind the faded sky-blue wallpaper of a banal décor. On the first floor, someone has had the idea of fixing up a door at the top of the farther staircase, so that if required this exit can be closed, although since the door is framed by nothing more than side posts all that need to be done to get past it is to clamber over the banister at that point. This menace, swinging on its hinges, can provoke flights of dizzy speculation in the mind of anyone contemplating it. What can possibly be the hidden significance of this door? Its presence evokes the most ignoble police operations, the pursuit to the very heartland of their loves of those sentimental murderers betrayed by weakness of intellect, encircled at dawn in the voluptuous labyrinths where they are hiding, the search narrowing while these doomed heroes stand on tiptoe, hand on pounding heart, still listening to the involuntary sighs of pleasure filtering through the closed doors. At odd intervals the corridors light up, but semidarkness is their favourite colour. A half-opened door releases a flash of *négligée*, a trill of song. Then a happiness unravels, fingers unlace, and an overcoat makes its way down towards the anonymous day, towards the country of respectability.

This place is ruled over by two women. One of them is a crotchety old thing who sits nursing her rheumatics beside the fireplace in the hotel office, next to the keyboard. The other one, though no longer very young either, is sweet and gentle, and still dark-haired, through habit, no doubt. She is the real landlady of this establishment, and I often wonder what will happen to her when the demolition men finally drive her out of here. Garrulous and easygoing by nature, she has acquired from her job a liking for anything dubious or chancy. Reluctant to press her tenants for payment, it is only sheer necessity that drives her to do so in the long run. She not only expects even the most regular among them to be involved in some kind of irregularity as a matter of course, she takes a positive interest in the goings on. Well, doubtless she tips off the police, like all the landladies around, but if she talks about them at all it is with a scared note in her voice, as though she were apprehensive of some shadowy misfortune. I remember, one day, my friend Noll was arrested on a perfectly trivial charge, something to do with disturbing the peace at night and yelling seditious slogans. The first thing I knew about it was when the police phoned up from the central station to check on the address he had given. I found his landlady in a terrible state: "Whatever can have happened to him, Sir? It's so silly to get into trouble like that. At least they won't keep him for long now. Only last month I had a tenant here who was in trouble with them." She heaved sighs of genuine relief when he appeared a few minutes later.

Between the boulevards and the hotel's first entrance, the building's street-level frontage is taken up by the *Librairie Rey*, with its window displays of magazines, popular novels and scientific publications. It is one of the four or five places in Paris where one can glance through magazines at leisure without buying them. So it usually has its quota of young people reading

busily, making a little tent of the uncut pages to squint inside, and others for whom this illusory occupation provides a screen from behind which they can keep an eye on the comings and goings in the passage, for various reasons which go straight to my heart. A single cashier surveys the bookshelves, from his perch in a little glass-panelled booth equipped with a frontal grille through which business is transacted. The theft rate here is almost as high as at the *Librairie Crès* in the *Boulevard Saint-Germain*, where in 1920 twenty thousand francs worth\* of books and periodicals were stolen in a single year.

The door of building no. 2 gives access to the staircase leading up to the two floors of furnished rooms. A glance through it will reveal, set back a little from the foot of these stairs, the glass-fronted lodge occupied by the passage's concierge. And to think that these glass panes guard a dual existence of complete passivity, at the very limits of adventure, of the unknown! For years and years the gatekeeper and his wife have been holed up in this retreat, watching skirts and trousers pass by as they climb up towards their assignments. For years now these two old people have been ineluctably moulded to the shape of this absurd place fringing the arcades, visibly consuming their lives, he smoking it away, she sewing, eternally sewing as though the fate of the universe hinged upon her needlework. Some fairly curious fluorescent growths must surely decorate these twin skulls. During the long hours and the darkness, a darkness which spares the exaggerated cost of an electric lamp, beautiful natural formations must build up easily and expansively behind this married couple of foreheads: he and she are so used to each other that their conventional

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\*At the then rate of exchange, of course. [Note added in 1966.]

gossip has at last spaced itself out into silence, so that their mechanical gestures of pipe and needle are now accompanied solely by those magnificent confusions of the imagination which are the prerogative of poets. Sedentary, eaten away by age and spiritual sloth, rummaging through their minds at the sight of the footsteps of mystery crossing those of whorishness just the other side of their window, what are they likely to find? A whole pack of obscene playing cards, which I take pleasure in visualizing. The queen of clubs . . . but one day I did as the notice suggested, and spoke to the concierge.

It was at the counter of the Café Louis XVI, where he used to treat himself to abbreviated holidays, cap tilted over one ear, nose buried in his drink.

MYSELF—Please forgive me for troubling you, but am I right in thinking you are the concierge of the passage?

HE—Since twenty years and more, Sir. What can I do for you?

MYSELF—Would you care to join me . . .

HE—A small *marc* . . . A real thirsty job I've got . . . All that toing and froing in there, raising a dust . . . Ah, you see some strange customers, pretty women too, and some not so pretty . . . I look at them as little as possible: none of my business, know what I mean? The concierge. Yes, I wouldn't say no to another small *marc*, very good of you, Sir, thank you. Some of them come and tell me their little problems. I give them advice. People, they make mountains out of molehills, you know . . .

MYSELF—You have all sorts and kinds of tenant, in your passage.

HE—(*becomes circumspect*).

I wanted to know if there still existed in his domain a bizarre establishment which Valéry had once described to me:

an agency which accepted unstamped letters and arranged to have them posted from any desired point of the globe to the address written on the envelope, a facility that would allow the customer to feign a voyage to the Far East, for example, without moving an inch from the far west of some secret adventure. Impossible to find out anything, the concierge had never heard such a place mentioned . . . Anyhow, what does a concierge know? And it was perhaps more than twenty years since Valéry had indulged in such pranks.

A shop selling canes and walking-sticks separates the Café du Petit Grillon from the lodging-house entrance. A perfectly honourable salesman offers to a questionable clientèle a wide choice of luxurious examples of these canes, displayed so as to show both stems and handles to their best advantage. A whole art of spatial panoply is at play here: the canes lower down form fans, while those higher up are crossed like Xs and, as the result of a strange tropism, incline towards the beholder their bouquets of pommels: ivory roses, dogs' heads with jewelled eyes, damascened semidarkness from Toledo, niello inlays of delicate sentimental foliage, cats, women, hooked beaks, countless materials ranging from twisted rattan to rhinoceros horn and the blond charm of cornelians.

A few days after the conversation I have just pretended to report, I found myself spending the entire evening at the Petit Grillon waiting for a person who, it became increasingly clear, had decided not to turn up. Having justified my suspiciously solitary existence, every fifteen minutes or so, by ordering a drink, each of which drained me a little more of my powers of invention, until I had prolonged my state of expectation and nervous irritability well beyond tolerable limits, I finally walked out into the passage. By that time the lights had already been switched off. My attention was suddenly attracted



by a sort of humming noise which seemed to be coming from the direction of the cane shop, and I was astonished to see that its window was bathed in a greenish, almost submarine light, the source of which remained invisible. It was the same kind of phosphorescence that, I remember, emanated from the fish I watched, as a child, from the jetty of Port Bail on the Cotentin peninsula; but still, I had to admit to myself that even though the canes might conceivably possess the illuminating properties of creatures of the deep, a physical explanation would still scarcely account for this supernatural gleam and, above all, the noise whose low throbbing echoed back from the arched roof. I recognized the sound: it was the same voice of the seashells that has never ceased to amaze poets and film-stars. The whole ocean in the Passage de l'Opéra. The canes floated gently like seaweed. I had still not recovered from my enchantment when I noticed that a human form was swimming among the various levels of the window display. Although not quite as tall as an average woman, she did not in the least give the impression of being a dwarf. Her smallness seemed, rather, to derive from distance, and yet the apparition was moving about just behind the windowpane. Her hair floated behind her, her fingers occasionally clutched at one of the canes. At first I thought I must be face to face with a siren in the most conventional sense of the term, for I certainly had the impression that the lower half of this charming spectre, who was naked down to a very low waistline, consisted of a sheath of steel or scales or possibly rose petals. But by dint of concentrating my attention on her gliding act among the weals of the atmosphere, I suddenly recognized this person, despite her emaciated features and distraught appearance. It was under the dubious circumstances of the insolent occupation of the Rhineland, and of an intoxicated delight in prostitution, that I had first met Lisel, by the banks of the river

Saar. She had refused to join the rest of her people in their flight from defeat, and all night long, as she paraded the Sofienstrasse, she sang songs she had learned from her father, a Rhine hunting captain. What on earth could she be doing here, among the canes? And she was still singing, judging by the movements of her lips, through the sound of the surf in the window display covered her voice and the surf rose above her, up as far as the mirrored ceiling beyond which there was no sign of either the moon or the menacing shadow of the cliffs: "The Ideal," I cried, finding nothing better to say in my confusion. The siren turned a scared face towards me and stretched out her arms in my direction. Immediately the window display was seized by a general convulsion. The canes turned ninety degrees forwards, so that the upper halves of their X-shapes were now opening their Vs against the glass, in front of the apparition and forming a top fringe for the curtain made by the lower fans. It was as though a row of pikestaffs had suddenly blocked the view of a battle. The brightness died away with the sound of the sea.

The concierge, who was shuffling along to close the passage's grille, asked me unceremoniously whether or not I intended to leave, and remained totally unmoved by my allusions to the toasts we had drunk together. Reluctantly I made my way towards the boulevard, turning round at intervals to look at the cane shop: but the only glimmer of light now to be seen came from the dim reflections in its windows of the streetlamps outside.

The cane shop in fact has two windows, and it was the one nearest the boulevards that had cast the spell which kept my mind in a turmoil that whole night. The other one contains a few more canes, walking sticks and umbrellas, as well as wallets, little pearl handbags, amber necklaces and a strangely

LOUIS ARAGON

formal arrangement of pipes which form a grave circle of mutes in the centre of the display, where the light plays caressingly around their oddly shaped heads. When I passed by the following morning everything had resumed its normal appearance, except that in the second window an accident had taken place, unnoticed: one of the pipes in a rack, a meerschaum whose bowl depicted a siren, had broken, as though it had been condemned to be a target in some seedy shooting gallery at a fair. From the end of this pipe's illusionistic stem there still protruded the twin curve of a charming breast: a little white dust that had fallen on the silesia fabric of an umbrella testified to the erstwhile existence of a head crowned with flowing hair.

The following shop is a café, the Petit Grillon, which is full of memories for me. For several years I used to come here at least once a week after dinner with friends whom I all took to be genuine at the time. We talked, we played baccarat and poker dice. It was there, in the light of daily events, in the revolving beacon of gains and losses, that I began to get a better idea of the greatness of a very small number of these boon companions, and the pettiness of most of them.



The Petit Grillon consists of two rooms, a fairly large one containing the bar, and a smaller boxlike room which used to be reserved for the sole use of our party when we arrived, six or seven strong, to play games, drink and talk. During the winter this second room is heated by a little gas radiator which is in constant danger of being knocked over. The customers of this café are regulars whom I've watched, year after year, come in and sit down at the same place. There is absolutely nothing to distinguish them from the rest of mankind. What draws them

PARIS PEASANT

here? A sort of provincial outlook, perhaps. For me, they are such natural phantoms that I scarcely notice them. A peaceable, home-loving crowd. Such was by no means the case in the old days, it seems. The same owner reigns over this café and the Certa in the other arcade. You could almost take him for a cavalry officer, except for his good-natured air. He has stuck this notice on the window of the Petit Grillon:

Having been robbed for the benefit of a Finance Company by an expropriation which has ruined the tradesmen of this passage, and being consequently unable to re-establish myself elsewhere, I am seeking a buyer for my bar equipment.

*Signature*

War Veteran 1914-18  
Disabled Serviceman

This is the first sign to be met with in the passage of the seething fury rightly felt by all the inhabitants of this place since they learned of the scale of compensation proposed by the company which has been awarded the Boulevard Haussmann contract by the City of Paris. Real civil war is brewing, and though things are still only at the stage of legal quibbles and mutual insults, of heated argument among businessmen and in the pages of newspapers, the prospective victims' exasperation

would not need to mount very much higher for the whole issue to become a matter of barricades and gunfire. Who knows, the accumulated rancours which these tranquil shops must surely be harbouring might well explode, next year, in a commercial Fort Chabroil<sup>1</sup> if justice, which in this instance is not only slow but suspiciously blind in one eye, were to declare in favour of the powerful Boulevard Haussmann Building Society and its chief supporters: the town councillors, acting as a front for huge enterprises such as the Galeries Lafayette and, very probably, for a secret consortium of all the local merchants who count upon this perforation to produce a new flow of traffic through the neighbourhood and thus increase their turnover astronomically. It is worth listening to the particular note of disgust which creeps into the voices of tomorrow's victims of expropriation when they mention the name of Bauer, Marchal & Cie (59, Rue de Provence), the bankers appointed by the City to finance the project. This bank takes shape at the back of their minds as the brain of the monster which is poised ready to devour them, and whose lumbering approach, marked by the thud of sledgehammers, they can hear by gluing an ear to any wall. They know already that January 1925 is the date when this legendary spider will smother them. Meanwhile, they employ various delaying tactics against it, such as arguing the profits their businesses could be expected to make during the run of the Great Exhibition. The authorities leave them with the hope that they may win the respite they are demanding, and the Exhibition, which is arousing precious little enthusiasm throughout the rest of the country, assumes the guise, here, of the Redeemer, the new Sun which it had been to the men of 1888 and 1899. Evidence of this struggle can be gleaned almost anywhere along the passage, either by talking to the residents or by reading the notices in the shop-windows. At the stamp

dealer's, next door to the Petit Grillon, where a short, sad story had already been related succinctly by successive sheets of paper:

CLOSED ON ACCOUNT OF  
OWNER'S SICKNESS

followed, lower down, by:

CLOSED ON ACCOUNT OF  
OWNER'S DEATH

someone had stuck a newspaper article, clipped, I gather, from *Le Bien Public*:

## THE BD HAUSSMANN BUILDING SOCIETY

Several of the small tradesmen who have been victimized for the benefit of huge enterprises such as the *Galeries Lafayette* are, we learn, on the point of seeking relief from the competent judicial authorities. But there can be no doubt that the City of Paris was fully aware of all the underhand deals and corrupt practices which have studded the history of the Boulevard Haussmann Building Society.

What is quite certain is that, at the very least, the compensation payments should have been allocated equitably. But the majority of the members of the Town Council—and this is a matter of public scandal—are shamefully involved in the misappropriation of public funds, and got themselves elected solely in order to pursue such activities.

Now, it may not be long before we learn some interesting facts. And thanks to the legitimate indignation of these shabbily treated tradesmen, it will be possible to lift the veil concealing the skulduggery of our aediles and of certain big financial sharks.

It is the same with the wine and champagne merchant in the Galerie du Baromètre who describes himself proudly as By Appointment to *Son Altesse Royale Monseigneur le Duc d'Orléans*, and marks his bottles with gold fleurs de lys accordingly. Between the two placards which list the clearance sale prices of his champagne and port, he has placed the following notice:

<p><i>As the result of an Expropriation which is nothing short of robbery (not only for myself but for the whole district) it has become impossible for me to establish myself elsewhere and I find myself obliged therefore to dispose of my stock</i></p>	
<p>Established here since 1909 7 years of lease still to run Free of rent thanks to subtenancies Indemnity: 6,000 francs insufficient to cover even expenses, taxes and removal costs LONG LIVE JUSTICE !!!</p>	<p>On offer to any business possessing working premises  <i>Enquiries invited</i>  <i>Callers 3 to 6 p.m.</i></p>

The Petit Grillon was bought four years ago for 200,000 francs, of which sum 80,000 francs in outstanding bills of exchange remains to be paid, yet as total compensation for expropriation and for repurchase of the remaining eleven years

of the lease the Building Society has allotted the sum of only 100,000 francs. Similarly, the company is offering 65,000 francs for the Certa café, whereas the establishment is worth at least 400,000 if we are to judge by the case of smaller premises in the Passage des Princes whose new owner has had to pay 310,000 francs just for the goodwill. The company is offering 390,000 francs to the Arrigoni restaurant, 275,000 francs to the Librairie Rey whose lease still has thirteen years to run, 400,000 francs to the Librairie Flammarion. The tradesmen of the passage have been all the more shocked by these ridiculous valuations in that they had counted on being paid according to the same rate as the tradesmen in the second segment of expropriation, up to and including the Taverne Pousset, a rate which has on the average been triple that of the wholly unrealistic scale of compensation adopted for the third segment. To add insult to injury, the Building Society blatantly wastes the profits it makes out of its demolition work: it is with an indignation bordering on open rebellion that the local people talk about how the futile ceremony of "inauguration" of the Boulevard Haussmann with a symbolic blow of the pickaxe cost the company more than 60,000 francs. Lastly, the company is accused of rushing through its expropriations in order to forestall the possibility of parliament finally passing the law on business property which has been under debate for so long. The press has almost entirely ignored the popular disquiet. Apart from the article in *Le Bien Public* which we have already studied in the stamp dealer's window, the victims of expropriation have nothing to quote but an article in the issue of *La Liberté* dated March 23rd, 1924:

THE RUINS OF THE  
BOULEVARD HAUSSMANN

*Parisian tradesmen claim to be victims of a denial of justice.*

The normally calm courts at the Palais de Justice were the scene of a scandalous uproar the other day. The trouble arose out of the manner in which the tenants of the final section of the Boulevard Haussmann have been expropriated. 'Bandits! Thieves! Traitors!' were among the mildest of the epithets hurled by an exasperated public at the heads of the jurors. The startled judge called in the gendarmes. And since then the proceedings have been conducted under the supervision of an impressive guard.

But since that day, too, feelings have begun to run high in this central district of Paris where, in the words of one of the interested parties, 'the incompetence of the jury has already caused more ruins than the demolition contractor's pick-axes will be able to achieve.' This called for an investigation. And we have carried one out with complete impartiality. It genuinely seems that expropriated tradesmen are the victims of an error. This error, if left uncorrected, would profit not the City of Paris but the Building Society that has won the contract... etc...

SUGAR ES very strong remedies alwing beforeh human failin ways of prev tions, of all culars, maki ficial, the resin is fat lethal.

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The official mouthpiece of the objectors is a bi-monthly news-sheet which calls itself:

**LA CHAUSSÉE D'ANTIN**

*Organe de Défense des Intérêts Politiques et Economiques  
du Quartier*

*Paraissant les 1 5 et 15 20 de chaque mois*

Rédacteur en chef : JEAN-GEORGES BERRY

The chief editor is the son of a former Paris Deputy and is without any doubt preparing to assume his father's illusory moral heritage. He can be seen without appointment every Monday and Friday from 5 to 7 P.M., at his home, 93, Rue de la Victoire, which is also the office of the newspaper. It is in the name of the Republic that he launches his appeals to the small tradesmen, and sows his journal with advice and opinion. On page 3, for example, we read:

Small tradesmen, this journal is your organ. It supports you. What are you waiting for to support it in your turn by placing some advertising in it? Remember that you are entitled to special low rates, and that this journal is committed never to accept advertising from the Big Department Stores.

And on page 4, below the "Recommended establishments in the district":

## APPEAL

We make an urgent appeal to all our friends, to all those who endorse our activities, to join without delay the Republican Committee for the Defence of the Interests of the District. Simply complete the membership form printed below, tear it out and post it back to us at the office of the newspaper.

The *Chaussée d'Antin's* pet aversion is M. Oudin, town councillor. It is he who gets the blame for all the misdeeds that have been perpetrated, he is in the pay of Bauer, Marchal & Cie, he is accused of inertia, if he is incapable of defending the interests of the district he should resign: "We need someone prepared to work and someone prepared to speak up in our defence. We are determined to obtain such a representative," says one article. And M. Oudin does not even live in the district any longer.

☆ ☆ ☆

Let me put my microscope aside for the moment. Whatever anyone may say, to write with one's eye focused on the object glass, even with the aid of a camera lucida, really is tiring for the vision. Grown unused to looking in unison, my two eyes have to oscillate their sensations slightly before they can work as a pair once more. A screw thread behind my forehead is unwinding blindly to readjust the focus: the smallest object I look at appears to be of enormous proportions, a water jug and an inkwell remind me of Notre Dame and the Morgue. I have the impression of seeing the hand I am writing with in exaggerated close-up and my pen is a spike of fog. Like attempting

to recapture a vanished dream the following morning, I find it difficult, as surrounding objects progressively reassume my own dimensions, to call to mind the microcosm I was illuminating with my mirrors just a little while ago as I transferred it to the little diaphragm of attention. Following the natural inclination of our heart when we let ourselves be swept away by its delirious interpretations, we almost succeed in picturing you, magnificent bacterial dramas, as being involved in passionate causes exactly similar to our own real-life vexations. Love is the sole sentiment noble enough for us to ascribe it to the infinitely small. But let us just for once try to imagine your conflicts of interests, microbes, and ponder upon your domestic squabbles. What bookkeeping errors, what frauds, what misappropriations of municipal funds preside in observable phagocytes, over the consequences of the physical phenomenon? Wriggle, wriggle desperately, tragic vibrios caught up in a complex adventure of which the observer perceives only the satisfying and reasonable play of the immutable laws of biology! What are you inscribing in my optic field, tiny tiny ones, with this tornado of enigmas, these luminous distress-signals? What is the meaning of the cinema of your vibrations, of the dance of the colloids? Attempting to decipher this rapid handwriting, the one word I can just make out among these ceaselessly changing euneiform characters is not *Justice* but *Death*. O Death, charming if slightly dusty child, here is a little palace for your flirtations. Approach gently on your wobbly high heels, smooth down your taffeta dress, and dance. All the world's subterfuges, all the artful expedients which enlarge the powers of my senses, astronomical telescopes and lenses of all kinds, drugs like fresh meadow-flowers, alcohols and their power hammers, surrealisms, all reveal to me your presence everywhere. Death, as round as my eye, I had forgotten you. I was strolling along oblivious

of the fact that I had to return home, to you, admirable house-keeper, to the house where the soup is already growing cold in the bowls, where you sit nibbling radishes while waiting for me, your fleshless fingers playing with the edge of the tablecloth. Come now, don't be impatient, I'll give you some more peanuts, a whole district full of boulevards on which to sharpen your dainty little teeth. Don't nag me: I'll be along.

What I forgot to say is that the Passage de l'Opéra is a big glass coffin, and like that same whiteness deified since the times when people worshipped it in Roman suburbs, still presides over the double game of love and death (L'Amour versus La Mort) played by *Libido* whose temple, these days, is built of medical books and who has recently taken to strolling around with the little puppy-dog Sigmund Freud at his heels. In the changing light of the arcades, a light ranging from the brightness of the tomb to the shadow of sensual pleasure, delicious girls can be seen serving both cults with provocative movements of the hips and the sharp upward curl of a smile. On stage, young ladies, on stage, and start stripping just a little.



"The living individual," says Hegel, "which in its first process behaves as in itself subject and notion, through its second assimilates its external objectivity and thus *gives itself* real determinateness. It is now therefore *in itself* or *implicitly* a *genus*, substantial universality. The particularizing of this genus is the relation of the subject to *another subject* of its genus, and the judgment is the relationship of the genus to these individuals thus mutually determined: the *difference* of the sexes."<sup>2</sup>

For me, this remark reveals the true meaning of the story about Paris: no doubt, only Venus among all her rivals seemed

woman to him, and so he threw her the apple. But what would he have done here? In the Passage de l'Opéra, so many female strollers of all kinds submit themselves to the judgment of Hegel. They are of varying ages and degrees of beauty, often vulgar, and in a sense already depreciated, but women, truly women, and palpably women, even at the expense of all the other qualities of their bodies and their souls; so many women, in league with these arcades they stroll along, are content to be solely women that the man who is still irresolute and solitary in his conception of love, the man who does not yet believe in the plurality of women, the child seeking an image of the absolute for his nights, has no business in these parts. How sad and touching it is to see those groups of flushed students jostling each other on their way to the Théâtre Moderne: once inside, how could they ever come to a decision?

Certainly it is not a preoccupation from which caresses are excluded that has lured this whole shifting population of women into this kingdom: indeed, they grant perpetual rights to sensual pleasure over their comings and goings. Charming multiplicity of appearances and provocations. Not one who brushes the air like any other. Each one leaves in her wake a different regret, a different perfume. And even though some of them may bring a very gentle smile to my lips because of the sheer disproportion that reigns between their indifferent or frankly ludicrous physique and their infinite desire to please, they still partake of this atmosphere of lasciviousness which is like the rustling of green leaves. Ancient whores, set pieces, mechanical dummies, I am glad that you are so much part of the scenery here: you are still vivid rays of light compared with those matriarchs one encounters in the public parks.

Some have made this place their headquarters: a lover, a job, perhaps the hope of snaring a rather different prey from

that usually to be found along the boulevards, in short some motive tinged by fate, has settled them within these boundaries. Others haunt the passage only because idleness, curiosity or chance has allowed them to stumble across it . . . it may be a timid young man scared to be seen with them in broad daylight, or it may equally well be a roué who feels at home here and who comes to inspect his catch in this calm retreat. The women one comes across here are often making their first foray into these convenient backwaters; though, far from being provincials, they have simply graduated from sitting each day at the terraces of neighbouring cafés. But in entering beneath these glass vaults they become aware of a separate existence in a world apart, and they feel uncomfortable. They talk in hushed voices, laugh rather too loudly, and keep a sharp eye open. It does not take them long to discover the features which excite and shock them. Generally, they go in pairs: it makes life easier. Only novices misjudge them; the others do not hesitate to invite these couples to join them in a drink so that they can get better acquainted. These are delicate conversations, in which the presence of a second woman introduces a note of sociability and politeness, until the moment when the interested party shows her gleaming teeth, and laughingly discusses her timetable and her most secret skills. There are long-standing liaisons which have chosen the Certa or the Petit Grillon as their rendezvous. These established menages are easily recognizable; the woman, as she waits, puts on an unconvincing air of coyness, until the man bustles up, still dripping with his social status, carrying a briefcase, and wearing the ribbon of the Légion d'Honneur. He runs his fingers over his beard to make sure it is well-groomed. Sometimes the woman has a child with her. She never for a moment loses her aura of mystery.

But it is the real old-timers who are my favourites. They

are often to be seen around. There is no need to study them at close hand: time gradually fills in an imaginary portrait of each one. They scarcely alter from one year to another, reflecting the march of the seasons, the vagaries of fashion, changing imperceptibly with the sky, like those puppets on barometers in the Black Forest who wear a mauve dress on rainy days. The tunes they hum change too: always a well-known tune, sometimes even recognizable. Some of them trickle away, the others grow old. Each spring brings its reinforcements for their contingent. The newcomers are timid or boisterous at first, but soon adapt themselves to their surroundings. A mobile human tapestry, continually fraying, continually being repaired. They may share the same common fund of hats and ideas, but they would never cheapen their demeanour, an indefinable sense of their bodies, except perhaps for an occasional coarse leer which indicates more clearly than anything a certain familiarity and chumminess, a delicious degradation which kindles my imagination immediately and warms my heart. In everything base there is some quality of the marvellous which puts me in the mood for pleasure. With these ladies, a certain taste for danger adds an extra ingredient: these eyes, their circles fixed for ever and their tiredness deified by paint and powder, these hands which everything detestably reveals as being expert, an intoxicating air of complaisance, a horribly bantering tone, an often lewd voice, commonplace remarks which tell the risky story of a life, signs that betray the kind of accidents to be expected in such a life, everything in these ladies gives cause to dread the ignominious perils of love, everything in them, at the same time, shows me the abyss and makes me dizzy, I shall most certainly forgive them in a little while for exhausting me. I am like the cloth merchant in the *Thousand and One Nights* who married a girl from the palace: she not only had him beaten with rods



for daring to caress her without first washing his hands, but personally cut off his thumbs and his big toes with a razor; but he did not allow a little thing like that to come between them, and made a solemn vow to her that he would thenceforward always wash his hands six score times with alkali, with the calcined ashes of plants, and with soap; then he bought a house and dwelt there with his bride for a whole year.



Two hairdressers follow the stamp dealer in single file, the first a ladies' hairdresser, the second a *Salon* for gentlemen. The specializations involved in your functions as hairdressers to the two sexes are by no means lacking in pungency. The laws of the world are inscribed in white letters across your shop fronts. The wild beasts of the jungle are your customers: they visit your reclining chairs as a preliminary to pleasure and the propagation of the species. You set an edge on hair and cheeks, you trim claws, you whet faces for the great natural selection. Nightingales have been seen wrapped in your moist shrouds; before sitting down, they had thrown into the little sand-filled spittoon their cigar decorated with the night's stars, and then abandoned themselves to the singing scissors and the magical atomizer. Who would have recognized you, melodious bird, in this condemned man fitfully reading the gossip of *La Vie Parisienne*?

I long to know what nostalgias, what poetic crystallizations, what castles in Spain, what constructions of languishment and hope raise their scaffolding inside the head of the apprentice at that moment, right at the beginning of his career, when he decides irrevocably to devote his hairdressing skills to ladies, and so begins to look after his hands. How enviable his allotted routine will be: from now on he will spend every moment of

his day uncoiling the rainbow of women's modesty, lightly floating heads of hair, wisps-of-steam hair, these charming bed-curtains. His life will pass in this thick haze of love, his fingers intertwined with the very emblem of woman's wantonness, with that most subtle device for caresses that she sports so nonchalantly. There must surely be hairdressers who, like miners down a pit, have dreamed of serving only brunettes, or of launching out into blondes. Have they thought of deciphering those networks which just a while ago gave a hint of sleep's disorder? I have often stopped at the threshold of these establishments from which men are barred, and I have seen the heads of hair uncoiling in their grottoes. Serpents, serpents, you never cease to fascinate me. So one day, in the Passage de l'Opéra, I found myself contemplating the pure, lazy coils of a python of blondness. And suddenly, for the first time in my life, the idea struck me that men have discovered only one term of comparison for what is blond: *flaxen*, and have left it at that. Flax, poor wretches, but have you never looked at ferns? I have spent months on end nibbling fern hair. I have known hair that was pure resin, topaz hair, hair pulsing with hysteria. Blond as hysteria, blond as the sky, blond as tiredness, blond as a kiss. My palette of blondnesses would include the elegance of motorears, the odour of sainfoin, the silence of mornings, the perplexities of waiting, the ravages of glancing touches. How blond is the sound of the rain, how blond the song of mirrors! From the perfume of gloves to the cry of the owl, from the beating of the murderer's heart to the flower-flames of the laburnum, from the first nibble to the last song, how many blondnesses, how many eyelids: blondness of roofs, blondness of winds, blondness of tables or palm trees, there are whole days of blondness, Blond's department stores, arcades for desire, arsenals of orangeade powder. Blond everywhere: I surrender myself to

this pitch pine of the senses, to this concept of a blondness which is not so much a colour as a sort of spirit of colour blended with the accents of love. From white to red through yellow, blond keeps its mystery intact. Blond resembles the stammerings of ecstasy, the piracies of lips, the tremors of limpid waters. Blond takes flight from definitions down a wayward path where flowers and seashells greet my eyes. It is woman glinting upon stones, a paradoxical shadow of caresses in space, a breath of dishevelment of reason. Blond as the reign of passionate embraces, these tresses were dissolving, then, in the shop in the passage, and as for me, I had been slowly dying there for the past fifteen minutes or so. It seemed to me that I could willingly have spent my whole life near this swarm of wasps, near this river of glimmers. In this underwater world, the imagination is haunted by those film heroines who, in search of a lost ring, encase all their American pearliness in a diving suit. This unfurled hair had the electric pallor of storms, the cloudiness of breath upon metal. A drowsy animal of some kind, lolling in a car. One felt surprised that it made no more noise than unshod feet upon a carpet. What is blonder than the froth of moss? I have often thought I saw champagne on the floors of forests. And chanterelles! And agaric! Darting hares! The moons of fingernails! The colour pink! The blood of plants! The eyes of bitches! Memory: memory is truly blond. At its very limits, where memory blends with falsehood, the pretty clusters of clarity! The dead hair suddenly took on a port-wine glint: the hairdresser was beginning the Marcel waving.

At freedom in the shop, huge and thoroughly modern wild animals lay in wait for *homo's* female, already the prey of small iron tongs: the mechanical dryer with its serpentine neck, the ultraviolet ray tube with its gentle eyes, the summer-breathed fumigator, all the crafty instruments ready to snap their jaws,

all the steel slaves who one fine day will rebel. As for the simulacra on display in the shop-window, I shall say no more\* about these waxworks that fashion has stripped of their clothes, digging cruel thumbprints into their flesh in the process. But where the devil had I met this woman who was now passing her hands over her remodelled coiffure? I caught a glimpse of her shoulders before a cobweb hid them from sight. Then it was the turn of her hair to disappear under a great maroon insect. A dragonfly was honey-gathering a little lower than her waistline, her hands were playing with gloves of sand and a handbag of ash-blond mica. Her walk was like laughter, and when she reached the doorstep I saw that her foot was caught in a snare of foliage, and her golden leg; and I asked myself once more: "*But who can this sponge be?*"

Then the charming blondness leaned towards me and said: "Have you forgotten already? It was only yesterday: the green plants are not wilted, the chandeliers have not lost their sparkle, the stage boxes are still dusky red. It was the moment of the equinox when I appeared in the centre of the gales of uncontrollable laughter. I only had to dandle myself a little and the swell of darkness suffused their faces, the ocean of men's arms stretched out towards Nana."

"Nana!" I exclaimed. "I scarcely recognized you. Why, you look divine, today!"

"I *am* the divinity of the day," she replied. "Through me all things breathe and have their being. Do you know any popular songs? They are so full of me that they cannot be sung, they must be murmured. Everything that exists through reflection, everything that sparkles, everything that perishes dogs

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\*But see *Anicet, ou le panorama, roman*, Chapter Two. [Note added in 1966.]

my footsteps. I am Nana, the idea of time. Have you never been in love with an avalanche, my dear? Just look at my skin. Although immortal, I have the appearance of a banquet of midday sunshine. A fire of straw one longs to touch. But on this eternal pyre it is the firebrand who goes up in a blaze. The sun is my little dog. See, it is trotting at my heels."

She went off in the direction of the Rue Chauchat, while I stood there bemused: instead of a shadow, a scarf of light was preceding her along the pavement. She vanished into the distant hubbub of the auction rooms of the Hôtel des Ventes.

The Hôtel des Ventes allows a little of its passions to filter through the sieve of the Passage de l'Opéra. But those who escape its halls are transformed here by a haunting memory, and although, when these nervous gamblers, these feverish look-out men enter this cavern, their faces are still flushed with the blazing reflections of auctions, as they advance into these magical arcades they fall under the spell of the place's enchantments and gradually turn into men. Even so, a few of them make a stop at the second hairdresser's in order to divest themselves more thoroughly of the trembling which would betray their identity. Heads dangling in the Portugal ware, cheeks surrendered to the blades of Sheffield, what do they think about in this sombre, oak-panelled *Salon*? The grime-dulled shop-window scarcely provides a hint of the excellence of the establishment, and its rather austere, high-ceilinged interior is not as modernistic as one might have hoped. This is not the traditional French hairdresser, recapturing the memory of its glorious years during the previous century by means of a proliferation of useless ornamentation; nor is it the American-style hairdresser, boasting barbaric gadgetry designed for a sort of erotic surgery, which has established its stereotyped image throughout Paris within the last ten years; nor, despite

the wording on the sign outside, mere vestige of a civilization that vanished with our childhood, is it a *Peluquero* of the kind that arrived in France with the maxixe and the tango and is still to be found in the neighbourhood of the Trinité. It may be considered, rather, to be a survivor of the outdated anglo-mania that sent its shirts to London to be laundered: in this instance, the Protestant-style *Lavatory* which seems no more English to us today than a certain type of eighteenth-century Sèvres porcelain seems Chinese. What a contrast with the adjacent boutique! No blue velvet curtains here, no enigmatic female cashier. And instead of following the example of its neighbours, whose venturesome operative name, *Norma*, conjures the image of a balcony overlooking a vineyard, the shop places itself under the more prosaic aegis of its seven hairdressers:

VINCENT  
PIERRE  
HAMEL  
ERNEST  
ADRIEN  
AMÉDÉE  
CHARLES

Stiff, unsensual hairdressers. Like their environment, they are made of dark wood and mirrors. They shave efficiently. They cut hair and that's that. Next please. The fact is, they are the products of a school which viewed hairdressers as precision instruments: their methods are devoid of humanity. In a country where the soaping of cheeks by hand, such as is practised in Germany, has been declared abominable, and sanction given to the badgering of those same cheeks by the immemorial shaving brush, it is entirely appropriate that such puritanical hair-

dressers, even when only a step away from the sanctuaries of sensuality, should succeed in upholding a tradition of Anglo-Saxon dryness. It is far more frequently among the small hairdressers of the outlying districts, Auteuil, even Ternes, that I have found sentimental practitioners capable of bringing a sort of non-professional passion to the care of the hair and beard, and of betraying through sudden unexpected refinements an instinctive anatomical knowledge which gives genuine meaning to a phrase used only ironically nowadays: *capillary artist*.

I shall never cease to be astonished by the degree of man's disdainful indifference towards his pleasures, and his consequent failure to extend their domain. Such an attitude reminds me of those unfortunates who are so concerned to subdue their erogenous zones that they wash only their hands and feet. Even those people who appreciate the delights of chance make no apparent effort to reproduce them. No system, no attempt at codifying pleasure. It is a miracle that they are still occasionally capable of giving way to what they so quaintly call vices. They do not undertake the education of their scalp, and their hairdresser neglects the opportunity to introduce these ignoramuses to the pleasurable sensations which they could so easily provide. As far as I know, the geography of pleasure has never been taught, although proficiency in this subject would constitute an effective weapon against life's tediums. No one has assumed the responsibility of assigning its limits to the *frisson*, of drawing the boundaries of the caress, of charting the territory of ecstasy. All that man has succeeded in extracting so far from the individual experience is a series of vulgar localizations. One day, perhaps, scholars will divide the human body up among themselves in order to be able to study the meanderings of pleasure: certainly such a study is as worthy of absorbing a

man's activity as any other. The atlases they will publish, incorporating their findings, will be required reading for all apprentice hairdressers. From these maps the youths will learn to let their fingers stray across skulls: they will learn to make them linger at the level of the lambda where pleasure reaches its peak, and then quickly let them slip away towards the temporal processes where, under the influence of the massage, new realms of nerves suddenly join the dance, sending out curious twinges in the direction of the ears and the adjoining regions of the neck. And I shall not even speak of the face: if they learn no more than to coax twitches from the elevators at the wings of the nose they will already pass for cunning masseurs.

Psychology, that old freak,\* whose presence at the hairdresser's is scarcely noticeable apart from the names of perfumes, the idea of hair dyes, and the romanticism of the various hairstyles (I know a place on the Rue du Débarcadère which offers an Albert-I-King-of-the-Belgians coiffure, a Joffre coiffure, etc.) no longer holds any secrets for tailors, and hasn't done for a long time. For example, right at the end of the Galerie du Thermomètre we find Vodable who attracts customers by calling himself: *Fashionable Tailor*. He also sells trunks, and, as he puts it in his careful English, *All Travelling Requisites*. I can't help feeling that that sensitive experimenter Landru must have bought his clothes here, trying on suits in the middle of luggage displayed like so many mysterious symbols of his destiny. My recollection of this man whom they decapitated is that his home boasted a mask of Beethoven and the works of Alfred de Musset, that he always offered his newly-acquired "fiancées" a biscuit and a small glass of madeira, that he used to wear a decoration from the Ministry of Education. Curious

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\*Var. *sneak*.

dead end of a whole world. It seems to me that the precise point in the passage where I am standing fits this man exactly and matches his accessories. And I think what a pity it is that the court of assizes does not issue a programme in which one could print in italics:

*At court and in town  
Monsieur Landru  
is outfitted by the Fashionable Tailor*

But I swear to you that for every dead Landru there are ten unknowns waiting to be discovered. They are the tailor's customers: I see them march past as though I were one of those slow motion movie cameras which photograph the graceful growth of plants. They are not all Parisian Don Juans, but a kind of bond they share in their style of dressing allows me to perceive that they are all pierced by a single mystery. Sentimental adventurers, dreamy crooks, or, at the very least, conjurers of reveries, they come here to acquire the ingredients for their innate sense of illusion. Nothing will reveal the nature of these paradoxical activities which they pursue from inclination even more than from necessity, or doubtless from inclination and necessity combined. Fated for a long time to come, for ever perhaps, to live on the fringe of the world and of reason itself, they will continue to exercise their imaginative faculties empirically in connection with specific and picturesque acts. One day an accident may betray them. But in general I visualize them sinking gently into an equivocal old age filled with predatory memories. Odd, unsuspected lives hoarding a private treasury of pungent stories. Today, man no longer stalks the

borders of marshes with his dogs, bow in hand: alternative solitudes have proffered themselves to his instinct for liberty. Intellectual no-man's-lands where the individual may escape social constraints. An unknown people lives there, caring little about its legend. I can see its country houses, its laboratories of pleasure, its hand baggage, its schemes, its traps, its amusements.

At the level of the printer who prints cards while you wait, just beyond the little flight of steps leading down into the Rue Chaptal, at that point in the far north of the mystery where the grotto gapes deep back in a bay troubled by the comings and goings of removal men and errand boys, in the farthest reaches of the two kinds of daylight which pit the reality of the outside world against the subjectivism of the passage, let us pause a moment, like a man holding back from the edge of the place's depths, attracted equally by the current of objects and the whirlpools of his own being, let us pause in this strange zone where all is distraction, distraction of attention as well as of inattention, so as to experience this vertigo. The double illusion which holds us here is confronted with our desire for absolute knowledge. Here the two great movements of the spirit are equivalent and all interpretations of the world have lost their power over me. Two universes begin to fade at their point of contact; like a woman adorned with all the magic spells of love when daybreak has raised her skirt of curtains and penetrated the room gently. For a moment, the scales dip towards the weird gulf of appearances. Strange lure of these arbitrary arrangements: here is someone crossing a street, and the space around him is solid, and here is a piano on the pavement, and motorcars squatting under their drivers. Unequal height of passers-by, uneven temperament of matter, everything changes according to the laws of divergence, and I am greatly astonished at God's imagination: an imagination attuned to infinitesimal

and discordant variations, as though the great question was to bring together, one day, an orange and a piece of string, a wall and a glance. It looks rather as though for God the world simply provides the occasion for a few attempts at still-lives. He has two or three little stage props which he uses assiduously: the absurd, the trumpery, the banal... impossible to get him to change his script.

If, standing at this sentimental crossroads, I direct my eyes alternately towards this land of disorder and towards the great arcade illuminated by my instincts, I do not experience the tiniest stirring of hope at the spirit of either of these illusionistic landscapes. I feel the ground tremble beneath me and suddenly I feel like a sailor aboard a ruined castle. Everything signifies havoc. Everything is crumbling under my gaze. The sense of uselessness is squatting beside me on the first step. He is dressed like me, but with an added touch of nobility. He does not carry a handkerchief. The infinite is reflected in his face, and he holds extended between his hands a blue accordion which he never plays, and upon which one can read: PESSIMISM. Pass me this little chunk of azure, my dear Sense of the useless, its song will please my ears. When I squeeze its bellows only the consonants can still be seen:

PSSMSM

As I stretch them again, the I's reappear:

PSSIMISM

followed by the E:

PESSIMISM

And the whole thing starts wailing from left to right:

ESSIMISM — PSSIMISM — PESIMISM  
 PESIMISM — PESSMISM — PESSIISM  
 PESSIMSM — PESSIMIM — PESSIMIS

## PESSIMISM

The wave reaches this shore with a barbaric explosion.  
 And starts to recede again.

PESSIMISM — PESSIMIS — PESSIMI  
 PESSIM — PESSI — PESS  
 PES — PE — P — p... , nothing more.

Standing on one leg, the other foot cupped in his hand, a bit theatrical, a bit common, clay pipe, cap tilted over one eye, and singing I do believe: *Ah, if only you knew the details of the life of Burgundy snails...* at the top of the steps, in the dust and the fag ends, why if it isn't that charming boy: the Sense of the useless.



Let me retrace my steps. Once again the light splits as it traverses imagination's prism, and I submit to this iridescent universe. What did you think you were up to, my friend, out there on the frontiers of reality? See, here is your kingdom of rock salt, here are your asterisms and your famous lodes. You know quite well that you are the Aladdin of the Western World, a harmless joke, destined never to emerge from this great blob of colour that weighs down the depths of your retinae. Nothing

more ridiculous than the conflict of a flame with the fire around it. You will never leave your ship of illusions, your villa of poppies with its pretty roof of quills. Your gaolers that are eyes trudge back and forth, rattling their bunches of reflections. What a delusion, to think that by spending twenty-six years digging, with a sliver of broken reason, a tunnel whose starting point is your mattress, you would finally surface at the seashore. Your memory opens on to a secret dungeon. There you will always find the same flowers, the same forests of tresses, the same disasters of caresses. In your Thebaid, the recumbent lions are glimmers of amnesia, and as for the ghosts! the pearly-hued ghosts seem to be praying as they fade into the background. Enslaved to a tremor, infatuated with a murmur, I continue to deteriorate in this twilight of sensuality. A little more intangible, a little less perceptible . . . each day, I bless the outlines of my inner self, and in the end I have so little desire to be understood, and then I myself can understand neither wind, nor sky, nor the simplest tune, nor kindness, nor glances any longer. And that, Bee's Polish and Kiwi, is how, under cover of my inattention, I come to be sidling across the shoeblack's shop front on the other side of the flight of steps which provides an exit on to the Rue Chauchat. And that, too, is how, while making my way back towards the boulevards, I find myself crossing the entrance, to my right, of the first corridor connecting the far ends of the passage's two arcades, and manage to avoid becoming engulfed in these black slopes that lead gently down towards the Théâtre Moderne. Directly opposite the tailor and the hairdresser's, a showcase belonging to the Restaurant Arrigoni, in which a coloured picture of a memorable banquet holds the place of honour amid a display of long-necked, straw-corseted Italian wine bottles, is all that separates this corridor from the pale biscuit-coloured Bath establishment.

A strong bond exists in men's minds between Baths and sensual pleasure: this immemorial notion contributes to the mystery of these public establishments which many people would never venture to visit, so great is the superstition of contagious diseases, and so widespread the conviction that the bathtubs prostituted here are dangerous sirens luring visitors into their traps of leprous enamel and stained tin-plate. Thus, the atmosphere of these temples devoted to a dubious cult is partly that of a brothel, partly that of a place where magic rites are performed. No architectural detail permits the inexperienced passer-by to confirm his suspicions about the irregularity of such a building: BATHS is all the façade says, and this word conceals an infinite range of truthful signs, all the pleasures and maledictions of the body, but who knows? perhaps after all the only thing to be found under its aegis is the promised water, limpid, tinkling water. The unknown is terribly tempting, and danger even more so. But in its contempt for the instinct of the individual, modern society has done its best to eliminate both these phenomena: certainly, under present conditions, the unknown no longer exists except for those whose emotions are easily intoxicated, and as for danger, everything visibly assumes an inoffensive hue each day. And yet in love—love of all kinds, whether it is this physical fury, or this spectre, or this diamond-like genie who murmurs to me a name equivalent to coolness—in all love there resides an outlaw principle, an irrepressible sense of delinquency, contempt for prohibitions and a taste for havoc. Confine this hundred-headed passion within the boundaries of your estates, if you will, or requisition whole palaces for it: nothing can stop it surging forth elsewhere, always elsewhere, there where its appearance is least expected, where its splendour is an outburst. Best of all, love thrusts up shoots where no one plants it: how vulgarity convulses it! it is

liable to give sudden wanton twitches. There are maniacs possessed by the street's haunting memory, and only there can they experience the full flow of their nature. You have come across these saturnine men in the heart of crowds, these crazy women in the first-class compartments of the Nord-Sud Métro train around five in the afternoon. How often have you sensed that the traveller was wearing a wedding ring on her finger? And yet nothing, she was seeking nothing but this fleeting derangement. The human sky flickers sometimes with lightning that the eye cannot follow. What factors, what compensations or vertigos, have reached their culminating point in these bizarre kleptomaniacs of passion? I find it entirely admirable that these married women, whom I imagine as being *apparently* happy, should be noble-spirited enough to be discontented with their lot. Away, then, in search of the infinite! You can see them in the cinema, quite unhinged in the darkness, or in the revolving suns of fairground merry-go-rounds, their skirts hitched up like a challenge. They are off on the conquest of themselves, on the crusade of desire: will they liberate this tomb, their heart? It is the vagrancy of uncertainty that their hearts must inevitably engender: in the split second of a coquettish movement a passerby may be convinced that his moment has come at last, and that, on the contrary, he is still the dupe of his imagination. Another gets her chief pleasure from lusting after a man who does not even notice her, to delude herself with a mounting hope shattered only by the polite tip of the hat, whereupon she would cry sour apples. Yet another goes hunting with grim resolution, and suddenly a hurricane blows up between herself and her prey, nothing can halt this adorable storm, everything precipitates this dual frenzy: then, just as she is about to come flat up against the body she has lured towards her, she shrinks back in a single motion, and with savage exaltation, through a callous

suicide, she refuses herself and becomes a stone, a stone. As for this last woman who is so cold, so unresponsive to all approaches, nothing will betray the fact that she knows her whole being is giving way to utter despair. Nothing, not even a trembling lip. Then she is off, moving like clockwork, it was probably a living corpse, my dear fellow.

At the baths, a very different kind of temperament tends towards *dangerous* daydreams: a twofold mythical feeling that is quite inexpressible comes to the surface. First, there is the sense of intimacy in the very centre of a public place, a powerful contrast that remains effective for anyone who has once experienced it; secondly, there is this taste for confusion which is a characteristic of the senses, and which leads them to divert every object from its accepted usage, to pervert it as the saying goes. It is not easy to decide what motivating factor is uppermost here: which is the first urge to seize the customer of hydrotherapeutic establishments. Undressing, under whatever pretext, may be a symptomatic act. Or a mere imprudence. What seems certain, though, is that when a man, used to seeing himself in jacket and trousers, suddenly finds himself contemplating his naked body in broad daylight, he exposes himself to a more or less appreciable risk of being unable to resist the temptation to use it for pleasurable purposes. Thus, baths would appear to be the ideal site for physical relationships and, even more, for the improbable adventure of a true love affair. However absurd this last hypothesis, it grips my imagination. Love at first sight in a bathhouse: laugh if you like, you don't know what you're laughing at. All the lasciviousness in the world drains away, here, going to waste simply because of the asynchronism of desires. It is just when the possibilities of an encounter are agonizingly limited—when I am alone in my room, when I am asleep, when I am running at full speed—that I most expect



an apparition to possess me utterly. My freedom, how I am imprisoned in your name. Then, too, places such as these are so calm, one might be in another country, a guest of some exotic culture, ah, don't talk to me about voyages. Only someone quite devoid of feverish passion could enter a bathhouse without becoming immediately convinced that he is entering the heart of an enigma! But in this world, there is so little faith in human aspirations, and the acceptance of a limit to depravity of all kinds is so engrained, as is the universal fear of compromising oneself, as is mechanical resignation to happiness, as is habit (the only woman today who wears a corset)—that—to my great regret, I admit, I am becoming alarmed and asking myself whether I would not do better to get the hell out of here and find a region better adapted to my volatile nature—that—I dream of a people that is both gentle and cruel, a people that is a cat in love with its claws and always ready to show the whites of its eyes and the blackness of its designs, I dream of a people as fickle as watered silk and always spurred on by love—that there is no one even prepared to recommend for our greedy leisure the delightful pastimes he dares not lay claim to for himself. Whence, the scandalous situation that, in Paris, the title of bath establishment only too often lacks any euphemistic suggestion: people do simply wash themselves there, as they might eat elsewhere. Indeed, moral decadence has reached such a point in this town, sensuality has become so listless here, and most men have become so strangely indifferent to the sense of the absolute, that it is almost only the pederasts, still a bit dazed by the tolerance they are beginning to encounter, and used to guile and tyranny as part of life's routine, who take advantage, these days, of the Baths' equivocal nature. The number of these accommodating bathhouses which have escaped their attentions completely could be counted on the fingers of

one hand. The proprietors complain, the customers stay away. Well, well! The fact is, these Gentlemen and these Ladies have been neglecting their desires somewhat. Up to the age of twenty they feel fine. After that, it's all over; curiosity, mystery, temptation, vertigo, adventure, gone gone for good. They do gymnastics to keep slim, but what exercises would help to put back the colour in their lives or build up their day's disquiet: as for lovemaking exercises, out of the question after twenty. They've learned their trade once and for all. They've acquired a technique of some sort and they'll stick to it to the bitter end: you take the woman in your arms and you say to her... so she promptly flops on to a sofa moaning: "Oh, Charles!" You see it happening all the time in well-made films. Is it the merest chance that these films never depict a woman who suddenly catches sight of a man, goes straight up to him, silently, her eyes shining with provocation, and places her hand unerringly on his trouser flies? Such films would have no success at all, they would smack too much of fiction: and what we are all clamouring for, make no mistake about it, is realities, yes RE—  
A—LI—TIES:

## The Realities

### FABLE

*Once upon a time there was a reality  
With her own flock of sheep in real wool  
And as the king's son came passing by  
The sheep bleated Baaah! how pretty she is  
The re the re the reality*

LOUIS ARAGON

*Once upon a time there was a reality  
Who never could get to sleep at night  
And so her fairy godmother  
Really took her by the hand  
The re the re the reality*

*Once upon a time there was an old king  
Who got very bored as he sat on his throne  
His cloak slipped off into the evening  
So then they gave him for a queen  
The re the re the reality*

CODA: *Ity ity the rea  
Ity ity the reality  
The rea the rea  
Ty ty The rea  
Li  
Ty The reality  
Once upon a time there was THE REALITY*

Let us then enter the Baths of the Passage de l'Opéra with a practical mind. And a little Kodak. It would exceed the bounds of probability to imagine that these premises serve any purpose other than a hygienic one. Its few customers are models of propriety. The shop space is entirely taken up by the head of a wide staircase with brown wooden banisters which plunges down into the basement. Above this staircase, facing the passage, hangs a magnificent painting of flowers, while on the wall to the right a portrait of a woman by the same artist is flanked by two romantic engravings, the one farther back representing a man leading three horses, and the one nearer the door depicting Mazeppa chased by wolves. Strictly between ourselves, the wolves' eyes gleam so brightly that with a little encourage-

PARIS PEASANT

ment I'd be happy to discover something symbolic in the phenomenon. After traversing an impressive landing, the staircase ends up in a basement comprising two spacious rooms, a wide one, and a somewhat narrower one from which a long corridor leads off in the direction of the boulevards, below the Restaurant Saulnier. The rows of bath cabins that open on to both rooms may be considered de luxe since they are all furnished with couches and dressing tables. The décor is completed by a large number of wall cupboards. This place, all doors and wainscoting, its only source of daylight the ceiling of frosted glass, gives off a solemn, dusty air, and with its dim electric lighting it could easily inspire me to idle fancies if I hadn't promised myself to be discreet. I shall therefore mention without comment the fact that all the cabins on the right-hand side of the corridor also have doors at their far ends, and these doors, which can be locked only from the inside, all give on to one huge room occupied sleepily by various shower contraptions, so that if . . . Well, suppose two customers clambered out of their baths to cool down a bit in this shadowy arena, they could meet each other in there without anyone being the wiser. There is nothing more mysterious than these curious little slatted shutters, set into the walls above the baths, which allow communication between the adjoining cabins in many of the Parisian establishments (those of the Rue Fontaine, the Rue Cardinet, the Rue Cambracères, for example). No one is suggesting that the architect foresaw the use that would be made of these fittings: could the engineer who drew up the plans for the Pont de Solférino have had an inkling of the debaucheries that his arches would one day shelter? The simple hearts of architects are free of all perversity.

In any case, I have sniffed out the real purpose of this basement: it is a laboratory devoted to calorimetry. The male and female attendants, who are, in fact, a couple of distin-

guished physicians in disguise, soak the volunteers in their calorimeters and then lose themselves in fascinating calculations about the dissipation of energy. They hope, one fine day, to take Carnet's principles by surprise. Meanwhile, he stands gaping, while she reads detective stories.

## LOUIS !

I'm coming out, I'm coming out: now who can that be calling me? The crowd is still strolling to and fro outside. No one I know . . . ah yes: the desire to see my first name, so seldom used in my circle, printed in capitals of a rather imposing size. A great desert waste stretches in front of my eyes, or a sort of tranquil meadow, perhaps: why believe it or not it's the Restaurant Saulnier. Its two floors, ground and mezzanine, fill the space between the Baths and the transversal corridor that emerges right opposite the entrance of the lodging-house. A gift of the gods, this restaurant: I have absolutely nothing to say about it, having eaten there a hundred times. The great quarrels of the Dada movement (you may have heard of the Dada movement?) used to adjourn to this place under something resembling a flag of truce, so that the combatants, who had just spent two hours at the Certa defending their reputations, could discover in a plate of cold meat evidence of the height of morality, the height of *fashion* as the Antiphilosopher<sup>3</sup> among them prefers to put it. At that time there was a Tribunal of Dada Safety, and by no stretch of the imagination could one have foreseen that the Reign of Terror would, one day, give way to the Directoire, with its games, its fops and its split skirts. These folk who feed themselves here are of small account. In they come and out they go again: an arrow or a hand indicates an appropriate destiny to each of them. Good luck, fellows.

Boasting three frontages, on the Galerie du Thermomètre, the little corridor I have just mentioned, and the Boulevard des Italiens, a Café Biard stands opposite the Librairie Rey. Main room containing bar counter, back room, with your multiple doors, your glass wall-panels still recalling nostalgically the 10-centime coffee, the 20-centime vermouth and soda, of vanished eras, with your pillars and your mirrors, you constitute a delightful palace of reflections resembling everything that we dreamers of Europe know about far-off America and its bloodstained epics. You are the setting for hidden crimes, dastardly plots, pursuits and ambushes. It is within your broken perspectives that the whole absurdity of a human life will be played out, revealing at last the great secret of those lyrical misfits who make solid citizens titter nervously in the darkness. And love: how strangely comfortable love would find itself in this café where everything contrives to provoke looks and glances. False light, abettor of all true exaltations: within these reckless premises, conflicting lights still clash. Oh God of hell, why do the whores who kill time here sing softly to themselves as they caress the cracked marble of the tabletops?



Like a molehill surrounded by scrabbled mould, the Galerie du Baromètre emerges on to the Boulevard des Italiens at the foot of the Librairie Flammarion's window display, a little distance from the terrace of the Taverne Pousset. A tout is permanently stationed there, tapping with his cane a wall poster advertising the Théâtre Moderne; bursts of shimmy mingle with his patter, directing the bystander's gaze leftwards, towards a music shop plastered from top to bottom with the sheet music published by Éditions Salabert. Strollers enjoy pausing here, attracted

equally by the words of this elegant, bored gentleman promising indescribable bliss in the second act, and this shop where a blonde can be seen enticing fashion and its songs to the keyboard of a piano.

How mankind loves to remain transfixed at the very doors of the imagination! This prisoner would dearly love to escape, but he hesitates on the threshold of possibilities, dreading that he may find he has stepped on to a rampart walk leading back to its own casemate. He has been taught the mechanism of the logical sequence of ideas, and the poor fellow has assumed that his ideas are connected. So he justifies his reason and his delirium by means of delirious reasoning. He has pondered Kant's sophism:

If cinnabar were sometimes red, sometimes black, sometimes light, sometimes heavy, if a man changed sometimes into this and sometimes into that animal form, if the country on the longest day were sometimes covered with fruit, sometimes with ice and snow, my empirical imagination would never find opportunity when representing red colour to bring to mind heavy cinnabar. Nor could there be an empirical synthesis of reproduction, if a certain name were sometimes given to this, sometimes to that object, or were one and the same thing named sometimes in one way, sometimes in another, independently of any rule to which appearances are in themselves subject.<sup>4</sup>

And mankind starts having doubts, because he dislikes question-begging and he can see just what little Emmanuel is driving at with his spell-weaving words, and he detects the flaw in this intellectual gambit and he tells himself that they are just trying to make a fool of him with all these promises of naked harem women in the second act, with all this vulgar, sentimental music, and besides the lady's beautiful hair is dyed. Buzz off, mos-

quito! For you the swamps are dry land, and so you'll never be sucked in! The trouble is that you fail to appreciate the limitless strength of the unreal. Your imagination, my dear fellow, is worth more than you imagine.

## MAN CONVERSES WITH HIS FACULTIES

*Playlet*

SENSE (*to Man*)—You look all upset today, have you had an unpleasant encounter down in the valley, then, or has some smart little bear's cub made an appointment with you for this evening?

WILL (*raising himself from a bottle of champagne*)—No fear of his going to the mountain this evening! (*With a resolute air*). If he goes up there, I'm going with him.

UNDERSTANDING (*sitting up suddenly*)—Hey, what about me? I'm going too, why should I always be the one to stay with the flock while Man goes off hunting wild goats and bears!

MAN (*smiling mournfully*)—Come, come! To put an end to this argument: I have no intention of going out at all today. Knowledge, poor suffering thing, has not left her couch since I fell out of love with her, and she might have given up the ghost altogether if it hadn't been for the attentions and prescriptions of that fine, upstanding doctor, the stranger who lives in the isolated house.

SENSE—Yes, the house on that lofty eminence, the one constructed from the letters of an ancient phrase which is far too long for me to remember.

UNDERSTANDING—Do you not know what happens to lovers when they see a lyre, a costume or some other object which serves as an accessory to their lovemaking? Why, in recognizing

this lyre they inevitably form a mental image of the person to whom it once belonged . . . just as, when one sees Simmias one thinks of Cebes.

SENSE—That's exactly it.

WILL—I don't care for this doctor of yours; every time he comes here, I feel quite scared of him.

UNDERSTANDING—Yes, and the way he's rigged out! Those huge moustachios, that bearskin headgear, that long sour face, that huge fur-lined frock coat: I've never seen anything like it.

MAN—He's a stranger.

WILL—Well, I don't trust strangers an inch. I've heard tell they carry children off and even eat them.

SENSE—Idiot! What about all those who employ Man as a guide beneath the waterfalls, over the glaciers, along the mountain streams: Love, Falsehood, Dream? Have any of these handsome masked strangers, resplendent in their rich apparel, been known to carry off or eat their guide?

WILL—Oh, that's not the same thing! We know where that lot come from. But this gentleman's more than a stranger, he's almost a foreigner, you might say: IMAGINATION—if that isn't a heathenish sort of name!

MAN—It's not the name that worries you. Anyhow, this new member of our little community is entirely devoted to our welfare; and when such benevolence arrives on one's doorstep, what's the point of trying to guess where it comes from?

SENSE—We don't know his profession, it's true, but still, since Knowledge has been sick it's he who has looked after her and supplied all her medicines—and he still hasn't put in a bill.

UNDERSTANDING—It's a trick, that's what it is! He's just waiting until Man has killed a nice, big bear, to slap in his bill.

WILL—A fat bill, too, I'll bet! It will probably scare us as

much as his thin face does. And that's not all: he says he doesn't like little boys because they chatter too much, and on top of that he claims he's only happy when he's alone.

MAN—Slander, slander. Imagination is a most worthy gentleman, beneficent and humane.

SENSE—Are you so sure about that? When that stranger arrived from the valley one stormy evening, no one knew a thing about him.

WILL—Yes, he suddenly swooped down on us like a lost kite.

MAN—Idle gossip.

UNDERSTANDING—I've heard some pretty good gossips myself, in my time!

MAN—Come! Come!

UNDERSTANDING—This gentleman . . .

SENSE—May be a notorious criminal, for all we know, who has taken refuge in our valley because it's a good hideout.

MAN—A criminal! Ah, but just what is a criminal? What do you think of the lightning, my dear Sense, what do you think of that brilliant wild flower that the mountains sometimes put in their hair? Is lightning a criminal, or a beneficent divinity? And you, Understanding, tell me what you think of Imagination?

UNDERSTANDING—I don't like uncertainty.

*At this moment, IMAGINATION appears, looking just as UNDERSTANDING has described him: he is an old man, tall and thin, with moustachios in the style of the Habsburg emperors, wearing a long fur-lined frock coat and a bearskin headgear. His face is a prey to nervous twitches. When he speaks he makes the gesture of seizing an invisible listener by an imaginary lapel. Tucked under his arm is a copy of Benjamin Péret's Au 125, Boulevard Saint-Germain. There is just one really rather odd thing about him: he walks with a rollerskate*

*attached to his left foot, but with his right foot in direct contact with the ground. Advancing laboriously towards the man, he starts declaiming:*

## IMAGINATION'S DISCOURSE ON HIMSELF

Well, the going has certainly been rough for you all: in your anxiety to make the best of a bad job, you reckoned without me. And so from one illusion to another you end up repeatedly at the mercy of the illusion Reality. And yet I have given you everything: the blue of the sky, the Pyramids, motorcars. Why should you lose faith in my magic lantern? I have saved up an infinity of endless surprises for you. As I said to the German students in 1819, one may expect everything from the mind's potentialities. See, already creations of pure fantasy have made you masters of yourselves. I have invented memory, handwriting, differential and integral calculus. There are still primary discoveries that are undreamed of, and that will make man as different from his present image as speech already distinguishes him, to his intoxicated delight, from the dumb creatures that surround him. What are you muttering about? It is not a question of progress: I am simply a coke peddler, and you may experience the rapture of a mirage in what to me is snow but to you is manna, from remembrance to systems of applied knowledge. Everything is cognate of imagination, and imagination is innate in everything. The telephone is supposed to be *useful*, but of course it is nothing of the kind: see how man is seized with convulsions as he screams *Hello!* into his receiver. What is he but an addict of the dope called sound, dead-drunk with conquered space and the transmitted voice? My persons are yours: here is love, energy, speed. Do you want pains, death or songs?

Today I bring you a narcotic originating at the limits of consciousness, at the very edge of the abyss. What have you

sought hitherto in drugs but a sensation of power, a mendacious megalomania and the free exercise of your faculties in empty space? The product which I have the honour to present to you procures all that, procures, too, immense and un hoped for advantages, transcends your desires, arouses them, makes you yield to new, insensate desires: make no mistake about it, those responsible for putting this philtre of the absolute into circulation are the enemies of order. They pass it round secretly, under the eyes of the police, in the guise of books and poems. The anodyne pretext of literature allows them to offer you at a rock-bottom bargain price this deadly ferment which it is high time to make generally available for consumption. It is the genie in the bottle, it is the gold of poetry in a solid bar. Buy, buy the damnation of your soul, at last you are going to lose your way, here is the machine guaranteed to capsize the mind. I announce to the world this momentous news item: a new vice has just been born, man has acquired one more source of vertigo—*Surrealism*, offspring of frenzy and darkness. Walk up, walk up, this is the entrance to the realms of the instantaneous, the world of snapshot. Modern hashish eaters, you will have no cause to envy the awakened sleepers of the thousand and one nights, the miraculously healed, the convulsionaries, when, without even an instrument in your hands, you find yourselves evoking the hitherto incomplete gamut of their rapturous pleasures, and when you assume over the world such visionary power, ranging from the invention to the glaucous materialization of the slippery gleams of the waking state, that neither reason nor the instinct of self-preservation, despite their beautiful white hands, could prevent you from using this power unreservedly, casting a spell over yourselves by piercing the mortal cross-piece of your heart not with a pin but with an enchanting image, so that you would finally become like the

man held fast for ever by one woman alone, transformed into a butterfly transfixed to this adorable cork. The vice named *Surrealism* is the immoderate and impassioned use of the stupeficient *image*, or rather of the uncontrolled provocation of the image for its sake and for the element of unpredictable perturbation and of metamorphosis which it introduces into the domain of representation: for each image on each occasion forces you to revise the entire Universe. And for each man there awaits discovery a particular image capable of annihilating the entire Universe. You who begin to glimpse the orange gleams of this charm, hurry, bring your lips up to this cool, burning cup. Soon, tomorrow, the obscure desire for security, which binds men together will dictate to them savage, prohibitory laws. The propagators of surrealism will be broken upon the wheel and hanged, the drinkers of images will be locked up in halls of mirrors. Then the persecuted surrealists will be found in *cafés chantants*, taking advantage of the confusion to peddle their recipes for infecting images. An attitude, a reflex action, a sudden betrayal of irritability on the part of certain customers will suffice for them to be suspected of surrealism by the police who are keeping them under observation. I can already visualize the law's *agents provocateurs* with their wiles and their traps. The right of individuals to forge their own destiny will yet again be restricted and challenged. Public peril will be invoked, or the general interest, or even the preservation of humanity itself. Upright citizens will launch indignant protests against this indefensible activity, this epidemic anarchy with its aim of rescuing each person from mankind's common lot and creating for him an individual paradise, this deflection of thought processes which will doubtless be labelled intellectual Malthusianism in the near future. What splendid ravages: the principle of usefulness will become foreign to all those who practise this

superior vice. For them, it will at last no longer be a question of *applying* the mind: seeing its boundaries dissolve into the distance they will share their ecstasy with all that is ardent and unsatisfied on this earth. Young people will plunge passionately into this serious, unprofitable game. It will pervert the course of their lives. The Faculties will be deserted, the laboratories closed down. The very idea of armies, families, professions will become inconceivable. Then, in the face of this ever-increasing disaffection of social life, a great conspiracy of all the dogmatic and realist forces of the world will be organized against the phantom of illusions. It will win, this coalition of powers dedicated to the principles of why-not and making-the-best-of-it. But it will be the last crusade of the mind. And for this battle that is lost in advance I recruit you today, adventurous, grave hearts, contemptuous of victory, who search the night for an abyss into which to hurl yourselves. Come, the roster is open. Queue up at this window, please.

The structure thus designated by Imagination's translucent index finger is the little wooden hut that serves as a box office for the Théâtre Moderne. It leans against a hoarding, grey by day but assuming a speckled hue towards sunset, into which is cut one of the doors of the Librarie Flammarion. Each time you cross her field of vision, a cashier sitting behind her window chants the prices of the seats and the nature of her house's attractions, an elementary but adequate idea of which is provided by the three or four framed photographs displayed on the front of the booth. This breast, these legs summarize the authors' intentions as clearly as do the posters at cinema entrances which feature an aimed revolver, a boat engulfed by raging seas, a cowboy strung up by his heels. And it costs next to nothing.

<b>THÉÂTRE MODERNE</b>	
<b>PRIX DES PLACES</b>	
<b>Loges et Avant-Scène.</b>	<b>30 fr. »</b>
<b>Fauteuils</b>	<b>Avancés. . . 25 fr. »</b>
	<b>Réservés . . 20 fr. »</b>
	<b>1<sup>re</sup> Série . . 15 fr. 50</b>
	<b>2<sup>e</sup> — . . . 11 fr. 50</b>
	<b>3<sup>e</sup> — . . . 9 fr. »</b>
<b>Stalles.. 5 fr. 75</b>	
<i>Tous droits et taxes compris</i>	

Beyond the hoarding, and as far as the cross-corridor, stretches the Hôtel de Monte-Carlo, whose upper storeys project beyond these limits, and even jump the gap, transversally, of the arcade at the entrance to the passage, evoking powerfully for me, at this level, the image of the Bridge of Sighs as I know it from picture postcards. At street level, the façade of the Hôtel de Monte-Carlo is pierced by windows composed of small Louis XVI-style panes behind white bars; a glance through them reveals a wide, low-ceilinged hall of profoundly gloomy aspect, in which potted plants and travellers are slowly dying from boredom under a large chandelier festooned with dangling crystals. Sunk in cane armchairs, the travellers read a variety of the foreign and out-of-town newspapers that are available in Paris only along the boulevards. A cosmopolitan gathering with its own odd characteristics, oddly calm, often picturesque, and

almost always weary. These exhausted gamblers land up here only at the end of exciting adventures, but how they have worn away the surface of the earth with the slow shuffle of their steps! Some of them sit around in the arcade as though it were a café terrace. They look as if they are waiting for something. But what? This coveted happiness will never turn up. You may as well be on your way.

Opposite the hotel, the lodge occupied by the passage's caretaker keeps one eye on a sort of miniature ravine which gives access to a tiny courtyard. Just beside the lodge with its charming crochet-work curtains stands a shoeshine parlour; let us make a brief halt there, it will cost us a mere sixty centimes, and we shall leave the place wearing suns on our feet. Shoeshine parlours breathe the very spirit of modernism: what decorative splendour invests the tins of polish, despite their Americanism and the lack of ingenuity shown in displaying them. And then, the shoeblacks themselves are simply adorable! Such exquisite manners, a way of making you wait for an eternity of time while, carried away no doubt by passion for their art, they keep rubbing away at shoes that are already throwing off dazzling reflections. A minor art, I'll admit, but art art art. It is doubtless a matter for regret that the shoeblack's art is strangely devoid of metaphysics, and its credentials might perhaps be less open to question if it took recent intellectual attainments more fully into account. One may equally regret that in a civilization such as ours the shoeblacks have registered technical advances over their predecessors of the romantic era. They have tended hitherto to demonstrate their inventiveness mainly in the interior decoration of their shops. The great discovery in this field has been that of elevated armchairs, the idea for which is said to have originated with a New York shoeblack—or, according to other authorities, an Italian colleague—who had started off in



bars, while still a youngster, and had pondered the fact that the high barstools were extremely convenient for the exercise of his profession. These daises, at the foot of which the artist shoeblack abases himself voluntarily, are admirably suited to daydreaming. If savants made a practice of having their shoes polished, what magnificent machines, what grandiose conceptions of the universe would emerge from between the arms of the shoeblacks' chairs! But, alas, professors tend to keep their shoes dirty and their nails in mourning. So they are not scientists or scholars, these passengers on a motionless ship, these strollers who come here to divest themselves of mud and dust while they lose themselves in meditation, their hearts brimming over, no doubt, with a great love. Poets? Who knows, retired officers, crooks, speculators, brokers, travelling salesmen, singers, dancers, schizophrenics, victims of persecution mania, never priests, but elegiac hearts, millionaire junk-dealers, spies, conspirators, politicians corrupted by boards of directors, plainclothes detectives, café waiters on their day off, journalists and Protestants, foreigners, murderers, Colonial Office employees, pimps, bookies and ghosts. If I were a ghost, this is the place to which I would return. I would proffer my shoes for shining, sitting spectrally in state upon one of those thrones of chance, like a statue of Haunting. In the vision that I have of the Commander, it is a shoeshine parlour that provides the site for his appointment with Don Juan, though when the Commander sat down beside him, the latter was already losing himself in idle dreams. And smoking. These days, Don Juan smokes. He was getting ready for a new adventure. So he needed clean shoes. They were handsome brogues. Perforated patterns with a cream-coloured underlay, on black and brown leather side panels and a white leather instep. Harlequin feet. With crepe soles, and heels of lamellated rubber. Shoes for adultery and

seaside resorts. A sort of perambulatory safety lock, guaranteed silent. Don Juan acquired the taste for this caramel-and-whipped-cream footgear after seeing his first Hollywood film. He scoured Paris to find something similar, and it was at a shop in the Quartier Saint-Georges specializing in tailors' misfits and undelivered orders that he finally ran to earth this pair of shoes that a Negro, in a moment of glorious extravagance, had had specially made for him, but which a combination of bailiff, cocaine and sheer nonchalance had obliged him to dispense with. But Don Juan's thoughts are elsewhere, and as for the Negro he is a hundred miles away in some provincial dance hall, between a cane chair and a beer mat advertising Tommysette. Don Juan dozes and sways, his feet floating away on the current of the polishing. Don Juan lets himself go, he loses himself in the pink pattern of a see-through shirt. He scarcely bothers to listen to the shoeblack's conversation with his neighbour. It is this customer's fourth reappearance that day, making five visits in all. He explains that the Rue Grange-Batelière is particularly dusty, that one gets terribly grubby in the Rue Réaumur. Just another lunatic, and yet I know that voice. Looking up, Don Juan recognizes the Commander. O destiny, maniacal destiny, so there you are right next to me. The Commander is wearing the Christ of Portugal, a decoration which apes the Légion d'Honneur. My dear Lord, I had hesitated between this shoeblack, the one at no. 12 of the same passage (Rue Chauchat), and that of the Passage Verdeau: in fact, they are all branches of the same firm, Brondex. In the end I decided on this one, and there you are: so I chose right. Do you mind if I get my shoes polished? I have a date, and the bedspread is covered with network designs representing the seasons and the labours of Hercules, encrusted into the *broderie anglaise* like corbelling. It is unthinkable, is it not, that haste should be allowed to sully

it with dusty shoes? "Your cigarette is going out," said the Commander, "allow me to offer you this cigar." Precious moment, Don Juan takes the cigar proffered by the spectre. This performance cannot go on much longer, I quit the shoeblack for the stamp dealer.

O philately, philately: you are a most strange goddess, a slightly foolish fairy, and it is you who take by the hand the child emerging from the enchanted forest in which Little Tom Thumb, the Blue Bird, Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf have finally gone to sleep side by side; it is you, too, who illustrate Jules Verne and who transport over the oceans on brightly coloured paper wings those hearts least prepared for the voyage. Those who, like me, got their first idea of the Sudan from a small carmine-bordered rectangle in which a white burnous mounted on a mahari advances against a sepia background, those who were familiar with the Emperor of Brazil imprisoned within his oval frame, with the giraffes of Nyasaland and the Australian swans, with Christopher Columbus discovering America in violet, will understand what I mean! But the tiresome reflections which adorn the window display we are in the process of contemplating no longer belong to those multi-valued series we used to know. Edward VII already looks like a monarch from ancient times. Great adventures have shaken those childhood companions of ours, the stamps which a thousand bonds of mystery unite with world history. Here are the newcomers which take into account a recent and incomprehensible reshuffling of global boundaries. Here are the stamps of defeats, the stamps of revolutions. Used, new, what do I care! I shall never understand the first thing about all this history and geography. Surcharges, surtaxes, your black enigmas terrify me: they conceal from me an unknown sovereign, a massacre, palaces

in flames, and the song of a mob marching towards a throne, waving placards and shouting slogans.

No surprise here, the value is clearly marked: the amount required to purchase its services is inscribed on the door, and again above the door in the blue and white lantern which lights up at night. I would like to speak frankly about the lavatories sandwiched between the Certa and the stamp shop. What can be the reason for the deep disfavour into which such establishments have fallen? Men tend to think of them in terms of vulgar drawings and a singular lack of nostalgic charm. And yet, from where you are standing in the arcade just glance through the half opened door to the washroom where a charming woman is applying makeup, and you may understand the true nature of this place designed for beauty to recompose itself after a natural crisis and the satisfaction of a need by no means devoid of grandeur. I have always cherished the spectacle of a woman at her toilet in all its infinite detail. At one time, in a big café that I used to frequent daily, the pretext of the vague medical studies which I had, at that tender age, drifted into, plus some useful connections, had won for me the privilege of tarrying in the ladies' washroom, and I loved to stay there, idly flattering those who came in and those who left, witnessing these adorable transformation scenes by women whose nature had just disarranged them slightly and who were using their arts to restore their powers of seduction. The infinite variations in their demeanour, their quite astonishing ways of behaving, their modesty and their immodesty, even the vulgarities which they deemed permissible under the circumstances, occasionally their dignity, their stateliness even: I never got tired of lingering in this place of transition where the spirit of lewdness came to relax. A curious ardour used to emerge from the diversity of

attitudes. Often, women travelling on this runaway train suddenly took a liking to each other, a liking which brought hands or lips together. The gesture of the mouth stretching itself for the lipstick, cloud of powder, and you, artificial lilacs, blooming for me under my very eyes.

And here I am on the threshold of the Certa, that celebrated café which I have not yet finished talking about. I am welcomed by a motto inscribed on the door above a shield holding a fan of flags:

## AMON NOS AUTES

It was while sitting here one afternoon, towards the end of 1919, that André Breton and I decided that this should henceforward become the meeting place for ourselves and our friends, a choice motivated partly by our loathing for Montparnasse and Montmartre, but partly also by the pleasure we derived from the equivocal atmosphere of passages. And we were captivated, no doubt, by an unfamiliar and unusual décor: it was destined to become very familiar to us indeed, since this place became the principal seat of Dada's assizes, it was here that this redoubtable association plotted one of those ridiculous and legendary demonstrations which constituted its greatness and its rottenness, it was here, too, that it met in a spirit of lassitude, idleness, or boredom, here that it assembled hastily in the throes of one of those violent crises which convulsed it occasionally when an accusation of moderantism was levelled against one of its members. I cannot help being filled with a sort of bemused sentimentality when I speak of this place.

A delicious spot, in any case, suffused with a light of sweetness, with calm, and with cool peace, behind the screen of

adjustable yellow curtains framing the great plate-glass windows which reach down to ground level, yellow curtains that can unveil or conceal a view of the passage, depending upon whether the customer seated near them draws their pleated silk back or across with a hand impatient with waiting. Wood is lavishly used in the interior decoration, and the paintwork is of the same brown as the wood. A massive counter takes up most of the space at the back of the café. A row of tall casks, equipped with spigots, jut out above the counter from the rear wall. To the right, at the back, the door leading to the telephone and the washroom. To the left, a little recess—to which I shall return—opens up about halfway down the room. The most noticeable feature of the room's furniture is that the tables are not tables but barrels. This main room contains two tables, one big and one small, and eleven barrels. Around the barrels are grouped cane-bottomed high stools and wickerwork armchairs: about twenty-four of each kind. Though here a distinction must be made, since almost each wickerwork armchair is different from its neighbour. They are all comfortable, to be sure, but in varying degrees. Personally, I prefer the ones that are low-slung and have latticework tops to their backs. One is well seated at Certa, and that's a fact worth noting. When we enter, we see a wooden screen to our left and a coat-and-hat-stand to our right. Succeeding the latter, a barrel and its seats. Against the right-hand wall four barrels and their seats. Then, just before the washroom, another wooden screen. Between the latter and the bar counter, a radiator, a piece of furniture housing the telephone directories, the big table and its seats. From in front of the counter to the entrance of the recess, already mentioned, in the centre part of the left-hand wall, three barrels and their seats. In the centre of the room, two barrels and their seats. At the entrance to the recess, a small table and an armchair. Fi-

nally, between the recess and the passage door, sheltered from the latter thanks to the wooden screen, one last barrel and its seats. Returning to the recess, we find a wall-sofa upholstered in imitation leather occupying its whole width at the back, three tables set close together in a line against the wall-sofa, a row of chairs along the opposite side of the tables, and in the far right corner a little movable gas radiator that makes itself very welcome in winter. Add some potted plants beside the counter, bottle racks above it, the cashier's booth at its extreme left, just by a door closed by a curtain that is usually draped back. Finally, at the pay-desk, or occasionally sitting at the table at the rear, relaxing, a lady who is both amiable and attractive, and whose voice is so soothing that I must confess I often used, in those days, to telephone LOUVRE 54.49 just for the pleasure of hearing her say to me, 'No, Monsieur, no one has asked for you,' or rather, 'None of the Dadas are here, Monsieur.' To be sure, the word dada is understood rather differently at the Certa than elsewhere, and with a good deal more simplicity, too. Here, the word connotes neither anarchy nor anti-art nor any of the other things that so frightened the journalists\* that they preferred to designate this *movement* by the name of *Hobbyhorse*. To be dada is no dishonour, it simply means a

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\*I shall have passed through this world with a few people all graced with a quality of absolute purity, that same purity you may have had the fortune to glimpse in the sky one summer evening (André Breton, for example) scorned, insulted, spat upon. But if one day my words become sacred—they are already—then let my laughter echo back from far away. My words will never serve your miserable ends, you who thought to sneer at us, filthy creatures. And when I say *journalist* I always mean *scum*. To hell with you at *L'Intran*, *Comœdia*, *L'Oeuvre*, *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, etc., morons, creeps, bastards, swine. All of you, without exception: glabrous bugs, bearded lice, burrowing your way into reviews, into dubious publications of all sorts, you'll get what's coming to you in the end. It all stinks. Ink. Squashed cockroach. Shit. Death to all you who live off the lives of others, off their loves, their boredom. Death to those whose hand is pierced by a pen, death to those who paraphrase what I say.

group of regular customers, a few young people, a bit boisterous at times, but likeable. One says: a dada, as one might say; the fair-haired gentleman. One mark of identification is as good as another. Indeed, dada has become such an accepted term that there is even a dada cocktail here.

I wish to devote a long and grateful paragraph to this café's drinks. And first of all to its port. The Certa's port can be drunk hot or chilled, and comes in several different varieties for the delectation of port-lovers. But the ordinary red port, at two francs fifty, is already so worthy of commendation that I fear I would do it an injustice if I discussed the others. I regret to have to say that good port is becoming increasingly scarce in Paris. But luckily there is still the Certa. The *patron* assures me that it is only at personal sacrifice that he has been able to provide such fine port for his customers. There are ports that taste reasonable but seem to be labile. The palate does not retain them. They evaporate, leaving no memory. This is not the case with the Certa's port, which is heady, consistent, full-bodied and genuinely *timbré*. And port is not the only speciality here. There are few places in France that can boast such a comprehensive selection of English beers, stouts and ales, ranging in hue from black to golden by way of mahogany brown, and incorporating every possible degree of bitterness and strength. My personal recommendation to you—from which most of my friends would wish to dissociate themselves, since, apart from Max Morise, they do not share my enthusiasm for it—is the strong ale at two francs fifty: it is a disconcerting drink. I would also recommend the Mousse Moka, which is always light and well blended, and for general purposes the Théâtre Flip and the Théâtre Cocktail, although these last two drinks seem to have been forgotten in the list reproduced on the following page.

**“CERTA”**  
**TARIF**  
**DES CONSOMMATIONS**

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Martini Cocktail	}	3 <sup>f.</sup>	Porto Flipp	}	3 <sup>f.</sup> 50	
Perfect »			Brandy			
Rose »			Sherry			
Brandy »			Egg Nogs	}	4 <sup>f.</sup>	
Champagne »			Fizzes			
Gin »			Sours			
Grillon »			Sangarees	}	3 <sup>f.</sup> 50	
St-James »			Pick me Hup			
Derby »			Kiss me Quick			
Omnium »			Pousse Café	5 <sup>f.</sup>		
Max »	Pêlé-Mêlé Mixture	2 <sup>f.</sup> 50				
Waller's »	Grillon Cup	3 <sup>f.</sup> 50				
Manhattan »	}	4 <sup>f.</sup>	John Collins Gin	}	3 <sup>f.</sup> 50	
Oscar »			Brom			
Dada »			Clover Club			
Sherry Cobler			Mousse Moka			2 <sup>f.</sup> 50
Champagne »			Florio			
Porto »						
Café Glacé		1 <sup>f.</sup> 50				

**Whisky**  
*Soda*  
— 5<sup>f.</sup> —

This list is displayed in the small room, and used to be surmounted by a placard advertising some drink whose name escapes me, a placard hand-painted by one of their former waiters in the style of Francis Picabia's mechanical pictures, but which vanished some time ago. One of the charms of cafés lies in these little placards hanging all over the place, as they do in particular profusion at the Certa, whether they extol the virtues of Martini, Bovril, Source Carola mineral water, or W. M. Younger's Scotch Ale. Sometimes, they succeed each other in a cascade:

FLIPS. . . 3 F. 50

ROYAL FLIP 4 f.

IMPERIAL FLIP 4 f.

Liqueurs . . . . . 3 f.  
Grandes Marques . 4 f.

PORTO CERTA . 2 F. 50  
ROYAL . . . . . 3 F. 50  
IMPERIAL. . . 5 F.

All these drinks are excellent, incidentally, in fact beyond reproach. And if you feel like having a consommé, try a Bovril: they will serve it to you with a delicious celery salt which you

should sprinkle on unstintingly. Let no one accuse me of partiality towards the Certa. I am at last about to make a complaint, the only one that occurs to me. I don't much care for the way they serve their *café filtre*: to remove the filter, which is a little metal pot, without burning one's fingers, one has to perform a complicated manoeuvre with two crossed coffee spoons inserted through the handle. And a solitary diner, lacking the extra spoon, cannot even do that. Then, where can one deposit the filter which is continuing to dribble slightly? The only thing available is the cut-glass saucer which held the sugar, and if one prefers one's coffee not too sweet then it still contains a lump. So you have a choice of dirtying the table or wasting a lump of sugar. That is really the sole reproach I have to make to the Certa. Apart from which, everything is just perfect. In winter, the café is well heated and never too cold; in summer, its ventilation system prevents it from getting too hot, and it remains a grotto of coolness. Except on Saturday nights, the place is never packed out. The staff is obliging, indulgent even. And although I have seen a good number of waiters come and go during the last five years, nearly all of them were models of politeness and discretion, made cocktails well, were more or less artists, and showed initiative and efficiency in running errands. The present waiter, René, is in this tradition. He sketches out projects for humorous posters against the expropriations, in the style of the caricatures in anti-English pamphlets of the Directoire era which made fun of the baggy trousers the English affected at the time. This is perhaps the moment to mention that the *patron* of this house is a man full of reserve and tact. I have seen him cope with quirky, bad-tempered or ill-mannered customers with an affability that does him honour. He deserves a better fate than that reserved for him by an unthinking municipality which seems more concerned with widening the

streets of its city than with preserving and encouraging a rare urbanity and gifts of courtesy that are rapidly vanishing from public places in Paris. I hope that, when the demolition men have finally chased him out, the *patron* of the Certa will open up a café or a bar elsewhere: I shall be delighted to become one of his customers.\* It is agreeable and comforting to feel oneself surrounded, thanks to the discreet intelligence of such a man, by the kind of atmosphere of cordiality and pleasant calm that is painstakingly maintained at the Certa.

Someone of this sort should be held up as an example as much as a Vatel or a Montagne. We have not directed our critical faculties sufficiently to the problem of the role played by bar and café owners: yet they are people who make a very real contribution to the maintenance of true civilization.

And how easy it is, amid this enviable peace, to start daydreaming. Reverie imposes its presence, unaided. Here, surrealism resumes all its rights. They give you a glass inkwell with a champagne cork for a stopper, and you are away! Images flutter down like confetti. Images, images everywhere. On the ceiling. In the armchairs' wickerwork. In the glasses' drinking straws. In the telephone switchboard. In the sparkling air. In the iron lanterns which light the room. Snow down, images, it is Christmas. Snow down upon the barrels and upon credulous hearts. Snow on to people's hair and on to their hands. But yes, a prey to the fretful agitation of waiting—for I am expecting someone, and have already combed my hair three times in anticipation—I draw back a curtain from the window and find myself immediately absorbed by the scene in the passage, its

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\*Certa is to be found today in the Rue d'Isly, on the premises of what used to be the London Bar. But where am I? Where is my body? It is night already.

comings and goings, its passers-by. There must be some purpose that I cannot guess behind this strange minuet of thoughts being danced out there. What can they be up to, those who are retracing their steps? Frowning brows, serene brows. As many gaits as clouds in the sky. But there is something puzzling me: what is the meaning of the dumb show being performed by these middle-aged gentlemen? They turn round, disappear, and then here they are back again. My suspicions are suddenly aroused, and I begin to scrutinize the handkerchief merchant's establishment.

The handkerchief shop's main entrance, flanked by display windows, is on the Galerie du Baromètre, but it also has a side door and a single window giving on to the narrow lane that squeezes its way along the back of the Hôtel de Monte-Carlo. The shop is separated from the intermediate section of the Restaurant Saulnier only by the black opening of a stairway leading to the upper storeys, where vestiges of forgotten agitation survive in the shape of the offices of *L'Événement politique et littéraire*. The whole length of the lane is bathed in shadow, and the faint light that filters from the Café Biard barely illuminates the recess which is used by the waiters in the vicinity of the hotel to stack spare chairs. Why does this narrow and apparently anonymous thoroughfare nearly always harbour a single motionless pedestrian? What an abstracted, unconcerned air they all assume: their whole attitude makes it perfectly clear that they are there by chance, by pure chance. On the far side of the window, the contents of which are obscured by the linen curtain running along the lower half, the door remains closed. Various gentlemen who look as though they are in a terrible hurry still find time to pass the stationary man for the third or fourth time. Ah, here comes a policeman: he conceals himself in a doorway, but only so that he can gulp

down the half-pint of beer that a friend has sneaked out to him from the Petit Grillon. Spare a little sympathy for the man on the beat, whose eyes devour so poignantly the forbidden Eden of café-bars. The policeman departs. The gentlemen resume their parade. Some of them have canes, some of them do not. Some of them wear moustaches, others are clean-shaven. In the arcade windows, the symmetrically displayed handkerchiefs form triangles suspended above sombre-hued petticoats which prevent the idle gaze from roaming over the shop's contents at its ease. Really a very peculiar collection of hopelessly unfashionable handkerchiefs, in red, green or blue cambric, but in impossible taste with their little pictures, their commonplace little embroidered patterns, their black hems. They could never conceivably tempt anyone. As for the petticoats... can there really be women who wear these plum-coloured petticoats with their long stripes in matching tones? It is difficult to see inside the shop unless one glues one's face to the plate glass: even then, one can only just make out a workbasket, and a piece of work left lying near an empty chair. Just then, the proprietress reappears at the back of the shop, escorting a customer whose features I did not distinguish very clearly but who is certainly elderly and venerable, the sort of old man to whom you, my dear friend, having been so beautifully brought up, would offer your seat in the Métro. He leaves by the side door, which remains open. The ancient gentleman overtakes me at speed: why, he has bought a red pocket-handkerchief, ah no, that is his Légion d'Honneur ribbon. The proprietress has taken up the piece of work and started sewing. A mature lady whose bearing positively radiates commercial dignity. Now someone else is disturbing her. Well, if it isn't the recluse from the lane. They have a short conference, she points his way towards the rear of the shop and follows him, but only after having closed the lane

door, which lacks a handle on the outside. At this moment, a pedestrian who had been advancing towards the open door stops in his tracks, looking a bit put out. Then resumes his perambulatory vigil. I have often noticed, from my observation post in the Certa, that this is the way the proprietress invariably treats her customers. A single one is allowed in at a time, he remains for ten or fifteen minutes, the door locked from the inside, then he leaves again and the door stays open until the arrival of a new visitor. Coyness, infirmity? People must need to blow their noses very frequently when they are no longer very young. The door never gapes open for long, and anyone who wants to enter needs to watch his opportunity pretty closely. I have occasionally seen the proprietress talking with a woman friend who never emerges from the darkest reaches of the shop, and who conducts her side of these little chats without ever revealing her features. But she is only a friend, and usually the handkerchief saleswoman is alone in the room, attending to business. I present myself on the threshold just as soon as it becomes negotiable. I doff my hat and look at the proprietress.

Halt, wretched man! no need to add yet another thunderbolt to those about to be exploded above your head by the Grand Opera's sound effects department. By your insinuations and your idle gossip you have already seriously inconvenienced the tradesmen of the Galerie du Thermomètre and those of a whole section of the Galerie du Baromètre, and you have set against you those whom you have not yet mentioned and who are apprehensive of your writing mania. These worthy folk are in a state of consternation. They have read, without really understanding, the pages which you inexplicably blacken with your frantic attempts to describe, in what looks suspiciously like a spirit of mockery, these winding byways now crouched

under the threat of the raised pickaxe. They find it impossible to disentangle what is pure invention from what purports to be a recording of their views, and so they are as unhappy as children in front of a distorting mirror. Watch out for yourself, they will either burst out crying or lash out with their feet. They would never have believed it possible that in a civilized society people had the right to call everything by its name. For example, the whole point of calling particular premises a *lodging-house* is to avoid a phrase such as *hotel for transients* with its dubious moral implication of rooms being booked by the hour. Here they are, worrying themselves sick because they think their reputations are ruined for ever. You do them an injustice: what will happen to their rights in the great struggle against the Boulevard Haussmann Building Society? What on earth would the lawyers think if by some misfortune they should read your mishmash of inventions and real facts? 'There's a bunch of people we can forget about,' is what they would think. And each of your epithets could bring down the total of the compensation figures a further notch. The old maids who sell canes in the Galerie du Thermomètre nearly died of shame when they read your description of their window display. A female German among their meerschaum pipes, indeed! War councils have been called for less than that. The other day, at a meeting of the passage's leading citizens, one of them brought along numbers 16 and 17 of the *Revue Européenne*,\* and these were discussed with a certain asperity. Who could possibly have given you your information? Suspicion was cast on a perfectly innocent businessman, who up till then had been serving the in-

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\*In which *Le Paysan de Paris* was appearing in instalments. Thus it is that during the 'twenties the standard of morals and that of fiction declined simultaneously in France.



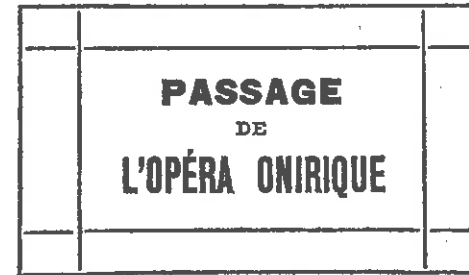
terests of the passage, of playing a double game and stirring up mysterious intrigues. The poor man is searching for you to clear himself of this accusation. He looked in at the Certa recently to see if you were there. Other victims of yours have gone there, crying for justice. They would like to meet up with this sworn enemy, this Machiavellian character, to give him a piece of their mind. And what would these bees say to the Baedeker of the hives? In one of the latest numbers of *La Chaussée d'Antin*, it is not without bitterness that you are quoted at length, for it seems that you have exercised your irony at the expense of this organ of defence of the district's interests, precisely because it had taken up the cause of the little sharks against the big ones. The fact that you have no particular affection for the widow and the orphan is deplorable enough. But your revelations, for which you are solely responsible, really alarm these gentlemen: where did you get these figures from and, in their own words, *can it be possible?*

Good people, harken to me, I get all my information straight from heaven. The secrets of each of you, like those of language and of love, are revealed to me each night, and there are nights in broad daylight. You pass close to me, your clothes fly away, your account books open at the page where the dissimulations and the frauds are to be found, the intimacies of your bedroom are revealed, and your heart! Your heart like a hawk-moth in the sun, your heart like a ship on an atoll, your heart like a compass-needle driven mad by a little piece of lead, like washing drying in the wind, like the whinnying of horses, like seed thrown to the birds, like an evening paper one has finished reading! Your heart is a charade that the whole world has guessed. Fear nothing, then, either for myself or for your reputation, and let me enter the handkerchief shop.

The lady in charge turns towards me a head that is not devoid of nobility. With her rather broad features, her Bourbon nose, a skin which has doubtless lost the elasticity in response to pinching that is so characteristic of youthfulness, a thickening of the neck which contrasts with the thinness of the face, unusual blond eyelashes and reddish eyes conferring a somewhat nocturnal aspect to the general appearance, no makeup, and just enough rice powder to conjure up the image of a lady's companion or a governess, her hair . . . her hair really deserves a paragraph to itself, with its manner of not conforming to fashion, of being discreetly tinted, of not being piled too high as with cashiers, nor being flattened too low as with nurses, the manageress puts her piece of sewing down gently and comes up to me. I can now rejoice at her apparel. The skirt is wide, and shorter than they are worn these days, 1917-style or thereabouts, shaped to give a rounded line at the waist. The colour of the garment is a gaudy half-tint that is better left to your imagination: a sort of reddish quetsch, a tone of red-wine vinegar, which bears the same resemblance to living colour as theatre spangles do to diamonds. It inclines towards red currant in its death throes, towards pecked cherry, it resembles those ribbons of the Palmes Académiques insignia which turn acid in daylight . . . ah, I've got it, the dress is litmus paper tinted slightly pink by urine. The top of the bodice reveals nothing more at the back than the nape of the neck garnished with stray locks of hair, while at the front the neckline scarcely bares the fork from which the neck's convergent tendons emerge gracefully. But the marvel of marvels is the bodice, a masterpiece of appliqué work in a long-vanished style. Women no longer wear boleros these days, a matter of regret in my opinion. But what can one say about the false bolero, which is not free-

hanging like the true one but sewn to the dress, and kept in place by visible stitching forming a design? What is more, the whole bodice is painstakingly trimmed with ribbon and passementerie of a green slightly brighter than almond, slightly duller than cabbage. And, as though that were not enough, the ribbon is applied in flat pleats, arranged in motifs that are inescapably reminiscent of snails and the decorations in suburban town halls. It should be added that this costume, worthy of featuring in a portrait by Gainsborough or Winterhalter, is by no means gracing a model of voluptuousness, however agile she may be: her body's deformations are of natural origin, and if it were not for certain engrained qualities, an almost owl-like restlessness, a kind of searching gaze, this person, Monsieur, could very well be your mother or your housekeeper.

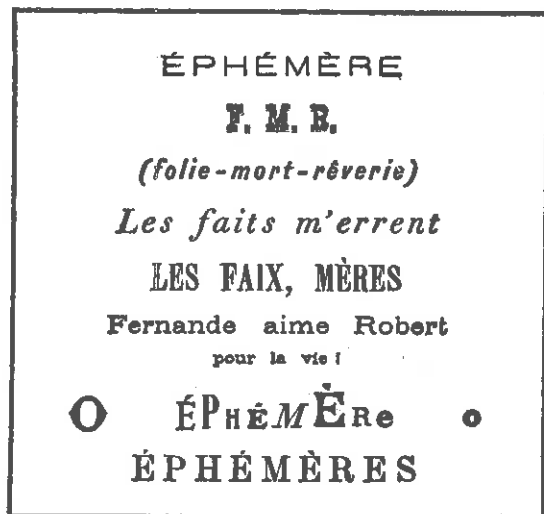
I know: one of the principal reproaches that has been made to me in the past, and that is about to be repeated now, is this gift for observation which you have to observe at work in me in order to confirm its existence and so hold a grudge against me for it. But honestly, I would never have thought of myself as an observer. I like to let the winds and the rain blow through me: chance is my only experience, hazard my sole experiment. I do not subscribe to the idea that the world can be had for the asking. This handkerchief saleswoman, this little sugar bowl which I will describe to you if you don't behave yourself, are interior boundaries of myself, ideal views I have of my laws, of my ways of thought, and may I be strung up by the neck if this passage is anything else but a method of freeing myself of certain inhibitions, a means of obtaining access to a hitherto forbidden realm that lies beyond my human energies. Let it assume its true name, then, and let Monsieur Oudin come and put up the plaque himself:



The stranger reading my little guide lifts his nose and says to himself: it's here. Then directs his steps mechanically towards the point where I have just abandoned him in favour of my oneiric placard, and, addressing the raspberry-and-pistachio lady politely, makes an enormous effort of the imagination and then asks for details of her tariff. The price seems very reasonable to him, and like a photographer in his studio the lady supervises the whole delicate operation personally. But what plunges the visitor over a precipice of conjecture is that instead of a standard rate being in operation there are three classes, as on the railway. He dreams of demanding 'the whole works', as though he were at the hairdresser's, and at the same time is scared to death of the idea. He thinks of the fantasies he created about love, his whole life flashes through his mind: his innocent childhood, his little sister and his parents gathered around the hearth, a painting on grey silk representing Paul and Virginia fleeing the storm, a heart pierced with an arrow, and two or three furnished rooms. Finally, he resigns himself to the least expensive simulacrum. But can I believe what I see in his eyes? This sacrifice of everything worthy of respect to an ardour that is welling up so powerfully in him at this moment, this base quest for the ephemeral lacking even the illusion of duration, this absence of pretext going as far as anonymity

and the isolation of pleasure, all this excites him mightily, and he is in something of a hurry to disappear into the shadows where I can just make out the languid movements of a pair of hands. Follow your inclinations boldly, stranger. You have my blessing, and that is a great deal, believe me. He grows taut. He writhes. Oh, he certainly didn't take very long, did he!

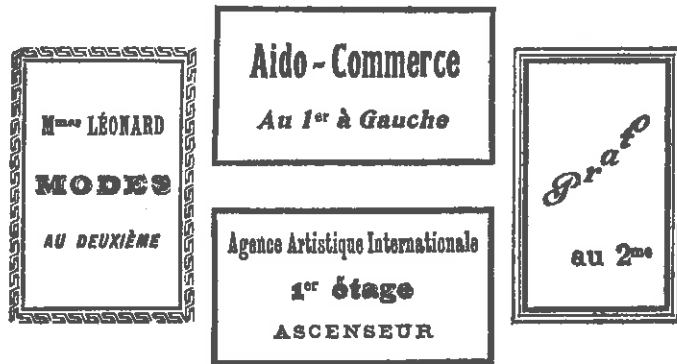
What are these sentimental murmurings I begin to hear? Can the orchestra stalls be taking themselves for musicians? I endorse all of mankind's inclinations, and for example I endorse his liking for the ephemeral. The ephemeral is a polymorphous divinity, as is its name. My friend Robert Desnos, that remarkable sage, who keeps strange ships moored in each fold of his brain, has pored long over these syllables which ring out like a legend peopled with green eyes and goblins. He has descended philology's silk ladder in his search for the meaning concealed by this word at the heart of its fertile images:



Ephemeral, F.M.R.L. (frenzy-madness-reverie-love), a fame really, ever merrily, Effie marry Lee: there are words that are mirrors, optical lakes towards which hands stretch out in vain. Prophetic syllables: my dear Desnos, beware of women whose name is Faenzette or Françoise, beware of those smouldering glances that could fatally ignite your passions, those women loved ephemerally, those Florences, those Ferminas, so easily inflamed to *affirm airily* an imaginary pregnancy.<sup>5</sup> Desnos, steer clear of Fanchettes.

To your left, in a décor of trunks, attaché cases, chests, suitcases, hatboxes, cutlery boxes, wine cabinets, valises, portmanteaux, satchels, bags, baskets and the whole magic paraphernalia of voyages, Vodable, whom we have already met in the other arcade, occupies the ground floor of number 17, next door to the Certa. To your right, opposite, numbers 16 and 14 are shared, beyond the handkerchief shop, by black-painted premises which are the offices of the *Journal des Chambres de Commerce* and by a colourful boutique *Henriette, modes*, whose hats scarcely protrude above the level of the half-curtain running across the lower portion of the window. Woe betide any young people who get so carried away by the mysteries of this particular stretch of the arcade that they stand on tiptoe in front of the latter establishment, hoping for the revelation of some new and intoxicating irregularity: immediately the honest milliners will rush out, fluent with imprecations, calling heaven to witness to the purity of their hearts and castigating with operative hyperbole the district's shameful transactions, and the consequent tendency to imagine a mythical ambiguity in the harmonious gestures of work and probity. The three disparate enterprises are capped, as though with a pediment, by the *Événement politique et littéraire*. Forward, forward, let us clear the path on either side of us of its enigmas, or rather let

us call forth these enigmas as the mood takes us, as temptation lures us: to the left, the doorway of number 17 and its shadowy staircase are framed by placards which immediately send me into a reverie.



Demon of conjectures, fever of phantasmagoria, pass your sulphurous and nacreous fingers through your tow hair and answer me: who is Prato, and on the first floor with its paradoxical lift what is this agency which I am obstinately convinced must be a vast organization engaged in white-slave traffic. Turn round, and see, there right opposite is the little restaurant where, in our progress towards the depths of the imagination, I find the last traces of the Dada movement. When Saulnier seemed too expensive for us, we used to come here, appeasing our inopportune appetites as best we could with food cooked in rancid coconut oil and with their sharp, unpleasant wine, consumed in a stuffy, vulgar atmosphere. What memories, what revulsions linger around these hash houses: the man eating in this one has the impression he is chewing the table rather than a steak, and becomes irritated by his common, noisy table

companions, ugly, stupid girls, and a gentleman flaunting his second-rate subconscious and the whole unedifying mess of his lamentable existence; while, in another one, a man wobbles on his chair's badly squared legs, and concentrates his impatience and his rancours upon the broken clock. Two rooms: a bar room with a zinc counter and a door opening on a low-ceilinged, smoke-filled kitchen, and a dining room extended at the end by an alcove just big enough to accommodate a table, a settee and three chairs, this being really a tiny courtyard covered over to provide the space for six extra customers. The chorus girls of the Théâtre Moderne, their lovers, their dogs, their children, plus a few commercial travellers, are the chief occupants, these days, of the restaurant's settees. The whole scene—sweaty walls, people, stodgy food—is like a smear of candle grease.

But who is this fat, surly old man stationed between the gunsmith and the hairdresser, and playing with a hoop? I am the only one to show any surprise. A strange, gaily coloured hoop, painted with scenes that link up in the manner of the stations of the Cross:

FIRST STATION: The sea, three seashells, a forest and the department of Puy-de-Dôme.

SECOND STATION: A seed.

THIRD STATION: The wave, the fire, a green plant; a figure representing egoism, a sort of naked, tiger-striped god, emerges from a conch, brandishing a telegraph form on which someone has written: *It's me, it's me!* and forgotten to fill in the name and address of the sender.

FOURTH STATION: A woman spitting flowers; in the distance, Eros, wearing a thornbush on his head, leans over the fountain's calmness. Title: 'I forget'.

FIFTH STATION: The seed.

SIXTH STATION : Breathings on the door of silence await the slave who does not return.

SEVENTH STATION : In ripping apart, the veil reveals a glimpse of desire in the form of a flamingo.

EIGHTH STATION : The flamingo flies away.

NINTH STATION : The flamingo loses its feathers in the open air.

TENTH STATION : The air.

ELEVENTH STATION : The seed blowing in the air.

TWELFTH STATION : Egoism and Cupid, supporting the armorial bearings of an imaginary country, mingle their hair together just as the sun strikes midday above the Puy-de-Dôme.

The peculiar old man disappears in the direction of the boulevards, bowling the illustrated circle along with a magic wand. I ask the hairdresser, who is standing in his doorway, if he knows this dreadful apparition.

'Do I know him, my dear Sir!' this affable artist replies, 'I do indeed! He is a regular customer of mine, name of Sch . . . , who spends his life playing at what he calls the wheel of Fluxion. Do come in.'

Gelis-Gaubert, the hairdresser, who occupies numbers 19 and 21 in the passage, has been described countless times. No other shop in the whole passage, in the whole of Paris almost, has provided journalists with more agreeable or easier material for newspaper reports of the graphic and sentimental variety. *The Hairdresser of Famous Men*: every three months or so someone rediscovers him and photographs him with his magnificent moustaches blending the hues of sand, pepper and gun-cotton. A single glance at his window display suffices to show that this hairdresser does not belong to the new school which has invented a thousand ways of making a profit out of its

customers. He still belongs to the era of the twenty-five centime shave: in those days it hardly paid to restore to men their youthfulness and freshness, to employ one's time and one's perfumes, and soap, and everything else that a hairdresser had to offer, powder, the camphor stick like a frozen lake, to receive a few centimes' tip for sole reward. He would have done better to become a tramp, or at least a pickpocket or a street sweeper. Finally the guild decided it had had enough of this, and so new services suddenly started to become available—more expensive frictions, massages, singeing, fumigations, and their countless modalities, the bill increased and the tip reached as much as three francs. When an old retired hairdresser pays a visit to a colleague using the new methods, his soul rejoices greatly when the assistant announces to the cashier the expenses just incurred at his hands by the client he is in the process of extricating from his wrappings and brushing with hogs' bristles. But at Gelis-Gaubert's everything has remained faithful to the ways of the past. In the windows are to be seen all the objects which, up to the beginning of this century, it must have been quite easy to persuade customers to buy for a life of shaving and hair grooming, if the passion for this art, the irresistible, vocation had seized you when you were too young to realize the extent of your folly: toilet-cases, jars and bottles, travelling bottles and sedentary ones, the former in their wooden housing, giving them a special value for true lovers of the genre; wash-gloves, pliable or unbreakable combs, of unequally combustible celluloid or tortoise-shell, of horn or metal; nail files and everything which makes the care of the hands a white magic, and rouges, and fright philtres,<sup>6</sup> and soaps of green, pink, yellow, or of that translucent molasses-black that recalls the delights of mid-August when the sun has joined in and the straw mats on the floors have been knocked askew and thoroughly bugged up

by aching, dog-tired feet; and the toothbrushes, the toothpastes, the headache powders and smelling salts, the eye lotions and miracle-working jellies. On either side of the door, the upper sections of both windows are fitted with two symmetrical rows of shelves, the first peopled with bottles of *Velouté Naturel*, the second with *Glykis*. I have never tried this last speciality of the house, a skin lotion which owes its sea nymph's name to its beautiful emerald colour. But the other, an emollient liquid for use as an after-shave lotion, has been applied to my face here, and I declare it to be a marvel. Thyme and lavender, the very odour of mountains, and not of those arrogant mountains boasting eternal snows and poisonous plants, but those which are resin and bilberry, on whose slopes the chalets can be seen adorning themselves mournfully with blue cheeses; everything in the *Velouté Naturel* recalls a morning landscape before the trees have quite shaken off the night, a landscape for cheeks which surrender themselves, beneath this tactile fresco, to the vertigo of a drive through the forest by car, don't forget to sound your horn: dangerous bend ahead. And what words can describe the display of sponges that provides the finishing touch in this shop which must have been born towards the end of the romantic era, when *The Burgraves* were being hooted off the stage and haunted châteaux left derelict? Sponges in glass jars, sponges at liberty, fine-grained as sand, cross-grained as humour, texture more variable than that of woman's skin, ultra-fine as a honeycomb towel, or porous as the sea's echoing grottoes where Tritons crowned with green seaweed ceaselessly stretch their limbs, sponges swollen by the water's sorrows. I have known a man who loved sponges. I am not in the habit of using this verb in the weak sense. I repeat, this man loved sponges. He possessed specimens of every conceivable shape and size. Pink ones, saffron ones, purplish ones. He took on their tinge.

And some were so soft and tender that he could not resist biting them. Sometimes in his frenzy he tore the most beautiful ones apart, and cried real tears over their scattered splendours. Certain ones he licked. Others he would never have dared touch, for they were queens, truly regal personalities. Others again he simply threaded on a string. And I have a friend who made love to sponges in his dreams. But to consummate this passion he merely cupped them in his palms and squeezed them: you see how easy it is.

The room immediately inside the shop is devoted to the sale of toiletries, and also contains the cash desk, while the second room is itself divided into two by the double row of chairs and basin units. The light streaming down from the sloping skylights in the ceiling reveals a spacious atmosphere: a feeling of grandeur, of the sort that has become rarer as rental values have risen, continues to reign here as though we were still living in palaces. A whole portion of this vast hall is set aside for waiting customers, although these seldom number more than one or two. They can remain close to the scene of operations, or retreat to a distant corner where they can read, or simply lounge, or do as I prefer to do and walk around. There is a staircase to amuse them with its spiral. Better still, the walls are adorned with countless souvenirs, for the establishment has been patronized by all those whom a false glory or perhaps a true glory steered, during the course of a half century, into these boulevard-lined latitudes where fame announces its ups and downs with a little toot on its trumpet: Grévin, Meilhac, Granval, the Duc de Morny himself, and the Goncourt brothers, a hundred faces one would love to smack, a hundred ambitious freaks, a hundred cabaret singers, a hundred dancers, a hundred social parasites, with their beards, their moustaches, their side-whiskers and their hair. This whole tribe lavished its photo-

LOUIS ARAGON

graphs and signatures. And for many of them, eternal fame reaches no farther than the walls of this room. A few, though, who were poor, paid the hairdresser in kind: it was thus that one of them parted with what looks like a little Horace Vernet sporting scene, and that a certain Gustave Courbet, who held anarchist opinions and suddenly left one day for Cairo, paid his bill with one of his own pictures, down there, on the right.

Arrigoni, Italian restaurant, follows Gelis-Gaubert at numbers 23, 25, 27 and 29. This district is full of Italian restaurants of rather uneven quality: in this particular place one eats fairly well, but it is comparatively expensive, and the service is rather too formal for the standard of food provided. At the gunsmith's opposite, the stranger arriving in Paris with his head filled with visions of a flighty, flirtatious world, the stranger looking for Montmartre who has so often given himself a stiff piece of work in front of a photograph of the Moulin de la Galette, will perhaps find a strange sustenance, preferable to ravioli and minestrone, an entirely unexpected food for his voracious and languid imagination: guns and their breeches. To think that here he can contemplate a unique firearm: a rifled carbine with a harpoon projectile for whaling! And will he not clutch at these hunters' larking-glasses? these wolf traps? He will ask himself, as I do, what can be the purpose of this strange apparatus surmounted by a rubber disc, and like me he will be lost for an answer. He will long to touch the bird shot and buck shot heaped into numbered bins, the lowest numbers being reserved for the largest-sized pellets. He will admire the target pinned on to the back of an old telephone directory, bearing an explanatory inscription together with examples of an unused shot, the same shot deformed after firing, and the hole it is capable of making. This is what the inscription says:

PARIS PEASANT

This shot  
if fired into a telephone directory  
will pass through more than 1,000 pages.  
It becomes so extensively deformed  
that any animal struck by it  
will be immediately incapacitated.

It can be fired  
from a double-choke shotgun  
with any kind of powder  
even with T powder

**DEFORMATION OF THE SHOT FIRED INTO  
A TELEPHONE DIRECTORY**

For his final delectation, there is a charming advertising cutout, representing a dog saying hello to another dog, bearing the following legend:

**BONJOUR, CHER AMI!**  
Avez-vous pris  
vos biscuits  
**MOLASSINE?**

and the supplementary comment:

**MOLASSINE** { dogs & puppy } biscuits

After the gunsmith comes the purveyor of champagne to S.A.R. le Duc d'Orléans. He boasts four windows, which we shall now inspect, starting from the boulevard end of the passage: the first contains Chianti, Lachrymae Christi and Malmsey; the second contains Chianti, Lachrymae Christi and Asti; the third contains electric radiators with copper reflector bowls; the fourth, on the other side of the door, is occupied exclusively by champagne stamped with the arms of the kings of France. In the same display window as the radiators are to be found plans and sketches of villas situated at Domfront-en-Champagne (Sarthe), only three minutes away from the station, on the main line from Paris to Mans. Finally, a placard announces to all connoisseurs the glad tidings of an apple brandy bottled after eighteen years of maturing in the cask:

**UNE RARETÉ : CALVADOS 1893**  
**Mis en bouteille**  
**APRÈS DIX-HUIT ANNÉES DE FÛT !**

And here we are at the corner of the second of the two narrow lanes which cut between the two arcades, the lane which terminates at the end of the Galerie du Thermomètre.

This angle, together with the end of the arcade itself, on the opposite side of the lane, is occupied by an orthopaedist and truss specialist who needs all the space in his two shops to accommodate his bizarre business. See how he rivals the neighbouring champagne merchant with his display of beautiful wooden hands, some articulated, others in one piece. And walking sticks, crutches, cupping glasses, headache pencils. And can anyone explain to me this *crime passionnel*: two severed hands

in a bidet? Trusses for all kinds of hernias, simple or double, with their pads attached to springy metal belts, trusses for adults, trusses for children. In the shop at the end of the lane, these same wares are to be seen in the company of many others: elastic stockings, stockings for sufferers from varicose veins, rubber knickers, douches with bulbs, douches with bags, women's girdles in a choice of pink, red or white, and in rubber, silk, or twilled linen, enemas, clysopumps, clysters, fumigators, cannulas, syringes, hot-water bottles, air cushions, eyecups, sample glasses and graduated measures, test tubes, etc., and an advertisement for the Conservatoire Renée Maubel. A trilingual placard also announces:

**PRÉSERVATIFS**  
 Contre diverses maladies  


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**HIGIENIC PRESERVATIVE**  
 Against various MALADIES  


---

**PRESERVATIVOS**  
 para varias ENFERMEDADOS

A curious conceit, a wild extravagance is suddenly revealed to us: trusses for Sundays! Art puts in an appearance on the surface of the constrictor disc: there are decorative patterns, and even a gold and silver gladiator's head against a red leather background. The ruptured wearer will surely be unable



to resist the pleasure of exhibiting this intimate and barbarous jewel from time to time. A little golden skeleton, composed entirely of those units which human industry can substitute for faulty elements in the divine work without destroying the latter's economy, dangles from the ceiling of this bazaar of the bizarre: he is almost fully equipped, this gleaming metallic gnome, this diagram of ourselves. And how the gods of antiquity on either side of him have been modernized for our benefit! Two little painted statuettes, with rosy flesh and black hair and beard, represent Apollo and Vulcan: but each has an arm or a leg, a head or a belly supplemented by a truss or by articulated joints all achieving the classic gestures of the Belvedere and Etna. It seems we have finally reached that extreme point where garnet-nippled man, proud of his illusions and as conceited as his laughter, no longer recognizes limits to his senses and his mind: so he retouches the gods or even substitutes himself for them, and raises his paradoxical temples to his errors and enigmas at the end of a dubious passage where draughts converge from every direction, at a point where shadow and architecture make vanishing easy. Here, man revels in a sort of intellectual onychophagy: he consumes an arsenious food which is his own substance and his own poison. Let him cast a last glance on this narrow lane lit faintly by the dirty window separating the truss specialist from the shoeblack, just opposite the two stairways, one of which leads to the bar of the Théâtre Moderne; let him cast a last glance at the Arrigoni restaurant's kitchen which looks out on the passage just at its angle; then, master-slave of his vertigos, let him direct his gaze towards number 29 *ter*, whose door, sandwiched between this kitchen and the entrance to the theatre, is adorned with a laconic summons:



Gloomy staircase, it is you who lead to the world's bright blossoming. On the second floor, to the left, we read:



The door opens in reply to the bell, and the madam, an ageing raddled blonde, urges you to come in. It is ten francs, and whatever you like to the little lady. Crossing the minute waiting room, where two is already a crowd, you can hear the sound of voices coming from your right, but you are led to the left along a dark corridor, watch out, there's a step, the door and there you are in the room. Come, Ladies! And in walk just two, fully clothed, you choose the shorter one, blonde curls, a gold tooth clearly visible at one side. The others withdraw, she gives you a demure kiss, says: Wait, I'll take off my schapska and be right back, and disappears. The room is dirty, but so what? it is a very broad desire that has brought you here. A wide, low bed, designed for precisely this purpose, is the main piece of furniture, although a few wobbly, dusty chairs, with old-fashioned fringing round the seats, could still just about function as auxiliaries for the parties accessory to the proceed-

ings. A hideous mantelpiece has a strip of velvet laid along it. There is a sofa between the window and the mantelpiece, backed by a piece of drapery. Between the window and the bed, a nailed-up door with a gap along the bottom edge through which the light filters. Some trashy little statuettes. A few pictures, two of which, above the bed at the end of the room, demand attention: they are engravings, chaste enough on the whole, doubtless supplements from *Le Soleil du Dimanche* of long ago, and both, it would seem, by the same hand. The first shows a couple standing towards the right of a meadow, dressed in romantic clothes à la Romeo and Juliet, and both apparently experiencing a feeling of languor: this would be only natural, for the whole field, where butterflies usually perform great multicoloured glissades, is today aflutter with little winged cupids in complete confusion, some of them in the air, others romping in the grass, while some mischievous ones are clinging on to the breeches of the overcautious young man or whispering into the ears of his belle. The second engraving, in black like the first one, depicts an alcove with a bed whose carelessly rumpled bedclothes cover a beautiful sleeping girl, all unaware—for it is a warm night—that the sheet is slipping down, and that a still modestly veiled breast is coming into view and will soon become entirely exposed. She is dreaming. And these are the same cupids visiting her, like a cloud of pollen, gambolling around in the curtains, on the floor of the room, even in the adorable shade of her dishevelled hair. Some obscure intuition convinces me that the sense of hidden reserve in these engravings makes them more appropriate decorations for this particular place than the kind of licentious images to be found on the walls of higher-class establishments. A sort of *poetic* spirit. But where have I come across this very poetry? this same feeling of voluptuousness? this craftsmanship? At the moment that his name comes to my

lips, a basic truth is revealed to me: today it is the shade of Théodore de Banville that reigns in Paris over the most abject prostitution. An enviable fate for a poet, after all, to have bequeathed his soul in this way to the little clandestine whore houses. More worthwhile than the effort involved in making schoolchildren learn by heart a poem in which the laurel speaks in the first person singular. The door opens and the girl I have chosen, clad only in her stockings, minces up to me, simpering. I am naked, and she laughs because she sees that she pleases me. Come here, dear, and let me wash you. There's only cold water, I'm afraid. Sorry, that's how it is here. The charm of impure fingers purifying my sex, her breasts are small and gay, and already her mouth is making itself very familiar. Pleasant vulgarity, your attentions cause the foreskin to unfold and stretch, and these preliminaries give you childish satisfaction.

People are rather apt to accuse me of extolling prostitution, and even—for I am occasionally deemed to have a curious hold over the world—of aiding and abetting its procedures. And the same people go on to raise dark doubts about the concept I may have, *deep down*, of love. But is it not evident that my taste and my respect for this passion is so enormous—unique, even, I add *sotte voce*—that the sense of repugnance is powerless to bar me from its humblest, least worthy altars. Is it not to misunderstand the nature of love to believe it incompatible with this degradation, this absolute negation of adventure which is nevertheless still a venture by my own self, the man jumping into the sea, the renunciation of all masquerade: a process that is overpoweringly attractive for the true lover? Here I denounce a lie, a hypocrisy which should never be endorsed by any man, even if his heart and mind have at some time been conquered by a woman: are those utterly stupid and commonplace liaisons and love affairs of yours,

which you would not dream of breaking off even when a greater vertigo confirms your misgivings overwhelmingly, are these miserable expedients with their virtuous idiocies, namely prudishness and the idea of everlastingness, any different from my own experience at the brothel, when, after wandering the streets for hours on end, increasingly preoccupied, I finally push open the door of my freedom? Let those who are happy throw the first stone: they have no need of this atmosphere where I achieve rejuvenation, surrounded as I am by the shocks and reversals that have never ceased to depopulate my existence, weighed down as I am by the memory of old habits whose scent, whose spoor still run powerfully across my heart. What do I care if a man, proud of having succeeded in accustoming himself to a single body, is revolted by this pleasure I find here from time to time, when for example after being short of money for several days the fact of being paid fills me with a sense of solidarity with the common people that hurls me brutally into the arms of these girls, what do I care if he considers this pleasure of mine a sort of masturbation? My masturbations are as good as his. And there is a charm that cannot be defined, that must be experienced: it would be like speaking an unknown language to try to explain to you what brings me here, if you have never felt that lure yourself, or if you think of it as a special kind of music hall to visit after an evening's drinking, in a gang, and—in obedience to the legends about the Palais-Royal arcade—for a lark. Even today, my emotions as I enter these erethismic premises are those I felt when still a student. Having no heart for broad jokes, I find it inconceivable that anyone should visit a brothel except alone and in absolute gravity. I pursue there the great abstract desire which occasionally emanates from the few figures I have ever loved. An ardour unfurls. I never for a moment think of the social aspect of these places: the expres-

sion *maison de tolerance* cannot be pronounced seriously. It is, on the contrary, in these places of refuge that I find myself released from conventional concepts such as toleration: basking in anarchy as one would say basking in the sunshine. Oasis. No further use now for this language, this learning, this whole education through which I was taught to exert myself at the heart of the world. Mirage or mirror, a great enchantment glows in this darkness and leans against the doorjamb of ravages in the classic pose assumed by death immediately after shedding her shroud. O my image of bone, here I am: let everything finally decompose in the palace of illusions and silence. The woman espouses my wishes submissively, and anticipates them, and depersonalizing my instincts suddenly, reaches out perfectly naturally for my tool and demands of me perfectly naturally what *she* loves.

The front doorbell rings. A fresh visitor is let in, and I waste no words while he is being conducted into an adjacent room. Coarse jokes, allusions to what he has come for: a regular customer, no doubt. And this same voice repeating: Come, Ladies. Like the daylight under the door, sighs filter through the walls' thin boards. While I am getting dressed my partner lifts up the drapery above the sofa and peers into a cavity beneath it. She gets flustered: Oh! it's only a wall-cupboard. This phrase alone is enough to arouse my suspicions. All right, so I have probably been spied on: old stories of voyeurs come to mind. I shall make no attempt to find out for sure.

Number 29 bis is the Théâtre Moderne. Climbing this narrow stairway that winds round a glass ticket-booth one finds oneself in the lower part of this first floor which, as we have seen, has an exit on to the lane; while at the same level the stairway leads to the manager's office, to the right of the cloak-room, beyond a sort of lounge which houses at its far end the

mean, dirty lavatories. Since using the bar entails ordering a drink, most of the spectators content themselves with staring into it disconsolately from the doorway: the décor is orange, one can dance to the piano, and a little corner is reserved for drinking. The ladies of the stage are to be found there, with their male protectors. The whole atmosphere tinged with the crazy hope of coming across an American, or an old man worth fleeing. One might almost be in the German provinces: a dilapidated imitation of the Scala at Berlin, minus its expressionist stage settings. A few steps higher up is the entrance to the auditorium.

Did the Théâtre Moderne ever enjoy an era of sparkling splendour? The fact that thirty spectators here constitutes a good house sets one thinking about the destiny of all these little theatres which people never tire of describing as perfect jewel boxes. Fifteen-year-old boys, a few stout men, assorted drifters slip into the cheapest seats at the back, while a few pink bonbons, professionals, or actresses between scenes, spread themselves in the twenty-five franc seats. Occasionally, a beef dealer or a Portuguese risks apoplexy by treating himself to a front-row seat and a close-up view of female flesh. Plays of very unequal merit have been performed here: *School for Tomboys*, *Saucy Springtime*, and a masterpiece of its kind, *Flower of Sin*, which remains the model of the sort of erotic, spontaneously lyrical drama that might profitably be pondered upon by all our aesthetes labouring painfully to produce something avant-garde. This type of theatre whose sole aim, whose sole means, is love itself is without doubt the only one offering us a truly modern dramaturgy free of all fakery. We can soon expect to see the weary snobs of the music hall and the circus descend like locusts on these despised theatres, where the need to support a few girls and their pimps and two or three willowy queers has given birth

to an art as primary as that of the medieval Christian mystery-plays. An art which possesses its conventions and its audacities, its disciplines and its contrasts. The most frequently exploited theme follows this pattern more or less closely: a French girl abducted by a sultan endures dreadful boredom in the seraglio until a bit of fun arrives in the shape of an ambassador, or an aviator who has made a forced landing, the visitor is thwarted in his loves by the ridiculous passion he inspires in the female cook or the sultan's mother, but all is well in the end and everyone is happy. Any sort of pretext, a party in the harem, the leaves of a photograph album turned to the words of a song, is good enough to justify a procession of five or six naked women representing the different parts of the world or the various races of the Ottoman empire. None of the great resources of classic comedy, misunderstandings, disguises, plots by jealous lovers, even Plautine doubles, are neglected. The very spirit of the primitive theatre is preserved here through a natural communion between audience and performers arising out of desire on the one side and the girls' provocative behaviour on the other, as well as out of impromptu conversations frequently initiated by the audience's vulgar laughter, its comments, the tongue-lashings given by the dancers to rude individuals, the rendezvous exchanged across the footlights, conversations which add a spontaneous charm to a text delivered in a shouted or mumbled monotone urged on by frequent prompting, or simply read straight from the script without any pretence. A few stock characters form the rather limited basis of the dramatic fauna: a virago, a foolish, bumptious manservant, an effeminate prince, a hero straight from the pages of *La Vie Parisienne*, an exotic creature with a tragic view of love, a Parisian woman who demonstrates the practice and philosophy of love in boulevard terms, some naked women, one or two female servants

or messengers. The moral is love, love is the sole preoccupation : social problems are never touched upon unless they provide the pretext for a display of nudity. The troupe is unpaid : the members take liberties with their roles, and they all exist on intrigues and love affairs. They are as touchy as a real troupe of *artistes* and intolerant of repartee and rowdyism. During the intervals the pranksters are taken aside by the actresses' natural supporters : What harm has that little girl ever done you, eh ? We've all got a living to earn, etc. My stroll has come to an end at last in this alhambra of whores, at the foot of these fountains, these moral confusions which are marked simultaneously by the claw of the lion and the teeth of the pimp. This classical gesture made by the little slave girl, whose mind goes back to the Rue Aubry-le-Boucher just off the Châtelet while she chants her line : *Greetings, mistress!* and the chorus sings :

*This is the month of Venus.*

*This is the loveliest month of all.*

(sacrilege of false pearls and spangled G-strings), this gesture freezes into immobility the Arabic lacework of pink stones within which neither the human face nor the deepest sighs can rediscover the mirror or echo for which they are searching. The mind is trapped by these networks which lure him irretrievably towards the final chapter in his destiny, the labyrinth without a Minotaur where Error, transfigured like the Virgin, reappears, Error with fingers of radium, my melodious mistress, my appealing shadow. The net enveloping her hair makes a marvellous haul of knives and stars. Superstitions soar up like swifts, to plunge down again like pebbles from a sling and strike uncertain brows along the ill-lit roadways of the night. What has become of my poor certainty, that I cherished so, in this

great vertigo where consciousness is aware of being nothing more than a stratum of unfathomable depths ? I am just one moment of an eternal fall. The lost footing never recovers itself.

The modern world is entirely wedded to my idiosyncrasies. A great crisis is brewing, an immense disquiet taking shape as it approaches. Beautiful, good, right, true, real . . . so many other abstract words are crumbling into dust at this very moment. And their opposites, once accepted in their turn, soon lose their own identity. Only ideal facts survive, one single mental matter reduced at last in the crucible of the universe. It is my own self that flashes through my mind. And vanishes. Nothing could possibly escape my attention, for I am the transition from darkness to light, I am at one and the same time occident and dawn. I am a limit, a bearing. Let all things mingle in the wind : those are the only words on my lips. And it is a ripple that surrounds me, seemingly the visible waves of a *frisson*.

A  
FEELING FOR NATURE  
AT THE  
BUTTES-CHAUMONT

*Ausschauende Idee*

I

During those marvellous, sordid times, I almost invariably preferred the times' preoccupations to my own heart's occupations, and lived a chance existence, in pursuit of chance, which alone among the divinities had shown itself capable of retaining its authority. No one had preferred charges against chance, and some were even reinvesting it with a great absurd charm, going so far as to place a few infinitesimal decisions in its care. So I let myself go. The days glided by in this sort of baccarat game where the shoe passed constantly from hand to hand. An idea of myself was all that was in my head. An idea that was born gently, parted the rushes gently. A forgotten word, an air. One feels it bound up with one's whole self, and like a form seeking another similar form with a lantern in the middle of the night—

PARIS PEASANT

see, there it goes now, flitting to and fro—one takes the least fold in the ground for a man, some shrub or a stray glowworm. In this alternating calm and disquiet which formed the only heavens above me then, I thought, as others do of sleep, that religions are crises of personality, the myths of true dreams. I had read the history of these pipe dreams, these seductive errors, in a fat German tome. I thought that they had lost, I thought I could see that they had gradually lost their effective power in this world which surrounded me and which seemed to me to be a prey to quite new and absolutely different obsessions. I failed to recognize the gods in the street, so weighed down was I by my precarious truth, not realizing that truth of any kind could only reach me in those places to which I had already carried error. I had not understood that myth is above all a reality, and a spiritual necessity, that it is the path of the conscious, its conveyor belt. I accepted uncritically the common belief that myth is, at least momentarily, a figure of speech, a means of expression: I was mad enough to prefer abstract thought to myth, and even to congratulate myself on the fact. The man sick with logic: distrusting deified hallucinations, I defied this deification.

Yet what was this need that moved me, this bent I felt like following, this detour that was more than a diversion and that so aroused my enthusiasm? I felt the great power that certain places, certain sights exercised over me, without discovering the principle of this enchantment. Some everyday objects unquestionably contained for me a part of that mystery, plunged me into that mystery. I loved this intoxication which I knew how to put into effect, although ignorant of its causes. I sought for it in empiricism, but my hopes of finding it there were usually deceived. Slowly, a desire sprang up in me to find out what was the link between all these anonymous pleasures.

I felt sure that the essence of such pleasures was entirely metaphysical and involved a sort of passion for revelation with regard to them. The way I saw it, an object became transfigured: it took on neither the allegorical aspect nor the character of the symbol, it did not so much manifest an idea as constitute that very idea. Thus it extended deeply into the world's mass. I was filled with the keen hope of coming within reach of one of the locks guarding the universe: if only the bolt should suddenly slip. It also seemed to me that time played a part in my bewitchment. While time lengthened in the same direction that I advanced each day, each day enlarged the influence that these still disparate elements exercised over my imagination. I began to understand that their kingdom derived its nature from their newness, and that a mortal star shone over the future of this kingdom. So they appeared to me in the guise of transitory tyrants, and in a sense the agencies of chance in relation to my sensibility. Lucidity came to me when I at last succumbed to the vertigo of the modern.

This last word, no sooner formulated, melts in the mouth. The same thing happens with the whole vocabulary of life, for it expresses the process of change, never the state of life itself. I was forced to admit to myself the inadequacy of pure thought to render an account of what possessed me. How could I have distilled the sense of mystery from that of logical possibility? However, the path I was following was such that I could no longer avoid consulting the map of its territory, and in these meanderings I began, to my incredulous astonishment, to sense a sort of presence that everything impelled me to call divine. What struck me about the intellectual progression which led me to this point was that it found its source entirely in those figurative thought processes which I have said I despised. I remember a shivering waxwork figure at a hairdresser's, her

arms crossed in front of her chest, her unpinned tresses soaking their permanent wave in the water of a crystal bowl. I remember a fur shop. I remember the strange dumb show put on by the electroscope's strips of gold leaf. O top hats! during a whole week you presented, for me, the black appearance of a question mark. On the threshold of palpable emotion, a mere nothing could induce me to think that there must be more certainty in my restrictive and particular concept of each thing than in the absolute intuition I had of it. That state of affairs did not last long. Then, without feeling reluctant any longer, I set about discovering the face of the infinite beneath the concrete forms which were escorting me, walking the length of the earth's avenues.

Thus incited by myself to integrate the infinite in the finite guise of the universe, I acquired the habit of constantly referring the whole matter to the judgment of a kind of *frisson* which guaranteed the soundness of this tricky operation. I came to consider this *frisson* an effective proof, and I became disturbed about its nature. I have already said, in different words, that I considered its nature to be essentially metaphysical. The intimate relationship I thus discovered, in a hundred circumstances, between the figurative and metaphysical activities of my mind, as they presented themselves to my consciousness in unison, induced me to reconsider those mythical creations which I had previously condemned rather summarily. I soon became aware that the distinctive nature of my thought, the distinctive nature of the evolution of my thought was a mechanism analogous in every respect to the genesis of myth, and it would certainly not have surprised me if my mind had suddenly fashioned itself a god, however ephemeral or unendowed with conscience that god might have turned out to be. It became apparent to me that man is as full of gods as a sponge plunged into the

open sky. These gods live, attain the zenith of their power, then die, leaving their perfumed altars to other gods. They are the very principles of every transformation of everything. They are the necessity of movement. So I was walking tipsily among countless divine concretions. I set about forming the idea of a mythology in motion. It was more accurate to call it a mythology of the modern. And it was under that name that I conceived it.

## II

The legend of modernity has its intoxications, and doubtless there will always be someone anxious to demonstrate the childishness it shares with Olympus or the Eucharist. I shall listen neither to the voice of scepticism nor to that of the fear of vulgarity. The most important things for me are the external symbols of a religion and the painted or sculpted representations of its divinities; I leave to the self-appointed experts their clever interpretations of those most beautiful of all the stories into which man has introduced the heavens as a theme. I will cross these enormous fields sown with stars.

Wandering through the countryside, I see nothing but abandoned chapels, overturned calvaries. The human pilgrimage has forsaken these stations, for they demanded a far more leisurely pace than the one now adopted. The folds of these Virgins' robes presupposed a process of reflection wholly incompatible with today's principle of acceleration governing movement from one point to another. Before whom, then, will contemporary thought come to a halt, along these routes where newfangled dangers dictate limits, before whom will thought lay, in humble supplication, its acquired speed and its sense of

destiny? Here are great red gods, great yellow gods, great green gods, planted at the edges of the speculative tracks along which the mind speeds from one feeling to another, from one idea to its consequence in its race for fulfilment. A strange statuary presides over the birth of these simulacra. Scarcely ever before had man had the pleasure of seeing destiny and force look so barbaric. The nameless sculptors who erected these metallic phantoms were incapable of conforming to a living tradition like that which traced the cruciform shapes of churches. These modern idols share a parentage that makes them doubly redoubtable. Painted brightly with English or invented names, possessing just one long, supple arm, a luminous faceless head, a single foot and a numbered wheel in the belly, the petrol pumps sometimes take on the appearance of the divinities of Egypt or of those cannibal tribes which worship war and war alone. O Texaco motor oil, Esso, Shell, great inscriptions of human potentiality, soon we shall cross ourselves before your fountains, and the youngest among us will perish from having contemplated their nymphs in naphtha.

Now that we have coaxed the lightning to curl round our feet like a kitten and, fearless as eagles, have counted the freckles on the face of the sun, to whom shall we now pay supreme homage? Other blind forces are born to us, other major fears, and thus we end up prostrating ourselves before the machines that are our daughters, before various ideas that we dreamed up innocently one morning. Those few people who foresaw this magical domination and sensed that it did not derive its principle from the principle of usefulness, believed that they had discovered here the basis for a new aesthetic outlook. They were guilty of a naive confusion between the beautiful and the divine. But here, at last, we are beginning to get a clear idea of the profound reasons underlying that feeling for plasticity which



suddenly arose in Europe at the beginning of this century. Man has delegated his activity to the machines. He has relinquished in their favour the faculty of thought. And machines certainly think. Indeed, in the evolution of this thought they go beyond the limited function originally envisaged. For example, they have invented the inconceivable effects of speed which so modify anyone experiencing them that it would be difficult, indeed arbitrary, to say that that person is the same as the one who lived in a world of slowness. The sensation that grips man, then, confronted by this thinking derived from his own thinking process but out of his control and growing steadily, unstoppable even by his putatively creative will, is nothing less than panic terror, a terror whose traps he fondly imagined he had circumvented, presumptuous child who fondly imagined he could walk in darkness without its company. Once again, you will discover at the origin of this terror the antagonism between man contemplating himself, contemplating himself in the process of being, and his thought process which is constantly evolving. Tragic nature of all mythology. There is an essentially modern tragic symbol: it is a sort of large wheel which is spinning and which is no longer being steered by a hand.

## III

Everything that is most eccentric in man, the gipsy in him, can surely be summed up in these two syllables: garden. Not even when he started adorning himself with diamonds or blowing into brass instruments did any stranger or more baffling idea occur to him than when he invented gardens. An image of leisure stretches out on lawns, sits at the foot of trees. It is almost as though man has rediscovered, through the mirage of

his fountains and little gravel paths, the legendary paradise he has never wholly forgotten. Gardens, your very contours, your artless abandon, the gentle curves of your rises and hollows, the soft murmur of your streams, all make you the feminine element of the human spirit, often silly and wayward, but always pure intoxication, pure illusion. Among your flower beds and boxtree alcoves, man strips off old habits and returns to a language of caresses, to a childishness of water-sprinkling. He himself, as he whirls round with wet hair, is the sprinkler in the sun. He is the rake and the spade. He is the chip of rock. Gardens, you resemble otter-skin sleeves, lace handkerchiefs, liqueur chocolates. Sometimes you press your lips against the balconies; you cover the roofs like animals; your gay whistling reechoes through the train of men's thoughts. I have slept in your canoes: my arm had uncoiled itself, little ants scurried away along the surface of the earth. Flowers massed themselves against the sky. The green bench felt nostalgic for the Nile where great white scarves fled before it along the burning ground. I have played on your lawns, and in your alleys my foot has kicked my heart between the posts of heaven and hell. On the edge of your grass borders I have waved my handkerchief like an emigrant about to set sail. And already the ship is fading into the distance. Among the garden's tackle and rigging the simplest desires, the sweetness and calm of the evening dry together with my shirt. The sun has left us a pot of geraniums in its will.

This evening, the gardens are marshalling their ranks of great dusky plants that look like nomadic encampments in the heart of cities. Some are whispering, others are smoking their pipes in silence, the hearts of others are overflowing with love. There are some which caress white walls, while others touch elbows with the foolishness of turnpikes and moths flutter in

the hoods of their nasturtiums. There is a garden which is a fortune-teller, another which is a carpet vendor. I know all their professions: street-singer, gold-weigher, meadow-footpad, lard-pilferer, Sargasso Sea pilot, you there, landlubber, you fire-eater, you, you and you, peddlers of kisses, all of you mountebanks and astrologers, hands full of bogus presents, images of human folly, gardens of moss and mica. They reflect faithfully the vast sentimental regions where the city dwellers' wild dreams stir. Every lingering remnant in adults' memory of the atmosphere of enchanted forests, every last vestige in them of belief in miracles, every breath of theirs which still inhales a perfume of fairytales reveals itself beneath the wretched, crazed disguise of these feebly invented landscapes, and exposes man and his senseless treasure-chest filled with intellectual trinkets, his superstitions, his ravings. Here he squats, surrounded by all the round pebbles he could find, counting them and laughing: he is happy. He has hung glass balls all over the trees, too, and poured a little water into the hollow of a rock. What will the females say about all these activities? He bites his nails, and laughs. When he comes to take a nap in a hammock, he will attempt to sleep like a log and like a tombstone both at the same time. A bird only has to sing, for his eyes to fill with tears. He gets all emotional as he sways from side to side in this cretinous symbol of happiness. Six-and-three of orchards, double-blank of terraces, is he playing dominoes or following some primitive liturgy? He laughs gently beside the fuchsias.

Those who have spent their life travelling, those who have encountered love and its climates, those whose beards have been singed by the south, whose hair has frozen stiff in the north, those whose skin is compounded of all suns and winds, those who were a perpetual quid in the Ocean's mouth between its

reefs and its spittles, the servants of smoke, the sail's lice, the sons of the tornado, when at the end of their long nightmare they return, a parrot perched on their shoulder, their footsteps forecasting earthquakes, still cling to one desire: to have a garden. Then, in the mental suburbs where these old monsters haunted by the sea's treacheries are relegated, dwarf palms, stocks and shell borders will evoke infinity for them. And the woman who comes from the confines of pleasure, she who was a tree's age-ring, a bitten lip, she who skirted close to unknown men and who remained beneath a lantern in the vast silvery half-light of the ports, those towns where everything turns, the dog around its tail, the knife in the wound, the sentimental ballad on its turntable, the woman who assumed the shape of desire, once she has finally abandoned the fan of caresses, at the cost of her sobs and her tantrums, demands nothing better than a background of greenery against which to silhouette the absurd remainder of her days. For all these obscure hearts which cluster round me, eternity begins one evening with a garden. Away with you, ancient lunatics penned up in your grass plots, stowed away among your barbarous flowers. Away with you, my fellow creatures. My fellow creatures, you? At this idea my cheeks bleed with shame. May the sky's awning cover you for ever more, may it conceal from my gaze your calm carouse, your mignonette and your pale rattan armchairs. May time's woodpecker, striking your temple with its cascade of blows, perforate your eardrums. The red roofs crumble as an example to your blood. Sheepish fellows, if you have not abandoned all claim to human dignity already, the hour of your death is upon you, for you are too fond of sowing the seeds of discord, of planting suspicion in people's minds, of pruning your opinions...

## IV

I have frequently been struck by various strange features of men's style of living. The fact that they reproduce on canvases what their sight can register, especially the sea, mountains, rivers. That they go on voyages. That they like gardens. I felt that there should be a single phrase to cover these disparate passions, and I looked for one, in fact I found it: the vague feeling that comes over them when engaged in any of these occupations, something analogous to the uneasiness that used to fill me when watching their activities, is what they call *a feeling for nature*. I had not asked myself if I possessed this feeling, but I posed questions about it to several people well-known for having it, and excelling in it. I realized before long that the knowledge they had of nature was an entirely vulgar one that wholly failed to meet my requirements; that they were merely specialists of feeling and totally ignorant of its object. So I undertook my own examination of the idea of nature.

Having pondered a little over nature, having confronted it as well as I could with my newest notions about the universe, it became clear to me that nature had been understood, not in the broad, philosophic sense, but in a narrow aesthetic sense embracing only those objects from which man is absent. Ancient acceptance of a word originating in that epoch when human creation was reputed to be ugly, was repudiated by its father, and was contrasted by him to a separate, divine creation from which he did not feel distinct. So it seemed to me right away that nature could play no part in this mythical concept of the modern world to which I was becoming attached. But soon, the analysis of these new myths obliged me to reconsider this point. Although supplanting the ancient myths of nature, the new myths cannot really be set up in opposition to them, for they

draw their strength, their magic from the same source, and so have an equal right to be considered myths. What really draws me to them emotionally is their extension throughout nature, and it is the recognition of this extension that makes them sacred and gives them this power over me. I admitted to myself that I could not discover the shadow of a reason for this partitive sense of the word nature. Henceforward I used it only to signify the external world taken as a whole. And this fitted in better with the picture I had formed of the external world, namely as being a single construct representing a limit of my mind: a limit which I erroneously believed I had determined by means of a mechanism which is in fact that of consciousness. The world enters my consciousness gradually and intermittently. Which is not to say that it is given to me. *I have given it to myself* through a point of departure that I have chosen for it in the same way that the mathematician chooses his initial postulate. The world's necessity originates in me. Thus the whole of nature is my machine: my ignorance of nature, my very capacity for such ignorance, is a simple fact of unconsciousness. Like the mathematician, who knows precisely the extent of his knowledge, yet remains ignorant of its ineluctable consequences. Tangible experience, then, appears to me as the mechanism of consciousness, while we can soon see what has become of nature: nature is my unconscious. In everyday terms, my senses borrow but never steal from nature. But very occasionally, at rare thresholds, I become aware of this bond which unites the data of my senses, a few of these data, with nature itself, with the unconscious. This exquisite consciousness of a passage is the *frisson* of which I was speaking.\* The object which is the oc-

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\*See Part One, *in finem*.

casion of that *frisson* is myth, in the sense that I have given to the word.

Having acquired these inner perceptions of nature and myths and the bonds that unite them, I felt a kind of fever to track these myths down. I invoked them. I took pleasure in feeling myself surrounded by them. I lived in a mythical nature that continued to expand in all directions. What part does a feeling for nature play in all this, I asked myself. The first idea to emerge is invariably linked with this defective sense of the word nature that I have abandoned. This idea\* is very closely connected with Christian monotheism, and the theisms that emerged from it. As I said, it presupposes the opposition of divine creation to human creation. It is during the eras when the various paganisms have succumbed to the miraculous claims of Christianity that we have seen this feeling, with its imperious characteristics, invade art. But now that Christian dogmatism is retreating in its turn from its place in human faith, the basis of this vulgar idea of nature is removed and discredit quickly follows. Unquestionably, it performs no useful function any longer, and must give place to an impulse flowing naturally from the century's philosophical thinking. A feeling for nature: let us, at last, understand the term in the new and general sense given it by the true meaning of the word nature. Which is, as we have seen, the sense of the external world, and for me the sense of the unconscious. It is necessary to reach agreement about this last expression.

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\*And it is clear that it arises from the mind's deprivation of those figurative divinities of the ancient religions who personified the natural forces. Christianity replaced them with a sentimental power, nature, bereft of all metaphysical value. The various theisms behaved in exactly the same way a little later on, when they replaced the triple, figurative God by, for instance, the concept of goodness.

Obviously, there can be no true sense of the unconscious, if we limit ourselves to the general conception of this faculty. At least, one could not have more than an abstract knowledge, or rather, a logical intuition, of it. But if we consider that the conscious can derive its elements from no other source than the unconscious, then we are obliged to agree that the conscious is contained within the unconscious. It is thus a preliminary sense by the conscious of the unconscious, a sense (of direction) which starts off figuratively but extends itself logically,\* and which in this way occupies the whole mind, that we may justifiably name the sense of the unconscious. Bearing in mind the definition I gave of myth, it will be seen that this sense is in every respect identical with the mythical sense, that it is indeed the mythical sense. And its description explains to us its power and its effects.

Thus *feeling for nature* is simply another term for mythical sense. At the beginning of all this, wishing to record the remoteness of the ignorance from which I was returning, I expressed the same thing negatively: '*I had not understood that myth is the path of the conscious, its conveyor belt.*' I must add here that myth is the only voice of the conscious, I mean outside the field of logical intuition, and that if this truth is unpalatable to our conscious it is because the latter never pictures itself, is unable to picture itself in its changing forms, and imagines itself, rather, as fixed, static in a sense, and consequently exterior to the unconscious, independent of it. Well, the conscious may as well climb down off its high horse right away: it is only a single modality, and if it continues to outlive its day it is only because at every point and in every respect it carries the

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\*A sort of sentimental backward-march.

mark of death. It is the phoenix of the spirit, condemned to a perpetual pyre.

At this stage of my reflections it occurred to me to give some thought to the circuitous route I had taken to get there. And I immediately noticed a vaguely fortuitous air mixed up with the necessity. The factors that had led me from one point to another, that had set me off on fresh tracks, that had prompted me to do a good deal of doubling back on myself, originated in encounters and circumstances which seemed wholly unconnected with the matter at issue: factors such as missed rendezvous, minor setbacks, voyages. I was sitting in a carriage, or in some place where the others were dancing and a mere nothing reactivated an idea which had already gained ground in the obscure silence. On some occasion so slight that I have forgotten its details, it became evident to me that I had neglected one of the most whimsical themes of my reverie: I mean the former idea of nature. I thought that after all, linguistic considerations apart, it might be asked whether there did not exist some specific mythical feeling restricted to what was once thought of as nature, but still effective today. Are there modern natural myths? That was how the question formulated itself. And it seemed to me perfectly legitimate to assume that only a kind of rhetoric was now in a position to distinguish these, and very artificially at that, from other myths, and that, if it existed, this modern feeling for nature could be explained only in terms of the notion I had acquired of a general sense of myth. For some time I juggled with various little notions which scarcely enlightened me about anything. Then I grew weary, and for six months I was entirely preoccupied with other things, until one day I returned home and there, sitting in a chair and staring at me, was boredom resplendent in his full dress uniform.

## V

Sweet woman of the winds, tosser and weaver of lights and shadows, you whose pure tresses reach my eyes along a smuggling route streaked with comets, once more Alcyone, charming Alcyone with eyelashes of silk, let me revive Moedler's myth.<sup>7</sup> May the sting of gravities inscribed with figures, blond arborescence of the sky's abysses, pierce your breast once more, may it prick you deeply, asbestos nakedness, may it inject you anew with ecstasy. So from time to time at the heart of the merry-go-round the hand which groups the planetary attractions releases the knot that joins the sky's balloons. Then the lines of force fall into the centre of the Pleiades, and under this rain Alcyone smiles. The flash of her teeth lights up the earth for one brief moment. It is at that moment that I dream and that I see in the air the absurd spectre of my destiny.

This spectre is boredom, an exquisitely beautiful young man who yawns and walks around with a butterfly net to catch goldfish. He carries in his pocket a pedometer, a pair of nail-scissors, a pack of cards, and all sorts of games based on optical illusions. He reads out aloud the wording on posters and signs. He knows the newspapers by heart. He tells stories that nobody laughs at. He passes a hand of shadows over his eyes. *Isn't that so?* say the French when they are absolutely at the end of their tether. But he goes farther, punctuating his words with a terrible expletive: *What's the good?* He cannot see a knob on an electric dial without turning it, a house without visiting it, a threshold without crossing it, a book without buying it. *What's the good?* all without curiosity or pleasure but simply because one has to do something, after all, and because here we are all the same after all. And what was this ALL which swells up in the voice that pronounces it?

LOUIS ARAGON

Nothing

Nothing, really, worth gnawing the fingers about, however cross at having been fooled. Listen to the song of boredom to a well-known tune, the well-known song to a tune of boredom :

*What's the What's the What's the good  
What's the good What's the good  
What's the What's the What's the good  
What's the What's the good good good*

Ad libitum :

*Wha Wha Wha—Wha Wha What's the good.*

Boredom watches the people pass by in the street. He goes into a café: he gets out of it. He goes into a girl's place: he gets out of it. He disrupts a life: he gets out of it. He might very well kill: he gets out of it. He might kill himself after killing time :



PARIS PEASANT

I get out of it: this is the second verse of the song.<sup>8</sup> That day, then, boredom was seated at my table, making himself thoroughly at home. He had rolled back his sleeves and written some little narratives that he proceeded to read out to me :

'Epilepsy had got acquainted in an engine-shaft with a basket-worker who raved at home. She offered him some hummingbirds. In next to no time she learned to remain mistress of her idle habits which was all she wanted. While the money lasted, exercising its digestion in the sun, the wicker twigs threatened to become smugglers like their father. The village policeman of the gloomy nights would not have settled for bread and water without the green grass and the little stick. But the cartwheels' dream recurred with absolutely mathematical precision each time the Venetian blind rattled the badly brought up little boy, sole heir of the house of Windy & Co., export bankers.'

Boredom paused, looked at me, then continued reading :

'Wood on the sly the bespangled artfulness that serves as a costume for these rope dancers who committed suicide at dawn with daggers in their smiles and catastrophes at their fingertips. Beneath the stones you will find the suns damaged by the use of narcotics which have handed me over to enormous scorpions whose feet are all I can see although their total shadow reveals to me their presence above my head, just there where my hair joins up with the preoccupations plaited at the thought of death. Today Monday death is a female swimmer whose sex I see moving in the silver by the light of the magnesium.'

'Under its starry swimsuit pleasure has traced nerves like twittering trees. At a touch the water becomes phosphorus. Death is named Lucy this evening. I plunge into her wake where the glimmering lights of houses lost in the provinces alternate with Inquisition braziers and wreckers' fires. Come to my aid

night that unfolds according to an ellipsis whose axis shifts to the exact extent that my mind succeeds in understanding nocturnal law and which bears an astonishing resemblance to a robe falling from a body noticed by chance at the foot of the streetlamps. Let pebbles be served on caresses and assassinations on Underground trains! As I was saying, I plunge into the breast of this camellia which I have known about for years, the impossibility of finding myself in the morning once more on the table where I offered my prayer to sleep. Already huge lions appear in the east and roar an incredible melody. Already the windows of adventure are opening and it is here that the crusade of the kiss and the birds begins. A flock of silences approaches. It seems to be applauding someone in a mirror. It is the hunger strike with its splendid cuffs and the confessor's shadow enters me by one eye and leaves by the other. May I be damned, priest, if you are anything else than the lure of danger. You laugh like a madwoman and the dividing walls collapse. Cardboard, cardboard, little seamstresses. At every moment the fashion houses unleash these wounds in my brain. Are they indeed real dragonflies? I am a prey to their unfolding. After the deluge of thoughts the clasped hands scatter over the rooftops and rediscover at the foot of the lightning conductors the mysterious couple who have just been united under a plane tree by the need to escape dressed as a police officer.'

Suddenly boredom got up and chased me out of my room. It was then that the idea came to me to pay a visit to my friend André Breton.

## VI

In 1924, when man, at his wits' end, having made the rounds of his curiosity and of the rather elementary diversions he had learned from his father and mother, sought to amuse himself by some means in keeping with the events through which he was passing, he had no option but to restore to life's complexion the tragic hue which was in high favour that year when catastrophes were the day's small change. Hence this wave of heroic sincerity, and the vogue for those parlour games that gave it a chance to manifest itself: recitations of each person's qualities and faults, the game of compulsory truth, the game of preferences, all pregnant with dramas, all helpful, therefore, in restoring to thought processes denied exercise in polite society that efficacy, that intrinsic offensiveness which breeds ruptures, jealousies, suspicions, and the ruination of love and friendship. I have always observed that these supposedly innocent occupations left enduring traces in those who indulged in them and that, after all, such people got their real pleasure, despite their denials, out of this havoc and its unpredictable repercussions. A tang of disaster hovered in the air, bathing life, tinging life with its hue: all the *modernity* of these times, this whole function of duration assumed an accent that was soon to seem curious and, in a sense, inexplicable.

At André Breton's, I found a number of people just finishing dinner, seated beneath those pictures which stabilize on his walls a few of the features of transient magic, people who had spent the whole afternoon at this site of convergences, playing the games I have just mentioned. They were all sunk in the kind of stupor that follows such games, when the participants no longer desire to continue, and want simply to ponder the

useful information they may have been able to glean from the completed exercise. The air hung heavy over their heads, and it did not seem as though anything could be born of this combination of men and women who, together with a little dog, had just eaten a meal. It was then that André Breton decided to come out with Marcel Noll and myself.

Marcel Noll shared the general mood of spiritual prostration: indeed he felt it with additional keenness as a result of a sequence of unnerving coincidences that he had experienced during the previous few hours. We all three felt debilitated, there in the low humid light of springtime, on the slopes of Montmartre where various temptations winked at us without attaining that power over us that we would have been happy to acknowledge. Even the charm of all the lights blossoming at the banal doors of pleasure failed to make us linger in those streets along which we glided in a light mist and enveloped in our personal fogs. This district, made of spangles among which the gewgaw peddlers take advantage of the simple-mindedness of a sentimental population, this district with a glimmer in its eye almost the colour of kohl, where it was too early for the nightclubs and too late for the cinemas, allowed us to escape through the meshes of its shadows towards the Place Saint-Georges around which the Rue Laferrière wrapped its hemisphere of kisses without succeeding in arousing our enthusiasm. We had reached the lower end of the Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, and had drawn level with the oculist whose shop-window displays a small multicoloured female bust with a 1907-period hairdo—a bust which the oculist has furnished with a pair of spectacles and which we refer to affectionately as *The Beauty of the Future*—when in the depths of our despondency we suddenly rediscovered, painfully, the use of speech. André Breton said he did not want to walk any farther, Marcel Noll

suggested going to Montparnasse, and I was unable to think of anything more original than drinking. This kind of twilight of decision-making drifted along with us as far as the Châteaudun crossroads, the favourite meeting place for Parisian accidents. It seemed simpler to us at that moment to get into a taxi than get into an argument. Noll, still haunted by his recent coincidences, took the precaution of giving the address of the Lion de Belfort, because that same day Robert Desnos had arranged a rendezvous there and at the agreed time someone else . . . when André Breton proposed that we go to the Buttes-Chaumont, although the park was no doubt already closed.

Certain words conjure up images that go beyond physical representation. The Buttes-Chaumont stirred a mirage in us, one with all the tangibility of these phenomena, a shared mirage over which we all felt we had the same hold. Our black mood evaporated in the light of a huge, naive hope. At last we were going to destroy boredom, a miraculous hunt opened up before us, a field of experiment where it was unthinkable that we should not receive countless surprises and who knows? a great revelation that might transform life and destiny. It is symptomatic of those times that three young men should all instinctively visualize a place in such terms. For these three, the romantic took precedence over all the attractions of this park which they had decreed should be their Mesopotamia for one half-hour. This great oasis in a popular district, a shady zone where the prevailing atmosphere is distinctly murderous, this crazy area born in the head of an architect from the conflict between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the economic conditions of existence in Paris, all this represented for the three strollers a test-tube of human chemistry in which the precipitates have the power of speech and eyes of a peculiar colour. Although they are thrilled with the idea that perhaps the park stays open at night, what



they hope to find there is not a retreat into solitude, but rather a retreat into a whole world of similarly adventurous spirits whom the strange desire to enter these shadows has singled out and brought together according to a hidden and supremely mysterious affinity. The one thing they would dread would be to stumble upon some rendezvous already arranged by a certain clique which they used to meet up with in the nights of the Bois de Boulogne and which entirely lacks any enigmatic quality for them today. They are not looking for pleasure-seekers, but for the *curious*, and when they use this last word they mean to indicate an active form of intelligence. They are looking for—they expect to find among these copses lost in the crossfire of risk—a woman who has not succumbed, a woman of unshakeable purpose, a woman with so generous a concept of life, a woman so genuinely ready for anything, that for her sake it would at last be worth while toppling the universe. At this point the three friends suddenly realize that they are weaponless.

Such preoccupations were nothing new for us: they were all part of a great chimera that took shape in reaction to the impossibility, in modern times, of eluding laws which no longer serve the interests of the individual and which, on the contrary, are busy establishing an all-pervasive universal morality. We shared one constant theme, a field of immunity granting all rights to experimenters fired by the new spirit which was their common bond, a field of action that we invented on the scale of contemporary life with its great towns, its factories, its realms of culture, and that we situated on the fringe where, in our opinion, freedom and secrecy had the best chance of flourishing—that is to say, along the stretches of that great equivocal suburb which rings Paris, the setting for those supremely disconcerting scenes in French serial stories and films in which a special kind of drama takes shape. Without actually picturing

this place to ourselves, we liked to imagine its approaches, deserted roads lined by little shuttered houses, and hoardings advertising LUCILINE, with a car abandoned not far from a railway bridge. Such a fiction may well seem childish to those who fail to recognize it as the reverse side of several existences. But let there be no mistake: imagination always collects its debts in the end, it is already the redoubtable beginning of a project in the process of completion, and this myth was destined to exercise a far-reaching fascination over one or two of those who had presided at its birth. And so we began to think idly that there existed, perhaps, in Paris, south of the nineteenth arrondissement, a laboratory which, under cover of night, might correspond to the most confused elements of our invention. The taxi that was transporting us with the machinery of our dreams, having traversed the ninth and tenth arrondissements in a south-westerly north-easterly direction along the straight line of the interminable Rue La Fayette, finally reached the nineteenth at that precise point which bore the name of Germany before that of Jean Jaurès, where, at an angle of about 150° opening towards the south-east, the Canal Saint-Martin joins up with the Canal de l'Oureq at the outlet of the Bassin de La Villette, at the foot of the great Customs buildings, at the elbow of the outer boulevards and of the overhead Métro line which reunites ridiculously those two extremes, Nation and Dauphine, in the presence of the Small Car Company, the Café de la Rotonde and the Café de la Mandoline, a few steps away from the Rue Louis-Blanc where the anarchist newspaper *Le Libérateur* has its headquarters, north of the V.D. fief and south of the undertakers' preserves, between the general stores of La Villette and the Northern Railway Company's rolling-stock repair shops. Then, heading south-east, the taxi took the tree-lined Avenue Secrétan which, beyond the cinema and the General

Omnibus Company, plunges through a region of schools and welfare centres constituting a triumph of secular organization. It was deserted at this hour and entirely surrendered to space, a great expanse of dead, useful masonry in which, compared with the brick and plaster walls, an air of bravado distinguished the stone of the barracks whose heights set unequal bounds to a number of local philanthropic ideas. Coming level with the Rue de Meaux we failed to notice the red dotted line which traces the border between the Quartier de La Villette and the Quartier du Combat. We had already passed the Bolivar Métro station where the Rue Bolivar is terminated by a spiral staircase, having started off among the rich pastures of new business and residential blocks. The Rue Secrétan then starts up, finally reaching the great paving-stone depot not far from the Jacquard vocational school. Thus it is that, as it approaches the park in which nestles the town's collective unconscious, the important factors of city life, assuming the menacing human form of postmen and middlemen, loom up out of the waste ground and out of the rag-and-bone men's and allotment gardeners' huts with all the conventional majesty and the frozen gestures of statues. At this hour, and at the speed our car was travelling, it would have been difficult to ascertain how many more opticians than usual were to be encountered in the Rue Secrétan between the Rue Bolivar and the Rue Manin, where the taxi finally came to a halt outside the chalet housing Edouard, Weddings and Banquets, which with its frieze of fretworked wood blends the style of the Black Forest to that of the Meudon industrial area.

The state of mind of the three companions, on realizing that the gates into the Buttes are open, may be left to the imagination. One of them, Noll, has never been here before, and this visit is, for him, the culmination of a day filled with su-

perstitutions, disquiet and boredom: the sudden leap of the imagination he now experiences is strengthened by the remarks being made about the garden by his two friends, who are recalling the great Suicides' bridge which, before metal grilles were erected along its sides, claimed victims even from among passers-by who had had no intention whatsoever of killing themselves but found themselves suddenly tempted by the abyss; they are recalling, too, the Belvedere at night, incredible it is that they can visit the Belvedere at night, not only the Belvedere but the lake too, and what astonishing variety is provided by this man-made arrangement of dells and running water. It is 9.25 and a thick fog has descended on the whole city. The tall lampposts illuminating the park with their incandescent gas jets form great sulphurous trails in this double night through which the tree trunks loom. A few boys wearing students' caps emerge from the Buttes and walk off without singing. We enter the park feeling like conquerors and quite drunk with open-mindedness.

## VII

Seen from above, the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont is shaped like a nightcap, the axis of which would clearly run from west to east and join the point where the Rue Priestley debouches into the Rue Manin to the point where the Rue d'Hautpoul debouches into the Rue de Crimée, the rectilinear base being formed by the Rue de Crimée which runs north-south, slanting slightly towards the south-east, from the Rue Manin to the Rue Général-Brunet. Of the two curvilinear sides of this figure, the northern one is convex in a north-westerly direction and formed by the Rue Manin, while the southern one is concave in a south-

easterly direction and formed by the Rue Botzaris. Furthermore, the point, the angle opposite the base, formed by the meeting of these two sides, bends southwards and slightly eastwards, forming a horn which extends the park southwards between the Rue Manin beyond the Rue Priestley and the Rue Secrétan, and the Rue Bolivar which succeeds it from the corner of the Rue Manin to beyond the Rue des Dunes, on one side, and on the other side along the Rue Botzaris from the Rue Fessart to the Rue Bolivar. The base of this extension is formed by the two pathways which connect the gateway opposite the end of the Rue Secrétan to the gateway opposite the end of the Rue Fessart. The park's relief, and the pathways which trace its outlines, are arranged in three separate schemes: the first to the west forming the extension just described, the second in the centre around the lake which occupies its middle section, the third in the east around the outer-circle railway line which crosses the park from the angle of the Rue de Crimée and the Rue Manin to the Rue Botzaris at the level of the reservoir, following a straight line perpendicular to the corresponding segment of the Rue Botzaris. The park's gateways to the north are situated first at the Place Armand-Carrel, secondly at the end of the Avenue Secrétan, thirdly at the angle of the Rue de Crimée and the Rue Manin; to the south they are situated first at the point of the Bolivar-Botzaris horn, secondly at the level of the Rue Fessart, thirdly a little to the west of the Reservoir des Buttes-Chaumont on the Rue Botzaris; finally, there is one near the point of the south-east horn facing the end of the Rue de La Villette. There are no gateways on the Rue de Crimée.

The western sector, bordered by the streets already listed, forms a single knoll surrounded by six ridges, not counting the long ridges running alongside the three bordering streets, Botzaris, Bolivar and Manin. This knoll, rising to the east of the

horn, overlooks the entrance opposite the Rue Fessart. It can be reached by a spiral pathway which is also the only means of descent. To the east this knoll bounds the path leading from the Rue Fessart to the Rue Secrétan which has already skirted the first three of the ridges I have mentioned, these three being to the north of the knoll, while the other three are situated respectively to the south and west of the knoll.

The second, central, sector is very much more extensive than the western one and has a square-shaped lake set in its middle, a lake whose southern rim runs parallel to the Rue Botzaris, while the main length of its northern rim, curving outwards, runs obliquely from south-east to north-west, forming with the Rue Manin an obtuse angle opening towards the south-west. The result being that the western side of the lake is smaller than the eastern side. The lake contains a triangular island, of which the northern shore runs parallel to the northern rim of the lake, while the other two shores converge towards the middle part of the lake's southern rim. The island is joined to the mainland by two bridges, a short one on the south side and a much longer one at its western angle. It constitutes a small peak rather than a knoll, and is surmounted by a belvedere. Two knolls from the southern border of the lake, the one to the east containing grottoes along its northern edge, while the one to the west overlooks the central gateway of the Rue Botzaris. Between the horn and this last knoll, another knoll to the west closes the circle of which the lake is the centre. The dell formed by these last two knolls, after sloping gently down to the height of the western angle of the lake, rises again, without attaining its previous height, to form a north-easterly relief which is a hog's-back ridge rather than a real knoll, its eastern slope forming the north-western edge of the lake and providing the site for the park's café. The slope dips to ground level opposite the

entrance from the Place Armand-Carrel, then rises again as a crescent along the northern rim of the lake before merging with the relief of the third sector.

This last sector contains a knoll which occupies the park's south-east horn, another situated to the north-east of the lake with its bordering pavilions, and between these two systems of elevations a wide dell follows the line of the outer-circle railway which runs in the open for the northern two-thirds of its route, then plunges into a tunnel in the south: at this level the centre of the dell rises up to form a fold of ground connecting the sector's two knolls.

In its entirety, the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont covers twenty-five hectares of ground: it was laid out during the second half of the nineteenth century, following the design of Barillet Deschamps and of Alphand, superintendent of Parks and Gardens. It covers a quarter of the surface of the Quartier du Combat, thrust into that district like a wedge running east to west, at the middle section of the line of the Rue de Crimée which separates it from the Quartier d'Amérique.

## VIII

Among the forces of nature, there is one with a power which has always been acknowledged and which remains eternally mysterious and wholly bound up with man: that force is the night. This great black illusion follows fashion, and the vagaries of fashion adopted visibly by its slaves. The night of our cities no longer resembles that howling of dogs of the Latin shadows, or the wheeling bat of the Middle Ages, or that image of sufferings which is the night of the Renaissance. She is a vast

sheet-metal monster pierced by countless knives. The blood of the modern night is a singing light. Night bears tattoos, shifting patterns of tattoos upon her breast. Her hair curlers are sparks, and where the smoke trails have just died men are straddling falling stars. The night has whistles and lakes of glimmers. She hangs like a fruit over the earth's coastline, like a haunch of beef in the cities' golden fist. This palpitating corpse has loosened her hair over the world, and the hesitant phantom of freedoms seeks refuge in this final nest, exhausting its insensate desire for open air and peril, there along the edges of streets illuminated by social sense. Thus, in public gardens the densest part of the darkness is no longer distinguishable from a kind of desperate kiss exchanged between love and rebellion.

Night gives these absurd places a sense of not knowing their own identity. Contrary to general belief, it was not for purposes of pageantry that Louis XIV had Versailles constructed, but for love, which also has its majestic aspect, with its hiding places of clipped foliage, the grottoes' covered walks, and the crazy population of statues. Today, hygiene has replaced both pomp and pump for city dwellers, and it is unconsciously in its name that they renovate these green retreats which they naively believe to be a refuge against tuberculosis. And then the night descends and the parks rise up. Just as a man falling asleep in a train sways, and his hand dangles, until soon the whole unwieldy body, forgetting the speed of the carriage, sags in the immobility of dream, so urban morality suddenly wavers under the trees. A sort of languor possessing the accent and grace of the unknowable crosses the little rustic bridges, several of which only look as if they are made of real logs. It is then that people think they are seeking pleasure. In the folds of the ground where everything solicits them, they

are the playthings of the night, they are the sailors of this tattered rigging, and now already a whole little part of themselves is shipwrecked. The great clamour of the imagination makes them forget the silence. The swan can be seen gliding on the ornamented waters, along the naked ankle of waterfalls. *Etcetera*. Here begins a region of eclipse. This noise of chains dropping off, at the first step towards the dark heart of the garden!

There is a moment when everyone is too weak for his love, there is a moment that resembles a very ripe berry, a moment that is gorged with oneself. Desire and vertigo have grown larger as they approach each other along two paths that are accomplices, and when they finally touch and blend together, then, through a leap, a start of my whole gaze, I attain myself beyond my own human forces, beyond circumstances, which are no longer these few gleaming aspects of things, but my life, and life itself, and the survival instinct, the thought that I am a continuing being, beyond everything I undertake, beyond my memory, I attain myself, I attain the concrete feeling of existence, which is wholly enveloped by death. Here I am in the splendour of destiny. There is a fierce edge to the air, that makes the eyes smart. Events will be forced to assume the shape of my madness. Pitted against reason, I know that my madness must triumph through its irresistible power originating outside the laws of nature. Darkness of whirlwind, it makes no difference: the night does not yield its vessels.

Man caught in the trap of the stars. He imagined himself to be a given animal. He imagined himself to be the captive of vicissitudes and days. With all his senses, his intelligence, his fantasies, he never paused to reflect except to coordinate and pursue ideas he had had, ideas he thought he had accumulated

in his head from beginning to end, from memory to the present, like a live bird between the fingers of cupped hands. He expected from himself his own conclusions and coherence. He organized his own being around the linked episodes of his fate. He confronted himself, followed himself; he was his own shadow, the waning of his own hypothesis. He perceived with intoxicating lucidity the graph of the forces that dominated him. He counted those forces. Above all, he complimented himself on his peaceful prospects. But one night, the night looked at him, the night who looks at herself in gardens as in mirrors, and who duplicates herself there from the cross of every tree, night who rediscovers her legend here and the face she used to have.

But the population of passers-by and strollers in these great endless towns, moving, and dying, cannot choose its nostalgia. All that it is offered is these mosaics of flowers and meadows, or these arbitrary reductions of nature, which constitute the two current types of paradise. He prefers the latter alternative, being still drunk with the alcohol of romanticism. He plunges into this illusion, perfectly prepared to recite to the Buttes-Chaumont Lamartine's *The Lake* which sounds so charming when set to music. Once he has plunged in, it is not the sound of the torrents that capsizes his spirit: the outer-circle railway is there, and the gasping of the streets marks the horizon's boundary. Great cold lamps rise above all this modern machinery, including what is pliable, including also the rocks, the hardy perennials, the domesticated streams. And in this place of confusion, man is horrified to come across, once more, the monstrous imprint of his body, and his gaunt face. Each step he takes, he runs full tilt into himself. Here is just the palace you need, great thinking mechanism, to find out at last who you are.

## IX

After advancing a few paces into the scent of the great nocturnal cyclamen, we left the road for the darkest of all the pathways where, in the hollow of black foliage, figures could just be glimpsed coupled together on their sacred thrones, on the benches like holes in mankind's vast loneliness. O couples! a great bird is suddenly silhouetted against your silence. Slow mimics, clasped hands, divine postures: I have acquired from your ways, from the diversity of your ways, a damning taste, a damned taste for surprise. Those who are motionless, who do not look at one another, who are lost, those united by a single bridge, for example at the shoulders, those who are intermingled from tip to toe, those who listen to each other, those who have evaporated into the landscape's atmosphere, the distant lovers, the timid, the impetuous, those who imagine they are invisible in the depths of an endless kiss, those who suddenly spring up and start walking, those who tremble, those who discover in a flash the sensation of existence, engulfed in this pleasure that everything will prolong, sensualists avoiding sensuality, park couples know how to make pleasure last beyond human limits. Let us stroll in this décor of desires, this décor filled with mental misdemeanors and with imaginary spasms. Perhaps the betrayal of a gesture or a sigh will allow us to understand what bonds unite these tangible phantoms with the touching existence of the trembling thickets and the blue gravel that crunches under our feet. Who will reveal to me the secret of the iron hoops which line the paths along the lawns' borders, the secret of these hearts amenable to a whole protocol of greenery and the overwhelming law of an invented country? Forward, my friends, into this peopled night.

There, then, is love, hieratic love lining the route of our procession. In search of pleasure, or of some countless confusion, the whole of human despair is there, submitting to this imaginary rite, in a prickwood temple where everything, keen cold and keen glances, conspires against the cult being celebrated there. But my presence, our presence, makes me an object of this worship: chased silver candlesticks seem to be taking a stroll among the altars in lovemaking chapels where this low mass is being officiated by heretical priests subject to strange variable canons. O imperceptible movements of bodies, you signify, each time, a great philosophical resolution of the shadows: gentle translations, none of the wilfulness of your birth is lost. It is the hour of the *frisson* which bears an astonishing resemblance to a stroke of black ink. We are delighted to be inkwells.

MARCEL NOLL:

What a long path we have travelled since the primeval forest! First, I wore down with my bare feet the grass leading down to the river. It was an imprint, and one of my first notions of memory. Then, when my trail endured, the spectre of footpaths began to haunt my intellect. He told me gently what route would bring me back to a girl in love. He led me towards places made for daydreaming, where habit at last fashioned my heart for me. The avenue! my first slaves, their gleaming backs rippling above their straw loincloths, cleared a way for me and made the trees and the stones accomplices of my steps. The avenue! it was as yet nothing more than a useful track, a clearing for my primitive soul, and this serpent grew, and connected the towns, but it was not the avenue with its nostalgic name, the alley which springs up only in the pure, splendid mind of a

madman who should have been an adolescent passionless monarch in the cold-drawn glimmer of a declining century. The avenue! the moment I enter it, my eyes take in its whole vista and the contrived exit of this great association of ideas planted from end to end with well pruned trees of selected varieties. Its width is in proportion to the uses envisaged for it, its length is adapted to the melancholy of the landscape gardener. It weds the shapes of the lawns, it caresses the stroller's pale brow. Do not allow avenues to proliferate, is the advice of the technical manuals. And I say to you, gardeners, that your laws, your wisdom are of no consequence. You fear that if a garden is divided up too much it may look small. Ah! you have been spoiled by your suburban customers, that's quite clear. You have lost the taste for greatness. May the sinuous concept of the avenue capture your minds again and lead you to real labyrinthine follies, may we read on the ground over which we wander the comical, despairing expression of your disquiet. As the sail moulds itself to the ever-changing wind so let avenues mould themselves to the garden where your hands abandon all restraint. And if philosophical descriptions engraved in the stone of monuments seem necessary to the double detour of groves and solitary meditation, go ahead with your philosophical inscriptions, on the wantonly moss-covered stone, on the flagstone loosened by the foot of a ghost: pay no heed to the hateful smiles of those who never conceived of gardens as poems. Go ahead with the showy absurdity of cascades, the hybrid pleasure of shady thickets. Let your hand hang up a creeper at just that spot where the gaze is bound to rise. O Krafft,<sup>9</sup> sad, hydrocephalous German standing at the brink of modern times, while the sound that could be heard in the distance was that of woodcutters chopping off heads, and at a moment in history when your country was being subjected to the kind of division

which is considered tasteless by the architects of our own era, the Duchênes, Martinets, Edouard Andr s and Vacherots:<sup>10</sup> at that moment you cast a wild eye, Krafft, genial dreamer, over your fragmented country and it was surely while studying those dominoes of frontiers that you invented the tortuous designs which find less and less favour among young people who, in these damnable days, consider them tedious. And yet you were the only one who knew how to endow gardens with their ideal nature: you made them both alluring and ludicrous at the same time. They opened their hearts to forgetfulness as well as to memory. Under your magical fingers their curves traced the image of your delirium, and you never had recourse to those colours which provide an easy way out for unimaginative gardeners: you required nothing more than delicate shadings from green to brown and to pale grey in the branches to set bounds to reverie's fugitive backdrop, towards which the hope of visitors tried to escape by swarms of glances. You did not have in your service the sturdy geranium, the heavy chrysanthemum, or the vivid sage; at the most, a scattering of Spanish sainfoin and columbine, auricula and pansies brightened your metaphysical shrubberies, your borders of sighs and regrets. I salute you, kneader of planets. And my regards to Frau Krafft.

Noll falls silent. The path winds along the flank of a hill, at the summit of which a candelabrum twinkles. Following the scheme of the night and the scheme of the park let us accompany the three friends as they advance, absorbed by a fleeting awareness of the oddness of things, filled with a desire which is an emanation of the world's very essence.

## X

They reach the platform that dominates the night. A solitary lamppost delivers a volley of violent, violet light. At this summit of the human spirit, the benches arranged in a semicircle around the gravel are empty. They seem to be at a dead end: 'For ten thousand years, now . . . , you've said it! Our young men search for some way out of it, but in every direction they stumble against the tripwires set up by a certain La Bruyère, and in the mist swirling around their feet a meadow plunges down and away. At last one of them recognizes the beginning of a path, and we are witnessing one of those departures that take place regularly in the history of science, when a wasp-waisted hypothesis is abandoned, by a fickle professor of chemistry or applied biology, on the reputedly inaccessible peak where, out of sheer bravado or misplaced pride, she had gone and perched herself so as not to fall in the esteem of her contemporaries. Then, without giving a thought to this desperate creature waving her handkerchief, the lecturer, after twisting, curling or waving his moustachios, sets off casually along an entirely new track, as he starts reminiscing about those lovely nights, those shared anguishes and the impatiently awaited papers from second-rate learned societies, the obsequious articles in obscure literary or scientific journals, in which the Latin poet Horace is quoted unsparingly when the author, coaxing the subject in hand back to more modest proportions, wants to show at the same time that the charm and culture exuded by his mind . . . what was I saying? eh, yes, wants to show that nobody can make him . . . oh well, *desinit in pisces*.<sup>11</sup> You will copy that out for me.

The purpose which impels me to recount this adventure, and to dwell on its infinite details, for example who is walking

in front, whether André Breton is carrying his walking stick today—a fine walking stick, incidentally, much admired by the café waiters, bought from an antique dealer in the Rue Saint-Sulpice who also sells fake pewter, a walking stick of doubtful origin, African according to some, Asiatic according to others, and according to still others a product of the exotic, intellectual genius of Gauguin, the man of coral and of green water, a walking stick embellished with obscene reliefs, men, women and animals, no end of them, slugs creeping towards vulvas, suggestive postures, and lower down the comical and terrifying sight of a bearded Negro with a huge erection—this purpose which impels me to recount this somnambulistic walk in the hollow of the aediles' indulgence, in the place where the local council meeting in full session has decided that our little nocturnal rebellions and the unsociability of our hearts are not likely to land us in jail, this purpose suddenly seems quite mysterious to me. Strange, strange: and I can guess exactly what is going to happen next.

When it is already broad daylight in some provincial town, and in the empty streets a dog suddenly sits on its backside, throws back its ears, points a yapping snout in the general direction of the sun, and starts an interminable howling about impending death, then the assistant in the hat shop which also sells funeral wreaths is overjoyed to find a plausible excuse, in the monotony of his miserable existence, for standing there, at the entrance to the shop, with his hands on his hips. If this dog is howling about impending death it is because somewhere in the world this morning someone is in the meticulous process of dying, either that or we would have to doubt canine sincerity, and the dog, that great mythical symbol, has never given us occasion, up till now, to lack confidence in its cynical foresight. Then the shop assistant at whose dual purpose counter both the



living and the dead of this prosperous country seat provide against inclemency and ingratitude—this shop assistant starts weighing up in his mind which citizen it may be who has just passed from the first category of his customers to the second. He tries on for size the reality of each one's death. Thus . . .

Ah I've got you, there's the thus that your need for logic was frantically awaiting, my friend, the satisfying thus, the soothing thus. This whole long paragraph was finally drawing its huge uneasiness along behind it, and the shadows of the Buttes-Chaumont were floating somewhere in your heart. Thus puts this dismal gloom to flight, thus is a gigantic sweeper whose hair is lost among the stars, whose feet enter the cellars of people's houses by way of the ventilator. Thus scandalizes poets in the feather beds from which they pluck their quills. Thus goes from door to door, making sure that they are bolted and checking on the security of isolated dwellings. Thus belongs to the Society of Urban Vigilantes. And I shall not even mention the thus-bicycle.

. . . Thus I experience the force of my thoughts, thus I ask myself what is dead within me and what is still effectual, and after being momentarily halted at the threshold of my mind by a sinister clamour I wander through my mental abodes by means of writing, seeking in each of them in turn a corpse and a burial;

. . . or alternatively thus I act the dog and bawl for the dead, the shop assistant is the reader, and the purpose of this contrived and misleading story is to proclaim the woes of the new human race, whose lawless accents I borrow to hasten the unexpected arrival of catastrophe, and stop reading this damn text;

. . . or alternatively thus ready to pass from hats to wreaths, man is alerted to his fate's revolutions by an animal

voice which appears at first to be addressing the clouds, and which for instance speaks of the spell worked by a city park, a spell in which the livid symbols of death and fog are mingled;

. . . or alternatively thus I take you in tow with my boat-hook of words, my heart and mind empty of everything except an overwhelming predilection for mystification and despair.

## XI

The path comes to a halt at a bronze column which measures the temperature, the time and the atmospheric pressure and confronts a vast crater in which the knolls hidden by the night are thrown like the dice of silence. Great gleams of night reveal in the distance the Belvedere and the smiles of several shadows, a reflection of sleeping water and the cry of a bird far below. But at the rim of this cup, at this cutting-edge of the darkness, beyond the Chinese foliage, under a lamppost in ball costume which throws its cold jewels to the meadow, shod with the colours of the unreal, electric hoarfrost and snow green, a proscenium in front of the orchestra pit brings a phantom number to our attention. There in the front row of the grass, a naked man is running motionless towards the abyss. It is his complete indifference to the evening chill that makes one think he must be made of bronze. This makes it easier to comprehend how, through what mystery, man has always wedded his divine representations to the image of the human body. And today, by poetic justice, even if this sceptic as desiccated as a skeleton's hand, poor laughingstock, this masturbator of the mind has only himself in view when he reproduces his generic features in clay or marble or metals, we get the same phenomenon in reverse: before, he wanted to show God to the world but the end result

was always simply a man; now, he has the illusion that he can produce a simulacrum of himself but as soon as his hands start fashioning a body or a face what promptly emerges is a god. So then man tried ugliness to stop himself conjuring these disquieting divinities from the earth in ever-increasing numbers. And what will become of humanity on that fast-approaching day when the population of statues will have grown to such huge proportions in town and country alike that it will scarcely be possible to make one's way along the streets choked with statues, across the fields of poses? A stifling prospect. Then in this cemetery of the imagination man will make the acquaintance of that divine power who is both reckless summoner of entities and unfortunate victim of disproportion and dream. Humanity will perish from statuemia, that's what. The god of the Jews, who feared competition, knew what he was doing when he prohibited graven images. Great private symbols exercising their concrete power over the world, the statues will eat your hair up, passers-by. O vigour of a night embodied in bronze, black precipice of dead, sunken eyes, just above the ground, disqualification of reason by spectres, willpower crumpled around these feet chained to their rock.

I repeat: seeking to check this progress of the divine through space, this invasion of matter by the immaterial, man, with an eye-winking consciousness of his destiny and his actions, had undertaken to sculpt henceforth nothing but hideousness with hips of emptiness. Eugène Manuel held that his aesthetic system also provided a remedy against this supernatural genesis. However closely we approach the everyday it can never be close enough, and a poet of the last century had a few words to say on the subject.<sup>12</sup> Useless: in their flannelette dressing-gowns, their comfortable jackets, their smiling amiability, the simulacra of modern times derive from the very inoffensiveness

of this garb a magical power unknown to Ephesus or Angkor. So true is this that in the end secret religions are established in honour of the new idols. Which explains how it comes about that an imprecatory rite has grown up around the incredible Gambetta, of the Cour du Carrousel.<sup>13</sup> Or that a sect, of which Paul Eluard is one of the fiercest partisans, comes to deposit in front of *Paris during the war* the periodical tributes of an amorous cult.<sup>14</sup> On my way home one evening, I was astonished to see a long procession of people dressed in white who had just been sacrificing doves in front of the Ternes balloon.<sup>15</sup> To say nothing of the convulsionaries besieging the Strasbourg monument! You might remember, if you are old enough, the already decomposed corpse that this gang used to trundle along in a motorcar, draped in his cape, to the Place de la Concorde every year. By juxtaposing this green and mouldering Déroulède to the majestic stone figure, they insulted life through the agency of this despicable human shape.<sup>16</sup> Then we have the phallophoria of Trafalgar Square, where one-armed Nelson is the witness of a nation's hysteria. And Frémiet's *Joan of Arc*, and Antonin Mercié's *Even so*. Not to mention sporting statues such as the Serpollet of the Place Saint-Ferdinand and the Panhard-Levassor of the Porte Maillot. Not to mention the magnificent apotheosis of Chappe at the foot of a telegraphic scaffold; or Etienne Dolet's broken chain in the Place Maubert. Another malefic statue, the Strasbourg *Lisel* with the goose; and the hermaphrodite of Montargis who postures in front of a huge placard proclaiming *The Goose's Foot*; and the entrance gates of the Corps of Naval Constructors at Toulon; and Vercingetorix at Gien!<sup>17</sup> Thus magic erects its black symbols in the centre of thoroughfares, and the simple-minded passerby contemplates them and congratulates himself on the sculptor's skill, and starts talking about the *rendering* of artistic emotion.

## XII

## THE STATUE'S SPEECH

Fusillades! For fifty years now I've been waiting for the fusillades. It is high time that all these moving, laughing people who trickle through the landscape where I am for ever frozen should be plugged with lead. Futile movements of crowds, of children. Contented mothers with their baggage of knitting. O Malthus, great-hearted bishop, it is my sister statues who will finally give substance to your chimeras: women no sooner see us than they abort, and with our polished members we help to set in motion the sluggish imagination of the timid girls who excite themselves in the strange shadow cast by our forms, in love henceforth with our superhuman bodies and nothing else. Then, in the depths of parks and avenues there takes shape a huge nostalgia in which we have a share and which blends the inanimate with the most subtle forms of life. Then, there rises the wind of sublime pleasures in which idea frees itself at last and finds nourishment in itself.

Man's idea! above the fields devastated by a network of crisscrossing footprints, man's idea appears, larger than nature, in the exemplary gesture of a sprinter or a king. At the feet of this idea man lives, his eyes upraised, without ever attaining identity with it, at the feet of this idea he rends himself and writhes in agony, in the throes of the great abstract delirium called psychology.

On the solemn oath of a statue, there is not a single activity in all the hundred thousand nooks and corners of space, not even philharmony or Nicolas billiards,<sup>18</sup> which seems to me as ridiculous as psychology. The confident thrust, the inevitability of this science . . . I would laugh at it if bronze enjoyed splitting

its sides. The fact remains, one evening man invented psychology. The wind was howling like all the devils in hell and our chicken-hearted fellow trembled. He saw his shadow, which soared up to the heavens at the slightest squall. He wanted to find some explanation for this terrifying phenomenon. This and the fact that the clouds were expiring in his hair, that the lightning had skewered his armour, that when his women were in labour they always dreamed of red fruits, that the forest's shutters were clacking their teeth in the dark. One by one, the various psychologies were born. There was the psychology of material affinities, or chemistry, the psychology of forces, or physics, the psychology of God, or religion, the psychology of flesh, or medicine, the psychology of the unknown, or the metaphysic, the psychology of the sea, or the nautical art. Content with very little, man, when confronted by any abyss, learned to make use of these detours to map the brinks of the abyss, to forget the abyss and the torments of the infinite. Unshakeable human positivism: you never ask yourselves, you whose hair floats lightly on your heads, what your phantom witnesses on their plinths engraved with famous names think of your trickeries, positive or not. We, who speak with the sky, we, covered with dew, the mineral dancers feared by the nights, we, the tamers of breezes, the charmers of birds, the guardians of silence, beneath the mind's adorable chandelier that illuminates our irremediable attitudes, divine principles prisoners of our concrete liberty, we specific emanations of a great breath of inspiration, negations of time inundated by the sun, we, vagrant idols, vagabonds of metaphysics, we dominate with all the athletic stature of thought the formless swarming of the nations of insomnia. Turn over on your mattresses, insane dreamers, the park is fresh and pure. Already the mist is racing to our heads. Already forgetful of your existence, tiny creatures, we

get through to the star at its azure extension. And in the process a meteoric tremor dispatches an aimless, hopeless blue panorama. Who's speaking? Divinity divined, here: who's calling? The kingdom of the absolute. How are all the angelic creatures? Very well, thank you. The wing, it is the wing which appears in the whole breadth of its concept, stretched in a wide span above the statue kingdom. The wing like an American flag fluttering in the air. The wing endowed with a lyrical nature, soft down, an intrinsic whiteness, and an attractive arrangement of well preened feathers, the wing which constitutes a flowered firmament.

What I, the bronze, know about a god, the presentiment I have of God, is the wing, and since it seems that imploring is the thing to do, it is the wing that we implore from the pedestal on which we stand petrified, from this wharf at which no ship berths, stretching our hands out towards the inaccessible. And I chant to this god-wing the rites of simulacra:

*Wing in all respects like love*  
*Wing above the armed redoubt*  
*Wing that blows the candles out*  
 \

*Wing whipping the ocean's waves*  
*Wing storm halted at the bourne*  
*Wing soaring from the worshipped dawn*

*Wing ah the fives that fill the night*  
*Wing blasphemes before snowfall*  
*Wing that is nothing else at all*

The statues send him the salvation of a silent greeting, praying with clasped hands that the sleeping trees should never intercept him with their antennae, our wing which art in heaven as on earth the immaterial at rest conceiving matter and re-

flected from this matter and from its negation in its free affirmation, etc.

This prayer, repeated nine times every night when the mole, raising the detritus of its runs, reveals the gleam of a blind eye among the scarlet pimpernel where a lover has lost his loved one's fingernails, will cause the blessings of the Wing to rain down upon all owners of statues, the Italian vendors of plaster casts, the proprietors of wax museums, the executors of memorial monuments, the subscribers to patriotic mausoleums, the schoolboy modellers of funny figures, the kneaders of bread-crumbs, the New Zealanders who create with clusters of little pebbles huge fantastic birds that cover a mountain's bare flank, the stylite apostles, the monarchs who immure whole armies, the collectors of skeletons, the window dressers in department stores, the heroes who instigate effigies of themselves, the town councillors infatuated with a theatrical, lifeless art, the fetishists of the public highway and those unfortunates who are in love with Egyptian mummies.

## XIII

We have rather lost sight of the three friends' itinerary: after entering the park through the gateway on the Rue Secrétan, and leaving on their right the path that leads directly to the gateway on the Rue Fessart, and the south-western horn, they have skirted and then climbed the highest knoll to reach the place where the column is standing and from where they have a bird's-eye view of the crater of the lake, the Belvedere, and the distant and at present fog-shrouded landscape of the close-set houses of the Rue Manin. Turning their attention away from this volcano of appearances, and disdaining the talkative statue,

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an Actaeon pointing out the lacustrian pit to his dogs, they decipher one by one, with the aid of a whole succession of the lighted matches that are their firebrands, the inscriptions on the four-angled column which adorns this philosophic traffic circle.

This column is surmounted by a weathercock which allows us to distinguish the faces of the monument following the cardinal points. The northern face looks in the direction of the lake and carries on its brow the date

14  
JULY  
1883

above a centigrade thermometer manufactured by J. Thurneysen, Paris, which informs us that the temperature reached 40° during the summer of 1868. Beneath this thermometer, the following legend is inscribed on the column proper:

DAY NURSERIES  
RUE DE CRIMÉE 144 (30 PLACES)

KINDERGARTENS  
AND  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:  
RUE BARBANÈGRE 7 (K. AND E.S.)  
RUE BOLIVAR 67 AND 69 (K. AND E.S.)  
RUE D'ALLEMAGNE 87 (K. AND E.S.)  
RUE DE TANGER 41 (K. AND E.S.)  
RUE DES BOIS 2 (K. AND E.S.)  
RUE JOMARD 5 (K.)  
RUE DE PALESTINE 1 (K.)

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RUE DE MEAUX 65 (E.S.)  
RUE FESSART 2 (E.S.)  
PLACE DE BITCHE (E.S.)

MUNICIPAL  
TRADE SCHOOL  
BOULEVARD DE LA VILLETTE 60

On the northern face of the pedestal, it is possible to decipher a series of suggestive explanations which reveal the existence of a whole world apart, one that no doubt has the local cinema as social centre, an industrious and ill-rewarded world, glowing with Sunday happiness and drunk with knowledge acquired at night school:

19th ARRONDISSEMENT

BY KIND PERMISSION  
OF THE MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION  
THIS INDICATOR-OBELISK  
WAS ERECTED ON 14 JULY 1883,  
BY THE INVENTOR  
EUG. PAYART, COMMERCIAL TRAVELLER  
WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF:  
MESSRS. A. BOUILLANT, METAL-FOUNDER,  
DUMESNIL, CEMENTER,  
COLLIN, CLOCKMAKER,  
RICHARD BROS, MANUFACTURERS OF BAROMETERS,  
DELAFOLIE, BASTIDE, CASTOUL SNR. & Co.  
MANUFACTURERS OF GAS APPARATUS

LOUIS ARAGON

BOUILLANT  
METAL FOUNDER, CONSTRUCTING ENGINEER  
PARIS

The western face of the column carries, high up, the laurelled initials of the Republic, superimposed upon a star; this insignia surmounts a round barometer, the dial of which reveals the address of the Établissements Jules Richard's limited company as being: 25 Rue Mélingue, Paris. Simple souls will make further discoveries: that if 73 signifies Storm in the language of the compass-card, 74 on the same scale means Heavy Rain, 75 Rain or Wind, 76 Variable, 77 Fine, 78 Set Fair, 79 Very Dry, 80 Barometer. One cannot fail to notice that only Storm and Very Dry are written with their feet pointing towards the frame, while the other indications and their magic numbers are subjected to centripetal force. Finally, one may well feel a sense of alarm at the uninterrupted succession of figures which, depending upon whether one counts them in a clockwise or anticlockwise direction, read either 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 73, 74, etc., or else 80, 79, 78, 77, 76, 75, 74, 73, 80, 79, etc., so that the imagination boggles at the curious meteorological phenomenon which must accompany the sudden transition from 73 to 80, and *vice versa*. Beneath the barometer, a fresh inscription:

PARIS PEASANT

THE 19<sup>th</sup> ARRONDISSEMENT  
COMPRISES THE QUARTIERS  
DE LA VILLETTE (73) | D'AMÉRIQUE (75)  
DU P<sup>t</sup> DE FLANDRE (74) | DU COMBAT (76)

POPULATION: 117,885 INHAB<sup>ts</sup>  
AREA: 566 HECT<sup>s</sup>.  
HOUSES: 3,162  
TOTAL LENGTH OF STREETS,  
QUAYS, BOULEVARDS, ETC.  
52 KILOM<sup>s</sup>. 383 M<sup>s</sup>

---

THE 19<sup>th</sup> ARR<sup>t</sup> IS CONTIGUOUS TO THE  
18<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, AND 20<sup>th</sup> ARROND<sup>ts</sup>.  
THE PORTE DE ROMAINVILLE,  
PORTE DES PRÉS S<sup>t</sup> GERVAIS AND PORTE DE PANTIN,  
PORTE DE FLANDRE AND PORTE D'AUBERVILLIERS,  
THE EASTERN TRUNK ROUTES, THE CANALS  
OF THE OURCQ AND OF S<sup>t</sup> DENIS,  
ALL ASSURE THE 19TH ARR<sup>t</sup>. 'S COMMUNICATIONS  
WITH THE EXTERIOR OF PARIS

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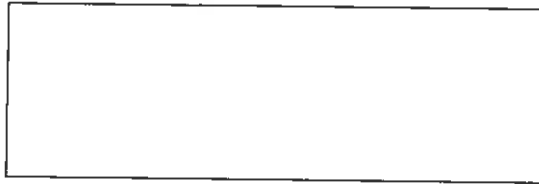
CUSTOMS AUTHORITY BUILDING,  
BOULD. DE LA VILLETTE  
BASIN AND DOCKS OF LA VILLETTE  
SECTOR BARRACKS 25TH BATN.,  
PORTE DE PANTIN

LOUIS ARAGON

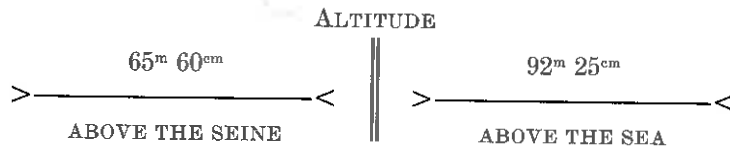
And on the plinth of the western face:

QUARTIER DU COMBAT

MAP OF THE 19<sup>th</sup> ARRONDISSEMENT



GEOGRAPHICAL POINT  
48° 52' 40" LATITUDE NORTH  
0° 2' 45" LONGITUDE EAST



O unfortunate Eug. Payart! inventor and commercial traveller, your generosity has not been understood or has been misinterpreted. You thought it sufficient to give the bronze, the apparatus, the IDEA. You thought that the community would at least stump up a map of the nineteenth, and, as we shall see on the eastern face, a map of Paris. Well, such is the stingy-mindedness of humanity that your monument will remain for

PARIS PEASANT

ever unfinished, with its two great blanks eager for local geography and a kindly impulse on the part of an eccentric municipality. It will be noticed, too, that by a touching stroke of fate the quartiers of the arrondissement carry the barometric numbers symbolizing storm, heavy rain, rain or wind, and variable. It would be going too far, though, to attempt to connect these numbers with the general sense of the quartiers' names, for if Combat joined with Variable is just about capable of making the mind's compass needle flicker, it would really be trespassing over the troubled frontier of imbecility to link Amérique with Rain or Wind, the Pont de Flandre with Heavy Rain, and La Villette with Storm. That's obvious.

The eastern face sports an empty glass dial which may originally have housed, which must originally have housed, a clock. They will replace it, if you behave yourself nicely. Above this glass-fronted cavity may be seen the arms of the City of Paris, and beneath it these magic words:

BUILDINGS

ASSIGNED TO RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS:  
CHURCH OF S<sup>t</sup> JAMES AND S<sup>t</sup> CHRISTOPHER  
CHURCH OF S<sup>t</sup> JOHN THE BAPTIST  
PROTESTANT TEMPLE OF THE RUE MEINADIER  
PROTESTANT TEMPLE OF THE RUE BOLIVAR

MUNICIPAL

ESTABLISHMENTS:  
GENERAL ABATTOIRS  
CATTLE MARKET  
FORAGE MARKET  
HORSE MARKET

LOUIS ARAGON

PUBLIC MARKET, RUE SECRÉTAN  
MUN<sup>L</sup> FUNERAL SERVICES

SQUARES  
AND PROMENADES:  
PARC DES BUTTES-CHAUMONT  
PLACE DES FÊTES

ASSISTANCE AND ACCOMMODATION:  
56, RUE DE MEAUX, 1, RUE JOMARD  
7, RUE DELOUVAIN

CASUAL WARD:  
166, RUE DE CRIMÉE

Let us pause for a breather, modern Champollions<sup>19</sup> that we are. Do you not think that the mysterious purpose which guided the hand of the engraver, which guided the spirit of the author of this inscription must have corresponded to some equivalent of the incomprehensibility and indecipherability of the cuneiform darkness, through which, nevertheless, one of your fellow creatures finally succeeded in making his way towards daylight? Patience. It is on the eastern face of the plinth that one may read:

PARIS PEASANT

PARC DES BUTTES-CHAUMONT

MAP OF PARIS



TOWN HALL AT 3<sup>k</sup> 500 S. W.  
PORTE D'AUTEUIL AT 10<sup>k</sup> 500 W. S. W.  
PORTE DE VINCENNES AT 4<sup>k</sup> 300 S. S. E.  
PORTE DE LA CHAPELLE AT 2<sup>k</sup> 700 N. W.  
PORTE DE GENTILLY AT 7<sup>k</sup> 300 S. S. W.

Finally on the southern face,

19<sup>th</sup> ARROND<sup>t</sup>  
BUTTES-CHAUMONT

MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION } PLACE  
MAGISTRATURE } ARMAND  
CARREL

DISTRICT  
POLICE STATIONS  
RUE DE TANGER 22 (VILLETTE 73 Q)  
RUE DE NANTES 19 (P<sup>t</sup> DE FLANDRE 74)



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RUE D'ALLEMAGNE 132 (AMÉRIQUE 75)  
RUE PRADIER 21 (COMBAT 70)

TAX-COLLECTOR'S OFFICES  
RUE DE FLANDRE 31 (73 AND 74)  
RUE RÉBEVAL 72 (75 AND 76)

FIRE STATIONS

RUE CURIAL	RUE DE L'OURCQ 89
RUE DU PRÉ	RUE RÉBEVAL 8
AV <sup>e</sup> LAUMIÈRE (MAIRIE)	AUX ABATTOIRS G <sup>r</sup>

POST AND TELEGRAPH OFFICES

RUE DE CRIMÉE 74 ☒ τ  
RUE D'ALLEMAGNE 3 ☒ τ  
RUE D'ALLEMAGNE 139 ☒ τ  
RUE D'ALLEMAGNE 211 ☒ τ  
RUE DES PYRÉNÉES 397 (20<sup>th</sup> ARR<sup>t</sup>) ☒ τ

RAILWAYS

OUTER-CIRCLE LINES

STATIONS } BELLEVILLE-VILLETTE  
PONT-DE-FLANDRE

EASTERN LINES

STATION : EST-CEINTURE

PARIS PEASANT

14 JULY 1883

OUSTRY, PREFECT OF THE SEINE DISTRICT  
ALPHAND, WORKS SUPERINTENDENT

ALLAIN-TARGE, MEMBER OF THE CHAMBER OF  
DEPUTIES FOR THE 19<sup>th</sup> ARR<sup>t</sup>

MUREAU,	MAYOR
GARCIN,	} DEPUTY MAYORS
MILOT,	
MALLET P.,	
BAILLE, L. E.,	SECRETARY

CATTIAUX, GUICHARD,  
REYGEAL, ROYER,  
MUNICIPAL COUNCILLORS

Suddenly, Noll could scarcely believe his eyes: on an outcrop of rock, above a vertiginously climbing ivy, like a diving-bird on its perch, stood a white spectre, empty space between its legs, an apparition framed by the great arch which links the sloping meadow to the Belvedere, where the meadow stops and kneels on a cup of black coffee. At that moment André Breton began to speak, 'From here you can see the Bridge,' he said to us, 'the famous Suicides' Bridge ...'

## XIV

Among all the sacred places which, like nodal points of human thought, express in a wholly concrete form specific aspects of a few great supernatural ideas, I imagine that a pagan, I mean a man capable of responding to the mysterious novelty of an idol, is likely to prefer those places which have become assigned to Violent Death, that divinity who brandishes the axe lashed to a bundle of firewood. There are those today who from wondering what exactly a sacred place may be, and fretting about the ephemeral nature of such a notion, end by expressing astonishment that the idea should be given currency at all. Yet it cannot be entirely without significance that so singular a concept should have taken shape in the primary depths of human consciousness. No philosophic system has the right to despise a concept: it is on the contrary its duty, its destiny to legitimize, to absorb all the concepts constituting previous systems, to give them the sense and acceptance that they had hitherto lacked. A system is a dictionary, and no word may be banished from it.

The forms of an idea: so that I may conceive its localized forms let me start dreaming a little about this precious expression. The forms of an idea: what pictorial timidity prevents me from envisaging them as the reality of being in all its richness of circumstances, clad in its finery of accidents, adorned with beautiful individual jewels?

I envisage ideas in the same way that others envisage persons, in the ordinary sense of this last word, which can become devilishly mystical. And, for example, the characteristic of the person, the personal aspect of the person, is an endlessly repeated element which will be found in at least a rudimentary state in every appearance, however remote, however unex-

pected, of the person: if a man applies himself to mathematics, I can detect in his manner of applying himself an element of compensation to his mother for some ridiculous prank, and on this walk one morning between high hedges there was a bird, a scrap of red stuff. In passing, I lay the foundation of a morality. Thus, the idea contains something which is to that idea what the accidental is to the person: the accidental, not the inessential, the accidental of the essence. Thus, in the absence of an image, I can still say: the mouth of an idea, its lips, I see them. It is this sweet semblance that I watch over, as I write, possessed with the idea of a kiss, and the woman I was waiting for has not arrived, we are the victims of a glazed evening in which everything blends, a glacial evening in which the mind shows through the reflections of glass and silver. This woman beside me, I understand in the depths of my being that there is a woman, that there is *this* woman in each idea that I circle in vain, that there is something which is precisely this woman in each idea, and her gestures are the gestures of the mind. Which brings me back to the sacred places.

Most often, they are legendary settings: some greatness of soul clings to these walls, these heights. They are genuinely transmuted by the flight of this memorable bat. Genuinely. Only something great could happen here. The ground is black, I use the word black in an exemplary sense to signify the sheer night which impregnates the impersonal at this threshold of all the mysteries. At last each particle of space is meaningful, like a syllable of some dismantled word. Each atom suspends here, as a precipitate, a little of its human faith. Each breath of wind. And the silence is a mantle that is unfurling. See these great folds of stars. The divine brushes the illusory lightly with the tips of its slender fingers. Breathes out its delicate breath upon the window-pane of the abyss. Cables to anxious hearts its magic

message: *Patience stop mystery in motion* and, betrayed, reveals itself to the glimmers of light. The divine communes with itself in the depths of a caress: the whole air of the landscape is mingled with the idea, the whole air of the idea trembles at the least breath of wind. It is a great lock of brown hair with which you would play to your heart's content, rolling it and unrolling it until finally the end of the world appeared, it is the ideal river lock in which the idea is captured, the concrete notion emerging from the pure reedless waters.

And yet, woman, you take the place of all form. I had scarcely begun to forget this neglect, even the black indifference that you cherish, before you are here again, and everything dies in your footsteps. In your footsteps on the sky a shadow enfolds me. In your footsteps towards the night I recklessly erase my memory of the day. Charming suppositious child, you are the epitome of a marvellous world, of the natural world, and it is you who are reborn when I close my eyes. You are the wall and the breach. You are the horizon and the presence. The ladder and the iron bars. The total eclipse. The light. The miracle: and how can you think of anything that is not a miracle when the miracle is there in its nocturnal robe? So for me the universe gradually fades away, melts, while from its depths there rises up an adorable phantom, there ascends a woman larger than life whose outline is at last clear, who, with nothing separating her from me, appears everywhere in the most positive guise of an expiring world. O desire, twilight of forms, in the rays of this occident of life, like a prisoner I grip the bars of liberty, I, the jailbird of love, convict number . . . followed by a figure too high for my mouth to contain. The woman larger than life is growing still larger. Now the world is her portrait, and whatever the assembled plots of her body have not yet utterly absorbed, whatever is not yet incorporated into her delight, is

scarcely spared by my delirium. And the blurring lines of this hazy, vanishing reality at last reduce it to a subordinate role in the portrait. Mountains, you will never be anything but this woman's distant background, and if I am present in the foreground it is so that she shall have a forehead on which to lay her hand. She is growing. Already the appearance of the sky has been tainted by this growing magician. Her dishevelled tresses cause comets to tumble into goblets. Her hands, but everything I touch partakes of her hands. Behold I am nothing more than a drop of rain on her skin, the dew. Sea, do you really love the putrescent corpses of your drowned victims? do you love the softness of their facile limbs? do you love their abjuring love from the unfathomed deep? their incredible purity and their floating hair? Then let my ocean love me. Pass across, pass across my palms, water like tears, boundless woman, by whom I am entirely bathed. Pass across my sky, my silence, my veils. Let my birds lose themselves in your eyes. Kill, kill: here are my forests, my heart, my cavalcades. My deserts. My mythologies. My calamities. And in this zodiac where I perpetuate myself, havoc at last, lovely monster, a venison of clarities.

Woman has taken her seat in the ethereal arena where all that is dust, butterfly powder, efflorescence and reflection becomes the effluvium of her flesh and the charm of her transit. I have followed with my eyes this endless wake of a ship, and just tell me, Sinbad, what you think of the magnet which unnailed your hull in midocean? As for me, I desire only that these foreign bodies which hold me together should finally leave me, that my fingers, my bones, my words and their cement should abandon me, that I should come apart in the blue magnetism of love! Woman, the eternal female, is contained in fire, in the forceful and the feeble, the full-blooded and the faint-

hearted, her femininity is in the flood tide's flux and flow, in the fall and flight of foliage, in the false front of the sun where like a voyager lacking guide or horse I lead my fatigue astray into a far-flung fairyland. Pale land of snow and shadow, I shall quit no more your divine meanders. Thus, rediscovering the joyous curve of your hip or the bewitching detour of your arms in all those different places to which I am drawn by the whole anguish of existence and by this immense hope that has alighted upon me, I can no longer speak of anything but yourself; and do not be taken in when I dissemble, all my words are for you, all my words are your appearance. My images have taken their varnish from your nails, it is through your voice that my demented language has poured out. Shall I now simply carry on with my mendacious description of a park through which three friends are wandering one evening? What's the good: you have soared above this park, above the strollers, above thought itself. The trace and perfume of you is what possesses me. I am dispossessed of myself, and of the development of myself, and of everything that is not the possession of myself by you. You are the heavens' grasp upon my shapeless clay. All is divine to me at last for all resembles you, and beyond my reason and my heart I know what is a sacred place, as far as I am concerned I know what consecrates it. I am the true idolater for whom the temples have proliferated like diseases. No single spot, henceforth, that shall not be a place of worship for me, an altar. And so I come back to this arch that soars towards an island where once my death was eagerly sought.

Here is the veritable Mecca of suicide. This bridge which we can reach by climbing a gentle slope. And the possibility of throwing oneself off it is surmounted, finally, by a little iron grille. This vertical extension of prudence was intended to signify the prohibition of a practice that had reached epidemic

proportions at this site. And just see how docile people turn out to be: no one any longer jumps off this easily negotiable parapet, neither to the left where the bodies used to fall on to the white pathway, nor to the right where the caressing arm of the lake that surrounds the island received the suicide at the end of his vertigo, the uniform acceleration of which was directly proportional to the square of his mass and the infinite power of his desire. There, I feel it coming over me again. Absolutely no desire to talk about suicide. Nor about anything else. What do you expect from me, all of you? There they are, staring at me stupidly. I am a man of flesh and blood, touch me and see, the perfect use of each of my limbs and muscles... ah ha, I know what's up, these gentlemen took me for a machine. Do them a favour? the hell I will. You can tuck your bridge under your arm and push off, along with your regret for those spangles which you would have liked to see me sew along its arches of moonbeams, spangles which you would have followed with your complacent gaze.<sup>20</sup> Blah blah blah. I only have to imagine what you are thinking to know it doesn't matter, all of you, little ones clustered round my feet for the moment, and I in all my great splendour, the sky for crown, my kaleidoscope reversed, shipwrecks in my pocket, a patch of meadow between the teeth, the whole universe, the vast universe where the ponies run free and unbridled, the columns of smoke amuse themselves by forgetting straight lines, and the glances! The glances have no reason to stop roaming, yet they are firmly focused: look, a scene on the bridge of a ship, with some damn fool of an officer giving a command through a cardboard loud-speaker; farther on, there are stone-breakers at a crossroads in the mountain, and their vizors make me laugh; then, above the heads of frozen sentries the nightingales' messages cross the track along which the white rats are racing at full speed, while

from the ledge of a casement-window a business letter which is not precisely a business letter but a pretext, well to put it bluntly a love letter, launches itself into space and flies away, away. Ah I have seen the soft step of burglars on the roof. The curious material of their jackets arrests my attention because of its resemblance to the check pattern of evergreens. O blue breath of ventilators.

Who is there? who is calling me? Darling. I am not mutinous, I hasten to you. Here are my lips. So steals away. And then afterwards. Me of course, not difficult. Damned, damned. Let me collapse, beat me, break me in. I am your creature, your victory, better still my defeat. That's all finished. You demand that I speak, me then. But what you want, what you love, this sonorous serpent, is a phrase in which the words enamoured of your whole self should be happily modulated and weighty as a kiss. What matter the iron filings lavished upon these scales, and the desperate sense assumed by every word in making the leap from heart to lips, what matter what I say if the sloughed sounds, transformed into agile hands, touch your lightly-clad body at last? Forbid me nothing any longer: look, I surrender. My whole thought process is yours to command, sun. Come down upon me from the hills. The air is redolent of a certain childish charm that you beget, it is almost as though your fingers were roaming in my hair. Am I really alone, in this grotto of rock salt, where miners carry their torches behind the darkness's transparent pendants, and go past pulling their snowy trucks. Am I alone, under these carefully pruned trees where in an azure heat the mules turn bucket-wheels, from habit; am I alone in this delivery van decorated with a faithful reproduction of the already outmoded sign of a lingerie shop. Am I alone at the brink of this man-made canyon in a garden to the southwest, where one can hear the clear laughter of women encrusted

with emeralds. Am I alone no matter where, under any artificial lighting, heedless of what retains me, beyond the little isochronous oscillations of my love, but strong in this love which reverberates within what serves as the bedrock of delirium, strong in the lynchings of kisses, in the summary justice of my eyes, the heart well and truly hanged, while the carelessly tied-up horses trail their tethering ropes as they graze, shying at the shadows, following the barberry hedges, and shaking their bi-coloured manes. Am I alone in any abyss whose splendours have just a moment since been veiled, above the heartsickness, the wrench of having to take leave suddenly of a happy company, above the fleeting perversities, and the other white skylarks already skimming the ground in a desire for rain and for omens in which a whole cloud of sweat was smoking. Alone from the ploughed lands and the swords. Alone from the bleedings and the sighs. Alone from the little urban bridges and the suburban solutions. Alone from the squalls, the bouquets of violets, the wasted evenings. Alone on my own sharp point, where in the winking lights of an unmasked ball a man lost in a brand-new and deserted district of a town seething with excitement, one divine summer night, lingers to piece together with the tip of his malacca cane the fragments, scattered at the foot of a wall, of a nostalgic postcard negligently torn up by an ungloved hand on which beside the rings there glittered the sharp bite, recently inflicted, of a tooth you do not know. More alone than stones, more alone than mussels in the dark, more alone than an empty pyrogen at midday on the table of a café terrace. More alone than everything. More alone than what is alone in an ermine coat, than what is alone on a ring of crystal, than what is alone in the heart of a buried city.

So I can continue, then, along this path which turns around the island's western slope and then immediately gives

birth, on the right, to the narrower path leading to the Belvedere. My steps are firm. The purpose that induces me to pursue an exploration which has suddenly become inexplicably compromised can scarcely result from chance alone. I have my reasons.

Well you can keep your reasons.

## XV

People have told me that love is a laughable matter. They have told me: it's easy, and have explained to me how my heart functions. Supposedly. They have told me not to believe in miracles, if the tables turn it is because somebody is giving them a shove with his foot. To cap it all they have shown me a man who falls in love to order, really in love, he is deluding himself, in love what more can you expect, in love we all know what that has meant since the world began.

But you fail to take my credulity into account. Ready to believe anything now, flowers could spring up in her footsteps, she could turn night into broad daylight, nothing, none of the phantasmagorias of drunkenness and the imagination, would seem in the least extraordinary. If people do not love it is because they do not know. I have seen the great white phantom emerge from the crypt, trailing a broken chain. But they have not sensed this woman's divine nature. It seems natural to them that she should be there, coming and going, their knowledge of her is abstract, their acquaintance with her casual. The inexplicable does not exactly leap to their eyes, so to speak.

From what ravine did she suddenly appear, along what footpath skirting the feet of resinous trees, through what trench of glimmers, along what track of mica and mint did she make

her way towards me. At every crossroads, between the same repeated vistas of brick and macadam, she inexorably chose the storm-coloured corridor, abandoning, from one pyrites to another, mineral foliage of various kinds, apricots petrified under calcareous waterfalls, rivers of murmurs where shifting shadows called out to her, and finally entering the magnetic gorge, between the splinters of soft steel, under the red arch. I did not dare watch her as she approached. I was held fast, riveted to the abstract diamantine life. It had snowed that day.

Men pass their lives in the midst of magic precipices without even opening their eyes. They manipulate grim symbols innocently, their ignorant lips unwittingly mouth terrible incantations, phrases like revolvers. It is enough to make one shudder to see a bourgeois family taking its morning coffee without ever noticing the unknowable that shows through the tablecloth's red and white checkered pattern. Not to mention the ill-considered use of mirrors, obscene signs scrawled on walls, the letter W employed carelessly these days,<sup>21</sup> music hall songs remembered without ever knowing the words, foreign languages introduced into everyday life without the slightest preliminary inquiry into their demoniality, obscure evocative words mistaken for telephone calls, and the code invented by Morse whose very name is food for thought. After that, what hope for man to become aware of the enchantments that surround him? This passer-by whom they are jostling—didn't you notice anything?—is a stone statue on the march, this next one is a giraffe transformed into a bookie, while this one, ah this one, ssh! is a lover. See how he walks, with all the slings' stones stinging his forehead, with swallow-threaded needles in his hat, with the breeze of happy valleys round his neck, the bite's carnation in his mouth, he is clad in white velvet, I swear he is, and when he stands over suburban fishponds and brings his

face down close to the surface the fish turn into knives. There are lovers in the streets, true lovers like those they laugh and cry about, like those they turn out of doors and those they celebrate in song, like those about whom a great fuss will be made one day. Look round: there are lovers passing by. O you whom a regiment and its string of oafs and oaths can keep leaning from a window for even a moment, you poor frogs attracted by a few motley rags, you who salute that tricolour flag that gives me a pain in the neck, the christ carried to the moribund behind a little bell, the dead, the married and all the other finks and stooges of the spirit, you who expose yourself in front of a man only after his name and yours have been orally united, desist, I say, from the absurdity of worshipping anything that is not love, and love alone. It is time to proclaim the religion of love. And should you find yourself swallowed up in the bustle of towns, your heart unmoored, your thought processes abandoned to the toing and froing of encounters, with nothing possessing your mind, nothing surrendering it to the divinity which alone should fill it, your ideas like lights dancing on the water's fickle surface, when a confused agitation reigns over the countless scattered elements arrived from the very limits of shapelessness and smoke, and you lose your way in a maze of habits and pavements, if you should bestow a vacant glance upon your surroundings and discover that this dark path has brought you for the first time into the street, then recognize the anonymous figure who has just come to a halt down there for what he is: a fakir of love, a man quite unlike yourself, dissipated as you are within the vulgarity of your soul, a man at last moulded and re-created by idea. Greetings to you, Legendary One: you are a haunted house, and nothing at all would be achieved by sending a delegation of scientists with all their little bits of apparatus to observe the strange phenomena to

which you play martyred host. But midnight is not long enough for your adorable ghosts: even the whole day, even the hours of sleep are scarcely sufficient, between your walls a perpetual sound of trailing robes makes you deliciously uneasy, you are in love with this sound. O what queen then has the palace that takes your form the palace from whose vault there once issued a damnable song and a black knight? Her arms, her beautiful white arms embrace your memory. Your memory? why no, it is she herself defying time and its quagmires, she is returning through the crannies of your veins, she gives a long, slow smile, is about to speak, the air she sings and breathes is quite changed by some new sovereign thought, she is aroused, she speaks, her breast quivers, and I hear. It is the sound of her heart which marks the beat of all my dreams. Here I am, my love, I have not left you.

## XVI

The path to the Belvedere is barred at night by a removable grille which can easily be circumvented along the grass verges. Then the path forks: in one direction the scene becomes picturesque in the Swiss manner, a little bridge and lots of greenery, but the other view is awe-inspiring, with its cliff dropping straight down to the lake, and the mountain's jagged stratifications, hand made, but by the hand of a giant. And like a man clasping his own human hands, the two footpaths meet again at a little Graeco-romantic temple whose Louis XVI pillars support a dome in the style of the Chapel of Atonement. Fine light effects, and the abyss, the landscape at our feet, I'm not in the least interested in your rapture. You start descending through a labyrinth of rocks, half grotto and half serpent, which

LOUIS ARAGON

provides an extremely auspicious atmosphere for my digressions. And a solid grille stops you suddenly along the route you wanted to take. Run the film backwards, grumbling as it rewinds: labyrinth, belvedere, the two twin footpaths, their father and turn right.

We descend by marbled paving stones, broad and flat and irregularly cut, that bring to memory my childhood rituals of jumping down staircases, along streets, on alternate slabs, you are only allowed to walk along the marble's streaks, and countless metaphysical games. To the right a charming statue representing a prostrate man grappling an eagle: what moral does this group point, and why do you take sides, who is right, who will win. And here right in front of you is the great suspension bridge. Forbidden to make it sway from side to side, I shall certainly make a point of doing just that.

O Suspended Bridges, etc.

A notable feature on our right, a peak for which the X Construction Co.'s genius is responsible.

The lake, with electric moonlight, painted by Arnold Böcklin, and the subject is continued in the frame, which is the City of Paris; the whole printed in three colours. And three young men contemplating it. For sale.

Going to the highest bidder.

The bridge trembles.

It is the sepia print which is described in M. G. Lewis's *The Monk* as follows: 'This inscription was merely placed here for the ornament of the grotto, and the sentiments and the hermit are equally imaginary.'<sup>22</sup> But what inscription is meant? and it seems to me, reader my friend, that all is equally imaginary. Yes indeed. From top to bottom of the social ladder.

The bridge trembles.

PARIS PEASANT

Ladders, I take my hat off to you. Yes indeed. My hat is imaginary. But the bridge is in suspense. Hanging on your lips, Ladies. The height of gallantry. Nothing could be more gallant than a suspension bridge.

☆

And then there are the sinking footpaths, the lake with its dozy birds, we throw stones at the Mandarin ducks who know quite well they won't be hit and continue to roost imperturbably on a perch in the water. The café above, the very spirit of Henry Bataille, those first acts where the decorators are still painting away, the dust-covers reserved for the furniture of the heart, how can you hope to understand me? Park, park and park. Here is the dream apartment: in a ravine of artificial rocks, an outlet at the back of the little valley near a stream rushing towards its own destruction by waterfall. Occasionally, André Breton expresses himself in an English of rare elegance. The substance of his dissertation, which is substantially indistinguishable from the substantive air, is an ambiguity established between trees and words, the meadow resembles a limerick, *there was a young lady of Gloucester*, and a little later it is Marcel Noll who peers between the gleams of light that crisscross through the fog to discover the charm of extraordinary voyages at the very back of the big grottoes forming nooks, see the map, along the south-east side of the island which we reach by a circular route. I leave these holes in the fake cliff to dreamers as hiding places for their owls and spinning spiders, and leave it to the journalists, saving their reverence, to develop this juicy theme: *grottoes are the nookies of darkness, and that's where I like to come and go.*



## MYSELF :

You think, my boy, that you have an obligation to describe everything. Fallaciously. But still, to describe. You are sadly out in your calculations. You have not enumerated the pebbles, the abandoned chairs. The traces of jism on the blades of grass. The blades of grass. All these people who are wondering what on earth you are driving at may as well get lost in the details, or in the garden of your bad faith. Readers, right dress! Hey you, the man with the pince-nez, get your chin up, can't you: the stars aren't made of shit. And at the command, try to make sure your feet keep time. Quick, march! They have followed me, the idiots, like in that complicated version of leapfrog known as going for a walk, in which the whole gang imitates the ridiculous pantomime indulged in by the bumptious squirt who started the game off. Climb this little hill, go down it again: that's got them exactly nowhere, but I don't deign even to laugh at them. They have no idea of my arrogance. When people talked to me they got the impression I was polite. My shoes, lick my shoes. And again. God knows what those shoes have trodden in recently. I shall never finish this book which you are rather beginning to like. You will simply have to imagine this sort of Siberia, these Urals which skirt the Rue de Crimée where the outer-circle railway passes. And the gateways and the approaches to the park and the poetry beyond reach for you who are from more conventional places, and for me whom . . . whom you do not believe. You, slaves, will be swallowed up in my own weakness. My arms, in relinquishing you, will leave you to your boredom, and disappointment shall be your punishment for having developed a reprehensible liking for me. I belong to the great race of torrents. This is not meant for your thick noodle. Everything I say, everything I think is too good for you, will

always be perfectly adequate. Hand over your watch, you. And you, your wife. Come on, no shilly-shallying, pile everything at my feet. No one's asking your advice, it's no use mumbling into your gums: SWEET NATURE. Lie down, flat on your belly, a bit quicker than that, do you hear, carpet! I am treading on their bodies, monarch of insolence I am advancing, soiling their jackets, and their skin, and their heart. Amusing designs on this servile Aubusson. Goddamn it, no rebellion, doormats. If only I'd thought of wearing my hobnailed boots, or my spurs. Spurs, that would be just the job. A few digs with the rowel. Then a grind of the heel. Shut up, the lot of you.

## XVII

*To M. Philippe Soupault,  
Editor of La Revue Européenne,  
4, Avenue Erlanger, Paris 16e.*

Monsieur le Directeur,

Are you not ashamed to be publishing, month after month, a medley of words lacking the general significance that would make it valid in the abstract eyes of thought? Close your petals, periwinkles. What abyss has ever yawned suddenly at the feet of your contributors? Can the purpose of fiction, and the whole jolly atmosphere it involves, the clever mental acrobatics performed by the fictioneers of the human spirit, possibly be worth this whole routine of writing and printing, the corrected proofs, your heart going pit-a-pat each month at the sight of the layout? The heavens unleash a great storm of derision upon this type of activity. When the account of ventures like this is written by some person who has always taken a vulgar, complacent view

of human agitation, tut-tutting about it like any housewife, then the whole falsity of this kind of intellectual position is shown up. Read what Wanda von Sacher-Masoch says somewhere about the founding of a review by her husband: the heart sinks, then surfaces again. Lord, what people! I am making these remarks to you because I got the impression on several occasions, from various signs of complicity you made me, that you had reached some general conclusions about the useless and derisory nature of all effort. Perhaps I was mistaken.

In any case, I undertook, mainly to compensate you for certain pecuniary advances you had been good enough to grant me, to expound a fanciful notion I had of the divine, and of the places where it manifests itself. At first, so as not to scare you with the magnitude of such a project, I offered it to you in the guise of simple walks, interspersed with reflections, a formula of which literature furnishes us with several examples. Doubtless you had been expecting archaeological and enraptured allusions, and the first pages of the manuscript must have disappointed you. Still, these first pages were well received by a few people, and you encouraged me to persevere. You had the good sense not to wax irate at the occasional advantages I took of your indulgence and your inattention by slipping in surreptitiously a sprinkling of comments in a slightly more licentious vein than we are accustomed to in France: I had surmised, correctly as it turned out, that the last thing in the world to preoccupy your mind would be the nature of what you gave the world to read. Indeed, you seemed enchanted by the whole thing, and your publisher himself was offering me the fabulous pot of gold for a luxury edition of a text that he doubtless found smutty. How wrong people can be!

What was I up to? Let me put it like this: I thought I was prodding metaphysics forward an inch or two. A laudable

error. But a delectable folly. For me to appreciate how false was the sound emitted by this fairground brass it needed all the dishevelment of the clouds of love. And here they are, some are rosy, and there are great gashes of clarity, fleeting shadows, balustrades for the birds. I can no longer share my mirages with you. Well, so much the worse if the account has an unfinished look about it, if the stroller roaming through the Buttes with my book in his hand realizes that I have scarcely said anything about this garden, that I have neglected all the essential features.

## XVIII

Whatever a man may have agreed to do, whatever element of commitment may be involved in this first step, whatever improbable skein of good reasons may have prompted him to pursue such a harebrained scheme, the very first moment of putting his intentions to the test is long enough for the spell to be broken. Yes, I began to mingle the landscape with my words. I thought of tracing a map of the mind and, in pursuit of my reflections, proposed a path to the *frisson*, I shook the dusty branches in which faded nymphs were dying, I believed my pleasure to be wedded to the light of an idea, and then, what do you think I care about all that in any case? You have been expecting to be diverted by someone whose attention has never been diverted from himself. May the indulgence of scorn rain down upon you for ever. It is not my job to rescue these sick readers from their boredom. Let them perish, let them wither away in the night of silence where vague mountebanks mime painlessly the appearance of human suffering.

I am not the kind of person who gives a name to every-

thing. Beneath a wave on the point of breaking up, in this hollow like an eye socket, there is scarcely a breath left in me, and which word is it then that, from all the millions of words, the millions of murmurs, the countless perplexities of idea, will, from this cluster of foam, the sea's blue cherry tree, choose my mouth, my mouth drunk perhaps from a kiss, and mad, and strangely free, and a stranger to myself, my mouth this mystery which sinks its teeth into the infinite spaces of the aerial world, which word is it that sums me up, O mockery, the word that I am dying from?

The conquests of the mind are nothing to me. Seekers of all kinds, what are you but odious apologists for the senses? Sometimes I have believed in a freshness of approach of quite another kind. I have pressed my lips against these snows. Fruits, melting gleams, spirits of youthfulness, plaintive waters, forests. Only an illusory bond secures me to your toboggan, O perfume of the world: you glide away, and at the bends the spills resemble a flight of birds. Before this cross commemorating an accident that happened to thought, I repeat: the conquests of the mind are nothing to me. When man strolls around the hall devoted to New Acquisitions with a smile on his face, a *smile*, I can never endure that smile. Since the days of the cavemen no ground, not a single fold, has been gained against mystery. Awake beneath the knife, condemned men, my brothers. In the maw of the Beast. Gently the sap from the breaking branch . . . flows over my face.

I shall no longer accompany you in the Barbizons<sup>23</sup> of pleasure. You are interested in this, in that: what do I care? My heart beneath this rock bridge and adorned by it with plumes—of smoke?—is full of the drift ice from the collision of great dead suns. The whole sky has drowned in my veins. The wind weeps in the volcanoes, and the ear is blocked with

lava, and the night levitates above the earth, and the larvae emerge from the furrows, and it is too late, it is at last too late for the desired destiny that can never be put into words, for the bleeding transfiguration of the corpse, and Lazarus will never leave his tomb. *He never left his tomb.*

Sometimes, in the midst of frustrating and humiliating circumstances—on this tide which sweeps me back on to the human cliffs, when the undertow of attentiveness dies at the feet of a woman, and yet her look has its price, and I hope desperately for a hypothetical good, sometimes I imagine that I am not alone under this star-studded bough. And that there is a great mass of beings, quickened by this movement of the waters, breathing like me, like myself the plaything of the planets' pale fingers. There would be men. And I am dreaming, and off goes my head. Where is it going, cut off? My head has perched itself on the human palm tree. Extraordinary romantic panorama. Here are all the fabulous characters: the grocer, the captain of equipment, the queen, the singer, the eskimo, the dairywoman. My head, do not drop to the ground again just yet. My head, open your eyes wide. Are these not blurred images of a reflection of myself? Do you hear the *sabir*<sup>24</sup> which the breeze dredging the human cornfields wafts to you? They are crazed words, which speak of happiness. My head, do not drop again just yet. Listen, it sounds like the song which at the end of a fine day wells up from the damp walls of prisons. Grand trite remarks, when everything is done with, if someone throws his mind back, it is the tritest remarks that will surface again in his memory: 'The weather was very mild today . . . I am not very fond of light-coloured dresses . . . Have you met that woman who is supposed to be so beautiful? . . . etcetera.' Do not drop again just yet, my head. The song resumes: 'One would almost think, forgive the expression, that the sky was within

reach . . . I felt so silly when I found your door locked, and not a word at the concierge's office . . . I just wanted to die—then and there . . . That was when I said . . . You will hardly believe me . . . People tell you such odd stories, and yet . . . Do you think one dies, really?' Drop, drop again, my head, played at cup-and-ball enough, dreamed enough, lived enough. Enough: let the smoke return towards the flame, let the future retreat within the day. You have seen your ruins, O Memphis, and your singing statue, O Memnon, occupied by black insects. What is the point of imagining this world, be quiet. You know the fate of thought.

He who was speaking gets up now. And once again tears off the head which has just been precariously reconnected. He tears it off his shoulders, and with unexpected force, with a force which one would never have guessed existed in those un-muscular arms, hurls far away from him his head with its pale eyes and clever lips, hurls his remarkable head far away from him, and it rebounds, over the stones which graze its skin, it rolls, it runs away, it bounces off the sides of mountains, it descends, it makes for the deep valleys; for a moment the clustered larches retain it in their copses by its ears, but the initial force of its propulsion carries it away, and the trees draw back with a gentle noise of rustling leaves, the Head passes, reaches the fields. Roll in the cultures, Head, in the seedlings. It mingles with the grain, and the winnower catches it in his basket and sends it flying towards other hedges where the schoolboy will in his turn come to gather it, bleeding under its black hair. 'This blackberry', says the youngster, 'is still all red on one side', and throws it crossly into the dust. Now the head learns to distinguish feet. All sorts of different people make use of this country path. Their movements are infinitely variable. Their steps betray the multiple motions of their hearts. The labourer's heavy tread, the young girl's soft footfall, and the

murderer in urgent flight, running through the grass. And your naked, weary, adorable feet. The head rolls gently towards the sea.

He who had finally parted company with his thought when far away the first waves had started licking the wounds of the spurned head stirred from his immobility like an inverted question mark. In the pure air, above the charred sierras, at those altitudes where the earth, scraped to the bone, bathes in the diamond sun's implacable glare, where each stone seemed marked with the hoofprint of an ironshod stellar horse, the decapitated body sent out in great spasms the triple spurt of its most powerful arteries, and the blood formed monstrous ferns in the sparkling blue of space. Their crosiers, uncurling in the depths, continued in the form of fine suspensions of life, a dotted line of rubies coiling around the last birds in the atmosphere, around the luminous ring of the spheres, around the final breaths of magnetic attractions. The fountain-man, swept along by celestial capillarity, rose up in the midst of the worlds, in the wake of his blood. The whole useless body was invaded by transparency. Gradually the body turned into light. The blood, rays.

The limbs, in the throes of an incomprehensible gesture, grew rigid. And the man was no longer anything but a sign among the constellations.

## THE PEASANT'S DREAM

The world exists in a state of unthinkable disorder: the extraordinary thing about this is that men should have habitually sought beneath the surface appearance of disorder for some mysterious order, one that comes naturally to them, that merely expresses an innate desire within them, and they have no sooner introduced this order into things than they start going into raptures about it, making this order the basis of an idea, or alternatively explaining this order by an idea. Thus everything to them is providence, and thus they render account of a phenomenon which serves to endorse their own reality alone, a reality which is the relationship they establish between themselves and, for example, the germination of the poplar, first producing a hypothesis they find satisfactory, then admiring the divine principle which gave the lightness of down to a seed that, to serve its countless purposes, had to be propagated in sufficient quantities by an airborne method.

## PARIS PEASANT

Man's mentality cannot endure disorder because he is unable to imagine it, I mean that he is unable to imagine it as a primary concept. That each idea arises only where its contrary is conceived is a truth which suffers from not having been examined hitherto. Disorder is imagined only in relation to order and, subsequently, order is imagined only in relation to disorder. But only subsequently. The very form of the word 'order' dictates this fact. And by endowing order with divine attributes the way is opened for the transition from its abstract conception to its concrete value, a transition which disorder, consequently, cannot achieve. The notion of order lacks the counter-balance of an unassailable notion of disorder. Whence the divine explanation.

Man clings to this explanation. Yet there is absolutely no difference between one idea and another. Every idea is capable of passing from the abstract to the concrete, of assuming the form of its own peculiar development, thus ceasing to be the empty shell which satisfies vulgar minds. I reserve the right not to remain bound by whatever idea the necessary consequence and logical progression of my thought may have impelled me to formulate. It seems evident to me that for the thinking man who does not obscure his ideal perception by the constant control and cross-checking of each moment of his thought, entailed by a comparison of that moment with all the preceding moments (and why this preference given to the past over the future which is its basis?), for the thinking man who conceives the difference between these last two words as residing in a purely syntactic relationship, who consequently can conceive of the coexistence in an airtight chamber of several distinct gases, each occupying the whole of the total available volume, for such a man disorder is capable of achieving transition to a concrete state.

It is clear that this is not simply a matter of feeling: if I have chosen order and disorder as the terms of this dialectic it is only with a view to demonstrating accessorially, while simultaneously providing an example of this dialectic, the vulgar approach which has permitted men to conceive the universe in terms of a divine inspiration that is repugnant to any genuine philosophical scheme. My thoughts are concerned, above all, with the way the mind works. Nothing is really unthinkable except the idea of an absolute limit: it is possible to define the mind as having no limit other than the unthinkable. And if disorder is unthinkable, I mean if it were concretely unthinkable, then disorder in concrete form would be the mind's absolute limit. A curious image of what several have named God. I do not see how this image might be reconciled with any of the systems of opinion that pass for knowledge among such people. The reason why I originally postulated, in a first figure traced by these reflections of mine, that disorder was unthinkable is that this familiar figure represented the vulgar knowledge which is the primary source of all my intuitions.

The idea of God, at least the introduction of this idea into dialectics, is nothing more than a sign of mental laziness. Just as this idea obtruded itself, during the first phase, to halt any genuine dialectical process, so it reappears during the second phase, by a similar devious route, and we can see how easy it is to deify order following upon disorder, or to bring these notions together into one of God during the course of their evolution. Transcendental idealism remained fixed at this last stage, and it must be admitted that the place it then allotted to the idea of God proved more acceptable to the mind than any of the roles that had previously been assigned to that idea. But in the same instant that I recognize in the very idea of an absolute mediator the identical cowardice and mental fatigue

that the idealists have already shown me to exist in theologies, I condemn the idealists, the mind condemns them, in exactly the same terms as the judgment they themselves have pronounced on theologies. The appearance of the idea of God requires to be examined in its three forms, at three levels of mental consciousness, so that I may recognize the mechanism of this appearance, so that I may gauge whether I am liable to succumb to this idea, and so that I may condemn myself in advance to the extent that such a lapse becomes evident to me as a virtuality in myself. And so that I may generalize the properties of this idea, through the same unchanging mechanism that I perceive in its process of appearing. The idea of God\* is a psychological mechanism. On no account can it be considered a metaphysical principle. It measures the degree of ineffectuality of the mind, and can never be considered the principle of the mind's efficiency.

From there to the conclusion that metaphysics is impossible is only a single step for a vulgar mind. So it happens that people sometimes achieve an intuition of this point of my reflections, but being unaware of the intermediary stages which have brought me to that point they often proceed from it to this conviction of the impossibility of metaphysics. Because for them God is the purpose of metaphysics. And, so they maintain with apparent success, if one cannot attain through metaphysics the idea that constitutes its purpose, then that is a good enough reason for the mind to eschew metaphysics. An error the ingenuity of which has guaranteed it incredible popularity. Apart from the fact that this error associated metaphysics with an irrelevant purpose, it borrowed its authority from a rather lu-

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\*A disgusting and vulgar idea.

dierous unconscious pragmatism. Yet, as it happens, for close on a century men have accepted this idea, which constitutes a veritable suicide of the mind, as the only valid one. All reasoning constructed along the same lines, but having more than mind alone for substance, would seem monstrous and shameful, and anyone making use of such reasoning who tried to reassert positivism's habitual posture would be treated as a madman. This is by no means a new sophism. The idealists encountered it in their time, and defeated it in their own cause. Yet a simple detour, involving the false modesty of the thinking reed putting on its usual show of sterling quality, was sufficient to bring back in full force a difficulty that had already been resolved. The whole of modern philosophy, even the school opposed to positivism, has been affected and vitiated by this fallacy. A philosophical mind has no alternative but to classify it among the grossest forms of error, namely the syllogisms condemned by Aristotelian philosophy, and then dismiss it.

If the problem of divinity is not, as has been obstinately claimed, the purpose of metaphysics, if metaphysics itself is not a logical impossibility, what then is the purpose of metaphysics? The idealists had already realized that metaphysics is not the outcome of philosophy, but its very basis, and that it is not to be considered separately from logic. However, the assumption of synonymy contained in this second point is unacceptable. If logic is the science of the laws of knowledge, and if these laws are incomprehensible independently of metaphysics, a proposition which I endorse, it does not follow that these laws constitute metaphysics, but obviously that, metaphysics being the science of the purpose of knowledge, it is only within metaphysics that logic exerts itself and develops its laws. I will be more easily understood if I say that the purpose of logic is abstract knowledge, and the purpose of metaphysics is concrete

knowledge. It follows, to use the language of idealism and in so doing unravel the strands of error in that system, that in neither instance can there exist a logic of notion or a metaphysics of being. One must conclude that it is solely these conceptions, the offspring of the very errors against which the idealists fought, that led Hegel to construct what he called *The Doctrine of Essence*,<sup>25</sup> a useless intermediary that allowed him to pass from logic to metaphysics after having originally compounded them. Yet all that was necessary was to maintain their individualities.

Logic is the science of being, metaphysics the science of notion. Were it possible for us to have direct access to metaphysical conception, our minds would have absolutely no need of logic. Logic is merely a means of raising us to the level of metaphysics: and it should not forget that fact. As soon as logic ceases to possess this value, as soon as it exercises itself in a vacuum, it loses all value. Although we gain access to metaphysics along the path of logic, metaphysics both embraces logic and remains distinct from it.

Notion, or knowledge of the concrete, is, then, the purpose of metaphysics. The mind's impulses gravitate towards the perception of the concrete. It is impossible to imagine a mind that does not have metaphysics as its object, however vulgar that mind, however muddled by opinionated feelings. This is the mind's goal, and it matters very little whether or not it attains what it does not realize it is seeking. A philosophy cannot possibly *succeed*. It derives its own greatness from that of its purpose, and retains this borrowed greatness only in the context of its own failure. So in the same breath that I affirm the failure of transcendental idealism, I salute that enterprise, the loftiest that man has ever dreamt of, as a necessary stage in the mind's journey. And yet, in his onward progress towards the concrete,

there is no need for man to trouble himself with the short-lived approval granted to a particular system. There is no rest for Sisyphus, but his stone does not roll down again, it ascends and must not cease to ascend.



Climb down into your idea, inhabit your idea, well-digger hanging from your rope. At first it was only an outline, a halo, and by now it has not got very far, and everywhere I touch upon things which are not that idea of yours, I touch that idea through everything that refutes it, the world expires along its shores. My idea, my idea clings to countless bonds. A long story and I am moved to pity by its scarred form, I kiss the imperfections of its foot.

Fearsome, charming whores, let others take to generalizing in their arms. Let such people become intoxicated at re-discovering, beneath this shifting, and for me disconcerting, appearance, what unites them all, what nevertheless amounts to true love. I prefer their kisses. I prefer each kiss, I single it out, I shall dream about it for a long time, I shall never forget it. I have heard men complain that their mistresses lacked some pleasant womanly characteristic, while succumbing to some other foible that most women avoid: these men suffered because they never felt beneath the skin they caressed this *frisson* of general law, which would have sent them into raptures. Well, not me. I adore you for this adorable, peculiar quality, not an inch of the body, not a tremor in the air that would be valid for anyone else. No museum could ever reconstruct you on the basis of your little dimpled hand. You put laws to confusion while at the same time you give expression to them. A great freedom that laws neglect bursts out around your feet. What

is marvellous is that I should have fled from womankind towards this woman. A vertiginous crossing: the incarnation of thought, and there I am, I cannot conceive of a greater mystery. Yesterday I clutched blindly at empty abstractions. Today a single person dominates me, and I love her, and her absence is an intolerable pain, and her presence . . . Her presence passes my understanding, for every aspect of her, her very power over me, springs from a source beyond nature. An attitude. A word. A single rustle of her dress. O, when the bracelet plays against the flesh.

I had paused at this point in my thoughts, like a man who no longer knows what has brought him to the place where he finds himself, and who looks vainly for a path by which to leave again. The unfortunate thing is that my way of thought governs my way of life. My friends, I know, were worried about the state of mind they saw me in; but they never suspected that it was a lack of metaphysical perspective that had put me to such confusion. I demeaned myself with the kind of petty literary activities that make me feel ashamed now when I think about them: the same sort of stirrings of shame that accompany one's recollection of stray episodes from childhood, of family existence. No logical step seemed capable of liberating me from this logical prison which showed itself in my melancholy. It was then that a total upheaval in my fortunes, a process in which I felt I played no part at all, so altered the direction of my thoughts that they in turn were overtaken by my new intentions. I fell in love, and what these four words leave to the imagination is unimaginable.

The question of when the idea of love, of this love, precisely of this love, arose in my mind is one that I cannot answer and yet at the same time can answer perfectly well. Every possible barrier existed between myself and this woman whom



I at first determined to shun, and to shun in myself, above all. With women I tend to get carried away violently by a certain arrogance derived from various sour memories, from a long-held conviction that at the very best a woman could only hate me, from a horrible sense of failure that continually carries me to the farthest reaches of a mortal darkness. I had forbidden myself to love this woman and, in a sort of confession of terror, had refused her even the regrets of memory. Various feelings within me also helped to dictate my behaviour. It was no doubt at this point that I guessed, though not clearly enough to trace the outline of a phantom, that my heart was undergoing a profound modification: the strange filigree of love was already starting to impress its pattern there. I thought I was simply experiencing a change of temperament, and it was in this state of genuine confusion that I met another woman. Let me make this confession to her today, may all this lapse back into unconsciousness, and may she pardon me. I did love her in my fashion of those times, within my limitations, and without knowing that her image was already blended with another's, I loved her truly, without lying, with a love that faded only in the light of love itself, and she knows quite well that she made me unhappy. Even with all the obstacles which, sometimes half-heartedly, she placed in my way I never wore out this love, and certainly it drew its very life from her. But listen to me, my dear, I rediscovered in myself what I had denied. You had been my sole defence and already you were retreating from me. So then I became unhappy for the other woman, unable to believe that she could know nothing of all this. I carried on my existence without making the slightest effort to contact her. As I have said, other feelings held me at a distance from her at that time. Then I trembled at the thought of my weakness being put to the test. I feared that if she humiliated me even once, life would

become unbearable for me. She did this extraordinary thing of calling me to her: and I came. Evening filled with confusion, evening of eclipse: then, in front of the fire that bathed us in its great glow, I acquiesced, seeing her eyes, her huge, calm eyes, I acquiesced to the idea of this love that had been no sooner conceived than denied, that suddenly compelled my recognition through its manifest existence, there within reach of my hand which thought it had gone crazy. I did not hurry. Hours and hours passed on the avowal's scarcely perceptible slope. There was no sharp break between indifference and love. A door finally yielded, and there before us stretched the marvellous landscape.

It is taken for granted too easily that passion befogs the mind: in fact, it baffles only that vulgar aspect of the mind, diligence. The amusements of lovers and the bemusements of savants remain equally diverting: they represent an identical process of adaptation to a very great objective. I discovered in love, through the very mechanism of love, what the absence of love had prevented me from perceiving. An emanation from this woman, beyond her image, re-formed itself into that same image which then blossomed into a particular world, that taste, that divine taste that I know so well in every vertigo, forewarning me yet again that I was entering this concrete universe which is closed to passers-by. For me, the metaphysical spirit was reborn from love. Love was its source, and I hope never to leave this enchanted forest.



The sphere of notion is similar to the bottom of the sea. It enriches itself, it gains extra dimension from the stratifications due to the very movement of thought, and in its reefs it embodies

treasures, ships, skeletons, all desires that have gone astray, all alien purposes. How strange the path followed by this medallion presented by a white hand in the night, from a glittering shop in a landscape of mist and music, as far as this blond sediment where it lies side by side with a jellyfish and the defeated gear and tackle of some anonymous Armada. Notion is also the shipwreck of laws, it is notion that upsets laws. Either it eludes me or I attain it. I raise myself painfully to the level of the particular. I advance into the particular. I am lost in it. The sign of this loss is the whole of veritable knowledge, all the veritable knowledge that has accrued to me.

Let me contemplate in my hand this object of my quest, this precious metal which is the sole desirable good, the sole flux of my thought, let me record its impression before it can melt away. I recognize this metal. Sometimes, before now, I have caught this reflection of everything glinting in a glass. I have drunk this ideal champagne. Without taking into account the direction my mind was taking, without proceeding by way of this meditative detour, these back tracks, these outcomes. From the swiftest glimpse an apparition arose. I did not feel responsible for this zone of the fantastic in which I was living. The fantastic or the marvellous. It is within this zone that my knowledge constituted true notion. My access to it was by a secret stairway, the image. Abstract research has induced me to consider it a crude illusion, yet finally notion, in its concrete form, with its treasure of particularities, no longer seems to me in any respect different from this despised method of knowledge, the image, which is poetic knowledge; while the vulgar forms of knowledge are nothing more, under their guise of science or logic, than the conscious halting places past which the image scorches, the image transformed marvellously into a burning bush.

I realize how shocking such a conception seems, I know the objection that may be made to it. A certain feeling for the real. Feeling, pure and simple. For how did the idea come about that it is the concrete which is the real? Is not the concrete, on the contrary, all that is beyond the real, is not the real the abstract judgment which the concrete presupposes only in the dialectical process? And does not the image, as such, possess its own reality which is its application to knowledge, its substitution for it? The image is not in itself the concrete, of course, but the possible consciousness, the greatest possible consciousness of the concrete. In any case, whatever kind of objection may be made to such a view of the mind is itself of little importance, that very objection being an image. Basically, no way of thought exists that is not an image. However, most images are registered so weakly by the mind employing them that they incarnate absolutely no estimation of reality, and consequently retain the abstract nature which determines their impoverishment and ineffectiveness. The property of the poetic image, as opposed to the *essential* image, if I may rely on this mediocre epithet, is to incarnate this quality of materialization, one that exercises a tremendous power over man and is quite capable of making him believe in a logical impossibility in the name of logic. The poetic image presents itself in the form of fact, adorned with all fact's necessities. But—and this is a fact that no one has ever thought of challenging, except perhaps for Hegel, and even he did not attach overwhelming importance to the question—fact resides not in the object but in the subject: fact exists only in terms of time, that is to say of language. Fact is only a single category. But the image borrows only the form of fact, for the mind can envisage fact outside of itself. At the various stages of its development, then, the image appears to the mind furnished with all the guarantees that the

mind demands of the modes of its knowledge. Image is law in the realm of abstraction, fact in that of happenings, knowledge in that of the concrete. This last premise allows one to come to a judgment and declare, succinctly, that the image is the path of all knowledge. One is then justified in regarding the image as the resultant of all the mind's impulses, in ignoring everything that is not image, and in devoting oneself exclusively to poetic activity at the expense of all other activity.

Be quiet, you do not understand me: I am not talking about your poems.

It is towards poetry that man is gravitating.

There is no other knowledge than that of the particular.

There is no other poetry than that of the concrete.

Madness is the predominance of the abstract and the general over the concrete, over poetry.

*A madman is not a man who has lost his reason: he is a man who has lost everything except his reason.* (G. K. Chesterton)

Madness is only an affinity, like reasonable with real. It is a reality, a reason.

I find scientific activity a bit mad but humanly defensible.

The consolations of logic.

No one has ever got around to saying: *What is needed is a logic for the people.* It's no concern of mine. But it could be maintained.

My concern is with metaphysics. And not madness. And not reason.

It matters very little to me whether or not I have reason on my side. I do not seek to be right. I seek the concrete. That is why I speak. I do not admit the right of anyone to question the premises of speech, or of expression. The concrete has no

other form of expression than poetry. I do not admit the right of anyone to question the premises of poetry.

There is a species of persecuted persecutors known as *critics*.

I do not admit criticism.

It is not to criticism that I have devoted my days. My days belong to poetry. Make no mistake, sniggerers: I lead a poetic life.

*A poetic life*, pray engrave that expression.

I do not admit the right of anyone to reexamine my words, to quote them against me. They are not the terms of a peace treaty. Between you and me, it is war.

In 1925, the newspaper *Le Figaro* asked in its literary supplement whether or not one *ought* to elide the e mutes in verses, whether one *should* alternate their rhymes. Knowing you as I do, this is exactly how you will always behave with regard to my thought. Judge, from that, of your judgments of my life.

My life? It no longer belongs to me.

I have already said so.

I have no desire to hog the limelight. But the first person singular expresses for me everything that is concrete in man. All metaphysics is in the first person singular. All poetry, too.

The second person is still the first.

These days, with no more kings around, it is the scholars and scientists who say: We desire. Stout fellows.

They fondly believe they have grasped the plural: but it is a viper that they have in their hands.

I do not go astray, I command myself. In a landscape, it is always some absurdity rather than the essential which holds the eye. My point of view has a fine prospect.

LOUIS ARAGON

I positively do not admit criticism.

I am in the heavens. No one can prevent me from being in the heavens.

They have displaced the heavens. In imagining the stars, they have forgotten my eyes.

Just what does hell mean for the human spirit?

The most tenacious of various hopes I have held was despair. Hell: my morality, you see, is not bound up with my optimism. I have never understood consolation.

Heaven will be of no help to me.

It is extraordinary, this need they have for a morality that will be a consolation to them.

No flowers, by request.

Prodigal on this side, parsimonious beyond: they lend their life by the week, at high rates of interest, hoping that their customers, reunited with them in death, will remain their debtors for all eternity.

To poetry, they prefer paradise.

Matter of taste.

Even in metaphysics, the general experience has been that poetry failed to feed the inner man.

What is this sentimentality?

Put aside sentimentality in all its forms. Sentiment, feeling are not just words to be kept, you bunch of crooks and swindlers. Visualize the world without bringing feeling into it. What beautiful weather.

Reality is the apparent absence of contradiction.

The marvellous is the eruption of contradiction within the real.

Love is a state of confusion between the real and the marvellous. In this state, the contradictions of being seem *really* essential to being.

PARIS PEASANT

Wherever the marvellous is dispossessed, the abstract moves in.

The fantastic, the beyond, dream, survival, paradise, hell, poetry, so many words signifying the concrete.

There is no other love than that of the concrete.

And since they are so keen on writing, it remains for them to write a metaphysic of love.

To meet a certain objection to nominalism: it might be a good idea to force people to notice what happens at the onset of sleep. How, at that point, man starts speaking to himself, and by what imperceptible progression he becomes carried away by his utterance which becomes manifest and effective, and how, when at last he attains his concrete value... there! the sleeper is dreaming, as they say.

The concrete is the indescribable: why should I care two pins whether the earth is round or not?

There is such a thing as a noble style in relation to thought.

Which is just what the psychologists deny.

Psychologists, alias soul-fanciers, are the acolytes of feeling. I have known several.

The inventor of the word *physiognomist*.

Those who say *God* for the best reasons in the world.

God is rarely on my lips.

Those who divide the mind up into faculties.

Those who talk about truth (I am not fond enough of lies to talk about truth).

You are too late upon the scene, gentlemen, for persons have had their day upon earth.

Force to its farthest limit the idea of the destruction of persons, and go beyond that limit.

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

- 1 Fort Chabrol. The name given to the headquarters of the Ligue Antisémitique, in the Rue de Chabrol, Paris. Here, in 1899, the leader of this organization, Jules Guérin, held out for thirty-eight days against forces of police trying to arrest him for his violent agitation against the proposed rehearing of the 1894 Dreyfus trial.
- 2 Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, 'Logic', § 220. (3). This rendering was prepared specially for the present work by Arnold V. Miller, translator of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, etc.
- 3 'The Antiphilosopher'. i.e. Tristan Tzara, author of the long prose poem *Monsieur AA l'Antiphilosophie*.
- 4 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'Transcendental Analytic', I, ii, 2. From the translation by Norman Kemp Smith.
- 5 The pun in French is infinitely better: '... ces femmes éphémèrement

## PARIS PEASANT

- aimées, ces Florences, ces Ferminas, qu'un rien enflamme ET FAIT MERES.'
- 6 'Fright philtres'. In the French, 'philtres d'effarement', a term invented by the author to describe the atropine-based liquids that ladies applied, with a dropper, to their eyes to make them look larger.
  - 7 Moedler. According to the author, a 'German physicist who propounded a theory of planetary attraction' (untraceable by the translator).
  - 8 'J'en sors.' This drawing is by the author. It has since been reprinted by him in his *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire, ou les Incipit* (Skira, Geneva, 1969), with the following comment (p. 58): 'A scribble in which I find myself once again the child who refused to learn to write: the introduction of this scribble into *Le Paysan* remains equivocal.'
  - 9 Krafft. According to the author, an '18-c. German designer of gardens. His renovation of the art of garden architecture in that country, and his rejection of the formalism of the French garden typified by Le Nôtre, made him a true representative of the spirit of German romanticism' (untraceable by the translator).
  - 10 Duchêne. Follower of Proudhon and editor of the radical journal *Le Peuple*.  
Martinet. 19th-c. French theologian and disciple of Maistre, whose books include *La Société devant le concile*.  
Edouard André. Botanist and horticulturalist who became assistant to Alphand, the superintendent of 'Promenades et plantations' of Paris (and designer of the Buttes-Chaumont).  
Vacherot. 19th-c. anti-idealist French philosopher, whose books include *De la politique extérieure de la République*.
  - 11 *desinit in piscem*. From Horace, *On the Art of Poetry*, iv, where the poet compares a work of art lacking unity with a beautiful bust of a woman terminating in a fish's tail. 'Desinit in piscem mulier formosa superne.' This Latin tag, hallowed by inclusion in the 'pink pages' of the Petit Larousse, is applied to things that peter out after a bold beginning.

- 12 Eugène Manuel. A late-19th-c. educationalist and writer of popular verse on down-to-earth themes, who became Minister of Education in the 1870 government.
- 13 The statue of Gambetta that stood opposite the entrance to the Cour du Carrousel (Jardin des Tuileries, Paris) was removed by the Germans during the Second World War.
- 14 *Paris during the war*. The title of a statue by Mercié to the glory of the French capital under siege from the German guns during the First World War. Although the woman brandishing a sword, who symbolized Paris, was generally considered hideous, Eluard liked to insist that it was really an extraordinary and powerful image of the 'woman of the people' (an opinion which the author endorses).
- 15 The Ternes balloon. Gambetta left Paris by balloon, while the city was under siege in October 1870. A monument celebrating the balloon was erected on the site of the daring escape, at the Porte des Ternes: it was known popularly as the 'monument aux colombophiles [dove-fanciers].' This was another of the many statues and monuments removed from Paris by the Germans during the Second World War.
- 16 The Strasbourg monument; *Déroulède*. This monument was one of many set up in the Place de la Concorde, Paris, to represent the most important French cities. The Strasbourg monument remained there after the 1870-71 war, despite the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine by the Germans; until 1914 it was a symbolic rallying point for nationalist demonstrations demanding the return of these provinces to France. Paul Déroulède (1846-1914), mediocre poet (*Chants du soldat*, etc.) and President of the reactionary Ligue des Patriotes, used the monument as a plinth for his hysterical jingoistic speeches.
- 17 Frémiet's equestrian statue of Joan of Arc is in the Place des Pyramides, Paris. Mercié's statue *Quand même* (*Even so*) was erected at Belfort in 1882, and later re-erected in the Jardin des Tuileries, Paris. Serpollet, the engineer who invented the steam-driven tricycle, is com-

- memorated by a statue in the Place Saint-Ferdinand, Paris. Panhard and Levassor, the pioneers, with Gottlieb Daimler, of the motor vehicle, are celebrated on a bas-relief ornamenting a monument at the Porte Maillot, Paris.
- The abbé Claude Chappe, a late-18th-c. engineer and physician, invented the first 'telegraph', a system of mechanical semaphores: there is a statue of him in the Carrefour de l'Odéon, Paris (until recent times the Carrefour Chappe).
- Etienne Dolet, the 16th-c. French 'martyr of the Renaissance', found guilty of heresy and burned in the Place Maubert, Paris, where his statue stood until removed by the Germans (for a fine photograph of this statue, see André Breton's *Nadja*, Plate 3).
- 'The Corps of Naval Constructors.' The French descriptive phrase lends itself to a poetic ambiguity: 'le Génie Maritime'. At Toulon, the gateway leading into the arsenal is surmounted by a series of bronze emblems.
- 18 'Nicolas billiards.' A game played on a round table furnished around its edge with elastic levers with which the players propelled balls.
- 19 Champollion. The early-19th-c. French orientalist who was the first to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics.
- 20 The meaning of this sentence suffers, in all French editions, as a result of several misprints and the omission of an entire qualifying clause. The French should read: 'Allez-vous en votre pont sous le bras, avec le regret de ces paillettes que vous auriez aimé ne voir coudre le long de ses arches [delete comma here] des rayons lunaires, et que vous auriez suivies de votre attention béate. {translator's italics}'
- 21 i.e. the W (for 'Viva Mussolini') used as a wall slogan by his fascist supporters.
- 22 In the French, this passage is introduced as follows: 'C'est de cette sépia qu'il est dit à la page 83 de l'édition originale du *Moine* de Lewis (traduit par l'abbé Morellet): . . .'. The attribution, in an 1838 edition of *Le Moine* (published by 'A. Cadeau'), of the translation to the philosopher and

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*encyclopédiste* Morellet is presumably humorous, since the text is identical to that of the translation by Deschamps *et al.* first published in 1799.

- 23 Barbizon. A village in the Forest of Fontainebleau where a group of mid-19th-c. painters, including Corot, Millet and Théodore Rousseau, had studios: hence the name 'School of Barbizon' for these precursors of Impressionism.
- 24 Sabir. A concocted word; originally used by Molière, and now applied to a French-based pidgin language of North Africa.
- 25 *The Doctrine of Essence*. Book 2 of Vol. I, 'The Objective Logic', of Hegel's *Science of Logic*.