

## Four Humanisms In One Day



Jonathan Keir

© 2021 Karl Schlecht Foundation (KSG)

Gutenbergstraße 4  
72631 Aichtal  
GERMANY

[www.karlschlechtstiftung.de](http://www.karlschlechtstiftung.de)

First printed 2021

Cover photo: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Apparizione dell'angelo a Zaccaria* (1490)

This is an open access title which permits any non-commercial use, distribution,  
and reproduction in any medium.

To my father Patrick (1955-1999), who would have celebrated a birthday  
on the evening this book was finished.

*Work as joy, inaccessible to the psychologists.*

Franz Kafka

*There is no way to calculate what effect this is having on our souls, because our souls do not exist in the domain of calculation. Any attempt to enumerate that harm just strengthens the enumeration-harm of the technocracy.*

Joshua Cohen

*Since his days in Burma, Orwell had feared that with Christianity in irreversible decline, the values that held a democratic society together would become collateral damage, leaving democracy dangerously vulnerable. Modern man, he concluded, must forsake the dead wood of Christian dogma but re-establish its core ideal: the brotherhood of all men based on common decency.*

*A year later, while on a commission to write about poverty and unemployment, Orwell had an epiphany: he saw his core ideals in action. The northern working class was living out these values. This was true socialism—common decency when ‘all the nonsense is stripped off’—and in Wigan Pier he declared himself a democratic socialist. But in reality his socialism was primarily an ‘instrument of justice’. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe’s judge declares that democratic law represents an attempt to codify the principles of decency. ‘And decency,’ he goes on, ‘is not a deal, an angle, a contract or a hustle. Decency is... in your bones.’*

Stephen Ingle

*People come and go. When you try to find your place among all the living and dead, the numbers are unmanageable, but working within a fixed group—two hundred and fifty people, one building, a roomful of framed photographs—there’s no fooling yourself. Is this my time? Maybe and maybe not, but my time is coming, and it should. Someone out there is waiting for my place.*

Ann Patchett

## Foreword

My writing, I now see after fifteen years of it, has revolved around the very simple idea of weaving previously unjuxtaposed and beautiful voices together, thereby manufacturing novel harmonies. I've borrowed different organising principles - 'warriors for civilisation', 'world ethos', 'spiritual humanism' and so on - but they all amount to the same thing: the name of the song can never capture the music. The result of these collections is always, for me anyway, something greater than the sum of their parts: you do it in the first place because you sense there are important connections there, but you can't consciously know what they are until you've written them out to yourself. An underground DJ in the capital of the Global Republic of Letters, you *create* something, a collage of one's own out of the fragments of others. You add the glue, but not the meat.

I have Milan Kundera to thank for helping me to realise that what I am doing, even if it is no good, aspires to the forensic quality of art. I don't think it's unreasonable to think of this book - or my others in the genre (*Warriors for Civilisation*, *From Global Ethic to World Ethos?* and *Peking Eulogy*) - as a form of novel-writing as Kundera understands it (i.e. the only reason to write a novel is to discover something you can't find out any other way). In an age saturated by disgusting self-promotional me-ness, humanistic authenticity requires us more than ever to forge our own storytelling in the stories of others, not as part of some self-aggrandising long-con marketing strategy, but precisely to demarcate and self-police the border between art and business. Further theoretical reflections on modernism and what comes after it, however, are thankfully reserved for the end.

Three of the four books discussed in the meantime have been competently translated by professionals, but I felt the amateur compulsion to engage with these four disparate texts directly; after all, I was trying to create a single story in my own words. A certain type of translation ethicist would regard this practice as a dishonest instrumentalisation of original works; to the dead ancestors and living authors watching on, these pages here are a record of *my* time: I have tried to honour you and keep you alive in them as best I could. For once, I'm not going to say in advance what the story here is; the reader will have to uncover it gradually for herself, which will require a patience that

only the most avid fan could muster. But there is world enough and time for one of those.

All tennis needs a net; I think it's fair to say that I have had my day-job in mind throughout the year in which this book was written. Luckily I have, on paper, the most interesting day-job in the world: I work for a foundation whose mission is 'to improve leadership in business and society through humanistic values' and 'to promote the holistic personality development of young people and future leaders.' I spend my days warning colleagues trained in other modes of thought that these are dangerous and hopeless goals; they are the *by-products* of art, and you fuck everything up, Stalin-style, by making them the yardsticks of your policy decisions. This thing here is the very opposite of soul-engineering: it is a story which I felt called to write, not some means by which to make you measurably and predictably better. It would be an insult to you - and to the authors covered in this book - to suggest otherwise.

So for God's sake relax and enjoy it. If you are starting in the morning, you could be finished by midnight, but of course you don't have to take the advice in the title literally unless you really feel like binge-reading the whole thing 'in one day'. If I knew exactly how this story was going to work on you, or what feats you might accomplish after having read and reread it, then it wouldn't be a real story. All art worth the name is an unbureaucratisable surprise.

Stuttgart, September 2021

## Contents

Foreword	5
1. Hector Abad Faciolince's <i>El olvido que seremos</i>	8
2. Varlam Shalamov's <i>Artist Polaty</i>	88
3. Ōe Kenzaburo's <i>Watanabe Kazuo o Yomu</i>	131
4. May Ziadé's <i>Al-Musāwā</i>	158
Quarter to Midnight	189

## 1. Héctor Abad Faciolince's *El olvido que seremos*<sup>1</sup>

Héctor Abad Faciolince's left-liberal father was murdered by the Colombian paramilitary right in 1987; he is still angry about it, but this is not the only important emotion or fact on show, either in Abad's 2006 book *El olvido que seremos*, which we will be examining here, or in the 2020 film *Forgotten We'll Be*, which could never have been a match for its neglected progenitor. By all means watch the film, but know that this is the full story behind it.

Abad's avowed atheism ends up subverting itself; he saves his father not only by making him exist for his readers, but by intimating the existence of a realm where his father's goodness exists independently of our knowledge or memory of it. It will take the whole book to understand the meaning of the Yehuda Amichai epigraph Abad chooses: 'For the love of memory/ I wear my father's face on my own.' I confess that, in my first 38 years, I had never heard of Amichai; if Abad had given me only this one new name, that would already have been plenty (and without getting past the letter A). Perhaps circumstances will conspire to bring me back to Amichai one day.

### 'Un niño de la mano de su padre'

Abad remembers the first 'theological discussion' of his life, namely with his pious nanny, 'la hermanita Josefa', who was deeply concerned about Héctor Abad Sr.'s hostility to Catholic traditionalism: 'I don't want to go to Heaven,' Héctor Jr. replies. 'I'm not interested in a Heaven without my father. I'd rather go to Hell with him.' Good luck not thinking of one's own parents when confronted with the following:

I loved my father in a way that I never knew again until my children were born. I recognised it when they came along because, if opposite, it was equal in intensity. I felt that nothing bad could happen to me when I was with my father, just as I feel that nothing bad could happen to my children when they are with me. What I mean is that I would get myself killed - without hesitating for an instant - to protect them. And I know that that is

---

<sup>1</sup> Héctor Abad Faciolince, *El olvido que seremos*, (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2017(2006)).

how my father felt about me. [...] I also know that there is something much worse than my own death: the death of one of my children. This is all very primitive, ancestral stuff, rooted in our subconscious, in brain modules older than rational thought. [...] I loved my father in this animal way.

So it is, surely, with most of us. This father, however, was thought-provokingly specific in his pedagogical convictions:

My father let me do whatever I wanted. Well, not *everything*; I couldn't pick my nose or eat dirt; I couldn't lay so much as a finger on my little sister; I couldn't go out without saying so, or cross the road without looking both ways; I had to be more respectful towards our various maids - Mariela, Rosa, Margarita - than to any guest or relative; I had to have a bath every day, wash my hands before eating, brush my teeth afterwards, keep my fingernails clean and tidy... But since I was an easygoing sort of kid, I internalised all these basic things very quickly. What I mean by *everything*, for example, was the fact that I could pick up his books and records as I pleased, and generally touch all his things (razor, scarves, aftershave, turntables, pens) without asking for permission. I never had to ask for money either. He explained it to me in the following terms:

'All that's mine is yours. My wallet is over there; just take what you need.' [...] I never knew whether to take one peso, two, or five. In the end I would just leave it all in there.

Natalia Ginzburg makes a similar point about kids and money: if you want them to care about more than money, find ways *not* to fetishise it. Conversely, if you want to demoralise your children, there are easy tricks: 'I think my father understood very quickly that he could prevent me from ever doing something: take the piss out of me while I was doing it.' Abad Sr.'s unconditional support and patience for his son - his refusal to impose any concrete vicarious ambition or existential frustration whatsoever on him - ends up bearing unexpected long-term fruit:

Whenever I stop to consider how limited my talents as a writer are (I almost never get the words to sound as clear as the images in my head; the result always seems like stuttering nonsense compared to what my sisters could do with language), I

remember the trust my father placed in me. I am then able to shrug my shoulders and carry on. If he was able to like even my earliest scribblings, what difference does it make whether I like what I write now? I guess the only reason that I have been able to keep writing all these years and keep delivering material to my publishers is because my father would have enjoyed reading all these pages more than anyone. He won't ever read them. It is one of the saddest paradoxes of my life: almost everything I have written has been for someone who can't read me; even this book is little more than a letter to a ghost.

[...] My father always thought - and I agree and try to copy him - that indulging children is the best form of education. In a notebook (that I found and published after his death under the title *Manual de tolerancia*), he wrote the following: 'If you want your child to be good, make her happy. And if you want her to be better, make her happier. We make them happy so that they can be good, and so that this goodness makes them happier in the long run.' It is possible that no one, not even a parent, can make a child completely happy on her own. What is absolutely certain, however, is that parents can do plenty to make their children miserable. He never even came close to hitting any of us, which by the standards of Medellín in those days made him an *alcahueta*, a softie. If I can criticise him for anything, it is for having displayed an excessive love, although I'm not sure that excess can really exist in this sphere. There are certainly unhealthy loves; but in my house, the following phrase - one of the first I ever uttered - has only ever been repeated in jest by everyone:

'Daddy! Don't adore me so much!'

Many years later, when I read Kafka's *Letter to His Father*, it occurred to me that I could write the same thing in reverse, an exact mirror image. I wasn't afraid of my father; I trusted him wholly. He wasn't a dictator; he let me do as I pleased and make my own mistakes; he didn't make me feel weak, but strong. He didn't think I was dumb; he thought I was a genius. Without having read any of my stories, let alone my books, he told everyone I was a writer, because he knew my secret calling, even if it bothered me from time to time that he took for granted the success of something which was still only a dream. How many

people could say that they would have the same father again if they were born a second time? I can say so.

I now think that the only way to cope well with life - which is hard for all of us sooner or later - is to have received a lot of love from our parents in childhood. Without the exaggerated love my father gave me, I would have been a much less happy person.

Abad Sr.'s parenting style was the opposite of weakness; although he didn't want to tell his children what, specifically, they should do about the world's (and specifically Colombia's) problems, he also refused to euphemise them away. Wondering why his father couldn't just call his medical students to tell them he wouldn't be in class one day, the young Abad received an exasperated lesson in distributive justice: 'What part of the world do you think you're living in? Europe? Japan? Do you think everyone in Medellín lives in posh little neighbourhoods like our warm corner of Laureles? Don't you realise that there are parts of our city where there is not even running water?! How do you expect them to have telephones?!' A recurring theme in this childhood is that you have to know your history:

'My son is going to ask for your forgiveness, and then I am going to assure you that this won't ever happen again,' my father said.

He tightened his grip on my arm, and I muttered 'Sorry señor Manevich' while looking at the ground. 'Louder!' my father insisted, and I said it again: 'I'm sorry, señor Manevich.' Manevich nodded, shook my father's hand and closed the door. This was the only time I was left with a mark on my body, a scratch on my arm, from my father's hand, a tiny scar that I deserve, and of which I am still ashamed, long after learning about the history of the Jewish people from my father. My idiotic, brutal and embarrassing act was not undertaken autonomously, out of some conscious ill will towards Jews, but in a spirit of sheer Groupthink. This is perhaps why, as a grown man, I have tried to avoid all groups, political parties, associations, mass protests, and other protofascist structures that might lead me to stop thinking as an individual and start making decisions based not on any personal reflection or analysis, but emanating from the weakness that comes from the desire to belong to a herd or tribe.

When we got back home from the Manevich visit - as always at the important junctures in my life - my father shut himself in the

library with me. Looking me straight in the eyes, he told me that the world was still full of a plague known as anti-Semitism. He told me what the Nazis had done to the Jews of Europe just 25 years before, and that everything had started, literally, with stones and broken windows during the terrible *Kristallnacht*. He then proceeded to show me some absolutely terrifying photographs of the concentration camps. He told me that his best friend and classmate, Klara Gottman, the first female to graduate in Medicine from the University of Antioquia, was Jewish, and that Jewish minds and hearts had given humanity some of the greatest gifts of science and literature over the last century. Without them, he concluded, there would have been much more suffering and much less happiness in the world. He also reminded me that Jesus himself was Jewish, and that many Colombians - quite possibly our own family - had Jewish blood, because Spain had at one time forced its Jews to convert. I had the duty, he said, to respect all Jews, to treat them as well as any other human being, and perhaps even better than normal, because the Jewish people - along with native American, African and Gypsy populations - had suffered the worst historical injustices in recent centuries. If my friends insisted on committing such barbaric acts, he explained, I would never be allowed to hang out with them again. But my neighbours, who had caught the edge of this episode from the footpath outside, were so terrified of 'the fury of Dr. Abad' that they never dared to throw another stone or shout another insult through the windows of the Manevich family.

Father's moral and historical severity was tempered, however, with extreme indulgence for Hector Jr.'s vocational whims. Hostile for autobiographical reasons to any trace of 'it'll-harden-him-up' machismo, Dr. Abad didn't even want to force his reluctant son to leave the warm bath of kindergarten:

This scene repeated itself so many times that, in the end, my father shut himself in his library with me, looked me in the eye and asked me, deadly serious, if I really didn't want to go to school yet. I told him I didn't, and immediately my start date was put off for a year. It was miraculous, a relief so great that even now, forty years later, I am overcome by a wave of pleasure as I

recall it. Did this 'spoiling' do me any harm? I can assure you that, the following year, I didn't want to stay home a day longer, and that I never missed a day of school or a single class (but for serious illness) in all my years of primary, secondary and tertiary education thereafter. 'Happiness is the best means of education,' my father always said, an optimistic formulation perhaps, but he said it because he really believed it.

There was never any getting mad over stupid things; when the young boy gets lost in the big city after missing the schoolbus and walking miles by himself, Father's reaction is calm and collected: 'If you ever miss the bus again for any reason, even if it's your fault, just ask me and I'll take you. Always. And if one day I can't take you, then you can stay home. It won't matter; you'll get reading in the library and learn more anyway.' What matters above all to Abad Sr. is the growing boy's freedom for knowledge acquisition; there is a mysterious trust that he will one day make the best use of it that he can. Worried that his father was still supporting him economically at the age of 23, Abad conserves his father's reply:

Your concern over your prolonged *economic dependence* reminded me of my Anthropology classes at university, where we learned that the more complex an animal species is, the longer its childhood and adolescence lasts. And I think our 'family species' is complex enough in every possible way. I was also *dependent* until I was 26, but to be honest I was never worried about it. You can rest assured that as long as you keep studying and working as you know how, your 'dependence' will not be any kind of burden for us, but rather a delicious obligation that we will continue to assume with enormous relish and pride.'

As the spectre of sentimentalised hagiography looms, Abad rescues us by plunging us back into his family's messy and concrete historical reality:

Parents don't love their children equally, even if they pretend to; in general, they love the ones who love them most, or in other words, at bottom, the ones who need them the most. Moreover (I would never claim he was perfect), in the preferential treatment he reserved for me, especially in the fact that he spent much

more time in serious conversation and tutoring with me, he committed profound acts of injustice and *machismo* against my sisters.

Nevertheless, the sense of generational progress - of which our author is a conscious beneficiary - is palpable from the beginning of the story:

Neither my uncles nor my grandfather - as far as I can remember - ever kissed their sons, or only very occasionally; it wasn't the custom in the austere and remote mountains of Antioquia, where not even the landscape is soft. My grandfather raised my father without obvious signs of affection, and my uncles behaved in the same way with my male cousins (they were slightly less harsh with the females). My father never forgot the time my grandfather had belted him with the same leather reins of the horse that had just thrown him off: ten thumps 'to see if he'll learn to ride like a man'. Then there were the times he was sent out to the fields at midnight to bring the animals to the house, pointlessly, in order to cure his fear of the dark and 'forge his character'. There was no playtalk or hugging between them, no trace of indulgence; if there was any expression at all of paternal affect, it was reserved for the final day of the year, once the annual fry-up was over and enough schnapps had been consumed to melt even the hardest of hearts. Everything between them remained *Usted*, a ceremonial distance even at the level of language.

[...] Sometimes my grandfather would say: 'This kid is missing a firm hand.' But father would always reply: 'If he needs one, life is always there to provide it - it gives us all one eventually. Life is more than enough to provide him with suffering; I'm not going to help things along.'

If I stop and think about it, regardless of what he thought and said, my grandfather Antonio was no less spoilt than I was. [...] My grandmother Eva had to get his clothes out and place them on the bed in the morning, arranged just as he was to put them on: socks, underpants, shirt, trousers, belt, tie, coat, scarf. And if she ever forgot to do it - or got the ensemble wrong - he would lose the plot and yell at her that he had nothing to wear, for fuck's sake, and what good was a wife anyway who couldn't even sort out his wardrobe?

All the children and grandchildren had a respect for Antonio that was mixed with a stiff dose of terror. [...] The only one who didn't fear him, the only one able to object to his blunt turns of phrase, was my father, perhaps because he was the eldest son, and perhaps because he had been the best at school and had distinguished himself later in his career. Still, there was always a distance between them, as if something had broken down irreparably a long time before. I think that there was a kind of silent protest against my grandfather in the storybook way my father treated me, as well as a determination to break the chain and never treat his own children the way he had been treated. [...] Occasionally] my grandfather would call me - *¡Mijito, venga!* - and would take out a leather coin purse that he carried in his pocket. Sighing, half-closing his mouth, he would weed out the smallest coins and then pick out two or three of them for me, tutting all the while as he did so: 'You can buy something with these, *mijito*. Or better yet, save them.' Grandpa had saved all his life, and accumulated a certain fortune with his cattle ranch in the southwest. [...] When he died, we never found out what had become of his 'thousand steers'; according to my uncles, who were also ranchers, there weren't so many after all.

The deep spiritual miserableness of Abad's grandfather Antonio, all hierarchy and profit and control, is subtly wished into the dustbin of history:

In my grandfather's house it was said that there were two kinds of intelligence: one was 'good', and while it was never explicitly stated that the other was 'bad', the preference for the former was clear: one type of intelligence (which some of my uncles and cousins had in abundance) was good for making money, while 'the other' only made life more complicated.

[...] When we were on our way to [his ranch], I would ask my grandfather which horse I was going to ride, and he would always say the same thing:

'El Toquetoque, *mijito*. El Toquetoque.'

The strange thing was that El Toquetoque was always different, a different colour even. I only realised what my grandfather had meant many years later when my cousin

Bernardo, who was older and much less gullible, explained it to me:

‘You fool! El Toquetoque never existed. What our grandfather was trying to say was that children don’t get to choose, that they would have to ride the horse that he chose for them.’

[...] In reality the only person I missed on the long and lonely nights at the ranch was my father. [...] He would welcome me back home amid laughing and shouting, asphyxiating hugs and a hailstorm of kisses. He would bend down, put his hands on my shoulders, look me in the eyes and ask the question which would wind up my grandfather more than any other:

‘Well, *mi amor*, tell me: did Grandpa behave himself?’

He didn’t ask my grandfather how *I* had behaved; *I* was the final arbiter of these excursions. My response was always the same - ‘Very well!’ - and this would temper my grandfather’s indignation. But once - when I was about seven - I made a gesture with my hand that indicated a mixed review.

‘What happened?’ my father asked in a mixture of surprise and amusement.

‘He made me eat porridge.’

My grandfather let out an indignant sigh, and told me something true, something I have to accept to this day as one of my greatest faults: ‘You ungrateful little shit!’ But my father just laughed, grabbed my hand, escorted me into the library for some quiet reading before taking me out for an icecream (‘so you forget the taste of porridge’). When we got back home, he told my sisters the story, imitating my hand gestures and laughing out loud at the memory of don Antonio’s indignant face. No one ever forced me to eat anything at home, and today I eat everything - except porridge.

### ‘Un médico contra el dolor y el fanatismo’

*My first real contact with suffering was not in my own skin or family, but in the world beyond; it was important to my father that his children knew that not everyone was as happy and fortunate as we were, and he decided that we should see this suffering at an early age. In the Colombia*

*into which I was born, much of this suffering was caused by misfortunes and diseases associated with poverty.*

Dr. Abad's social justice crusade was not without medical cause: 'Without proper nutrition it isn't even true that we are all born equal; these children come into the world at a disadvantage,' he would say of Medellín's slum population. The abstract cognitive abilities which allow educated, middle-class public servants to maintain a sense of collective responsibility in their work were nevertheless buttressed, in Abad Sr.'s case, by searing personal experiences:

Clean water was one of my father's earliest obsessions, and it remained with him throughout his life. [...] Two of my mother's uncles had died of typhoid owing to the poor water quality, my grandmother had been very ill with it, and the father of my grandfather Antonio had also died of typhoid in Jericó. This may have been where my father's obsession with water hygiene came from; it was a question of life or death for him, a way of reducing the sources of suffering and potential death in the world by at least one. But the final straw was the death from typhoid of a university classmate. My father saw him in his last throes and watched him die, a young man with the same professional dreams, and he decided that it should just never happen again in Medellín.

Héctor Abad Sr., however, is no mere utilitarian; his editorial role at the journal *U-235* gave full play to his deeper humanism:

Rereading some of the old editorials in *U-235*, one realises just how profoundly romantic the dreams of this young medical student were. In every volume he takes up a cause more or less impossible for a young *parvenu* from the provinces. But beyond his own worries about fighting for ideals that transcended selfishness (and the deeper strain of egotism that consists in turning oneself into a self-sacrificing romantic hero), *U-235* also opened its pages to other writers striving to carve out a similar path.

One of the most important articles ever published in *U-235* appeared in its very first number. It was signed by the greatest

and perhaps only philosopher our region has ever produced: Fernando González. [...] What González recommended was what my father tried to practise, what he died practising:

‘The true doctor has to travel, observe, get his hands dirty, listen and smell and touch, as well as struggle to educate the next generation, who will give him in advance the name he has to earn: Maestro. Yes, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed graduates, this is not about seeming handsome or charging giant bills or selling a quota of pills... You are called to all four corners to treat the sick, find creative solutions to their problems - in a word, to *serve*.’

The doctor’s vocation, Abad Sr. argues, transcends bourgeois security and status just like any other calling which we could care to take seriously:

In my father’s view, a doctor had to be willing to look into things, to understand the relationship between economics and health, give up being a sorcerer, and become a social activist and scientist. In his graduation thesis, he criticised the magician-physician class: ‘For them, doctors need to keep pretending to be pontiffs, lofty and powerful, offering advice and consolation like divine gifts, extending charity to the needy with a sense of entitlement akin to priests who believe themselves to be descended from Heaven, when all they really know is how to use Greek, at the hour of innocent death, to mask their total impotence.’ He was enraged by those who sought simply to ‘treat’ typhoid instead of trying to prevent it with improved hygiene. He had absolutely no time for ‘miracle cures’ and ‘new injections’ that doctors gave to high-paying clients. He was disgusted by greedy private doctors who merely addressed children’s immediate medical problems instead of seeking to identify the root causes of their poor health, which more often than not were social in nature.

Such whistleblowing was never going to go down well with the private practitioners, but the hatred for Héctor Abad Gomez in Medellín went much further than any professional rivalry or unmasking of trade secrets: this Robin Hood figure was tugging at the rotten reactionary fabric of Colombian society itself:

He always said that clean water and pasteurised milk saved more lives than individual 'curative medicine', but most of his colleagues were only interested in enriching themselves and increasing their prestige as the sorcerers of the tribe. [...] Many doctors hated him for promoting simple population medicine ahead of their privatised clinics, laboratories and specialised studies.

[...] It seemed to the rich [in Medellín] that, with his mania for equality and his social conscience, my father was rousing the rabble for a revolution, [even though he] had trained at a pragmatic American college (the University of Minnesota), had never read Marx, and confused Engels with Hegel. In order to understand better what his enemies accused him of being, he decided to read [Marx and Engels], and not everything he found in them was crazy. To some extent, and gradually over the course of his life, he turned into the leftist social justice warrior of his enemies' nightmares. But by the end of his life, he would describe himself in the following terms: Christian in religion, out of admiration for the figure of Jesus and his focus on the weak; Marxist in economics, because he hated economic exploitation and the excesses of the capitalist class; and liberal in politics, because he couldn't stand dictatorships of any kind, not even of the proletariat.

Abad documents his father's struggles with local university administrators; this means a dull few pages for the reader, but the events recounted were important to the family who lived through them, and hence to Abad's story: Father's chronic job insecurity led Abad Jr.'s mother Cecilia to set up a successful business, not least in order to give her husband the financial security to speak his professional mind.

In dealing with the two very different halves of his family, moreover, the young Abad must make his way between a Scylla of superstition and a Charybdis of chauvinism:

Despite the early attempts at indoctrination [by our mother's family], my sister Sol didn't become a nun - even if she retains a few pious convictions and is prone to sudden bouts of spiritual fervour - but rather followed in our father's footsteps and became an epidemiologist. Listening to her sometimes, I think I am hearing Dad all over again as she delivers the same monologues

about clean drinking water, vaccinations, preventive medicine and basic nutrition, as if history were cyclical and Colombia a country where no one listens and learns.

[...] My father, with the inevitable macho taint of his education, was never going to be happy about my mother going out and working, nor about the physical and mental independence that earning one's own money brings. Still, she got her way in the end, as she always does with her firm and constant character mixed in with an indestructible core of happiness. To this day she remains immune from grudges and lasting bitterness. Resistance against such a character has always been futile.

More will follow on Mum and Dad's relationship; for her part, Mum forced her son into the salutary experience of realising from an early age that she was a discrete human being who could have had a very different life from the one she in fact had:

Since my father never went to mass, it always seemed to me that church was the place where my mother and Dr. Maya committed the terrible sin of saying hello to each other, as if with every wave of their hands a secret sign of all that could have been between them were being communicated. [...] My mother wanted to call [her firm] Faciolince & Hijas in her feminist vein, but my father made her call it Abad Faciolince Limitada so as not to leave the men of the family out, as the women of the family had seemingly intended.

To the extent, however, that we all pick a path between the worldviews of our parents, it is clear that the main enemy in young Abad's *Lebenswelt* is the Catholic superstition of his mother's family and mainstream Colombian society, to which his father is the heroic embodiment of resistance:

A few years after the death of [Mother's father figure] 'the Archbishop', in the period when I was regularly accompanying my father and [the American philanthropist] Dr. Saunders on their rounds as social workers in the worst slums in Medellín, *la Gran Misión* made its grandiose entry into our town. This was another kind of social work, full of piety, a Catholic *reconquista* of Latin

America bankrolled by the Apostle Franco himself. The mission was run by the Spanish Jesuit Padre Huelin - a dark, dry, ascetic figure, wizened in the Ignatian fashion and possessed of a sharp and fanatical intelligence. Huelin's opinions were as merciless and definitive as any from the Inquisition, and he was received in Medellín with great collective enthusiasm, an envoy from the Beyond sent to put an end to Colombian disorder through the sheer force of devotion to the Virgin. [...] The Virgin of Fatima was a supernatural gift sent to lead the masses back to the path of prayer, truth, and Christian resignation - or at least to the Church's tame 'social doctrine'. The appearance of the Blessed Virgin in Portugal - more than poverty, drinking water or agrarian reform - became the hot topic of conversation in our kitchens, sweatshops, hairdressing salons and cafés. [...] The goal of *la Gran Misión* was to spread the cult of the Virgin of Fatima across Latin America and remind the masses how sweet Christian resignation could be, for when all said and done, God would reward the luckless poor in Heaven, so there was no urgent need to pursue material development on Earth. Alongside the Virgin cult, there was also an elaborate and muscular plan to defend the eternal truths of the Catholic faith and bring the moral values of the One True Religion back to life. [...] My mother, [my nanny] Josefa, the maids and my big sisters all went to these processions while my father and I stayed home and slept like saints.

Dr. Antonio Mesa Jaramillo, the Dean of Architecture at the Universidad Pontificia and partner of my father and Dr. Saunders on their slum rounds, was the first to be taken down by this dawn rosary. One of the leading architects in Medellín, Mesa had spent some time in Sweden, and had brought back a passion for contemporary design. As these noisy displays of faith got on his nerves (he was a quiet Christian who wore his faith on the inside), he wrote an article in the liberal evening paper *El Diario* in which he complained about the noise which such processions caused. He proceeded to deliver a furious critique of this Iberian 'Tambourine Christianity'. 'Did Christ yell?' he asked. 'We used to be able to rest, to fall into the abyss - the mystic vacuum of sleep. Spanish Catholicism has now come to try our nerves. This is Fascism: noise, nothingness, gibberish. They confuse the religion of Christ with the Running of the Bulls. These are nothing but

morning orgies, screams from hellish centuries of obscurantism.’ My father shared this view and pointed out, in jest, that the Padre Eterno was not so deaf that one had to shout at Him.

[...] *Ipsa facto*, for the crime of having written this article, monseñor Félix Henao Botero, the Rector of the Universidad Pontificia, removed Dr. Mesa Jaramillo from his post and barred him for all time, amen, from the Faculty. The newspaper *El Colombiano* conducted a survey of opinion among leading Medellín intellectuals on this decision; every single one supported the Rector, and bitterly condemned the article. Only my father, identified by the paper as ‘the known leftist leader’, applauded Mesa Jaramillo’s courage, adding that, although he didn’t agree with him on everything, he would defend to the death any person’s right to free expression, as was proper in a liberal society.

My father, who lived his life at the margins of the Church, was convinced that this sort of backward Spanish Catholicism was bad for the country. Indeed, its defenders had sought to persecute those who fought from within the system for a more open and modern Catholic faith. There had long been good priests (bad in the Church’s eyes) who were sensible and sensitive to the problems of the local community, especially in the slums we visited at weekends. My father always cited the example of Padre Gabriel Díaz, a real servant of God, salt of the earth, and for precisely this reason the bishops and cardinals refused to let him work in peace (they kept moving him all over the place so that he never quite managed to build up a following). Anyone who sought to involve or open the eyes of the poor was considered a dangerous activist who threatened the imperturbable order of Church and society. Years later, when the slums of Medellín turned into hotbeds of murder and playgrounds for thugs, the Church had already lost touch with these communities just as much as the State had. Church authorities had decided that leaving them alone was for the best; abandoned to their lot, [these suburbs] turned into places where bands of young killers grew up like weeds in the undergrowth.

‘Guerras de religión und antídoto ilustrado’

*An eminent German philosopher had announced the death of God a few decades before, but the news had not yet reached the remote mountains of Antioquia. God was in his death throes here too, more than half a century on; a few young people (nihilist poets) had at least started to rebel against him, and were trying to raise scandals which showed how little the Almighty cared about what happened in this valley of tears. For indeed the rays of His anger did not touch the wicked, and the favours of His grace did not rain down exclusively on the good.*

*I felt as if a war between two conceptions of life was being waged within my own family: a terrifying and dying God that one still venerated out of fear, and a benevolent reason which was slowly being established. Or rather, there were the sceptics, who were threatened with hellfire, and the believers, who claimed to be the defenders of the Good, but who in reality believed and acted as if they were driven by the truly malevolent fury. This struggle between old and new convictions, between divinity and humanism, went back a few generations on both sides.*

Abad succeeds, from the relative privilege of the future, in revealing the unconscious dimension of his forebears' various struggles with science and spirituality. The subjective experiences of our loved ones work on us when we are not looking:

In spite of her origins, or perhaps because of them (she never liked her siblings' excessive and too easily scandalised moral rigidity), my grandmother married Alberto Faciolince, a liberal with a sunny disposition and an open mind, with whom she spent four happy years in matrimony before the transport engineer was called to the presence of God (who had not yet died) in a stupid workplace accident in Boyacá. [...] One of Albert's brothers, Wenceslao Faciolince, married his widow. A lawyer with a disagreeable temperament, later a judge in Girardota, Wenceslao said the same thing when he woke up every single morning: 'A man condemned to death is now waking.' My grandmother was never happy with him; he was very different from his brother, both

at the dinner table and in the bedroom, which are the two most important places in any house. I inherited my mother's aversion to lawyers.

[...] I think I can see a certain torment in the consciences of my grandmother Victoria and my mother as well, a result of the contradictions with which they lived. Both were deeply liberal and tolerant for their eras, far from prudish in any respect. They were happy and vital women, of the firm view that one should enjoy oneself before being eaten by the worms and vermin. They were nevertheless obliged to hide these dispositions behind certain outward signs of Catholic devotional piety. [...] At the same time, my grandmother could not free herself entirely from her education. It was as if she was compensating for the excessive liberalism of her temperament with conspicuous outward displays of religiosity and support for the Church. She hoped to keep up appearances, and perhaps even save her soul, by overdoing her rosaries and making ornaments for young priests in poor parishes.

A similar thing happened with my mother, a feminist *ante litteram*, active not in the theory, but in the daily practice of feminism.

Abad Sr. was lucky enough to have other influences: exiled Ecuadorian President José María Velasco Ibarra (1893-1979), for example, was for a time his school Headmaster, and later an important friend. Consider the contrast in messages: for all one may wish to criticise him, superstition and fear of hellfire were no part of Ibarra's modernising program:

You want revolution? Generate one in your own souls first. Love for humanity, for your country, for struggle and undaunted sacrifice: this is revolution. Love for everyday progress and justice: this will allow you to overcome all obstacles and embrace all labours. [...] There is more life in twenty years of Calderonic heroism than sixty years of leisured misery. [...] Aviation is the most sublime metaphor of human spiritual activity. It represents human beings in search of adventure and novelty, of freedom from the vulgar provinciality of the Earth, of momentary communion with the purity of Heaven in order to redescend to Earth purified by contact with the Infinite.

This Enlightenment spirit, however, had violent enemies in mid-century Latin America; long before he was murdered, Hector Abad Sr. had saved himself once before, like Ibarra, by fleeing:

After quitting his job at the Ministry of Health with a furious letter in which he refused (in his typical tone of romantic indignation) to be an accomplice to the murders committed by the conservative regime, my father was lucky enough to receive a job offer from the World Health Organisation in the United States. This lucky refuge saved him from the reactionary zeal which killed five of his best high-school friends and another 400,000 Colombians. From then on he described himself as a 'survivor of the Violencia' even though he had survived by spending the worst years of political persecution and assassination in another country.

For Abad Jr. (born and raised in Colombia), this fundamental cultural conflict filtered down, as all civil wars do, into the veins of his own family. Despite his reluctance to tell his son what to think, Abad Sr. made it clear which side he hoped his son would line up on:

This struggle between the most reactionary Catholic traditionalism, on the one hand, and a Jacobin version of the Enlightenment wedded to the idea of progress via science on the other, played itself out in my own household. [...] I took part in the [Catholic] processions during the day, but my father offset my religious instruction with his words and books after he got home from work. As if my soul itself were at stake, I passed from dark caverns of daytime theology to rays of Enlightenment hope at night. At the age when our most solid beliefs about the world - the ones that stay with us to the end - are formed, I was caught in a storm of contradiction, although my true conquering hero was the solitary knight who, with a teacher's patience and a father's love, explained everything with the beacon of his intelligence, a lighthouse in the surrounding darkness. [...] It was a great relief for me to be able to stop believing in evil spirits and quit fearing either God or the Devil; I was able to concentrate my worries on bacteria and thieves instead.

[...] 'Go to Mass and keep your mother happy, but it's all a load of rubbish,' Dad explained. 'If there really was a God, He

wouldn't want us to worship Him like some vain monarch who forces his subjects to kneel. If He really *were* all-powerful and good, He wouldn't let such terrible things happen in the world.'

Abad Sr. was no anti-Christian; he simply strove to point out to his son that Christians in history had been both victims (e.g. of the Romans) and perpetrators (e.g. with the native populations of Latin America) of terrible, self-justifying imperial violence:

All this to impose the supposed religion of love of one's neighbour, a merciful God and brotherhood among human beings! Out of the macabre dance of history, in which yesterday's victims become today's criminals, I was left with the vague hope, transmitted to me by my father's optimism, that we were finally living in a less barbaric era, and that - nearly two centuries after the French Revolution - humanity might reach a state of real liberty, fraternity and equality on my watch, one in which people could calmly accommodate different religious beliefs without having to kill each other over their disagreements.

Although he told me plenty of shameful stories about crusading Christians and the tortures inflicted on their victims, my father had always maintained a deep respect for Jesus himself, and found nothing objectionable in his teachings except that they were very hard to live up to, not least for recalcitrant and hypocritical Catholics. [...] He liked the Bible, and would sometimes read me excerpts from the Book of Proverbs or Ecclesiastes. Although he recognised that the New Testament was a poor cousin of the Old in terms of its literary qualities, he also saw that the Gospels represented a moral quantum leap over the Pentateuch, where one was still allowed to whip one's slaves to death if they misbehaved.

The antitotalitarian streak which prevented Abad Sr. from unduly capitulating to religious right-wing threats also inoculated him, eventually, against the godless left-wing forms of the same mania for dictatorial control:

When my father was invited to the Soviet Union in the early 1970s, [...] he returned in a state of absolute disillusionment regarding the achievements of 'real socialism'. He was shocked

above all by the intolerable levels of interference by the Soviet police state in the lives of citizens, the unforgivable breaches of individual liberty and human rights.

'We're going to have to come up with a Latin American socialism, because the one over there is terrifying,' he would say, even if it pained him to say so.

He firmly believed that the future of the world would have to be socialist if we ever wanted to overcome the miseries and injustices of our past.

All this required, however, a clear sense of belonging in history, a connection to the heaving totality of human striving far beyond the isolated mountains of Antioquia, and - well - porn:

Amid all my anxieties, my father read entries from the *Colliers Encyclopedia*, which we had in English, or excerpts from the great authors deemed necessary for a 'liberal education', as it said in the Prologue to the Britannica collection of Classic Books, 50 tomes bound in fake leather encompassing the most important monuments of Western culture. In the back of every *Colliers* volume there were chronologies of the major advances in civilisation, from the invention of fire and the wheel through to space rockets and computers; an enormous faith in the power of scientific progress to lead us to a better place was implicit throughout. [...] He also showed me a book which I only found out was important years later: Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art*. When Dad was at the university I would open this book again and again to the same page. [...] At the time, the name of the artist and the painting didn't matter to me, but I now know that it was Giorgione's *La tempesta*, and that it dates from the early 16th Century. The full forms of this woman were at once the most disconcerting and the most appetising thing I had seen up to that point, with the possible exception of the perfect face of my first love at primary school, Nelly Martinez, an angelic young girl I had never been brave enough to address and whose father, if I am not mistaken, was a pilot, which only made her even more ethereal, mysterious and interesting in my eyes.

Abad Sr. was as relaxed and matter-of-fact about the birds and the bees as it was possible to be, which was far more than could be said for the other male role models in young Hector's life:

Our teachers' crusade against sex was 'mission impossible', as we now say.

[...] 'Son, how pure have you been lately?'

I think Padre Mario's mornings and afternoons consisted in the vicarious and inadmissible pleasure of hearing, one after the other, the detailed confessions of our hormone-fuelled longings. This oral pornography always required more details from us, more details, who and how many times and which hand and what time and where. It was obvious that, although he outwardly condemned these revelations, he was morbidly fascinated by them; the only thing our confessions revealed was his own anxious insistence to hear them. [...] Between two mad religious fervours, masculine at school and feminine at home, I had an enlightened evening refuge: my father. [...] Why did he opt to send me to a private religious college when he himself had studied at secular public schools? I think he was forced to accept the fact of the deplorable collapse of public education in Colombia in the 1960s and 1970s. Poorly paid and poorly selected teachers herded into voracious unions which encouraged mediocrity and intellectual sloth. A lack of political will (the ruling elites were happy to send their own children to private schools and let the masses fend for themselves) and a general loss of prestige for teaching as a profession, not to mention background economic and demographic factors, all sent the public school system in Colombia into a spiral of decline from which it has yet to recover.

Mum, however, could turn on a hip-roll when it counted in the young boy's education; the effect of these maternal interventions was always, despite appearances, to reinforce Father's salutary liberality. Seeking entry to the local San Ignacio Jesuit College, Cecilia shows her son how not to be pushed around by wankers: after the Rector, Padre Jorge Hoyos, had delivered an arrogant monologue about the destinies of the three types of applicant to the school (the 'Heaven' of entry, the 'Purgatory' of the waiting list, and the 'Hell' of rejection on the grounds,

for example, of unhealthy left-wing influences in the family home), Mum shows her colours:

As the motive for our visit was obvious (and the number of places in his college limited and much desired), [Royos] had internalised his sense of influence, his identity as a person who could choose, or not, to grant a favour. [...] At a certain point my mother had heard enough, and with the knowing smile she had perhaps learnt from her uncle, the Archbishop, as the deadliest weapon for putting people immediately in their place under the guise of faint sympathy, she changed her tone and her pronouns and, without a moment's hesitation, countered cheerfully:

'Oh Jorge, come on, just put us in Hell already; we're going to apply for another college. Sorry for the bother. Bye.'

She took my hand, turned on a dime and headed straight out of the office without so much as shaking hands or looking back. We never saw the Rector again in our lives.

The dilemma of the young Héctor's education was not perfectly resolved, but the end result was a net win for the forces of Enlightenment:

If I think about it more clearly, I realise that my father was also caught in an internal struggle in those years. He wanted to educate me as a non-believer, or at least to liberate me from all those ghosts of repression and religious guilt that had accompanied him throughout his own education. But at the same time, partly out of respect for my mother, and partly because he thought a religious education would be more rigorous and structured for me in those particular circumstances, he just left it all half-baked, and let things play out as they would. Or perhaps it was just in the spirit of his good nature, which wanted to give everyone a chance before taking sides.

[...] Blindly believing what our parents tell us is a matter of life and death for any young child, both in practical matters and in religious ones. [...] Only those exposed very early in life to the seed of doubt are ever really capable of questioning their own beliefs. One additional difficulty for the point of view which refuses the astrological or 'spiritual' in the mumbo-jumbo sense [...] is the fact that the too-easy consolation of another or

immortal life [...] will always be more attractive, and offer more social cohesion and cheap kinship among strangers, than a sober and disenchanting vision of the world. [...] It is a hard and daily business to avoid the permanent temptation to believe in a junky metaphysics which tells us that our souls will all-too-easily survive our physical death. For if our souls are in any way connected to our minds or unique intelligences, as we feel they must be, then it is easy to demonstrate, either with a sudden accident or the slow abyss of Alzheimer's, that the mind is not only not immortal, but even more mortal than the body is.

### 'Viajes a Oriente'

*During my childhood in the 1960s and 1970s, my father was regularly the target of ideologically motivated missives at the university. [...] During the transition, when the left took over the space that the right had held, I remember that my father began preaching tolerance for all ideas more than ever before. He defended a 'mesoistic' ideal, a word of his own invention which represented an antidogmatic philosophy rooted in the practice of negotiation and an aversion to extreme solutions. He would often repeat the following phrase, which he had probably lifted from somewhere: 'When the Guelphs accuse you of being a Ghibelline, and the Ghibellines accuse you of being a Guelph, well, you're probably right.'*

*He was disgusted when the Marxists converted the old university chapel into a laboratory, and later into a theatre: if the campus had to leave room for secular values, it was equally true that it had been born out of religion. Most of the staff and students, moreover, were believers; respecting a place of worship was not a betrayal of any secular ideal, but would rather have been the very symbol of my father's liberal and tolerant creed, which welcomed all manifestations of the human mind (including religious ones). In this spirit, it would have been good if the university had added a Buddhist temple, a synagogue, a mosque and a Masonic lodge as well. Every kind of*

*fundamentalism was pernicious for him, whether of believers or non-believers.*

*In the early sixties, however, when I was just a toddler, the problem was the extreme religious right, as it would be again in the 1980s.*

These politically imposed 'journeys to the East' brought Abad Sr. to the point of suicide. Abad Jr. skips over why this might have been; missing his family wouldn't seem to explain it (wouldn't he want to stay alive at all costs to see his family again?). More likely, it was the thought of family - and his responsibilities to them - which sustained Abad Sr. through his despair in the face of perceived professional or vocational failure. Although he was able to practise medicine in the East, there was a sense that his life's work ought to have culminated in *national* service of some kind. When your own country is in a mess, you can't really ever run away from it in good conscience; humanism always requires patriotism of a certain kind. We get a sense of why the periods of forced exile in Asia must have been so tough for Abad Sr. when local university authorities pressure him to choose between 'teaching and activities foreign to it': he had chosen to tie the meaning of his life inextricably to *Colombian* public health:

'I must make clear, with all due respect, that I have never understood my role as a university professor to be a renunciation of my rights as a citizen, which include the right to free expression of my ideas in the ways I see fit. [...] The department under my leadership - 'Preventive Medicine' - promises to be of general service to the Colombian people, and is in constant contact with the current realities of this country. I will not isolate myself or my students in an academic ivory tower; on the contrary, it behooves us to go out and touch these problems, not just past and future ones, but the challenges of the present above all. The university ought no longer to be an ethereal island cut off from the anxieties of living, breathing people, an entity oblivious to the environment sustaining it, a mere vehicle for the transmission of methods and privileges which have left the Colombian people stuck with medieval levels of social injustice.

Just yesterday, on horseback, I visited some of our serfs with the President of an American NGO. These people had no water, no land, and no hope. I thought that I might tell my students, and

anyone in the general public who wanted to listen, about all this, and invite them to consider what could be done to improve the lamentable circumstances of these people. If such behaviour is incompatible with a Professor's chair at this university, then do what you may, señor Dean, but I am not going to vacate this chair because of economic or political pressure. I have spent my whole life fighting for the right to express myself in this manner.'

The best parents find ways to channel the awkward incommensurability of their vocational sense of self and their family sentiments - we can't be at the office and the family dinner table at the same time, even though we would die without either - into extra love for the kids. Abad Sr.'s commitment to Colombian public health is not lived as a betrayal by his son; on the contrary, it is a source of extra strength and meaning for him:

There were postcards and letters of course, and the six children all got plenty, individually and as a group, every week. We wrote a lot too, and in the family archive we still have many of his replies, always brimming with love and tenderness and personalised advice, the pain of separation tempered by the constancy of our best sentiments. Returning to the desolation of my bedroom, I would put his cards and letters under my pillow; these lines from Asia, written in my father's voice, were my nocturnal companions and the bedrock of my dreams.

Rereading some of these old letters, and remembering the hundreds of conversations I had with him over the course of my childhood, I have realised that we are not born good: if we are lucky, someone tolerates and channels our innate mediocrity, leading us down paths that may prevent us from harming ourselves and others, and perhaps even inspiring us to elevate our efforts. You don't teach people to be good; you teach them not to be bad. I have never felt like a great person, but there are many times when I could have been bad - cowardly or greedy for example - and have been less so because of my father's influence. More important still, if I am able to enjoy some happiness in my life, behave more or less normally and decently, enjoy a certain amount of maturity, remain optimistic and peace-loving despite all the violence I have witnessed, then it is simply because my father loved me as I was, an amorphous bundle of good and less good things, and showed me the way to get the

best out of the mixed bag I was given. Even if I don't always live up to this best, when I do, my memory of him is always there in the background.

The problem for the young boy left behind, however, 'was that when [Dad] disappeared for months on end, I fell defenceless into the dark Catholicism of my mother's family':

Among so many icons and prayers and sacred images, there was a permanent smell of religion, a candle always burning, a constant terror of sin, and a stuffy convent atmosphere in the family. [... A steady stream of] women came to my grandmother's house to sew, gossip, and say a ton of rosaries. [...] My mother never went to these gatherings, [...] but she left us there, my sisters and me, ostensibly so that the old ladies could look after us, but in reality so that we could see it, have a taste of her own childhood. [...] *Ora pro nobis, ora pro nobis, ora pro nobis*: the incessant repetition of these words produced a reaction in me that, depending on the day, ranged from laughter to anguish, daydreaming, and irresistible and infinite sleepiness - *never* spiritual elevation, and almost always a definitive and irremediable boredom.

I still remember exactly how I felt whenever my father came back from the Philippines or Indonesia after what seemed like years (I later realised there had been a total of around 18 months of orphanhood in various stints). At the airport, waiting for him to arrive, there was fear mixed with euphoria: it was like preparing to meet the sea. [...] At the top of the steps, unmistakable with his dark suit and tie, shiny bald head, thick-framed square glasses and sunny disposition, waving from afar, smiling down from on high, our hero, our father, returning from an important mission in deepest Asia, laden with gifts, [...] laughter, stories, and happiness to rescue me from this sordid world of rosaries, illness, sin, desperate piety, spirits and superstition. I doubt that I have ever felt, or will ever feel, such relief and happiness as when my saviour, my true Saviour, returned.

'Años felices'

The 'happy years' of Abad Jr.'s childhood were framed not only by his father's warmth and intelligence, but above all by the strength of his parents' relationship with each other:

My Mum and Dad were very different in their beliefs and habits, but complementary and often very loving towards one another in our daily lives. There was such an obvious contrast in attitude, personality and education that I was always going to have the riddle of their relationship to solve as I picked out my own path through life. He was agnostic, while she was almost mystical in her Christianity; he hated money, and she hated poverty; he was a materialist in spiritual matters, while she left the spiritual for the world to come, and got on with the business of accumulating material wealth in this one. Somehow, these obvious contradictions didn't put them off, but actually attracted them to each other, no doubt because a common core of human ethicality united them. [...] 'I love him as he is, all of him, all his qualities and shortcomings. I even like the things I disagree with him over,' Mum told us many times.

[...] When they were apart, they spoke fondly of each other, and each taught us to love and appreciate the unique qualities of the other. Some mornings, especially at the ranch in Rionegro, I would find them lying in bed cuddling and talking. My father wrote poems and love songs to her (which the children would have to recite and sing at birthdays), and then there was the same sentimental song at every birthday, which Marta accompanied on the guitar ('I would be a ghost without you; I would be nothing without your love'). At the end of his life, my father had started growing roses for a very simple reason: 'Because my wife, Cecilia, likes roses.' My mother, meanwhile, worked so hard because, at bottom, she wanted to free my father from worrying about money, allow him to go on giving it away, as was his wont, without having to feel guilty about the family. Above all, however, she wanted to offer him the luxury of independent thought at the university; there would be no way that they would force her husband into silence by threatening his family with starvation, as is so common in this country.

Abad Jr. enjoyed a healthy family life; to call it 'ideal' or 'perfect' would be to misunderstand what families are (or could ever be), but he was

lucky enough to be surrounded, in his innermost circle, by good individual people who enjoyed comfortable material circumstances and healthy relations with each other. The second concentric circle in his world, however - the wider Colombian 'community' - was a different story:

For my father, 'charity in the home' made no sense, because there was nothing generous about obeying our most natural and primitive instincts (those who failed this test of spontaneous generosity in their own families were guilty in his eyes of the sin, or 'morbid degeneration', of avarice). It was only 'charity' when the generosity reached those beyond our immediate kin; this was perhaps why he decided to spend or give away so much money and time on idealistic projects with practical consequences, such as teaching the poor to boil their water, improving household sanitation, or building aqueducts and sewers.

But my father's sense of charity, so profound and broad at the level of the human collective, was more theoretical than practical in our daily lives. Whenever one of the *campesinos* near the ranch came to him with some ailment or other, it was always my mother who took care of it [...] while he stayed in his room reading or kneeling in front of his roses.

Abad Sr. was no hands-on house doctor: 'My father never liked the direct practice of medicine; many years later I learned that there had been a traumatic experience during his surgical training.' This clumsiness and general aversion to the concrete was no fit for the one-on-one patient problem-solving where Abad's mother excelled. The beauty of his parents' relationship was that each recognised in the other a necessary supplement to herself; Abad Sr.'s penchant for idealism is doubly admired by his wife and son precisely because he was humble enough to wear the limits of his own character on his sleeve:

He was easily moved, even to the point of tears, and he could be rapt by poetry and music, even religious music. [...] Music was the very thing he turned to, in the privacy of his library, as a balm in his moments of grief and disappointment. He was in general deeply sensual, a lover of beauty - in women and men, nature and manmade objects - and generally couldn't have cared less about merely practical things like the inner workings of labour-

saving devices. [...] The material world, for him, seemed almost not to exist, if not for the minimum conditions of human well-being which obsessed him precisely because they would allow everyone to concentrate on what really mattered, which were the sublime creations of the human spirit. The most beautiful and incredible things of all for him were scientific, artistic, musical and literary breakthroughs.

[...] In general, his thousands of books are full of underlined words and notes in the margins, but almost never beyond the first hundred or so pages, as if he suddenly gave up, or more likely, because something else came along that was even more interesting. He read few novels, but many books of poetry, in Spanish, French and English. [...] He was interested in political philosophy and sociology (Macchiavelli, Marx, Hobbes, Rousseau, Veblen), popular science (Russell, Monod, Huxley, Darwin), philosophy (the Dialogues of Plato in particular, that he would read aloud), [...] but he would jump around from one thing to another, seemingly in dilettantish fashion, but actually because he was happy and deeply involved. [...] One month he was in love with Shakespeare, the next with Antonio Machado or García Lorca, then there would be weeks with Whitman or Tolstoy. He brought tremendous enthusiasm and passion to these relationships, but perhaps this was why he seldom sustained them beyond a couple of months.

More lasting than his private literary enthusiasms, it is the image of Abad Sr.'s marriage which shines even more brightly through the book than his own individual star:

Despite his intellectual struggles in aid of an enlightened and tolerant liberalism, my father knew himself to be the victim and bearer of the squalid education he had received in the remote mountains of his childhood. 'I was born in the 18th Century; I'll be 200 soon,' he would say as he recalled his upbringing. Although he denounced racism with angry arguments, in his daily life he found it difficult to accept that one of his daughters could go on a date with someone loaded with slightly more melanin than we were. Sometimes, in a carefree moment, he would speak with pride of his grandfather's blue eyes, or the red tint in the hair of one of the many young relatives in the family. My mother, by

contrast, was open in her dislike of black and brown people, even if she couldn't say why ('just ugly,' she would admit in sudden outbursts of candor); nevertheless, in her everyday [interracial] dealings, she was much more relaxed, friendly and honest than my father.

[...] I suppose that's why they loved each other so much: my mother saw her *raison d'être* in my father's passionate generosity of thought, while my father saw in her the embodiment of his ideals. Or sometimes just the opposite: my mother would see him act as the Christian she wished she could be, while she solved everyday practical problems like the useful and rational person he would have liked to become.

I am convinced that my father was able to dedicate himself to his bursts of idealism [...] because my mother took care of the household with her keen sense of practicality. [...] The economic security she gave to the family allowed my father to live his ideological and spiritual independence to the end. This harmonious marriage of theory and practice gave us children a concrete image, so rare in this world, of a happy couple. We now know that the only reason to pursue wealth is to be able to conserve and protect freedom of thought at all costs, so that no one can blackmail us in the workplace to prevent us from being what we are.

Mum's business acumen and general 'economic' awareness also provided father and son with the keys to something more:

When my father arrived home from work, he was either in a good mood or a bad one. If the former - as was almost always the case, since he was a happy person - one heard the magnificent sound of his full-bellied laugh, bells of happiness chiming on cue like a clock. He yelled out our names, and we came running to receive his excessive affection, his obscene flattery and drawn-out hugs. If, however, he arrived home in a bad mood, he would sneak into the house and lock himself in the library, where he would proceed to listen to loud classical music and read in his armchair with the door locked. After an hour or two of mysterious alchemy (the library was the room of transformations), the father who had arrived glum and grey would come out happy as Larry. Reading and classical music restored him to his natural state of

happiness, and the laughter and urges to hug us and talk to us returned.

Without ever saying so much as a single word about it, without forcing me to read, and without preaching the virtues of classical music for the soul, I learned, just by observing him, how much music and reading could do for people. Life has given us all a great gift, inexpensive and within reach: books and music. The miserable and grumpy *señor* who arrived home with his head full of the bad influences, tragedies and injustices of reality beyond the front door had recovered the best of himself thanks to the great poets, thinkers and musicians in the library.

Abad Jr. enjoyed years of taking this childhood for granted at his parents' and sisters' side:

Afterwards, or before, or before and after, when they left him in peace for a few good years, my father was able to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to his work. [...] He had made a pragmatic alliance with the conservative political leader Ignacio Vélez Escobar (also a doctor), which mitigated the right's distrust of him (he can't be that bad - i.e. that much of a Communist - if he's willing to work with Ignacio) and also increased the left's confidence in Vélez (he isn't such a reactionary after all if he's working with Héctor). They achieved great things together; my father was able to dedicate himself to his passion - saving lives, improving basic hygiene, drinking water, nutrition, sanitation, housing and so on.

Life rushed by in a happy routine and without obvious milestones; my mother's business was in a phase of rapid expansion, and the days, weeks, months and years blended into each other. The children studied hard at school, passed all their exams with good grades, and Mum and Dad got up every morning and went to work without complaining. In those years I never once heard a single syllable of doubt or reluctance about going to work, because they both felt useful and successful in their jobs, or even 'self-realised', as one had started to say in those days. In the weekends, if there were no public health drives in the slums, we went to Rionegro. Dad and I would go on long walks there; he would recite poems from memory, and then we would sit down in the shade and he would read *Martín Fierro*,

*War and Peace* or Barba Jacob to me. Mum and my sisters played cards or gossiped about boyfriends and pretenders. The whole thing had a harmony that seemed eternal.

The clouds are gathering quickly on the horizon, but Abad wants to burn as much family sunshine as he can into his reader's memory, not least because, without it, the subsequent losses would be less meaningful:

They were years of bliss, as I have said, but happiness is made of such a fickle substance that it can easily dissolve in the memory. When we try to recreate such moments in our minds, the danger of contamination by an excess of sentimentality is omnipresent; I have always thought that such saccharine nostalgia is useless or worse, because it prevents us from living the present as we should. At the same time, later tragedies should not tarnish the happy years, as often happens with people who grow resentful of the world and who, after subsequent injury or injustice, abolish the past, including the happy and full bits. I don't think there is anything, however, that could contaminate those happy years for me.

The son of a happy family carries an acute burden, however, when it comes to living up to all that happiness; it is impossible not to doubt one's own relative ability in the face of such brilliant parents. The young Abad gets a bitter early taste of his own limitations when his sister Sol nearly drowns: she is saved by a stranger as he watches on: 'Although my sister didn't drown, I was always left with the horrible feeling that if life put me in another situation like that, where I suddenly had to prove what I was, I would be a coward all over again.' Dad's warmth and trust have to be repaid after all; this is, in a way (but only in a way), a worse tyranny than hierarchical violence. Dad eventually decides that a young and mollycoddled Héctor needs to face the realities of life; he decides to show him a dead body:

In the long nights that followed, my father felt very guilty about the whole thing. He sat on the ground next to my bed for hours, explaining facts to me while stroking my head and reading me happier stories. Whenever he saw that I was replaying the images in my mind, he said he was sorry. Maybe he thought my life had been too easy and that it was time to show me the

painful, tragic and absurd side of existence as a kind of warning. But if he had been able to guess what was coming, he would have known that these early attempts to vaccinate me against the horrors of the world were completely hopeless.

Abad Sr.'s conviction that life is cruel enough on its own eventually wins out over disciplinarian impulses; still, no parent can be 'perfect' in the long run. The guilt Abad Jr. feels at not living up to his father's faith in him is eventually smashed by the events of life itself; he will have to face them on his own anyway. Whatever rivalry and father-son ego stuff goes on in Abad's adolescence (more on which to come), the aftermath is a sense of inheritance rather than rupture:

The chronology of childhood is not made up of straight lines, but of discrete chunks; memory is a translucent and patchy mirror, or rather, it is composed of timeless shells of memory washed up on a beach of oblivion. I'm not very happy with this sentence and I want to delete it, but I will leave it as it is in order to show, or to remind myself, that I could have gilded the lily much more than I have so far if I had wanted to please a certain type of reader.

I know that many things happened in those years, but trying to remember them all is as hopeless as trying to remember a dream: what is left is a sensation without an image, a history without a story, empty, a vague disposition of the spirit. The images have vanished. The years, the exchanges, the games, even the caresses are gone, and yet suddenly a light will go on in some obscure brain region. It is almost always shame mixed with happiness, and my father's face is almost always there, stuck onto mine like a ghost that we drag around, or that drags us around.

An episode at the local Book Fair illustrates the point: a parent who lets her child make her own mistakes places an enormous burden of psychological responsibility on her, but she will win her back with interest in the end:

The Feria Popular del Libro was being held in Medellín, downtown, and Dad took his two youngest - Sol and me - along with him. When we got there he said that we could each choose a book, whichever one we wanted, and that he would buy it for us

so that we could read and enjoy it together when we got back home. We were going to go through the whole fair once, and then at the end choose the book that had most grabbed our attention.

We ended up going round the whole thing twice. Without putting any real pressure on us, he would pick up books here and there and advertise the virtues in question. - the excitement of the story, the skill of the author, the importance of the theme. My sister followed one of his suggestions and picked out *The Nightingale and the Rose and Other Stories* by Oscar Wilde, a simple but sweet edition with a red rose on the front. I, on the other hand, had fixed immediately on a big, expensive book titled *The Official Rules of All Sports*. Now if there was one thing my father disdained, it was sport, especially team contact sports, which for him were nothing more than a source of injuries and accidents. He tried to dissuade me by saying that such a book was neither literature nor science nor history, and he even stressed, which he never did, how expensive the book was. But all that only made me more determined than ever; biting his tongue, my father did as he had promised, and bought it for me.

When we got home, we went to the library together, and while I was struggling to understand the rules of American football, which I have never been able to grasp, my father began reading Wilde aloud to my sister - *The Nightingale and the Rose*. [...] Eventually I gave up on my book, and went and joined them, head bowed and sorry. My father read to the end of the story with a great deal of emotion. I was almost as miserable as I had been when I had failed to rescue my sister at the beach, and I think my father was almost as disappointed in me. I hid my own book away, out of sight, like a piece of pornography, and I went and read all of Wilde's stories over and over again. From then on I only read literature, science and history, and I still have no idea about the rules of cricket, rugby, American football or judo.

This boomerang ideal of parental tolerance obviously extends to other habits than, er, reading:

'Sorry, didn't realise you were busy.'

Afterwards he didn't say a word about it; it was only weeks later that he told me the following story: 'When I was in the last year of my medical degree, one of our cousins, Luis Guillermo

Echeverri Abad, called me over to his house. After beating around the bush for a while, he finally ended the mystery and told me that he was very worried about his son, Fabito, who only seemed interested, morning, noon and night, in rubbing one out. "You're almost a doctor," my cousin told me. "Talk to him, tell him how dangerous the sin of onanism is." So I went and had a chat with his son,' my father continued, 'and told him not to worry, that there was no harm in it, and that it was perfectly normal; in fact, I said, something would be wrong if he *wasn't* doing it. But I did give him one piece of advice: don't let your father know what you're doing. A while later Luis rang to thank me. I had worked a miracle: his son Fabito had somehow given up the vice of masturbation.' And as if there were no greater moral in the story at all, my father let out one of his huge and unforgettable barrels of laughter.

What I felt in the deepest of all my entrails was that my father had confidence in me, regardless of what I did. He had high hopes for me as well, although he always rushed to remind me that I didn't have to achieve anything specific in life; my mere existence was enough for him, and he just wanted me to be happy. On the one hand this meant a certain weight of responsibility (not to betray his hopes or his trust), but it was a sweet burden, more than bearable. Even my flimsiest achievements were welcomed by him; my mediocre first drafts celebrated; my mad changes of direction welcomed as excellent training; my lack of endurance a genetic defect from which he also suffered; my general ideological and psychological instability as inevitable in a world transforming before our eyes, even as a sign of a mind flexible enough to avoid taking sides prematurely in our kingdom of confusion and indeterminacy.

Not once - not when I changed career four times, not when I was expelled from university for criticising the Pope, not when I was unemployed with a daughter to feed, not when I went to live with my daughter's mother without marrying her - not once did I hear criticism or blame from him, only ever a full acceptance of my life and my independence. This is how he was with all of us I think, not a censor, nitpicker or inquisitor, let alone a jailer or torturer, but always liberal, open, positive, accepting of our faults as innocent mischief.

Even the blurry border between behaviour and identity is policed with high degrees of both clarity and finesse:

My father was perhaps more puritanical in life than in thought, and a bit conservative in spite of himself in family matters, where he was theoretically very liberal. My mother, by contrast, claimed theoretical fidelity to the teachings of the Holy Church, but was often more liberal than my father in practice. [... Still,] I could talk about all these intimate things with my father directly, because he always listened without being outraged; his tone was loving and only mildly didactic, never censorious.

[...] In any case, being gay or straight was the same for him as being right- or left-handed: one cohort was simply more numerous than the other, and the only problem, ultimately manageable, with being gay was a modicum of social discrimination, at least in a country as closed-minded as ours. With equal doses of indifference and pride, discretion and confrontation, and above all with a sense of humour, one could cope with all the hassle. The worst thing in life - far worse than any discrimination - was not to be what one was, and he really stressed the last bit as if it was coming out of the deepest part of himself. The most serious damage one could do to one's personality, he said, was to pretend, hiding what one is and claiming to be what one isn't; this was a recipe for unhappiness and also a matter of bad taste. However it all turned out, he told me, with a wisdom and generosity for which I am still thankful and a calm that still calms me down, I should just let it all unfold.

Eventually, paid by my father (but not suggested by him), I talked through all my anxieties with a psychiatrist (Ricardo José Toro) and a psychoanalyst (Claudia Nieva), both of whom I recall fondly. As I talked with them - or rather, as I let my fears pour out of my brain and into their heads - I found the path of my deepest desires, and whether by chance or boring statistical probability, I ended up in the well-worn grooves of the majority. The result of this whole process, however, was that I no longer feared my darkest desires, and I don't feel tortured or guilt-ridden because of them. If I have felt impulses of attraction for forbidden objects, such as my neighbour's wife, for example, or women much younger than me, or my friends' girlfriends, I haven't experienced these infractions as a torment, but as the stubborn recurrence of

my body's programming, ultimately blind and innocent, as impulses which must be controlled to the extent that they harm others and oneself. Such pragmatism is at odds with any absolute and abstract moral system (such as those of religious dogma) which does not change according to circumstances or opportunities but remains identical, a rigidity which is ultimately harmful both for society and the individual.

### 'La muerte de Marta'

*We were happy because my father had returned from Asia for good and didn't think he would ever have to leave again (the last time he had been depressed almost to the point of suicide). They weren't persecuting him at the university for being a Communist anymore, which was good, although the Communists started to accuse him of being a reactionary (all happy people, for a certain type of Communist, are reactionaries for the simple fact of being happy amid the misery and poverty of others). We were happy because for a time it seemed that the powerbrokers in Medellín trusted my father enough to let him get on with his work; they saw that he was doing good things for public health in the city - vaccinations, aqueducts and so on - and that he was a man of action, not just words.*

The tectonic injustice of our planet will make its irruption into this family idyll; Hector's older sister Marta will die of skin cancer at the age of sixteen, leaving an unsalvageable husk of ruin behind her: 'The star of our family was Marta (Marta Cecilia for my mother; Taché for my father; just Marta for her siblings). It was clear from a very young age that there was none among us as happy or intelligent or full of life (and I can tell you she had fierce competition from her sisters).' Scarcely a performing art at which she did not excel, Marta had the gall to be better than her brother at almost everything:

[Her violin teacher] Matza would look at his instrument during his classes and say to his students: 'This is my intimate enemy.' That

may have been the reason why Marta gave up the violin at eleven; in any case, it seemed to her a sad instrument, one which demanded a total devotion of life and time. It was an instrument made for classical music, she said, and she was very much about seizing the present, which in the late sixties meant rock and roll. She gave up the violin without any regrets, and without any comments from our parents, who never put any pressure on any of us to pursue one vocation or other. She took up guitar and singing lessons.

[...] She read more than I did, and was so quick-witted and brilliant that my father took her as his favourite, even over the only one who had the unearned merit of being male, and even over his eldest daughter, who was always going to have a special place too.

Reflections on family in general, and the Abad family in particular, are occasioned at this point: Marta's death at least lays bare that every member - two parents and six kids - has a discrete and irreplaceable value. Take the third child Eva for example:

There were only four of us left at home [after Maryluz and Clara got married]. Eva Victoria, now the eldest, was the elegant one among us. She spent her days with a classmate, María Emma Mejía, who gave her advice on clothing and makeup and taught her to move like a ballet dancer. Thanks to these early lessons, Eva, or Vicky as we sometimes call her, has the most refined manners among us, a proud gait from a foreign family that is less disdainful than beautifully self-restraining. Still, excessively self-aware, as if out of fear of some original sin, she sometimes lets life pass her by, seeing shortcomings where there are none.

For some unfathomable reason, however, the universe picked out the livewire of the litter for early death. Abad's relationship with his own life is unavoidably changed:

In a certain sense [Marta] made me feel not only younger, which I was, but smaller in every respect. She always said the right thing, came up with some brilliant solution of profound insight, while I struggled to untie the knot of words that formed in my brain long before they ever reached my mouth. But I wasn't unduly bothered

by this inferiority, because I had already given up trying to compete with her orally and begun to take refuge in the slow rhythm of books, and in deeper and more permanent conversations with my father. [...] In order to avoid competing with her in speech or dance or song or homework, I turned into a lone ranger, [...] useless at sport and good for one thing only: writing. And finally there was Sol, still stuck in the fog of early childhood.

[...] Cancer at the age of sixteen, and in a girl like Marta, would cause unbearable pain and existential doubt in anyone who knew and loved such a person. There is a high point in our lives, and I believe it coincides with the end of adolescence. The parents have spent many years carefully shaping the person who will represent and replace them in the world; this person finally starts to fly on her own, and in this case, higher and further than anyone before her. The death of an elderly relative, or even of a newborn baby, hurts less. There is a value curve in our lives, and we reach that peak between the ages of about fifteen and thirty. Then it slowly descends again.

Of course it is even worse for the father than the brother:

My father would lock himself in the library and put on Beethoven and Mahler. Behind the music, which was always loud, I would hear his sobs, his cries of desperation, his cursing of Heaven and himself for his stupidity and uselessness, for not having got her moles removed, for having let her sunbathe in Cartagena, for not having studied more medicine, and whatever else he could think of. Behind that locked door he would unload all his impotence and pain, unable to bear what was upstairs: the apple of his eye wasting away, slipping through the fingers of his medicine while there was nothing he could do about it except offer her morphine. [...] I would sit just outside, like a dog whose owner won't let him in, and I would hear him crying under the door. These cries came from somewhere so deep, as if from the centre of the earth itself. [...] Eventually he would come out, eyes red, feigning a smile to hide his grief, and he would see me and say, 'What are you doing there, my boy?', pick me up, give me a hug, and take me back up to see Marta. He would try to cheer her up by saying that she

would feel better the next day when the drugs started taking effect.

It was a slow and tortuous decline, 'until one day Marta asked for the guitar, tried to sing, and couldn't. With a desperately sad smile in her eyes, she said to my mother: "Mum, I don't think I'll ever sing again." And she didn't, because her voice was gone.' The final phase was marked by the kindness of Abad Sr.'s sister Inés, and by the presence of two loyal boyfriends:

On weekday afternoons, and sometimes in the mornings too, Aunt Inés came to the house. Widowed and generous to a fault, Inés was a mature, kind and discrete woman, affectionate without overdoing it; she had spent her entire life helping others. [...] Marta enjoyed having her by her bedside because she knew how to treat the sick; she didn't talk too much.

[...] My sister explained to Inés, who was a bit shocked at first, that Andrés was her spiritual love, while Hernán Darío was her physical love, and that she liked having both of them. It was as if Marta had read the Platonic dialogue on love that my father read aloud to me one day many years later, the one about the two goddesses of love, Pandemica and Celeste, who are like a single constant in our deepest psyche, in the soul which we all bring to the world when we are born, and thanks to which we are able to understand one another and enjoy all new knowledge as a kind of imperfect memory of something older and bigger.

So much for the author's avowed atheism; *of course* there is something going on behind and through all this human meaning:

Ten months after Marta's death, Maryluz had a daughter, to whom she gave the name Marta Cecilia. As if by magic, this child inherited Marta's spark and light. After his daughter's death, my father poured this immense lost love into his grandchildren, spending long days and nights with them, writing poems and articles about them, and defining his love for them as superior to love itself.

Even in the worst of our own and others' suffering, humour can burst uncontrollably back into our lives:

‘Dad, Dad, come quick,’ Maryluz shouted. ‘Marta’s thrown her liver up:’

And for the first time in months, my father burst out laughing. ‘You can’t throw your liver up, my dear.’

Something about trying to talk about any of this with each other, however, is sacrilegious and wrong:

When Marta entered the final throes Dad gathered his children together in the library and told each of us a separate lie. To Maryluz he said that she, as the eldest and the mother of a newborn herself, was worth more; to Clara he said much the same thing, because she was married and on the way to a family of her own; he wasn’t quite sure what to say to Eva, but he said something about her being more important to Mum than Marta was; then I was the only boy, and Sol was the youngest. In spite of everything, he said, we should consider ourselves fortunate and stay strong: the family had survived, and would prevail. Marta, he told us, would become the stuff of family legend. The whole meeting was a mistake, a series of useless lies and fake comforts, and should never have taken place.

But the death happened anyway, and all each of the Abads could do was deal with it:

Finally, after months of containing themselves, Mum and Dad were able to let themselves go and cry in front of her. And they cried for a very, very long time. If Dad were alive today, he would still cry when thinking of her, just like the rest of us do when we find ourselves replaying the whole thing in our memories. After experiences like this, life can be nothing more than an absurd and meaningless tragedy for which there is no possible consolation.

Abad would not have bothered to write *El olvido que seremos* if he really believed this. The book itself is as much about Marta as Abad Sr.; the ‘two burials’ below are the main milestones on his spiritual journey. The interesting question for the reader at this point is how Abad can honestly

integrate Marta's death into a positive vision of the universe, as he obviously does for the book to exist in the first place.

'Dos entierros'

*At a certain point in the sermon my father whispered to me, 'I can't take any more of this,' and as Monseñor explained why he was so happy (I felt that perhaps he really was happy to see us all suffering like this), my father and I went out into the vestibule of the church (Santa Teresita in Laureles), and stood there for a minute in the sunshine, under the blue indifference of Heaven. [...] During communion they started singing some of Marta's favourite songs, and we went back in to feel the only consolation there is when one is sad, and that is to feel sadder still.*

*Marta's devastating death was the turning point in the life of our family; we were never the same again. I would say that none of us was able to feel fully happy in the old way, not even for the odd moment, because just as we were beginning to feel like our old selves, we realised that something - someone - was missing, that we weren't complete, and that we had no right to our old happiness under such circumstances. Even a perfect summer sky hides black clouds somewhere on the horizon.*

*I found out years later that Mum and Dad never had sex again after Marta's illness, precisely because such perfect bliss was now forever impossible for them. They remained very loving towards one another, and they would stay in bed together on Sunday mornings; we could see from their warm fraternal hugs that they still loved each other, but no perfect intimacy was possible for them anymore.*

Palpably unsure where his story is going or why, but sensing that neither the scientific nor the philosophical mode will cut it, Abad helps himself to the novelistic freedom for totality which permits a thorough examination of the gaping entrails of his own family:

‘Marta would have been fifty today.’

Mum still keeps count. [...] I still remember the gold leaf Dad commissioned as a thank-you gift for the doctors and nurses who had looked after Marta at the end. The following was engraved on it: ‘Death does not take away those we love. On the contrary, it fixes them in our hearts. Death is not the enemy of love; life is the enemy of love.’ [...] Mum and I celebrated Marta’s 50th with no candles and no icecream, the birthday of a girl that my father, coping in his own way, told himself had never existed, and who had been nothing more than a beautiful story.

The funeral of Abad Sr. - ‘Christian in religion, Marxist in economics, and liberal in politics’ - is another occasion for reflection on the difference between earthly and eternal ‘fame’: when a person dies, she survives not only in the memory of those who knew her or in the archive of her endeavours, but also, in a certain sense, she feeds herself invisibly back into the pool that nourishes the rest of us. I am not ‘improved’ as such by my contact with the story of Héctor Abad Gomez, of whom I had never heard until this year; I am, however, brought closer to an understanding of myself which predates my contact with the story. I become both more of what I already unconsciously was, and yet also something I would never consciously have been but for the efforts of this Colombian (a country in which I have never set foot) and his son, the author. Eventually no one at all will know the name ‘Hector Abad Gomez’; his entire story will fail to be passed down. I was in no relevant sense ‘destined’ to hear it, but a mixture of luck and effort from a large number of people threw it into my path at this time. ‘Which wise person would prefer to be a penniless disgraced exile rather than stay in her own city and lead there a flourishing life, mighty in wealth, revered in honour and strong in power?’ Boethius’s Prisoner asks rhetorically in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, as if baiting his reader to dissent. Abad knows there is more going on behind his father’s death than the grief of those who survived. His uncle’s speech at his father’s funeral proves it:

He spoke about his brother’s sacrifice, his willingness to die for his convictions, the profound compassion which led him to refuse injustice. Convinced in what he was saying, he said that such a just man would not be condemned in the Beyond, as he had been by some in this world. There were no bullshit Hallelujahs

this time, only well-considered phrases which sought to express what the congregation was feeling, which was a profound sadness. This burst of courage and rebellion from a member of Opus Dei is something for which I will always be grateful to my uncle Javier. My mother and sisters had the consolation of supernatural justice to fall back on, a final payment for good works rendered, and a chance of another meeting somewhere in the sky. I never felt this consolation, and seem incapable of feeling it, but I accept it as part of the family furniture, as much a part of us as our recipes or our pride at what our father achieved in the world.

### 'Años de lucha'

Abad Jr. is angry precisely because his father was denied years of productive life by the thugs who murdered him. There is no reasoning or 'consoling' this injustice away: it's just a fucking net loss for the universe. And yet one can take the view that the book and the film and the whole associated publicity train are a kind of expression of a law of conservation of spiritual energy; Abad Jr. is making up for the loss of his father with his literary activity, just as Abad Sr. channeled Marta's death into his family life and social work. Part of this inherited energy is diverted, in Abad Jr.'s case, into doubt about how best to use it:

I'm not sure at what point the thirst for justice passes into the dangerous territory of temptation to self-indulgent martyrdom. Elevated moral sentiments run the risk of overflowing and collapsing into a frenetic activism which has more to do with vanity than anything else. If optimism and faith in the potential goodness of human beings is not tempered by the scepticism of those who also know how inescapably pathetic certain of our native tendencies are, then utopian thinking results. Such Savanarolas and Robespierres can end up doing far more harm than good. Marcus Aurelius himself said of the Christians in his empire - 'wackos of the Cross' - that they were wrong to go so far in their defence of truth and justice as to glorify sacrifice.

I am certain that my father would never have given in to the siren's call of martyrdom before Marta's death; afterwards, however, no price seemed too high in comparison. After a

calamity on such a scale, all other problems assume a relative status; no one could possibly care ever again if she lost a finger or had her car stolen. When one carries an infinite sadness around inside oneself, death assumes trivial proportions. Even if one falls short of opting for suicide, the option of being killed by someone else, especially if it's for a just cause, suddenly looks much more attractive. I think there are episodes in our private lives that prove decisive for our professional destiny.

Those bequeathed mere kill-or-be-killed tribal animality rather than sparks of education and enlightenment, however, will lack the energy to change the structure of the world; in contrast to a man like Héctor Abad Gómez, the common denominator among vengeful and resentful 'terrorists' (as Joseph Conrad showed a century ago in *The Secret Agent*) is spiritual *laziness*:

It has always seemed to me that ruthless people lack literary imaginations - this capacity for putting ourselves in foreign situations that we enhance by reading great novels. Such people are unable to grasp that life can turn on its head from one moment to the next: we could suddenly find ourselves the victims of pain, poverty, oppression, injustice, and even, worst of all, torture. If my father was so quick to understand and act to mitigate the pain of doña Fabiola for her missing child, it was because he was able to imagine very clearly what it would be like to be in such a situation, with one of his children in this foggy realm from which no news, no word, not even the certainty and resignation of a recovered dead body would emanate. The 'disappearing' of a loved one is as grave a crime as an open kidnapping or assassination, and in some ways worse, because it offers only uncertainty, fear, and vague hope, nothing concrete at all.

After my sister's death, my father's commitment to his social causes grew stronger and more focused. His passion for justice increased, while the precautions he took for his own security dwindled to none. This process of abandonment only quickened when my younger sister and I started university, because, if I am not mistaken, he was finally able to tell himself that his material obligations as a father were now more or less behind him. 'If I get killed for what I'm doing, wouldn't it be a beautiful way to go out?'

he asked rhetorically when one of our relatives pointed out the extreme danger to which he was exposing himself by so publicly denouncing the torture, kidnapping, assassination and arbitrary arrest raging in Colombia in those years, and defending instead a culture of respect for human rights. But he refused to give up his crusade because of our fears for his safety; he was sure that he was doing what he was supposed to be doing. 'You have to think very highly of yourself to be ready to sacrifice yourself,' as Leopardi famously put it.

Marta's energy and wit are in some sense recycled into *El olvido que seremos*; neither Abad Sr.'s sacrifice nor his son's book about it would have existed without her and her tragic destiny. This is an empirical observation, not a moral judgment of anyone. But it is clear that literature like this is a necessary threat to the totalitarian worst in us, a tribal inheritance which, while inherently 'lazy', is innately powerful in both its leftist and rightist forms:

Academic freedom had disappeared; professors were ideologically monitored, their curricula controlled through unannounced inspection visits to their classrooms and lecture halls.

[...] The Ministry of Education made the mistake of expanding university quotas to the point of populist excess, and the universities, in order to cope with the massive influx of students, took on an army of underqualified teaching staff, many of whom came from the anti-academic hard left. Such people soon began regarding old stalwarts like Carlos Gaviria and my father as decadent bourgeois reactionaries for the simple fact that they defended academic rigour and did not openly support the extermination of the capitalist class. In the space of a few years, Colombia has passed from one extreme to the other, and the public universities collapsed because the best people decided to go private rather than stay and deal with these new extremists, who represented the worst and most violent strand of leftist dogma.

Abad Sr. was left to struggle, minus his liveliest daughter, in this miserable social climate.

### 'Accidentes de carretera'

Abad Jr., meanwhile, was growing up fast, confronting his own self-induced chaos on the way:

I jumped out of the car and bent down over her. 'We have to get her to the hospital!' I shouted. 'Help me get her into the car!' But no one helped, not even my cousin Jaime, who was still reeling from the impact. [...] The woman was in shock, and they rushed her into a resuscitation room. [...] It was a nightmare; I felt like I was losing my mind; I wouldn't have coped if I had killed someone.

Fearing the worst for both himself and the innocent victim of his speeding, Abad checks himself into a 'facility' before begging his family to get him out:

There is no better place to go crazy than a madhouse. The healthiest and sanest person will only last a few days - what am I saying, a few hours. The patients in the other rooms came to hear my screams and witness my delirium. They even took the piss: 'This one's in a real bad way,' they said. 'Calm him down, calm him down.' They started clapping for the nurses in unison, as if the whole thing were some sort of Andalucian flamenco performance.

Luckily the whole thing ends well for everyone, even if an appalling portrait is left hanging behind:

Doña Betsabé was already on the mend and feeling much better, though it took her months to make a full recovery. My mother offered portering and cleaning jobs to her unemployed children, while my father opened doors for others. They were very poor, and Doña Betsabé told us something terrible, a miserable reflection on our society: 'This accident has been a benediction for me. I was coming out of Mass and praying that my children would find work. But I had to pay for my sins first. I paid for my sins, and God gave my children work. The whole thing was a benediction.' I went to visit her once, and then never again. When

I saw her all I could see was her ghost, her dead body, the body that had barely flinched as we got to the hospital. What if she had died that day? I don't even want to imagine. I'd probably still be in that madhouse.

Father and son get away after all this and spend nine months together in Mexico City, Dad on vague diplomatic duty and Junior recovering via a 'literary working holiday':

I don't think I've ever read as much as I did in those months in Mexico, during those long mornings in Ivan [Restrepo]'s magnificent library. [...] A few times I joined the 'Ateneo de Angangueo' lunch circle at Ivan's house. [...] These lunches lasted all afternoon, and consisted of a thousand small plates of the finest local fare. [...] I remember that Fernando Benítez always said goodbye in the same choreographed way: 'Young man, may you be very happy.' This always gave me a delayed laugh when I got out to the street. [...] The people I really wanted to meet, however, were Juan Rulfo, who was quiet and didn't go out much; García Márquez, who wasn't part of this set; and Octavio Paz, whose poetry and essays I had been devouring in those months. Like a pope, however, Paz would only see people by appointment at three months notice. Then there was a younger poet, who blew my mind at the time and whom I still admire, José Emilio Pacheco, but he spent half his time in the US. None of these four was part of the 'Ateneo de Angangueo', which was for people who were happier than they were famous, people who took themselves and everything else a little less seriously. It may be that one has to choose in life between being a true celebrity, like Paz, and being truly happy, like Benítez; if so, then I hope we would all have the wisdom to choose the latter, like my friend Iván Restrepo or Carlos Monsiváis or Princess [Elena] Poniatowska, who are all people at least as content as they are well-known.

The overall effect of this gap year in Mexico was both to sharpen the young man's vocational tools and vocational will, on the one hand, and to give him the gumption to begin the burdensome process of inheriting the family's generational mantle from his father:

I was in Mexico City for a total of nine months. My father stayed a couple of months longer, a year in total. The thing I want to emphasise is that he let me treat this whole time as a kind of sabbatical, without any kind of academic or professional pressure, just reading and enjoying life and accompanying him on the odd diplomatic engagement. Among many other books, I remember reading Proust's *A la recherche*, all seven volumes, with a passion and concentration I have never matched since in any literary endeavour. The February, March and April afternoons I spent reading Proust in Mexico City were the defining reading experience of my life. That was the point at which I confirmed to myself that I wanted to do exactly the same thing as Proust: spend the main hours of my life reading, writing, and complaining about asthma as an excuse for not going out. [...] If I have never reread him, it is for fear of spoiling the perfect memory of those happy months.

My father had given me permission not to do anything in particular; it was enough for him that I was reading seriously and experiencing life in a big city, with its cinemas and concerts and museums. The one thing I did do was sign up for a series of literary workshops at the Casa del Lago: poetry with David Huerta, short stories with José de la Colina, and theatre with a teacher whose name now escapes me. I also went to a smaller workshop one night a week at the Casa de España with a great Central American teacher with whom I later lost touch: Felipe San José. He was a kind of disciple of Rubén Darío, fantastically well read, and an offerer of generous support to all his students. He was my first real gateway into the Spanish Siglo de Oro and contemporary Spanish writing.

Halfway through the year my grandfather Antonio, deeply worried, wrote to my father. He had heard that I was spending my days in a kind of Proustian idyll, stretched out on a bed or couch reading interminable novels and sipping wine by the caskload like a bachelor withdrawn from the world, an Oblomov of the tropics, or some other 19th-century dandy faggot. Nothing could have been more distressing for him as a form of character education, and from the perspective of a hard-working and pragmatic cattle rancher (and even in my own view as I look back on it), I have to recognise that I was going half wrong, and that my grandfather was half right. But my father, as he always did with me, just

laughed as he read Grandad's letter and said that the old man didn't understand that I was giving myself a university education. Where did he find all this trust in me despite my obvious and shocking symptoms of indolence?

[...] Another very clever *mestizo* student, who was writing a historical novel full of poetry on the first contact with Hernán Cortés, told me on the last day of classes before my return to Colombia: 'Hector, I'm deadly serious: don't ever give up writing.' This seemed to me a strange way of putting it; it was as if he were asking me to give up existing. For even though it took me another twelve years to publish my first book, I already knew what I was, and what I was going to do with my life. In Mexico I wrote the short story that, a year later, won a national prize back home: 'Stones of Silence'. I owe José de la Colina and Felipe San José for their comments, which made the story much less terrible. And I can also thank David Huerta, son of Efraín, for helping me to give up poetry, for even though I thought I was most gifted there, I realised that I ultimately have nothing to offer: instead of trying to publish it separately, I now hide bits and pieces of my poetry inside my prose.

[...] But this year of excessive intimacy with my father was also the year in which I realised that I had to separate myself from him, kill him as it were. I don't want this to sound too Freudian, but it was quite literal at the time. Such a perfect father can become unbearable. Even if everything you do wins his approval (or rather, precisely *because* everything you do wins his approval), there comes a point where, by some vague and mad unconscious reasoning, you get sick of having this god tell you how great you are, always going along with you, always letting you have it your way. It is almost as if, at the very end of adolescence, one needs an antagonist rather than just an ally. But it was impossible to fight with my father; the only way to man up to him was to make him go away, perhaps even killing myself in the process.

In reality I only managed to liberate myself from him, from his excessive love and his perfect treatment of me, and of my correspondingly excessive love for him, when I went to live in Italy with Barbara, my first wife and mother of my two children, in 1982. But the climax of my total dependency and communion came in Mexico in 1978, when, as I say, I wanted to kill him and

kill myself in the process. I will tell the story briefly even though I don't like to remember it; it was all so confused, imprecise and violent, but nothing came of it in the end.

Abad recounts the story of his mad speeding on the open road in Mexico - the pent-up frustration of God knows what exactly as his father lay asleep in the passenger's seat next to him - until he sees goats and instinctively slams on the brakes: 'My father woke up in shock, barely saved by his seatbelt, and without saying a word seemed to have understood the whole thing. He made me give up the keys, and although he was a terrible driver, drove all the way back to Mexico City at fifty kilometres an hour without pronouncing a single syllable the whole afternoon.' It is to Abad's immense credit that he recounts these and other shameful incidents in such detail, refusing to pretend them away.

### 'Derecho y humano'

Recoiling in horror at his impulse to murder someone so wonderful, Abad goes back to singing the old man's praises by showing how Abad Sr. achieved his own mature compromise with himself and the world around him:

My father, unlike other descendents of Spanish stoicism, cried without shame in the vein of Homeric heroes. [...] In his second book, *Letters from Asia*, he explained that he had become a university lecturer too early, and that the great teachers only reach their full height after many years of maturation and introspection. 'How many mistakes,' he wrote, 'do those of us make who start teaching too soon, before we have achieved adult spirithood and the tranquillity of judgment that accumulated experience and knowledge alone can provide in the second half of life? Mere knowledge is not wisdom. Nor is wisdom on its own enough. We need knowledge, wisdom *and* goodness if we want to teach other human beings. Those of us who became teachers too early in life should humbly apologise to all the students we harmed.'

Now, at the precise point at which he was reaching the stage of his life where vanity and ambition had waned, and where he

was guided less by raw passion than a mature sobriety of will earned through many trials and setbacks, they kicked him out. Teaching for him had nothing to do with the competitive streak of sport, nor with the beauty and impetus of youth, but was associated with maturity and serene and secure knowledge, which are more frequently enjoyed in later life. Those who wish to retire from teaching at the appointed age should do so, but if a professor has not lost her marbles, and on the contrary has finally reached the apex of maturity and serenity from which she has a panorama over everything that matters most to her profession, and if as a bonus the students like her, then barring her from teaching is a criminal waste of human talent. In Europe, Asia and the United States, they don't typically force professors to retire, but rather begin to look after them more by reducing their academic load, thereby liberating them to accompany senior students and younger academic staff in their professional growth.

[...] This forced retirement caused a sharp but short-lived pain. At a farewell with his closest students, he said very simply that he had decided to live more slowly, to read more, spend more time with his grandchildren and generally dedicate himself to 'cultivating roses and friendships'. And this is what he did. He spent three or four days a week - Thursday to Sunday - on the farm in Rionegro. The mornings there were devoted to his rose garden; [...] in the afternoons he read books and listened to classical music, also taking time here and there to prepare his radio program (*Thinking Out Loud*) and various newspaper articles. In the evenings he would visit his best friend, the poet Carlos Castro Saavedra; returning to his bedroom, he would read into the night until he fell asleep. The rose garden gradually filled up with the most exotic colours; the whole thing took on a real and symbolic value for all of us. In his final interview, given in August 1987, he referred to his rose garden when asked about his 'rebellion': 'I don't ever want to lose this streak. I've never lived on my knees for anyone: I only kneel before my roses, and I only get my hands dirty with the earth of my own garden.'

Many friends and relatives have vivid memories of my father's rose garden in Rionegro, which still exists in less kempt form. He didn't give his flowers away to everyone, only to those he thought deserved them; sometimes he even openly refused people, with a dark smile on his face and a silence that only we

understood. Those enjoying his favour, however, were offered detailed descriptions of his art of cultivation.

The garden, a metaphor neither of Eden nor of our so-called fallen state, functions as an incubator of beauty in a world we can never master:

He would stop in front of the only thing in the garden that never flowered - a camellia bush - and ask Heaven why, as if it were a personal affront to him. Only once, when he was in the middle of just such a complaint with my sister-in-law Monica, did he suddenly see a small white camellia poking its head out. He lopped it off and gave it to her, intrigued and delighted by this single exception in so many years of life.

He would come back to Medellín on Monday mornings, and it was in these years, freed from the stress of office routine, that he dedicated all the time left over from cultivating roses and friendships to the defence of human rights, which also seemed to him to be the most pressing public health issue in Colombia at that stage. He wanted to apply his dreams of justice to the practice of that which he considered most urgent.

He loved gardening in part because it symbolised a return to the family's rural origins. But the whole time he spent tied to the land, he was also dreaming of medical reform. He wanted to train a new type of doctor, a *poliatrist* as he called it, a healer of the *polis*. This new 'social doctor' would not treat patients' symptoms one appointment at a time, but would rather intervene directly in the root causes of illness.

The old proverb 'A teacher never knows where his influence stops' assumes metaphysical proportions in *El olvido que seremos*; Abad wants to trace his father's local influence in Medellín in part to point beyond it to the Platonic realm in which it is now mysteriously housed:

My sister Sol, who in those years had taken up medical studies at a private university, remembers that my father invited her and all her classmates to join a 'poliatry' course he was organising at Bellavista Prison. My sister tried to sell the idea to her classmates, but they refused. One of them, now a cardiologist, stood up and, in the most hurtful and aggressive tone he could muster, shouted back: 'We have nothing to learn in a prison!' As

he was the leader of the gang, the others went along with him. The only one from that distinguished cohort who ended up going was Sol herself, and she remembers the experience as the one where she learnt the most medicine in the shortest time, though medicine of a particular kind, social in nature, in direct contact with the public and private failures which were the causes of prisoners' pain.

My father didn't offer answers during these excursions, as one expects from such medical training, but preferred the Socratic method of teaching through questions. The students were disoriented, and some even complained: what was the use of a professor who asked one question after another instead of spoonfeeding answers?

The real target of Abad's book is not God or the unfair universe which makes everything possible, but the sad excuse for a 'culture', unable to ask the right questions, which legitimised his father's murder:

The most dangerous thing for human health here was neither hunger nor diarrhea nor malaria nor any other virus or bacterium or cancer or respiratory illness or heart disease. The thing causing the most deaths in the country was other human beings. By the mid-eighties, this plague most often took the form of political violence. The State, and the Army in particular, aided by mercenary death squads and other paramilitary forces who acted with the support of local Police, were exterminating political opponents under the guise of 'saving the country from the threat of Communism'.

[...] Vaccinations and hygiene were no use in combatting this particular plague: the only things one could do were talk, write, denounce, and explain - demand, in short, that the State do something to contain the epidemic since it enjoyed a preponderance of power and weaponry. In order to do so, however, the State had to act within the rules of the democratic game and avoid the arrogance and cruelty of the criminals it claimed to be fighting. In his last book before his assassination, *Theory and Practice of Public Health*, my father stressed that any freedom of thought and expression we now enjoyed had been 'hard won by thousands of individual human beings across history'. The historical record shows that the conservation of this

freedom requires constant effort, occasional fighting, and sometimes even the greatest sacrifice. Many teachers here and everywhere else in the world have been prepared for all of this, and this will remain so in the future.’ He finished with a sentence that remains as valid today as when it was written:

‘The alternatives are becoming clearer and clearer: either we learn to behave intelligently, respecting nature but also accelerating as much as we can the fledgling process of *humanisation* our culture has undertaken, or the quality of human life will deteriorate.’

In seeking to triumph over the forces tearing Colombia apart in the 1980s, Abad Sr. ‘fought against this new plague of violence with the only weapon he had: the freedom of thought and expression, exercised in peaceful protest against rights violators of all stripes. [...] He denounced every massacre, every kidnapping, every disappearance, every act of torture.’ Accused of siding with the guerrillas against the government, the father is defended by the son in the following terms: ‘If one rereads his articles today, one sees that he denounced all kidnappings and indiscriminate acts of violence with equal force and desperation. But it seemed worse to him that the State, which claimed to respect and uphold the law, sank to the level of dirty war or financed the paramilitary forces which did so.’ It was the culture as a whole, however, which was rotten; Abad Sr.’s murder confirmed that the last hint of dignity in the air, a vague and ancient aroma which had protected him for decades, was now gone:

In the months prior to his assassination, at his beloved University of Antioquia alone, six students and two staff had been murdered. One would think that such crimes would have stirred the local citizenry, but no; life continued on as normal for everyone except this ‘crazy’ bald professor, this sweet old pensioner, this blowhard with a juvenile passion for justice. ‘They are exterminating the intelligentsia, making the most socially engaged students disappear, killing political opponents, taking out the best priests, lopping off the heads of popular movements in our poorer *barrios*. The State wants to present every concerned or thinking citizen as a Communist and a mortal threat.’

[...] As he was the least conservative among the older generation and was only becoming more liberal and

confrontational by the day, the roles in the household gradually reversed; we, his children, were the ones telling him not to go out, not to protest, not to publish his broadsides, because there was a strong whiff of death in the air for such gallantry.

[...] Only once, in a bar while on holiday near Magangué, did one of my nephews unwittingly hear a confession from the paramilitary group responsible for my father's death. It was the anniversary of the murder, and a photograph of my father appeared briefly on the television news. 'That fuck was one of our first kills in Medellín,' he overheard one of them saying. 'He was a very dangerous Communist; we have to keep an eye on his son too, because he's on the same path.' My nephew, mortified, didn't dare mention that they were talking about his uncle and grandfather.

[...] They had never really touched my father [before the murder], and the odd time they *had* arrested him, they no sooner let him go, as if shamed into doing so by his evident dignity and innocence. Always immaculate and impeccably dressed in suit and tie, always open and honest and smiling, his saving graces were his reputation as a teacher, his pleasant manner, and his immense capacity for human sympathy. He risked a great deal, but most of us just thought: they'll never really do anything to old Dr. Abad; everyone knows he means well (and after all, he'd been doing the same thing for fifteen years and no one had laid a hand on him). The Government always called him in to negotiate when things were desperate: when a church, consulate or factory was occupied, or when a hostage negotiation was taking place. All parties to the conflict trusted his word.

Cultures, however, can slide off cliffs; Abad Sr. identifies the root of Colombia's manifold problems in a local newspaper article, 'In Defence of Life and the University', published just days before his murder in August 1987:

'The university is in the sights of those who don't want anybody to question anything, and who want us all to think the same things. Such zealots view all knowledge and critical thought as socially dangerous, and they therefore wield the weapon of terror to throw the critical interlocutor off balance and plunge her into desperate submission as an example to others.'

Rereading his articles, one almost always finds a measured and tolerant voice, a million miles from the dogmatism which characterised the left in those years. There remain, however, odd phrases here and there which may seem optimistic by today's standards, or overly robust in their assertion of leftist social policy. As I read him now, I myself want to critique some of his arguments, and have done so many times, at least in my head. Once, however, I found a quotation, ostensibly from Brecht, which he had underlined over and over, and which reflects the context in which he was trying to operate: 'We went on changing the country like we were changing shoes, desperate whenever there was injustice without corresponding indignation. The hatred of base conditions also deforms people; anger at injustice makes us lose our voices with frustration. One day, when human beings finally become friendly with one another, please look back generously on us.'

The phrase 'the pen is mightier than the sword' is not a law of nature; it must be proven anew by the creative efforts of every generation. Abad Sr. did what he could, but was unable to prevail; his son wants to build on what his father started:

'I accuse the interrogators of the Batallón Bomboná in Medellín of being pitiless and soulless torturers, devoid of human compassion, trained psychopaths and criminals with official salaries, paid therefore by Colombian citizens themselves to reduce political prisoners and trade union leaders of all stripes to conditions incompatible with human dignity. They have initiated an entire smorgasbord of traumas, many of them beyond remedy, and many others which will have lifelong consequences for their victims.

'I formally and publicly denounce the methods of the so-called *mandos medios*, their systematic violation of the human rights of hundreds of our co-citizens.

'And I accuse the Army High Command and the political leaders of this country who read this article of criminal complicity if they do not act immediately to bring this situation under control, a state of affairs which offends the most elementary sense of human solidarity that all Colombians not in thrall to the madness and fanaticism of the day must share.'

Brave and specific denunciations like this induced rage in the Army and some sections of the government, but no concrete action. [...] Once, my sister Vicky, who moved in the highest and wealthiest circles in the city, told our father: 'Dad, no one likes you here in Medellín.' He replied: 'My love, there are plenty of people here who think I'm alright, but they don't move in your orbit. One day I'll take you to meet them.' Vicky says that the day of Dad's funeral, when she saw thousands of people marching with white scarves, dangling them from windows and arriving all the way to the cemetery, she realised that Dad had finally arranged the meeting.

It would take a long time to transcribe the dozens of articles my father wrote in protest against the violence, many of them using the first and last names of the perpetrators. [...] He did it for years, though at times it seemed to him as if they were cries in the desert. [...] He was most radical in his quest for a society which was fairer and less generally odious than the classist and discriminatory Colombian society of his day. He didn't preach violent revolution, but rather a radical change in the priorities of the State: without giving citizens at least a certain equality of opportunity and ensuring a worthy minimum level of subsistence for all, there would be more violence, more delinquency, more armed gangs and more guerrilla activity.

'A human society which aspires to be *just* is of necessity required to provide the same physical, cultural and social opportunities to all its component parts. If it does not do so, it creates artificial inequalities. The physical, cultural and social environments in which rich and poor children in Colombia are raised are far from equal. The rich are born into clean houses with good servants, a library at home, and opportunities for recreation and music. The poor are born into slums or in houses with no plumbing, in neighbourhoods without playgrounds or schools or even medical services. The rich go to fancy private clinics, while the poor, if they are lucky, make it to overcrowded public health centres. The rich have excellent schools; the poor have terrible ones. Are you really giving everyone the same opportunities with such a recipe? From the moment of birth you are placing individual human beings in unfair and unequal situations. Even before they are born, poor children are at a disadvantage because of their mothers' nutrition. In the San

Vicente Hospital we weighed and measured children born in the Pabellón de Pensionados (families who could pay) and the so-called Pabellón de Caridad (families who could afford little or nothing for delivery services). We found a statistically significant difference in weight and height among the two groups, which means that these children are already unequal when they are born - not for any biological reason, but because of social factors such as unemployment and food security.

‘These are irrefutable and self-evident truths that no one could hope to deny. Why then do we - in denial about the overall situation - put so much energy into preserving the *status quo*? Because selfishness and indifference are typical of those who blind themselves to the evidence and remain satisfied with their own living conditions at the expense of others. They refuse to see what is in plain sight in order to maintain their privileges in all areas. What can we do about all this? Whose responsibility is it to take action? It would seem as if those directly affected are the ones who should stand up for themselves. But almost always, caught up in the urgency, fear and tragedy of their own daily lives, socially disadvantaged people remain unaware of the objective unfairness of their situation; the injustice doesn’t get consciously internalised.

‘Strange as it may be, the historical record shows us that it is a handful of people who have themselves enjoyed acceptable living conditions who have assumed leadership in humanity’s ongoing struggle for social justice. [...] This is how major improvements in many countries have been achieved: we are living in an age where growing numbers of people - those with the luxury of being ethically awake and alive to the suffering of others - no longer accept the continuation of inequality and injustice as a *natural* phenomenon. Their struggle against ‘the established order’ is a hard and dangerous one. They have to face, among other obstacles, the anger and unease of politically and economically powerful forces. They have to face consequences which may end up threatening their own tranquillity and life options, and to accept a life at the margins of what the established society regards as ‘success’.

‘But there is an internal motor which drives them to do this work. For many, this is the very thing which makes life worth living: the struggle gives meaning. To have lived at all is

worthwhile if, at the end of one's life, it seems that the world is better in some aspect than one found it as a result of one's own efforts. To enjoy the finer things in life is a legitimate animal ambition. But for a human being, a *homo sapiens*, this hedonistic consumption and cult of the present is empty at the end. [...] If we want to justify our stint in the universe, we have to aim for goals beyond mere physical enjoyment of our own lives. [...] The important thing is not to reach these goals in our own lifetimes, but to struggle for them. We cannot all make it into the history books. But as cells in the universal and transtemporal human body, we are nevertheless aware that we can do something to improve the world we live in, and that those coming after us will inherit. We work for the present, to be sure, but for the future as well, and this makes us happier in the long run than the empty pursuit of our own one-time experience. To know that we are contributing to the improvement of the world is the highest of human aspirations.'

This clear humanist spirit, pulsingly emotional, runs through everything my father wrote. He used his own voice, knowledgeable and convincing, to persuade everyone around him who was able - both richer and poorer than he was - to wake up and do something to improve the iniquitous conditions of life in general, and life in Colombia in particular. He did this right up to the very last day in a prolonged and desperate attempt to fight with words the barbaric actions of a society which refused, and refuses, to do much other other than maintain enormous existing injustices, even going so far as to assassinate those who would seek to rectify them.

Just as we are moved to tears at the impossible gallantry and Nazarene purity of all this, however, we are swiftly reminded that Abad is trying to *humanise* his father, not deify him:

I don't want to write a hagiography; I have no interest in depicting a man unbound by the inherent imperfection of human nature. If my father had been a little less susceptible to showing off, if he had kept his virtue signalling and SJW fanaticism a little better under control, he would have achieved even more, especially at the end of his life, because he lacked patience and constancy in finishing the many things - the too many things - he started. He

himself recognised this character flaw and would often say of himself: 'I'm a great father but a terrible mother,' by which he meant that he was good at seeding ideas, but not at bringing them to gestation.

He made stupid errors as we all do - joined absurd causes, was frequently gullible, and at times served as the mouthpiece for interests that manipulated him with flattery. When he realised that he had been used by someone, he always said the same thing: 'My intelligence has only served to make me a fool.'

[...] At one stage, and because they knew how to play to his vanity, he was roped into the Colombia-North Korea Friendship Society. He started bringing home books on *juche* by Kim Il-Sung, and even went to a painful conference in Portugal which celebrated the thought of this bloodthirsty megalomaniac, one of the 20th Century's veritable A-List dictators. The really bad thing was that he soon realised that the whole thing was garbage - when he talked about *juche* he would laugh his head off at the stupidity and *faux* erudition of the whole thing - but he had joined the group, and so he let himself get dragged along, thereby turning himself into a tacit accomplice of the North Korean regime. He never actually wanted to visit North Korea, likely because he knew that he would have to face the inevitable distance between the propaganda and the reality and give up his support for all the bullshit.

[...] Towards the end of his life he was certainly exploited by the Colombian hard left. Although he hated the idea of armed struggle, he reached a certain understanding and even offered a sort of tacit (though never explicit) justification for the guerrilla insurgency. And because he shared some of their political ideas (agrarian and urban reform, redistribution of wealth, a loathing of monopolies, abomination for the corrupt oligarchs who had brought the country to the most shameful depths of poverty and inequality), he sometimes turned a blind eye to atrocities the guerrillas were committing: attacks on Army barracks, absurd bomb blasts and so on. It is true that he always openly reviled kidnapping and indiscriminate terrorist attacks on innocent civilians, but like many defenders of human rights, he saw government atrocities in more vivid colours than those of the armed enemies of the government. He explained this away in more or less coherent terms: it was somehow worse when a

trusted priest sexually abused a young boy than when a known deviant did so. [...] The guerrillas had openly declared themselves to be above the law, but the government claimed to be upholding it. This was true, but one can lose a sense of proportion when one starts down this road, and he sometimes did. This could never justify his assassination, but it does partly explain the anger of the assassins who murdered him.

I remember we once discussed a phrase, attributed to Pancho Villa I think, which he often repeated: 'Without justice there can be no peace.' Or stronger still: 'Without justice there can be no peace, and nor should there be.' I asked him if it were not therefore necessary to adopt armed struggle as the primary means to combat injustice. He said that it was necessary against a Hitler; he was not a complete pacifist. But in the case of Colombia, he was absolutely sure that armed struggle was not the path to a solution, and that existing conditions did not justify the uses and abuses of violence to which the guerrillas had descended. He believed that reform - deep-seated and radical, but less than outright revolution - could be enough to transform the country in a positive direction. He never once deviated from this position, not even when he was angriest of all at the atrocities committed by the government and its paramilitary allies. Although he understood why the likes of Camilo Torres and José Alvear Restrepo had chosen the means they had chosen, he didn't agree with them. He would never have been able to use a gun or kill anyone with his bare hands, or knowingly support anyone who had. He preferred the Gandhian way: peaceful resistance, all the way to the supreme sacrifice of life itself.

There is no divine formula here; these are questions of individual character and autonomous human judgment: Hitler almost certainly needed assassinating at a certain point, but Abad Sr. would probably have lacked the stomach for the job, just as he left to others the myriad local surgeries that also needed performing on his watch. He found a vocation - public health - which suited his character and general disposition; this was not the only one he *could* have chosen, nor one that he was in any literal sense 'fated' to have chosen, but one which he actively sought out for himself. His son followed in his footsteps, not by copying his father's vocational choices, but by choosing with the same freedom.

## 'Abrir los cajones'

*I kept the bloody shirt for many years; the clots darkening and burning off over time. I don't know why I kept it. It was as if I wanted something to prick my fading conscience, a spur for the memory, a reminder that I had yet to avenge his death. I burnt it while I was writing this book, because I realised that the only vengeance, the only memory, and also the only chance to forgive and forget, was to tell the whole story.*

This 'whole story' does not include absolutely everything; if he doesn't want a 'hagiography', Abad doesn't want a tell-all biography of his father either - only the spiritually salient stuff. Abad Sr. was vaguely bisexual (Visconti's *Mort à Venise* was in any case charged with secret meaning for him), but Abad Jr. doesn't see any point in peeling the onion beyond the following:

I remember that my father said many times that every human being, every human personality was like a cube on a table in the middle of a room. The top side is visible to everyone; there are sides visible to some, but not others, from front on, and other sides we can only see obliquely from our point of view; then there is the underside, not always even visible to the person in question. Opening a dead man's top drawer is like suddenly seeing a side of him that only he could see and never wanted to be seen, the intimate side he kept hidden from others.

My father had offered many clues about this private world - not the kinds of confession or bursts of brutal honesty that weigh one's children down, just the odd ray of light on some of the darker symptoms of which he himself was also partially unconscious.

[...] In a letter he wrote to me at the end of 1975, and which he published as an Epilogue to his second book (*Letters from Asia*), he mentioned the following: 'I have gradually realised that beauty is the thing I most admire. [...] I could perhaps have

become a writer if I had put my mind to it. But you are already starting to experience all the hardship, effort, isolation and intense pain that life demands of those who take up the burdensome path of creating beauty.'

[...] We all have zones of shadow in our lives. These are not necessarily sources of outright shame, and may even be the things of which we are proudest, the things which made our passage through the world worthwhile; yet still we do not wish to share them with anyone. We may hide them because we are ashamed, or because we know the society in which we happen to live will regard them as monstrous or filthy even if we don't. They may even be things that are reprehensible and detestable in any time and place, things that no human morality could ever accept.

I didn't find any such dirty secrets in my father's papers. What I did find only made him greater, worthier of respect, and even more courageous in my eyes. But as he did not want his wife or any of his children to know what was in them, I will treat the whole box as closed, thereby avoiding speculations which perhaps belong in a soap opera, but which would not do justice to a person who loved all human manifestations of beauty and who, as such, was the embodiment of both spontaneity and discretion.

We are allowed to take certain things with us to the grave; in any case, the grave is where we are all going. But in what precise sense, if any, we will 'meet' or swap stories with each other when we get there is, Abad suggests, subtly beside the point of our lives on Earth; something more important than our own direct knowledge of everything is going on.

'Cómo se viene la muerte'

*Our lives are rivers  
Which run to the sea  
Of death;  
Lordships go there  
And end there  
And are consumed;  
Young torrents wash in,  
And so do older*

*And thinner currents:  
The rich and the  
Hand-to-mouth  
Equal at last.*

Jorge Manrique's 'Coplas por la muerte de su padre' (c. 1476), which Abad Sr. knew by heart and passed down to his son, set the tone for Junior's final reflections on his father's life and legacy:

Of all possible deaths there is one type that we accept with a degree of resignation: death of old age, in one's own bed, after a full, intense, and useful life. Such was the death of 'maestro don Rodrigo Manrique, so famous and valiant'; his son Jorge's 'Coplas', therefore, although they mourn the death of his father, reach a conclusion which is less resigned than happy. His father not only accepts his death, but welcomes it with relish [...] in his old age and surrounded by his loved ones. This is the only sort of death we accept with consolable serenity. Almost all the others are loathsome and unbearable, most of all the death of a child or young person, or any death caused by direct human-on-human violence. Our very being rebels against such events, and there is an accompanying pain and rage, which at least in my case do not ever really go away. I never 'accepted' my sister's death, and I will never 'get over' my father's death either. It is true that, in a certain sense, he was satisfied with what he had already achieved in his life and was ready to die - even happy to die if necessary - for a good cause, but he also abhorred the sort of violent death that was explicitly being prepared for him. This is the most painful and unacceptable thing about the whole story. This book is an attempt to leave a testament to this pain, a document at once useless and necessary: useless because it can't turn back time or change the facts; and necessary, at least for me, because my life and my vocation as a writer would lack all meaning if I did not write what I feel that I have to write, and what I have failed to write in 20 years of trying - until now.

Abad Jr.'s vocation as a writer is organically connected to his father's life and martyrdom, not because he had not already fixed on writing as his calling before his father's death, but because he is unable to write

authentically at all without also trying his best to understand the source of his emotion surrounding his father's death. After finding himself described as 'a useful idiot' for the left on a blacklist in the days before his death, Abad Sr. is only able to make light of the threat and say 'how honoured he was to be in the company of worthy people who had done so much for the country.' While friends like Carlos Gaviria ended up 'surviving by fleeing the country', Abad Sr. just

opened a bell-shaped bottle of whisky which Carlos took away empty that afternoon and later kept as a memento in his study. [...] 'I don't want them to kill me, and I don't want to take any stupid risks, but perhaps it wouldn't be the worst of deaths; if they do kill me, hopefully it will be good for something.' Carlos went home with a vague sense of dread.

Quoting from Abad Sr.'s *Manual de tolerancia*, Abad Jr. reminds his reader that his father wasn't really ready to go at all:

'Montaigne said that philosophy was useful because it teaches us how to man up and die. I am closer to the end than the beginning of this birth-death business, and the theme of death is thankfully becoming ever simpler, more natural and - no longer as a mere 'theme' but as a reality - almost desirable. And it's not because I'm jaded or disappointed; on the contrary, it's because I feel I have lived fully, intensely, sufficiently.'

It is clear that he was already prepared to die, but that didn't mean he wished to be killed. In an interview the week of his death, he put it in the following terms: 'I am very satisfied with my life and I don't fear death, but I still have many things left to enjoy: my grandchildren, my roses, conversations with my wife. I don't fear death, but I don't want them to kill me just yet; I want to die peacefully, surrounded by my children and grandchildren. A violent death must be terrifying; I don't like the idea of it at all.'

Borges's 'Epitafio', found scrawled in his father's pocket (and in his father's own handwriting) on the day of his murder, reminds us of the metaphysical business going on behind all the sordid events here: it is not just that we *will* all be forgotten; it is that we are all *already* forgotten by the world we live in: any 'meaning' we feel must be located in some other dimension, not in this-worldly fame or reputation or celebrity:

We are already the oblivion we will be.  
The elemental dust fails to recognise us,  
The red Adam that we now all are  
And will never see again.<sup>2</sup>

Abad Sr.'s gestures of this-worldly kindness to his son, however, extend well into the boy's adulthood, indeed right up to the end. Among his last ever words to his son ('recently returned from Italy at the age of 28, married, unemployed, and with a child just learning to walk') were the following in response to another failed job interview: 'Don't worry son. One day they'll be the ones calling you.' The raw brutality of his father's lonely assassination lies as an affront to the beauty of the Abad family:

He looks up and sees the ill-wishing face of his killer, sees the pistol flash, and hears the shots fired at the same time as a bullet in the chest floors him. His glasses fly off and break; from the ground, he thinks simultaneously about everyone he loves as his torso is riven with pain and his eyes get one last look at the gun, which fires more shots - in the head, the neck, and one more in the chest. Six shots in all, which meant that one of the assassins emptied his clip on him. The other killer follows Leonardo Betancur into the union office and kills him in there. My father did not see his much-loved student die; indeed he never saw anything ever again, and no longer has anything to see or remember. He bled out then and there; his heart stopped beating and his brain stopped working.

[...] My sister, brother-in-law, mother and I surround the body. Mum takes his wedding ring off, and I pull the two pieces of paper out of his pockets. I will only later realise what they are: one is the list of targets for assassination, and the other is the Borges epitaph, now spattered with blood, copied out in his own handwriting: '*Ya somos el olvido que seremos.*'

I don't weep at the time; it is a tearless sadness I feel at first - total, but still stunned and incredulous. As I write now I can certainly shout about it, but at the time the shock was overwhelming. There arose an almost serene wonder at the extent of human depravity, a rageless rage, a dry cry, an utterly

---

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'Epitafio', in Abad, *El olvido que seremos*, p. 279.

still and immobile pain, a quiet abyss. I try to think it through and process it. I promise myself that I am going to remain ice-cool in my dealings with the assassins until the very end of my days, give them absolutely fucking nothing. I come close to collapsing, but I'm not going to do that. 'Cuuunts!' I yell, and this is the only thing I yell: 'Cuuunts!' I still yell the same thing to myself every day as a reminder of what they were, what they are, and what they always will be to me.

The funeral speeches say what needs to be said:

I still have the speeches of Mejía Vallejo and Carlos Gaviria. The local novelist, born in the same town as my father (Jericó), spoke of the imminent threat of the memory hole: 'We live in a country which forgets its best faces, its best impulses; life here risks continuing in its irremediable monotony [of violence], with its back turned to those who give us our reasons for living. I know that tears of truth will well up in the eyes of those who knew you and can still see your face, but then the darkness will fall, because we are a land which easily forgets the things we should most cherish. [...] The oblivion will fall, and it will be like a monster flattening everything; not even your name will remain. I know that your death will serve no purpose, that your heroism will join all our other absent virtues.'

Carlos focused more on the figure of the humanist confronted with a country in decay: 'What did Hector Abad do to deserve this end? We have to look for a concrete answer to this question, because when we do, we are forced to face up to the contrast between the spirit he embodied and the miserable canon of values which now reigns among us. In service to his vocation he fought for life, and his assassins snuffed it out of him; as a Professor of Medicine, he battled ignorance precisely by conceiving of it, in the Socratic fashion, as the fount of all evil in the world. His killers cut him short by invoking the barbaric slogan with which Millán-Astray once shook Salamanca: "*Viva la muerte!* Long live death! Down with the intelligentsia!" His conscience as a civilised and fair man led him to conduct his struggle within the realm of the law, while those controlling the levers of state power, who ought to exercise this very conscience, show more faith in bombs and bullets.'

Though we won't know for a few pages yet what was bugging him most of all for years after the event, Abad Jr. was outright inconsolable in the immediate aftermath:

On the night of the 25th, Maryluz [...] didn't want to go to the scene of the crime; she went to his office instead. All the children met up there (except Sol, who didn't come out of her room for a long time). [...] 'The first thing you yelled at me was "Look what happened to Dad for being nice to everyone!" You were wild with the entire universe,' Maryluz told me years later.

Others in the family, like Abad Jr.'s former brother-in-law Alfonso Arias, dealt with the whole thing differently, and in a sense more admirably:

'I put several years of effort and love into looking after your father's roses while I was close enough to Rionegro. I enjoyed doing it because it was a sort of homage to him as a man. The image of your father kneeling in his jeans and straw hat, hands dirty, is the happiest memory I have of him. This garden represented something big - it was a symbol rather than a mere hobby - and I am convinced that he was trying to tell us all something by dedicating so much time and effort to cultivating it, to something that had no immediate instrumental value beyond the sheer beauty of itself. There was an implicit message hidden in all this labour. I still pass by from time to time, and I sometimes see it from the plane, because we pass right over the rose garden as we land. A glimpse of colour from the sky is the last I have seen of that garden.'

Abad himself, however, is still struggling to get to the bottom of all his clean and dirty thoughts, desperately trying to purify and elevate the best of them to the realm of transcendental meaning:

Almost twenty years have passed since they killed him. Not a month, not even a week has gone by without my feeling an irrepressible duty, if not to avenge my father's death, then at least to narrate it properly. I can't say he has visited me in my dreams like the ghost of Hamlet's father, begging me to avenge his *monstrous and terrible murder*. My father taught us to eschew

vengeance. The few times I *have* dreamt of him, [...] our conversations have been pleasant and relaxed, full of the physical affection that always reigned between us.

[...] I have, however, heard something resembling Hamlet's father's 'Remember me' in my dreams:

Remember thee

Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat

In this distracted globe. Remember thee!

Yea, from the table of my memory

I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,

All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past

That youth and observation copied there,

And thy commandment all alone shall live

Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmixed with baser matter.

It is possible that this is all a meaningless 'signifying of nothing'; no words will revive him, and no account of his life will bring his flesh and blood and laugh and immense bravery back to the world, but still, I need to tell the whole thing. His killers remain at large, more powerful by the day, and I have no way of fighting them by hand. Only my fingers, pounding out one key after another, can reveal the truth of his life and the injustice of his death. I am using his own weapon of choice: words. To what end? There is no end, or rather, there is only the most general one: that his story be known, that the memory of him may be extended just a little before the definitive oblivion arrives.

As Barcelona was falling and defeat was imminent in the Spanish Civil War, Antonio Machado wrote the following: 'It is not widely known that courage is the virtue of the unarmed, never of those predisposed to kill. Men of peace win wars in the end, not warmongers. A person is only brave if she can [amid the threats of battle] allow herself the luxury of continued physical love for her neighbour, which is the specifically humane manifestation of our nature.' This is why I have not only recounted the ferocity of those who killed him - the seeming winners of this dirty little war - but above all the energy of a life given to helping and protecting others.

Abad already knows his conclusion by this stage in the story - he almost certainly didn't when he started (hence the need to start writing in the first place) - but he keeps us in suspense for another few pages before smacking us, unsuspecting, in the face with it. In the meantime, however, he rewards us with a full account of his mature moral theology:

Two decades have now passed, and I am finally able to keep a cool head as I compile this memoir of grievance. The wound is there, in the memory, but scars have long since formed on the surface. In the end I think I've managed to write what I know about my father without an undue excess of sentimentality, which is always the danger with this type of writing. His case is not the only one from our annals, and in a way it is not even the saddest. Thousands and thousands of fathers were assassinated in our country at its necrophilic worst. But it is one such case, to be sure, and the saddest for me personally. It also stands as a symbol of the many, many unjust deaths we have suffered here in recent decades.

I make myself a sad black coffee and put on Brahms's *Requiem* amid birdsong and mooing from the fields. I find a letter that my father wrote to me from here in 1984, a reply to a letter I had sent him from Italy in which I complained about feeling unhappy there, and in which I even considered giving up yet another job and returning home. I think I'd even suggested to him that life itself was weighing me down. His reply has been a source of strength and confidence for me ever since. Transcribing it here may seem a little odd because he speaks so well of me, but it reveals the unconditional love of a father for a son, the *a priori* love that, if we have received it, allows us to face the worst that life can throw at us:

'My dearest son: it is more common than you think to feel depressed at your age. I remember a bout of my own in Minneapolis, when I was 26; I was really at the point of taking my own life. I think the winter, the cold, the lack of sunlight, for tropical beings like us, can be a real catalyst. And to tell you the truth, the idea of you turning up here with your bags and telling Europe to keep its treasures fills your mother and me with happiness. You have spent so much time gaining the equivalent of a university education in the real world that it is hardly surprising that you feel constrained and bored by university life.

Whatever you do in future, whether you write or not, whether you get another degree, work for your mother, edit a newspaper, teach in a high school, give lectures like Estanislao Zuleta, act as the family psychoanalyst or just continue being Héctor Abad Faciolince, it will all be fine; what matters is that you don't stop being what you've been so far: your own *person*. It is only for being how you are, not for the fact of writing or not, shining or not, but only *because you are as you are*, that you have earned the affection, respect, acceptance, trust and *love* of almost everyone who knows you. This is how we want to keep seeing you, not as some future famous writer or journalist or professor or poet, but as the son, brother, friend and humanist who understands others and does not insist on being understood himself. The glamour of any future fame or recognition will not add anything for those who believe in you because we already know *who you are*.

'For God's sake, Quinquín, why on earth would you think that 'we support you' because 'you could go a long way', even if you have already gone further than all our dreams for any of our children.

'You know very well that our ambitions for you - your mother's and mine - are not for glory, or money, or even for happiness (which sounds nice and can't last forever), but rather for a more solid, durable and reachable sense of self. We have spoken often of the torments of Carlos Castro Saavedra, Manuel Mejía Vallejo, Rodrigo Arenas Betancourt and other geniuses we know. The same could be said of the likes of Sábato and Rulfo, or even García Márquez himself. Remember Goethe: 'All theory is grey, my friend; only the tree of life is green.' All we want for you is that you *live*. This means something quite different from fame and prizes. I think I had too many concrete ambitions in politics when I was younger, and I was unhappy because I couldn't achieve them. Only once I got beyond the thirst for concrete recognition did I begin to feel truly happy. Cecilia, you, and all my other children and grandchildren have been a big part of this [transformation]. Marta's death was another story. But in another way things are very simple once we are done overcomplicating them in our youths: sooner or later you've got to put ephemeral things like fame, glory and success in the eyes of others behind you.

‘Well, Quinquin, you know what I think of you and your future. You have nothing to worry about. You are going well, and things will only get better from year to year. By the time you get to my age, or your grandfather’s, you’ll be able to enjoy the landscapes in La Inés that I plan to leave to you; amid all that sunshine, heat and greenery, you will see that I was right. Don’t put up with anything over there that you don’t think makes sense for you. If you want to come home we’ll welcome you with open arms. And if you regret coming home and want to go back to Europe again, well that’s fine too; we’re in a position where we can pay your return trip as well. Just don’t ever forget that the most important thing is always to *return*. Besos from your father.’

I have now returned, writing about him from the desk where he wrote to me, sure that he was right. [...] Here I am on this piece of land that he left us in La Inés. The miserable killers who took his life and, for many years, our happiness and sanity will not win, because the love for life and humane happiness that he taught us is much stronger than their death drive. Their abominable act, however, left a permanent wound, because as one Colombian poet puts it: ‘That which is written in blood cannot be erased.’

In another letter he wrote to me from La Inés, this one from 1986, my father told me: ‘I’m getting more and more fruit trees going here, even a grapefruit tree, which I hope that you and Daniela, and Daniela’s children too, can enjoy.’ Daniela, my daughter, had been born earlier that year, and my father managed to help me with her first steps in the weeks prior to his murder. There is a family line which has not been broken. These murderers did not exterminate us, and will never do so, because there is a bond of strength and joy, of love for the land and for life which such murderers could never hope to break. Moreover, I learnt something else from my father which his murderers did not know how to do: to put the truth into words, so that it can outlive the lies which ever threaten it.

‘El exilio de los amigos’

*In late November 1987, three months after my father's murder, as we were coming out of a meeting in the local Asamblea, my mother suddenly had a sense that my life was in danger. Two young men with backpacks were walking quickly towards us; my mother threw herself instinctively in front of me, covering me with her body and staring at them intently. They slipped away. I don't know if they had anything planned for me, but we were both chilled with fear. That night, as the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights in Antioquia was reformed, four of us had spoken. The new President, the lawyer and theologian Luis Fernando Vélez, was a decent man who had published books on indigenous Catío mythology. He was unable either to understand or to tolerate the fact that his colleague in the Asociación de Profesores, Héctor Abad Gómez, had been murdered. In his speech, which I still have, he said the following: 'The standard-bearers for the worthy cause of human rights in Antioquia have been martyred. Today, we survivors are gathering up the flag purified by the blood of those who have fallen.'*

It didn't take Abad Jr. long to realise that he would not be following directly in his father's footsteps. As well as his distinct sense of cosmopolitan literary vocation, there was little doubt that human rights activism was as good as a suicide mission in Medellín in 1987:

I didn't want to join the Committee, and there was an air of defeat in my words: 'I don't believe that bravery is passed down genetically, and worse still, I don't think it can be taught by example. Nor is optimism something one can either inherit or learn. The proof of this is that the person talking to you, the son of a brave and optimistic man, is full of fear and recalcitrant pessimism. I will speak here today, but not in the hope of offering any stimulus to those of you who would continue with this lost cause.'

'You are here because you have the same courage my father had, and because you don't suffer from the same misgivings and disorientation as his son. I recognise something in you which I loved in my father, something which I deeply admire, but which I

am unable to reproduce or imitate. You have justice on your side, and for this reason I wish you every success, even if my wishes are unlikely to be realised. I am here for the simple reason that I was an intimate witness to a well-lived life. I also want to make public my pain and anger that this life was snatched from us. It is an unmitigated pain and an anger without hope, a suffering which promises no consolation and a rage which seeks no vengeance.

‘I don’t believe that my defeatism here can have any positive effect. I speak to you today with the inertia of a perfect pessimism - of reason and action. [...] It would be disingenuous to say that our family feels like it has lost a battle, as one is supposed to say in such filial orations. Not a bar of it. We feel as if the war itself is lost.

‘We need to dispense with a common misconception regarding the present political violence, a piece of bullshit which has the persuasive force of an axiom. Few question it or think about what underlies it. According to this erroneous view of the current situation, the violence we are suffering is blind and senseless. But are we in the midst of amorphous, indiscriminate, crazy violence? Far from it. The current penchant for assassination is methodical, organised and rational. Indeed, if we paint an ideological portrait of the victims to date, we can see the exact outline of the future victims as well: *us*.’

I am obliged to add that, of the four of us who spoke that night (Vélez, Santamaría, Gónima and me), I am the only one who was not murdered. The president who took over from Vélez, Jesús María Valle, was also assassinated (the paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño later admitted to ordering the hitjob personally).

Forced into exile for a time, Abad maintains contact with Carlos Gáviria in Buenos Aires and Alberto Aguirre in Madrid (‘as if he knew that my fragile maturity still needed some fatherly guidance, the best thing my father left me were these two friends of his’). Visiting Madrid for Christmas in 1987, Abad finds Aguirre

wandering the streets citing poetry. Like a madman? No, like an exile. [...] Inevitably we touch on August 25, the fateful day when death reached out for us and Aguirre hid like a rabbit, as he put it, in an apartment. We hadn’t seen each other in the four months since. The day before the murder, they talked about the hitlist that

was circulating: they were both on it. Alberto Aguirre was ‘a communist with union ties, a sower of popular discontent’, Héctor Abad Gómez was a ‘useful idiot for the guerrillas’. Something like that anyway, but I’m not going to cite it directly here. Every time I read it I feel like vomiting, even today.

[...] In his last article before going into hiding, Aguirre wrote: ‘There is an exile worse than physical exile: spiritual exile.’ He didn’t publish anything for several years. Breaking his silence in 1992, he offered a series of sober reflections on his experience, *Del exilio*, and I published them when I ran the local university magazine. There is no trace of all this in Google, the new Library of Babel of our time. I have to mention it here, even though I am shy about doing so, so that it is not forgotten, or at least so that it may be known for a few more years.

The contrast between Abad Sr., Aguirre and Gaviria on the one hand, and their mortal enemies on the other, could not be more obvious: one side is constantly questioning its own motives, while the other is just looking for excuses to justify itself:

[Carlos] Castaño, like all megalomaniacs, was not remotely ashamed of his crimes, and even confessed to them in a filthy little book: ‘I dedicated myself to cutting off the multiple [leftist] heads of the monster which threatened our city with subversion. I am not sorry about it, and I never will be.’ He eventually confesses to killing Pedro Luis Valencia, a week before my father, with the help of official intelligence; then he admits to killing Vélez, in the same place and on the same day of the year that my father was killed.

I’m not going to say anything more about this patriot; my fingers won’t let me. [...] But let’s return to 1987, to this bloodbath produced by [Castaño] and his accomplices. [...] I am sitting next to this bloodbath. As the blood flows, it is clear that, indeed, the head has to all intents been severed. This is a euphemism for murder in general, but it is also uniquely apt for this brand of murder in particular, which aims to cut off the body of society from the intelligence residing in the head.

Even the Abad family dentist, Heriberto Zapata, could see what was going on when Abad Sr. was murdered:

[Zapata] had figured it all out without being told: we were face to face with an act of run-of-the-mill fascism: 'Héctor's attachment to high liberal humanism made him flexible and open at a time when there is only room left for fanatics.' At the end he too cites Millán-Astray's disgusting catchphrase, secure in the knowledge that this is also the motto of my father's killers: '*Viva la muerte! Abajo la inteligencia!*' It's the same story: cut off the head to save the body.

Even a couple of decades on, the free-thinking Carlos Gaviria remains

one of the few Colombians who has a truly liberal and independent mind at a time when there are renewed fears that the country might return to the darkness that reigned in the 1980s. I didn't see him in Buenos Aires in those years of exile, but we wrote regularly to each other, and when I visited Argentina for the first time recently, he gave me a map of the alleyways, cafés, parks, bookshops and Borgesiana he had enjoyed in his years there.

I have no doubt that there are people today who would love nothing better than to 'cut off the heads' of people like Alberto Aguirre and Carlos Gaviria, [...] thereby cutting off the very conscience of a free society.

The main cause of difference between the fate of Gaviria and Abad Sr., however - and here comes the reader's punch in the face - was Junior's own insouciance:

When I say that my best friend, my father, didn't make it into exile, what I mean is that we, his family, are partly responsible, and more specifically that / am responsible, that I should have loved him more and better than I did. If I had loved my father as much in 1987 as I did when I was a little boy, I would have realised how much danger he was in, I would have forced him to leave the country, or at least go up to Cartagena for a while, as I myself did. There was a list, he was on it, and they were already killing university professors. We didn't rush to save him, we didn't shove him into the back of an armoured truck and force him onto an aeroplane. Carlos Gaviria and Alberto Aguirre, the friends I

inherited from him, saved themselves, made it to exile, and came back to fight for their country again. They will die as old men, as my father should have done, but instead he was brutally murdered, among other reasons, because his son did not love him as he should have. I will never forgive myself.

### 'El olvido'

*We are all condemned to dust and oblivion. The people whose stories are told in this book are already dead, or on death's door, or at the very least, will die at a future date which is decades rather than centuries from now. Quevedo described the transience of our existence with the following verses: 'Ayer se fue, mañana no ha llegado,/ Hoy se está yendo sin parar un punto,/soy un fue, y un será, y un es cansado ('Yesterday is gone, tomorrow nigh, and today is hurtling by; I am a past, a future and a present sigh.'). We march on ineluctably to the moment where we cease to exist, surviving for a few more fragile years in the memories of those who knew us. But even this life in the memory of the living is closer to expiry with every passing second. Books are a hologram prosthetic of memory, a desperate attempt to make the irredeemably finite endure. The people who wove the fabric of all that is dear to me are all either dead or absent or otherwise on their way to ghosthood; we ourselves move in the world as projections of these ghosts who preceded us. In short, all these flesh and blood people, all these friends and relatives I love so much, all the enemies who hate me with such constancy, are no more real than fictional characters, and in the best-case scenario will share the fate of such characters on the stages of the future world. Most, however, will be nothing at all beyond an eternal pile of dust, a tombstone in a cemetery whose letters will eventually fade to illegibility. From this perspective, lived memory is so short that, if we are as honest about it as Borges was, we will see clearly that 'we are already the oblivion that we will be'. This oblivion and elemental dust into which we will all be*

*converted were a consolation for Borges during his brief sojourn 'under the indifferent blue of Heaven'. If, as it seems, Heaven is indeed indifferent to our joys and sufferings, if the universe couldn't care less whether there are human beings in it or not, then returning to the void from which we came is both the worst misfortune and the greatest comfort, for it finally offers us relief from the tragedy and pain caused by the death of those we love. Even though I know it's coming, I don't want to imagine the dreadful moment when the last of the people I know and love - children, wife, friends, relatives - cease to exist, which will also be the moment at which I will cease to exist forever as a living memory. My father did not know, and did not wish to know, when I would die. What he did know - one fragile source of consolation for us - is that I would remember him and fight to save him from oblivion for a few more years, in my case with the evocative power of my writing.*

Well it's more than that, isn't it? I had read this story before, even though I had never read it; surely all art makes us feel this way, namely improved by the complete chance of contact and completed by the pure destiny of it as well, as if there were no contradiction between the two emotions. Some of the questions medieval Christian Europe spent hundreds of years tortuously asking itself - theodicy, free will and the like - look crazy and pointless from the privilege of our more relaxed and less hellfire-consumed, less totalitarian century; men like Abad's father and Abad himself have helped us get to this horizon, but by its very nature, the panorama they open up to us on their shoulders is broader than any which they themselves can see:

A good portion of my memory has been poured into this book, and since all human beings are cosmic siblings insofar as we think, speak and feel in similar ways, I hope to have found in you, my readers, allies and accomplices capable of plucking the same chords from the black box of spirit, which is the living heart-mind we all share. As one of the great Spanish poems begins, '*¡Recuerde el alma dormida!*': 'Remember the sleeping spirit!' This line was the final catalyst for this book, which is after all a

homage to the memory and life of an exemplary father. I wanted to awaken my deepest memories here. If these memories strike chords of spiritual harmony with any of you, and if any of what I have felt (and will cease to feel) is recognisable and comprehensible, then this oblivion that is coming for each of us will be postponed a moment longer in the fleeting reverberation of the neurons of those, many or few, whose eyes pass over these letters.

No, Héctor Abad Faciolince: more than neurons matter. They are the means, not the end of what we are all doing here. Thank you and your father and the rest of your faraway family for giving me a burst of energy to do something more with mine.

## 2. Varlam Shalamov's *Artist Lopaty*<sup>3</sup>

*What if it's too late? What if the influence of liberalism is inexorably declining along with the relative power of the West? What if anti-liberal Deneen is right to gloat over 'a 500-year-old philosophical experiment that has run its course'? Speaking only for myself, I hope I will then go down with the good ship Liberty, working the pumps in the engine room as we try to keep her afloat. But as I breathe my last mouthful of salty water—glug, glug—I shall find consolation in reflecting on one last, peculiar quality of Liberty. Some time after the ship seems to have sunk to the bottom, it comes back up again. Odder still: it acquires the buoyancy to refloat precisely through sinking. It is no accident that the most passionate voices for freedom come to us, like the prisoners' chorus in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, from among the unfree.<sup>4</sup>*

Timothy Garton Ash

The fact that Varlam Shalamov regarded Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's illusion-shattering and century-defining *Gulag Archipelago* as a cloyingly privileged account of Soviet camp life should be enough on its own to elicit interest in his *Kolyma Tales*. The third book in this cycle, *Artist Lopaty* (1964), caught my attention above the others, I confess, because I liked the title (*Artist of the Shovel* in literal English translation). We may all be forced into slavery at some point, so it might be well worth knowing something about it, but physical bondage at the mercy of other sentient beings is a permanent feature of the human spiritual landscape even if our modern education and justice systems keep us from ever having to experience it first-hand. The post-traumatic nightmare or 'fit' with which the book begins, years after the ordeal, is characterised by a complete lack of 'solitude's beatific calm', and by a desire to be alone afterwards: 'I wasn't afraid of my memories,' Shalamov concludes, as if,

---

<sup>3</sup> Varlam Shalamov, *Artist Lopaty*, (FTM (e-book), 2013(1964)).

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, 'The Future of Liberalism', <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/the-future-of-liberalism-brexit-trump-philosophy>, 9/12/2020 (accessed 22/12/2020).

on the contrary, they are now treasured by him as existential moorings. The familiar 'sweet nausea' of Shalamov's time in the Russian Northeast, briefly relived in a Moscow psych ward in 1960, nevertheless swiftly gives way to the mad injustice of the facts: 'They all died...'

### 'Nadgrobnoe Slovo' ('Funeral Oration')

What follows in lieu of an introduction is more than a list of names: it is a reminder to the reader just how much worse this story is than an account of a single narrator's suffering. In this eulogy to an entire lost generation of human beings and human potential, each of the dead has a story, but the pieces of these stories do more than add up linearly to the rotten whole. The smallest detail can have a sudden, disproportionate or even Copernican effect on our understanding of Soviet history.

The 'oration' starts matter-of-factly enough. Nikolai Barbé, 'one of the organisers of the Russian Komsomol' (with whom Shalamov 'lifted a big rock out of a narrow pit'), is shot after a betrayal from a younger local apparatchik who enjoyed 'a great career afterwards'. Barbé's most cherished personal object - a woollen scarf - had already, however, been unceremoniously stolen by shameless thieves, after which Barbé's frozen cheeks were never warm again. The strong and dexterous Yoska Ryutin worked with Shalamov even though 'the hard workers didn't like working with me'. Ryutin 'understood perfectly well why we had been sent there', but this wisdom did nothing to prevent him from having his treasured chess set stolen by a bunkmate 'who smelt like a ram' ('you won't be needing this anymore'). Dmitry Orlov ('a former Kirov aide') also 'died', even though he represented that rare breed of Soviet Renaissance man who, unlike Shalamov, was as comfortable with outdoor tools as with a pen in his hand: "I think," he retorted didactically, 'that any educated person should know how to sharpen a saw.' The economist Semyon Sheynin was 'decent' and 'more than courageous', even if 'he took a comparatively long time to realise why we were there'; after selling a rare parcel for food ('our families had no idea what we needed') and seeking out his friend Sheynin to share it, Shalamov received a thump on the back of the head while Sheynin was boiling some water in the next room: 'For years afterwards I could not think about that robbery without being overcome by a terrifying and piercing

shock' at the animal injustice of it. And of course, like all the others, Sheynin 'died'.

It ramps up slowly from there. Ivan Fedyakhin, a revolutionary socialist who had set up the first collective farm in Russia without Bolshevik sanction, disapproved of the mercantile practice of trading cigarettes for bread in the autumn of 1937, but by the winter ('the last time I saw him'), he was accepting stolen ration passes and crying into the 'shrapnel-porridge' he was forced to lick in pathetic and unnourishing quantities from his spoonless bowl. The 'French Communist' Derfel was weak and small and beaten often and died quickly ('one of the lucky ones'), but suffered more acutely than most from the 'moral torture' of disbelief, as a card-carrying member of the Comintern, that *Soviet* authorities could lock him up in this way ('we were all in the same boat'). The 'Dutch Communist' Fritz David, accused of espionage, received pyjamas and a photograph of his wife in a rarely conceded parcel from Moscow, but the photograph was stolen on the first night ('for wanking, you idiot!' the naive Shalamov is told by a bunkmate). David lost his mind and was taken away to death at some point, but not before he lodged himself in our narrator's memory by falling asleep standing up, like an exhausted horse, in the hopelessly overcrowded barracks.

Seryozha Klivanskiy, a former university classmate and early companion of Shalamov in Moscow's Butyrka Prison, guessed correctly that they were both headed for 'torture by freezing' in the north. This was not by any means 'the whining of a coward'; Klivanskiy kept his cheer better than most in the mines, and even as a 'sanguine violinist', he enjoyed imitating the rough talk of the camps' meanest souls. A lover of poetry, Klivanskiy would read aloud to himself in the early prison days, but even *he* gave up reciting poems in Kolyma. And this was still not the worst of it: 'He was one who shared his last mouthful, or rather, continued to share it. This means that he cannot have lived to the point where there were no last mouthfuls, when no one shared anything with anyone.' The 'decent' Brigadier Dyukov, for example, was never even classified as an 'enemy of the people'; concerned above all with 'playing a role' in the revolution and virtuously meeting the camp's production quotas, he nevertheless ended up before a firing squad 'along with hundreds of thousands of others like him', because the heroic work of his brigade of peasant workers ('intellectuals were on the whole much less productive') was sabotaged by superiors who objected to the tone of Dyukov's daily calorie demands for his supermen after they somehow survived the 'hungry winter' of 1937-38.

Hunger turns people into 'half-mad' justice warriors, Shalamov observes, until even the energy for justice runs out. The hungry fight each other constantly, so much so that others soon stop taking an interest or breaking up the combatants. Naval captain Pavel Khvostov was one such brawler ('he would look at me like I was a maniac when I read poems'); indeed, the real division in camp life was less between 'guard' and '58er' - a reference to the famous Article 58 of the Soviet Penal Code - than between 'thug' and *literok* ('book-reader'). Even this line, however, was blurred by all the hunger and desperation; Roman Romanov died in front of Shalamov's eyes, but the author 'couldn't have cared less', a scathing comment on both his own loss of humanity and Romanov's self-serving 'officiousness'. The other enemy of humanism, of course, was the relentless cold; Volodya Dobrovoltsev was partially spared the 'eternal preoccupation' of everyone else in the camp - 'how to warm oneself up' - by virtue of his much-envied job near the camp's furnace: 'The biting cold did not permeate his entire being. [...] This is why he was the object of such jealousy.' And yet, 'jealousy is a bad judge of character'; Dobrovoltsev guarded his privilege alright ('the value of the job was simply too high'), but he also shared it when he didn't have to, breaking rules to let Shalamov and others warm themselves from time to time. 'Did he die?' Shalamov wonders; in any case, Dobrovoltsev later dispelled all rumours that he was a spy or informant by escaping into the wilderness.

Christmas evening in the camp rolls around; the kitchen stove, 'more beautiful than usual', makes the inmates 'sleepy and lyrical'. While the philosophy professor Glebov dreams of home, Shalamov tells the huddled souls around him:

I honestly think we'd be better off in prison. I'm not joking. I don't want to go back to my family like this. They won't understand me, and they'll never be able to understand me. I know that the things they value are trifles. They will neither be able to understand nor feel the things which have remained important to me. I will only bring them new things to fear, more fear piled onto the terror they live with already. No one should have to see and know the things I have seen. Prison is something else. Prison is freedom. It's the only place I know where people can freely speak their minds. Where their spirits can rest and their bodies can rest too, because there is no slaving to be done. Every hour of existence there is meaningful.

Those with worse prison memories than Shalamov (e.g. survivors of 'Method Number Three') disagree, but the peasant Zvonkov makes the same point in a different way: 'The thing I've lost here is my love for work; my connection to the Earth has been severed.' Dobrovoltsev, meanwhile, dreams only of 'spitting in the face' of those responsible for 'what they have done to us'.

### 'Kak Eto Nachalos' ('How It All Started')

Natural disasters are possible and real in Kolyma, but God's recurrent inhospitability is not what this story is all about. The three deadly 'windstorms' of the winter of 1937-38 are all man-made; in the first instalment, government rations run short, guards' salaries dry up, hunger spreads, bartering is forbidden, and people stop giving food to each other and start stuffing themselves in secret in their 'ever rarer free moments'. Looking for food becomes the 'automatic activity of every person at every opportunity'. Shalamov would have occasion to make the same observation many times: after the tenth or eleventh hour of tortuously difficult work on an empty stomach, 'you stop noticing the passage of time - and a Great Indifference washes over you' ('the hours pass like minutes, or even faster than minutes'). Dalstroy Director and Kolyma 'camp founder' Eduard Berzin, meanwhile, was 'called to Moscow and shot' on suspicion of espionage for the Japanese (along with the entire entourage that had set up the camp in 1932). In total 'several thousand people' - no one can say exactly how many - were either shot or given long prison sentences in connection with the 'Berzin affair'.

The second 'windstorm' was the endless run of shootings in the camp itself ('enemies of the people' and 'Trotskyists' in turn) - the so-called 'Garanin list'. There is relief at not being on the list oneself, but 'the whole thing was too foreign, too terrifying to seem real. [...] In the Stalinist context of those years, Garanin's days were themselves numbered.' Indeed, he too was arrested and shot on suspicion of espionage for the Japanese. Still, 'not one of the "Garanin sentences" was overturned. [...] Garanin was one of many Stalinist executioners killed by other Stalinist executioners at the necessary time.' The 'cover story' for Garanin's death - that he had been exposed by his sister in his

spy activities - was 'one of hundreds of thousands of similar stories which the Stalinist period drilled into the ears of everyday citizens.'

What got one on the 'Garanin list' in the first place?

A half-heard complaint that the work is difficult is enough for the firing squad. The most innocent comment about Stalin is enough for the firing squad. Silence while others shout 'Hooray Stalin' is enough for the firing squad.

[...] What else was enough to get one shot? 'Insolence towards camp guards.' What did that mean? A verbal insult, an answer deemed insufficiently polite, any 'discussion' whatsoever in response to beatings, blows or kicks. Any unnecessarily lively gesture. 'Refusal to work.' Many died because they did not know just how dangerous this was. The sinewless old, the hungry, the otherwise exhausted... Three refusals and a bullet. By law. Many failed to understand this central tenet of camp life, [...] namely that a refusal to work was regarded as the most serious of all crimes, worse than any act of sabotage. You were supposed to expend your very last calories and crawl to work if necessary. [...] Do that, and you're saved, that day, from the firing squad. Once you're there you can find a way not to work; I mean, you can't do anything anyway. But withstand the torment of the day, do a token something, and you're not a 'refusenik': they can't shoot you. It was said, in such a case, that the bosses had no 'right'. I don't know whether such a right not to be shot ever really existed, but on many occasions over many years I just forced myself to go to work.

'Theft of metal' was also a capital offence initially, though later punishable only by years of sentence extensions. The most common cause of death by firing squad was 'failure to comply with norms' ('entire brigades were shot on this account'). 'Failure to meet government production targets' could also be considered a 'fatal counter-revolutionary crime'.

The third 'windstorm' - worse than the first two combined - was 'general death' from violence and disease:

Doctors were afraid to write the true cause of death. [...] The formula 'nutritional dystrophy' was only used much later - after the Siege of Leningrad - as an acceptable, Greco-Roman way of

writing the true cause of death. 'What Russians with no Latin or philological training/ Called simply "hunger" without explaining': these words from Vera Inber, which I often repeated, struck a chord in Kolyma even though I had not been surrounded by people capable of appreciating poetry for many years.

Any type of person in the camp who could get away with beating 58ers - often to death - could do so without punishment: 'Lack of punishment for beatings - or indeed murders - corrupts the souls of everyone involved, everyone who has committed them, seen them, or known about them.' Such thugs were responsible for a very large number of fatalities: 'They wanted to show they were on the bosses' side, draw a line in the snow between them and us, prove that only we, not they, were "political prisoners". [...] By that stage, of course, there were no real "political prisoners" at all.'

### 'Pocherk' ('Handwriting')

Where do you take the narrative from here? Overdoing the pornography or statistics would be counterproductive; instead, Shalamov tells the story of a Kolyman 'Christ' risen from the dead. Given a lifeline because of his 'clerical' handwriting, this 'Christ' helps a visiting 'Investigator' with his paperwork once a week in a warm office as the winter of 1937-38 takes its toll.

What was this 'Investigator' doing in Kolyma in the first place?

We joked in camp that the Investigator was there for especially important matters, for in camp there was nothing that was not extremely important: every misdemeanour, or appearance of a misdemeanour, could be punished with death. It was either death or a full justification, and who could ever provide one of those?

'Christ' is described as 'ready for anything, but indifferent to everything'; he finds turnip peels on the path to the investigator's house and 'shoves them in his face' before going on to fantasise about how good they were. The problem of scurvy in the camp is discussed:

Christ wanted to continue this conversation, talk about how he sucked and gnawed his way through those nutritious turnip peels

that the Investigator had thrown into the snow, but he decided not to, out of fear that that his industry might be interpreted as a capital form of arrogance.

The Investigator eventually takes pity on his prisoner ('the bosses don't understand what they're doing here, and they don't care'):

Many of Christ's comrades had already been shot. The Investigator himself was shot in the end. But Christ was still alive, and every so often he would picture his burning file, the Investigator's hands saving his life by throwing it onto the fire - a gift to the doomed from the dooming.

### 'Utka' ('The Duck')

On another flight of imaginative fancy, Shalamov makes his readers believe that he is a duck: 'The flock had long flown south, but one duck remained. [...] The duck wanted to rest for a bit, then gather itself and fly off after its family. But it didn't have the energy to fly.' We are jolted back to the reality of camp life with the observation that 'a human being is running in pursuit; he has been watching [the duck] for a long time and following her with a secret hope, but lo and behold, the hope evaporates - the duck disappears into the ice.' The duck could save itself by flying away but it doesn't have the strength in its wings, so all it can do is bury itself under the ice; the human waits for it to pop up for air, and chases it desperately over the ice until darkness falls:

It was time to head unsuccessfully back to barracks from this chance hunt. The man cursed himself for wasting so much energy on a mad pursuit. Hunger had prevented him from thinking clearly, formulating a decent plan to deceive the duck; the impatience of famishment had ruined everything.

Even so, he didn't want to eat it; the idea was to offer it to the foreman in exchange for being taken off the dreaded night shift. But the man in question - Shalamov, or some version of him - has not learnt the art of duck-hunting in his useless civilised life up to that point:

He had not been taught to think about the possibility of such a hunt; his brain could not correctly resolve the series of unexpected questions raised. He had been taught to live in a world where his own [hunting] decisions were not necessary. [...] It was extraordinarily difficult to find oneself in sudden charge of one's own [physical] destiny...

The Maoist-Leninist argument that bourgeois intellectuals should learn to grow their own food misses the point that the modern division of labour allows *everyone* to escape the tribal chaos of survivalist life; instead of this liberating 'civilisation', where people can focus on their 'vocations' in collective security, everyone in Kolyma is reduced to short-term careerist tacticking: the foreman also sees the duck, and thinks of giving it to his boss, and the foreman's boss sees it too, and thinks of giving it to *his* boss - or better, his boss's wife - and thereby winning a 'safe future'. But the duck dies somewhere in the dark before any of the humans can lay their hands on it.

### 'Biznesmen'

The details of Kolya Ruchkin's 'business' schemes matter less than Shalamov's decision to turn to them next: among the horrors of camp life, there is something uniquely memorable about Ruchkin's instinct for profit, which extends to blowing off his own fingers in pursuit of commercial advantage within the Kolyma economy. 'The bosses did what they could to dissuade the self-harmers,' Shalamov calmly recounts. Ruchkin nevertheless found a niche of well-fed warmth and security within the system, and used it, for as long as he was able, to push his own mercantile advantage by trading in cigarettes, lunch rations, and other prized wares. 'Get fucked, this is my business'; like a good capitalist baron, Ruchkin extended this motto even to those 'workers' and 'partners' he dragged into his schemes.

The fact that Shalamov is not really judgmental of anyone trying to survive in the utterly squalid camp environment does not absolve his reader from asking what these fevered memories, collected in the early sixties, are *for*. Again and again we are drawn to a distinction between meaningful work, which is rendered impossible in Shalamov's Kolyma, and mere animal survivalism - which, as the world's contemporary slums in their infinite variety attest, can and *will* always take creative modern

forms, at least as long as there is either desperation or greed in the world, which could be quite a while. With the benefit of hindsight we can now easily see that the Leninist dream of a commerceless society produces its predatory, mafiaesque opposite, while Wall Street just ratchets up the stakes (and the sophistication of available 'instruments' of predation). The meaningfulness of work, understood as happy service to some freely held vision or other of humanity ('humanism'), is utterly unconnected to personal gain (at least beyond a certain point); it begins where the latter ends. And yet the human being is needy, and often worse; no talk of vocational self-fulfilment can begin until a degree of financial and spiritual independence is reached which is demanding on multiple levels for any 21st-century humanist: there is not yet enough money in the world to allow us all to live comfortably and enjoy our 'professions' without having to worry how much money they bring in, and even if there were, most of us would not yet feel comfortable trusting our societies to provide said minimum for us while we focused on them (not least because many of us have developed expensive and unnecessary tastes). The enduring value of Shalamov's humanism lies less in its forensic dissection of a specific society - Stalin's - from which humanity can draw (and has drawn) obvious historical lessons about the extreme dangers of totalitarianism: it is rather in its general *plaidoyer* for an end to all possible forms of unnecessary economic predation. Ruchkin is recognisable as a dodgy real estate agent in our world; his type does not automatically disappear with the disappearance of gulags. The full measure of the horror of Shalamov's Kolyma can only be taken against the *total* opportunity cost of camp arrangements: a healthy society, Shalamov suggests, is one in which Ruchkin's petty profiteering is no longer necessary, and where everyone has enough money and freedom to create what she deems to be useful.

### 'Kaligula'

A bureaucracy built on a principle of totalitarian violence will always elicit absurd justifications from scared functionaries. The decision to place a horse in solitary confinement 'does not even seem strange' to those carrying out the order: if ordered work is not done, then *someone* must be held responsible, even if it is no human's fault; anthropomorphising the horse who has underdelivered is as logical and self-interested a conclusion as Roman Emperor Caligula's famous decision to make his

yes-saying horse a consul. One of the implicated humans, Ardatyev, is happy with this solution: 'I punish human beings every day; I'm not going to feel sorry for a horse.' Beating the thing had failed; it now belonged with the other 'enemies of humankind' and 'members of the intelligentsia' in the Soviet prison system.

### 'Artist Lopaty' ('Artist of the Shovel')

How will humanism survive this slavery? The figure of 'Christ' returns to the stage again here, his spirits immeasurably lifted by a new boss with the appearance of a conscience. Kotochkin's drunken abuse will hurt all the more because he has promised so much - not just money, better rations and a more humane brigade, but fair recognition of Christ's suffering as one of the 'old hands'. This was a foreign-educated man - a reader and dancer and sportsman - who embodied the promise of culture in an animal environment: 'He probably even knew who Einstein was.' And yet the quadrilingual Kotochkin was dragged from the good life in Harbin and made to pay for his father's sins; he was still a child in the economy of the world's sufferings, and his resentment at his fall in station - he was serving fifteen years - bubbles over in drink. Even Kotochkin's right-hand man Oska, 'a former history teacher' who ought to know better, ends up denying Christ the mercy the reader still dares to expect of Kolyma's greatest souls. The appearance of decency in Kotochkin's brigade - an illusion which lasts for weeks - ends up being worse (and more memorable) than the open exploitation Christ faced in other barracks. Kotochkin and Oska manipulate the feelings of their men to squeeze more work - and hence more profit for themselves - out of them.

There would be something touching about the way Christ seems to take Kotochkin's throwaway comment about his being an 'artist of the shovel' to heart, except that we are forewarned in this chapter that Christ was already one of those who had learned to expect nothing of new bosses. And yet even Christ begins to think at one point that this boss not only 'understands' but also 'feels' the extent of his spiritual effort to keep showing up for work: as a consequence, Christ 'really did start working harder' for Kotochkin, appreciative of a ration he knew he didn't officially deserve for his meagre output. And then Kotochkin's generosity is thrown back in Christ's face as a brutal reminder of who's in charge: a thirst for justice and fair pay in such an unfair environment, a thirst which

Christ dares to dream for a moment might be quenched with this boss, is quickly interpreted as arrogance by those with a shred more power (who have also been wronged themselves). Shalamov is not the only mid-century intellectual to observe that culture does not provide automatic inoculation against such spiritual disease; if German concentration camp guards could listen to Beethoven in the morning before their shifts, as Adorno and countless others wryly observed, then Shalamov's Kolyma is no different; Kotochkin may love reading and dancing, but that ends up making him a worse and more diabolically intelligent boss than if he had just been an unlettered brute. The limits of humane gesturing in the camp are clearly delineated: the phrase 'artist of the shovel' is the work of an insult comic, not a friend.

By contrast, the one truly friendly phrase from this chapter comes from someone Christ has long forgotten:

As with all prisoners [in Kolyma], Christ never knew where exactly the new people in his life came from. Some stayed a short time, others longer, but all were apt to disappear without saying goodbye, either because they died or because they were transferred without warning [as Christ himself had been to Kotochkin's brigade].

[...] This kaleidoscope, this symphony of endless new faces didn't wear Christ down as such. He simply didn't have time to think about it. 'Don't waste time worrying about new bosses, Christ. There is only one of you, and many bosses lie ahead.' Christ couldn't remember anything about the joker and philosopher in the camp who had once uttered these playful words. But they were important precisely because of the jocular solidarity in which they had been offered to him.

## 'RUR'

'Weren't we just robots?' Shalamov asks rhetorically of his 1938 stint in the 'RUR', Kolyma's 'prison within a prison' and 'camp within a camp'.  
Alas,

alloyed to the metallic unconsciousness of robots there was something still human in us. [...] Only twenty or thirty years later

do we find the strength for comparison in our efforts to resurrect time, its colours and the feeling of its passing.

At the time the most we experienced was a vague, aching physical happiness of muscles consumed by hunger when for even a moment, an hour, a day, the mine, the work, the hated toil could be avoided. Forced labour and death were synonyms, not only for imprisoned and doomed 'enemies of the people', but also for camp bosses and Moscow.

Prisoners were sent to the 'RUR' for 'slacking' or otherwise 'failing to fulfil quotas', but not, crucially, for 'refusing to work'; as we have already seen, 'refusal to work in camp was a crime punishable by death. They shot you after three such refusals, three failures to show up, three acts of will. [...] We had no strength left for work, but we were not refuseniks.' The daily routine of the RUR had certain advantages over the rest of the camp (at one point Shalamov 'wanted only one thing: for the RUR never to end'), but he also knew first-hand 'the insecurity of those who never trust their luck' and the sensitivity of prisoners to 'broken promises'. Sure enough, the wretched Garanin reenters the story and orders Shalamov back to the mine.

### 'Bogdanov'

An NKVD man 'with polished fingernails', Bogdanov worked through the 'shooty season' of 1938 in Kolyma's 'deaf taiga':

The storekeeper brought fresh produce daily to the boss's door, while the lackeys rolled 200-litre spirit barrels along taiga roads laid for this purpose. Liquor was the most important thing in Kolyma, as Bogdanov had been well taught. What about a dog? No, Bogdanov didn't have a dog. No cats either.

[...] Bogdanov assured us that he would spread order among the fascists. The Soviet approach to corrections, he said, embraced both reform and retribution, and he promised a full measure of the latter.

Bogdanov's character is laid bare to the prisoners in 'the new boss's first literary work', *Order No. 1*:

It has become apparent to me that the prisoners' area has degenerated, and that camp discipline has been forgotten there. This expresses itself in a failure to stand to attention as well as in insufficient saluting of bosses.

In view of the fact that this represents a breach of the basic laws of Soviet authority, I categorically submit...

Bogdanov is described as uninterested in either industrial production or the arts; he is a wife-beating and prisoner-beating alcoholic, but it is above all *spiritual* sadism, not physical violence, which drives him:

'These letters have arrived for you, see?' I hadn't heard from my wife in two years - there was no way to contact her - so I had no idea what had become of her or our young daughter. And suddenly I could see her handwriting - not just one letter, but several. My shaking hands reached out automatically for them.

Bogdanov held the letters up to my face. 'There goes your mail, you Fascist piece of shit!' He proceeded to tear them up and throw the scraps onto the fire. I had waited two years through blood, death and forced labour in the Kolyma goldmines for nothing.

I turned and left the room without seeking the usual permission. Bogdanov's howls of drunken laughter continue to ring in my ears 25 years later.

And yet Shalamov is still capable of the following sentence: 'One could forgive Bogdanov everything - his making a mockery of the prisoners, his hopelessness as a manager, his arrogance.' Kolyma is so far beyond the pale of liberal humanism that self-righteousness and indignation at private violations is relativised: no individual person, not even Bogdanov, was as cynical as the system itself.

### 'Inzhenyer Kiselyov'

Shalamov rams the desperation home with the story of a man 'whose soul I did not understand':

A young engineer, 30 or so, an energetic worker and recent graduate, Kiselyov arrived in the Far North to complete an

obligatory three-year internship. He was one of the few bosses to read Pushkin, Lermontov and Nekrasov, as his library card showed, but above all he was a non-partisan figure, insofar as he had not been sent to verify anything in particular for his superiors. And yet, despite the fact that he had not crossed paths with prisoners on his life's journey to that point, Kiselyov revealed himself to be the most brutal butcher of all.

I must admit that the 'and yet, despite the fact that...' is my own addition; Shalamov doesn't even bother to stress the contrast:

A dark, sadistic thirst for murder lived in Kiselyov's heart, and in the autocratic lawlessness of Kolyma this thirst found an outlet, an opportunity for development and growth. [...] After the day's work was done, Kiselyov, unable to rest, stormed from barrack to barrack looking for the man that he felt like insulting and beating the shit out of that day.

It was the ferocity as well as the frequency of the beatings which distinguished Kiselyov from the other bosses; he would get stuck in with his boots and kick his victim half to death - if the victim was lucky. The 'active relish' of Kiselyov's mortal beatings aroused the shame and outrage even of those 'whose feelings had been dulled by years of confinement, those who had seen it all before and acquiesced to the great indifference that the camp bred in people.' This jolt was a good thing:

It was terrible to see the camp, and not a single person in the world needs to know such a camp first-hand. The experience of the camp is negative in its entirety, down to the last minute. A person only gets worse, and it cannot be otherwise. There are many different things that a human being shouldn't see, but seeing them on its own is not the worst of it: the real problems start when a person starts to feel - forever - that this scum is part of her own life, that her moral standards are shifting beneath her feet, and that she is adopting the ethos of the thug of her own free will. [...] Occasions for such corruption were always plentiful. This question of ethical borders was vital for the prisoner; indeed, it became the most important question in her life. Am I still a human being or not?

The 'Stalinist scythe of death' cut everyone down - prisoners and non-prisoners - with random indifference: 'The camp was a tremendous test of an individual's moral reserves, and even of elementary human morality. Although 99% of people failed the test, those few who passed it died together with all those who fought only for themselves and were obliterated anyway.'

The corollary of this is that there was never any gratitude for anything, not even the fake kind when we flatter our bosses and they know this is what we are doing but smile politely anyway. Kiselyov was not the kind of predator who could be bought off with kindness, like bringing him a duck to eat; 'Kiselyov knew how to keep score with the prisoners, and he taught his wife the same philosophy. [...] [Taking the duck off our hands, she 'rewarded' us with] two scraps of bread. Disappointed, we gulped the bread down - Savchenko got the bigger bit, while I got the smaller one.' By 1939, Shalamov has internalised the law of the Kolyma jungle:

Surviving the deadly year of 1938 by complete chance, I resolved not to doom myself without a fight to my familiar sufferings, to the daily, hourly humiliations, the beatings, the mockery, the constant wrangling with guards, cooks, and bosses of various stripes for a piece of something or other to eat, all in order not to die a hungry death today and live to do the same dance all over again tomorrow. [...] I found a way to get Kiselyov off my back.

This involved risk of course, but 'not one of the old Kolyma hands counted on returning alive from the North'; Shalamov didn't kill Kiselyov himself - he invented a blackmail ruse to get transferred to the infirmary instead, and never saw Kiselyov again - but when news of Kiselyov's inevitable sudden death six months later went round the camp, Shalamov admitted that it was 'a day of special celebration for the prisoners'.

### 'Lyubov Kapitana Tolli ('Captain Tolly's Love')

The old insurance man Rabinovich did not want to die, and he leveraged his family's regular parcels to him; bribery secured him a relatively easy

job in Kolyma's otherwise mortal 'special zone'. Shalamov, by contrast, took a different view of his own predicament:

I wrote and told my family I don't need parcels. If I survive, then I will do it off my own bat. I will only be indebted to myself. [...] There's nothing chivalrous about it; we're just so far beyond good and evil here that we are outside humanity entirely. After what I've seen, I don't want to owe anyone anything, not even my own wife.

Shalamov is only interested in talking to the loquacious Rabinovich, or indeed in anything at all, 'after lunch'. Although friendship in the camp was impossible, they at least reached a point where they would 'treat each other with human respect': Rabinovich shared the 'elderly penchant for telling one's own story to the first passerby in a bid to leave some life behind on Earth'; and besides, as a 'trapman', he had energy left at the end of a day's work which Shalamov did not have the force to imagine:

After a day in the goldmine, a person would have thought she lacked the energy to climb out of it. And yet she found a way. After half an hour or perhaps even a whole one, she crawled up to the gates of the prison tower and through to the barracks. There was the usual Soviet slogan to welcome her: 'Work is a matter of honour, a source of glory, an opportunity for valour and heroism.' You slithered to the mess, slurped a few drops from a bowl, and collapsed onto your bunk. In the morning it all started over.

Not everyone went hungry, although I never fully understood how or why. When the evenings got warmer and lighter in the spring, a new round of games started: the wonderful 'Live Bait' series. A food ration was stuck on an empty chair until the day's starving victim reached out for it. At that point in the spectacle, the predators came out of their corners and beat the skeletal thief to death.

Shalamov's scarf is so full of lice that it moves on its own; in the end, 'almost happy that I had nothing left to hang onto', he gives up fighting to keep the thieves at bay and falls into a deep spring sleep with sweet dreams, 'perhaps because my body no longer had to contend with

thousands of tiny hostile enemies swarming around its neck.’ Rabinovich didn’t help against the thieves, but Shalamov didn’t expect him to (‘in the camp it was every man for himself’); still, Rabinovich *did* find a way to slip a grateful Shalamov a lunch pass ‘to comfort me for my loss’. In return, Shalamov ‘fought off the armies of sleep invading my whole body’ and forced himself to listen, one evening, to Rabinovich’s story about his daughter in Moscow. An American Navy Captain had asked for her hand in marriage, but Rabinovich was reluctant to offer his consent because he feared that, by so doing, he would never see her again. Shalamov was ‘bewildered’ by all these dramas: “‘You’re nearly 70, and a reasonable man,” I said. “Let’s celebrate tomorrow.” [...] Not even an earthquake could have kept me a moment longer from sleep, from the oblivion of sleep.’

It was a year before Rabinovich and Shalamov saw each other in the camp again; his daughter had married Captian Tolly in the meantime, but Soviet authorities had refused to let her travel (‘Stalin took such international marriages as a personal insult’). Rabinovich reported with ‘boundless happiness’ that his daughter had ‘escaped’ to America via Stockholm, and that Soviet authorities didn’t dare to draw attention to such cases. Rabinovich survived in captivity until his death in 1954.

### ‘Krest’ (‘The Cross’)

*I borrowed my father’s well-thumbed copy of The Stranger (1942) and greedily consumed it in one sitting on a train from Frederikssund to Copenhagen. I was spellbound. How could I not be? There in the novel was the bright Algerian sun and the shimmering Mediterranean Sea; outside my window was the drab Danish sky—the color of a pâté, forever portending rain. With every page I longed more intensely for the spare beauty of Algiers, to sense what Camus elsewhere describes as “a life that tastes of warm stone”—a life that, in the hard lyricism of his prose, seemed simple yet inexhaustibly rich. At the end of the novel, when the condemned Meursault is visited in his cell by the prison chaplain, he is asked if he ever wished for another life. He answers a little evasively. After the*

*chaplain demands to know exactly how he pictured this other life, Meursault, finally, responds with a shout: “One where I could remember this life!”*

*[...] When at last he emerged from what he described as the twin torments of depression and writer’s block, Camus seemed cautiously poised to embark on a promising new path in his work—a descent inward that would finally allow him, he felt, to do justice to the silence and the sunlight that was his creative wellspring. ‘A man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened,’ he wrote in 1958. [...] Camus could not believe in God because to do so, as he put it in ‘Summer in Algiers’, is to ‘sin against life’ by hoping for another, thus ‘evading the implacable grandeur of the one we have.’ [...] But as William Faulkner wrote in his obituary of Camus, ‘When the door shut for him he had already written on this side of it that which every artist who also carries through life with him that one same foreknowledge and hatred of death, is hoping to do: I was here.’ More than that, Camus left behind a body of work that appeals to those of us who are still here to be here.<sup>5</sup>*

Morten Hoi Jensen

The young director of the 2020 film *Sententsiya*, Dmitry Rudakov, describes his interest in Shalamov in the following terms:

[His] stories have different titles, but the same themes recur, as if he was worried his earlier stories might not survive. [...] In the story ‘Sententsiya’, for example, he describes a transcendental experience. The hero had a [pre-camp] ‘self’ which dreamt of becoming a poet. But in the camp all poetry vanished: there was only swearing and ordering. [...] And then suddenly there is a

---

<sup>5</sup> Morten Hoi Jensen, ‘Without God or Reason’, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/without-god-or-reason>, 6/1/2021 (accessed 24/1/2021).

word which flashes in the protagonist's head and connects him to his former life, his full self. 'Sententsiya!'<sup>6</sup>

The blind priest who is the protagonist of the next story in *Artist Lopaty* is not in Kolyma at all, but he suffers all the same at the hands of the Revolution. Denied a livelihood by Soviet atheism, he is also denied his eyesight via glaucoma, and forced to pawn everything to keep himself and his wife alive (the four kids aren't much good). The very last thing to go to the pawnshop - stripped for its gold - is the priest's old cross: 'Is God really in it?' he asks. The only thing God *is* in is the relationship between the two old husks reduced to the final extremity. His wife can't bring herself to tell her daughter that the grapes she sends home are rotten by the time they reach her, just as she can't muster the cruelty to tell her husband that the three goats he lovingly keeps - Mashka, Ella and Tonya - cost the family more than they bring in. No longer 'fat', and 'driven half-mad from hunger', she still can't bring herself to strip her husband's dearest possession for parts; he can't bear *her* suffering either, so he fumbles around and does it for her.

### 'Kursy'

#### *FIRST AND FOREMOST:*

*A person prefers not to remember the bad stuff. This feature of human nature makes existence easier. Your memory strives to relive the good times and the light, and to put the heavy and dark business behind it. Friendship does not prosper in the cauldron of life's toughest conditions. Our memory prefers to arrange the past into a whole to which it is not indifferent; it picks out the happier and easier parts and, if we are lucky, weaves them into a meaningful story for us. This is all a kind of defensive reaction of the organism, a distortion of the truth of how it all was. But what is truth anyway?*

---

<sup>6</sup> Dmitry Rudakov, in Ksenia Reutova, 'Shalamov: Bitoe Steklo', <https://www.colta.ru/articles/cinema/26311-kseniya-reutova-intervyu-dmitriy-rudakov-film-sententsii-varlam-shalamov-poslednie-dni>, 25/12/2020 (accessed 24/1/2021).

*The best times I had during my long years in Kolyma were the months I spent training as a paramedic in the camp hospital near Magadan.*

Shalamov introduces what is by far the longest chapter in *Artist Lopaty* with these existentialist musings. He is suggesting that he remembers this 'coursework' time more clearly than the other bits of his imprisonment, and hence that the events of the (much shorter) prior chapters were perhaps even worse than his *post facto* descriptions of them - a frankly bracing thought.

The food at the hospital was 'much thicker' than it was in the mines; you could even go back for seconds. No one thought about the 'coursework' itself, only about how to prolong her student stint. The first exam, in any case, was a Russian language dictation in which Turgenev - no doubt turning in his grave - was used as the source text. For Shalamov, starving for years in the mines, the whole surreal experience of an *exam* at such a point in his life brought his long-forgotten memories of university in Moscow flooding back to him. The sudden random importance of these exams - essentially high-school-level tests in various subjects - for his prolonged access to calories (a total divorce from the spirit of real learning) is not lost on Shalamov: in a dictatorship, you never know which piece of random information might save your life. He somehow passes chemistry and makes it into the next stage:

I didn't do anything for two whole days; I just lay on my bunk, breathed in the stench of the barracks, and looked up at the smoke-stained ceiling. A very important - nay, an extraordinarily important - phase in my life was beginning. I felt it with my whole being. I had set off on a path which might end up saving me. I suddenly needed to start preparing for life, not death. I wasn't sure which was harder. [...] Although I was nearly forty, I threw myself into it with body and soul. I also counted on being able to help people and settle some old scores. In short, I hoped to become human again.

One of Shalamov's new classmates was the Tatar writer Min Shabaev:

Shabaev knew Russian very well and took all his notes in Russian, but only years later did I discover that his prose writing

was all in Tatar. Many in camp do their best to keep their pasts a secret. This doesn't only make sense for former investigators and prosecutors. As an intellectual, a worker of the mind, a 'four-eyes', writers always inspire hatred in prison settings, both among the inmates and among the bosses. Shabaev figured this out very quickly.

Next to Shabaev sat Bokis, an 'enormous Latvian' who would later become the Kolyma ping-pong champion: 'Bokis had been to the taiga and seen the goldmines. He was terrified by the spectre of the whole thing, but for the wrong reasons: he didn't fear what he really ought to have feared most, which was the corruption of his spirit.' Shalamov goes round the room telling the stories of his new classmates, exercising his returning curiosity as he does so. When the name Alexander Fleming is mentioned in class, he feels 'a sharp jab of resentment' at the fact that he has never heard it: 'I had spent nearly ten years between prison and the camp, and hadn't seen a newspaper or a book or anything since 1937. I'd heard that there had been a war, and that there was this new thing called penicillin, [...] but Fleming?!' Shalamov connects his frustration to the character forged before the beginning of his Kolyma ordeal; if the gulag indeed made one's behaviour and sense of self deteriorate, an easing of conditions would only return one to where one had been upon arrival:

I repeatedly made the observation that imprisonment, especially in the north, conserves people as if in jars: their spiritual development and gifts freeze at the point of arrest. This stasis extends until the day of release. A person held captive for twenty years acquires no ordinary life experience in that time. The schoolboy stays a schoolboy, and the wise man stays wise, but gets no wiser.

There were even women - eight of them - in Shalamov's new class. If the constant camp surveillance made 'love in its traditional and eternal form' impossible, the presence of these women was at least 'a reminder of an earlier life', a 'more important consideration' than many of the sexually frustrated and constantly humiliated prisoners realised at the time. The only forum where heavily guarded exchange was possible - the so-called 'culture brigade' - was a 'deception' and a parody of the real thing, but it was much better than slaving in a goldmine. Many of

these women were family members of executed men, though that naturally changed nothing of their underlying fate as victims, of which there were only two relevant types:

The difference between a piece of shit and an honest human being is observable in the following context: when a piece of shit is wrongly sent to prison, she assumes that she is the only innocent one, and that everyone else is an enemy of the state and the people, a criminal and an arsehole. An honest person, upon finding herself unjustly in prison, realises that her bunkmate might be in the same position.

The 'teachers' in Shalamov's class were mostly enthusiastic about their teaching: 'They missed the living word and the transmission of knowledge which had constituted the meaning of their lives prior to arrest.' Olga Semenyak, for instance, a former lecturer in the Faculty of Diagnostic Therapy at the Kharkov Institute of Medicine, offered Shalamov books from her library for general evening reading - Blok first, then the Bible:

I returned the book to her a few days later. The agnostic abandon with which I conducted my worldly affairs never coagulated into Christian faith. But there were none who conducted themselves with more dignity in camp than the believers. Corruption threatened the souls of all, and only the religious resisted.

Of course, not all the doctors and medical specialists were humanists: some 'hated the prisoners, [...] tyrannised them, humiliated them daily and hourly, picked on them in myriad ways, generally insulted them and abused their unlimited authority over them.' It is as if Shalamov is busy here delineating two permanent kinds of people in all walks of life: those who need to compensate for something inside themselves via deliberate cruelty to others, and those who have nothing to prove, no need to elevate themselves by making others worse off, and who are hence ready to contribute to something genuinely prosocial. Only the latter have any chance of surviving a gulag with their spirits intact; it is superhumanly difficult not to feel the need to compensate for being permanently cold, hungry and exhausted. Those characters who most enjoyed treating prisoners like dirt, Shalamov stresses, also pledged the loudest and most heartfelt allegiance to Stalin. Twentieth-century

dictatorships from left to right appear under this lens as magnifiers of hierarchical instincts: not everyone wants to do away with dictatorial social structures because some people actually want a steady supply of people to whom to be cruel - much more than they want any liberal-democratic 'negative' freedom to cultivate an independent personality. This is precisely why someone like Dr. Fyodor Loskutov, 'a man who devoted his entire activity as camp doctor to helping others, and prisoners above all', was only punished by the regime:

The help [Loskutov] rendered was not only medical. He was always helping someone out, writing recommendation letters, feeding people who needed it. [...] And so for twenty long years, all he got from above was time added onto his sentence.

As Shalamov points out, it was much harder for someone like Loskutov to 'do good works' in the 1930s and 1940s than it had been for his Russian counterparts in the 1860s (a period of 'moral improvement' rather than 'degeneration'), but this 'exceptional figure' somehow managed it: 'Loskutov was not very literate in a formal sense; he arrived at medicine with little prior education. But he read a lot, observed well, thought about what he saw, and exercised his judgement freely and independently - a self-made Renaissance man.'

Shalamov skips over a long cast of mixed and interesting classmates confronted by the same situation: 'Every day we were tortured by doubts: would they suddenly close the course? Constant and terrifying rumours to that effect kept me awake at night.' The final exam approaches, and everyone passes, but Shalamov is still proud of himself; the path to selfhood and freedom from recognition is not complete without a modicum of recognition, without which we all shrivel over time:

We had become part of the great human medical corps. Both doctors and the sick now looked at us as such. We were no longer lumpen figures in a crowd, but trained and important specialists. For the first time in Kolyma, I felt necessary: to the hospital, to the camp, to life, and to myself. I felt like a human being with a full palate of rights, at whom no one could shout or jeer. [...] The shards of my broken self received the clay, the cement they needed to piece themselves back together.

The course ended, and the younger guys found themselves with girlfriends in the group, just as you would expect in normal circumstances. But the older ones did not let any amorous feelings get in the way of the future they knew was coming. Relationships were a poor bet in the camp game, and we had had no choice over the years but to become masters of self-restraint.

What did develop in me, however, was an acute sense of self-worth. If someone else knew something better than I did, I took it as a kind of personal insult. I felt I owed it to myself to have all the answers.

Our knowledge grew steadily, but above all, our curiosity widened; we asked the doctors everything, even stupid questions, but they never treated them as stupid. [...] Medical terminology lost its aura of impenetrability. I started reading specialist journal articles and books without my initial feeling of helplessness and fear of failure. [...] As a paramedic] I was obliged to recognise all immediate dangers to human life. It was thrilling and unsettling in equal measure. I was afraid not to measure up to my eminent duty.

### 'Pervyy Chekist'

Prison, as Shalamov has by now firmly established, was a cakewalk in comparison to the goldmine, but still: 'Prison is no place for the sly. You are face to face with people for 24 hours a day. No one has enough energy to pretend the whole time to be other than he is. [...] The truth emerges - not created by the prison, but distilled out of it.' While prison 'does not break the will' as the gulag does, there is still plenty to fear: alarms caused an inevitable physiological dread reflex. The open torture of prisoners only began towards the end of 1937 (this story was from earlier that year), but there had always been two schools of thought when it came to coaxing confessions: immediate psychological pressure, and leaving the victim alone with her own thoughts. Gavriil Andreev - the 'first Chekist', and by now 'a veteran of both Tsarist and Soviet exile' - was subjected to months of prison alongside Shalamov, and struggled out loud to understand what had become of him twenty years on from the Bolshevik Revolution. Despite his adversarial loquaciousness, the epileptic Andreev was 'much loved' among the

prisoners ('to the extent that love was possible in such a place'), and he kindly refused to let his cellmates know what was waiting for them in Kolyma, even though he was one of few who already knew at least some of what would be in store for them: 'There was no way to talk about it,' Shalamov says initially. 'It wasn't because it was a secret; it was because he would have felt it was a truth that mustn't be believed.'

As an 'advanced' inmate Andreev naturally understands - even better than the other, less hardened prisoners do - that there is a big difference between a bullet, a ten-year sentence in one camp and a five-year sentence in another: the point is not to try to liberate or exonerate oneself from absurd charges, but always to wrangle for the least dreadful possible punishment. When Shalamov suggests to his reader that destiny 'depends on a series of chance events, and even more often does not depend on chance at all', he is calling us to accept with courage that we may all become victims of forces beyond our control. Prison was a place which, for all its cruelty, intensified this sense of humanistic solidarity (witness the prisoners' heartfelt concern for Andreev's violent epilepsy); by contrast, camp life - the cold, the hunger, and above all the soul-destroying *work* - destroyed all humanism, leaving the individual entirely alone against the elements. Shalamov finally concludes from the hindsight of 1964 that, far from having had 'no way to talk about it', the naturally loose-lipped Andreev generously kept this 'truth' from his cellmates in 1937 - most of whom were still at the start of their journeys in the system - even as he let other, more trivial secrets from his past loose in the cauldron of prison life.

### 'Vejsmanist'

Death - 'the great democrat' - is the omnipresent enemy of any prisoner-paramedic with a conscience; even for a qualified doctor, it is not easy to treat dying prisoners 'unless one has become a complete bastard'. Shalamov, clearly remembering his own experiences (real and/or imagined; this chapter begins with the dream of a bear destroying 'irreplaceable' medical notes in the taiga), introduces 'Andreev' as the paramedic-subject of this chapter; as with the 'Christ' device employed earlier in *Artist Polaty*, this surprise recourse to 'Andreev' serves to 'democratise' the narrative itself - not to turn Shalamov into the Messiah or instrumentalise Andreev for Shalamov's purposes, but to 'universalise' Shalamov's individual experience as humbly and

unselfishly as he can. Andreev has retroactively become part of Shalamov's sense of his own self, just as the horror of Kolyma led the author of the *Kolyma Tales* to identify - subconsciously at first, then consciously (if always ironically) in his writing - with the sufferings of Christ.

Kolyma's hospitals were constantly full of prisoners trying to run away from 'the most terrifying thing of all: the lethal and annihilating work.' But there were also doctors - like the 'cosmopolitan', Brussels-educated polyglot Dr. Umansky - who had chosen voluntarily to serve in Kolyma as a way of hiding in plain sight from the regime. Umansky, who found morgue work 'easier on his conscience' than treating the living, shares 'tea' ('no bread') in unwashed cups ('the air here is cleaner than the water') with the heretical 'Weissmanist' Andreev. The conversation shifts to the only thing that matters: 'We just have to survive Stalin,' Umansky whispers to his interlocutor. Even though he openly dissents from Stalinist genetics, nothing could be farther from daily life in Kolyma than such 'scientific disputes'; not even the loud-mouthed Andreev is physically able to voice his agreement with Umansky's prognosis:

Andreev stayed silent in admiration, unable as he was to overcome himself and speak. This instinctive, intense silence was a behaviour which years of camp life - with its accusations, investigations and interrogations - had drilled into him; he couldn't just break this rule now, throw it out the window. [...] 'Quite right of you to keep your mouth shut,' Umansky replied.

Umansky is said to have died 'on 4 March 1953', or in other words, the day before Stalin; his work on linguistics 'was not continued by anyone'. Shalamov knows that this fate could have been his; he is somehow responsible, eleven years later, for writing Umansky (as well as Andreev and countless others) into his story.

### 'V Bolnitsu' ('To The Hospital')

The paramedical *training* may have been the highlight of Shalamov's years in Kolyma, but the work itself was destined to be hell; this was already intimated in the previous chapter. Everyone in the camp was sick all the time, but of course 'order' had to be maintained, which meant

that only a few could ever be treated at any given time. Anyone who could *possibly* work was forced to do so.

'Christ' desperately wanted to work in the camp hospital - not in the field - but of course the hospital was a 'privilege'; expressing his wish to his sadistic paramedic superior only got Christ packed off to even worse work: 'The much desired hospital was only about four kilometres away, but to get there one needed written authorisation. This medic knew that he was the master of Christ's life-and-death fate. And Christ knew this too.' Upon his return to the 'cold, hungry and painful [unfreedom] back in the thick of the Kolyma experience', Christ finds an old boss who keeps him alive by plying him with herrings: 'They didn't know each other's names, but the coincidence that brought them briefly back together suddenly became a force capable of transforming human life. [...] They didn't talk about it, but they both understood it and felt it: Christ had a hidden right, and his old boss a duty.'

### 'June'

'Andreev' returns to centre stage here; Shalamov has been at great pains throughout *Artist Polaty* to suggest just how much his memory and general sense of time, reality and self were affected by the chronic malnutrition and exhaustion of camp life, and his *Kolyma Tales* are hence better understood as *post facto* literary reconstructions than as literal autobiography. We are somewhere in 1941 or 1942 here, but 'Andreev' is down the mine, and unlike the foremen, he has no energy spare 'to take an interest in such things as wars'; news of the German bombardments of Sevastopol, Kiev and Odessa were as relevant to daily life in Kolyma as 'reports of war in Paraguay or Bolivia'. Still, the dream of being 'liberated' from the mines for a shot at a more pleasant fate - on the Soviet front line against Hitler, no less - does the rounds among the miners. Bread rations in the camp are suddenly cut by half - 'a terrible development' - while the mines remain 'as cold and dark as usual', at least by mild June standards. The previous winter, Andreev had cried for the first time on the night shift (-20° underground and '-60° plus windchill factor' above):

It hadn't happened to him before, or at least not since the early years when he received letters from his mother which he was unable to read or remember without tears. But that was a long

time ago now. Why had he suddenly cried at this point? Powerlessness, loneliness, cold - Andreev was used to all these things, and had adapted to them by forcing himself to remember poems, whisper them inaudibly to himself. But in the extreme cold it was impossible to think. The human brain does not work in such conditions.

## 'May'

Even the odd remaining dogs in Kolyma were 'educated for malice' - poked with sticks, kept in barrels by their owners, and so on; 'Andreev' is once again the reluctant observing protagonist of this chapter deep in the war, where he is unlucky enough to be the bunkmate of a captured killer for two long weeks. Hungry as always, Andreev tries desperately to make his bread seem more filling by immersing it in boiling water, but as our narrator (i.e. Shalamov) tells us, 'no one paid any attention to Andreev's schemes. He was one of hundreds of thousands of luckless goners in Kolyma whose minds had long disappeared beyond the pale. [...] They said there was still conserved meat to be found, but this remained a legend for Andreev.' *Everything* - clothes, tools and medicine as well as food - began to run short until American 'presents' began arriving. Although the rumours that the American bread supply in particular would dry up were constant, Andreev was beyond worrying about anything: '*Che sarà sarà*. Another winter had just passed, and he was still alive, not least because he had given up ever guessing what might happen beyond the present evening.'

By this stage in the war - the Russians are said to be advancing on Berlin, so we would seem to be in 1945 - 'murder was proving contagious' in Kolyma. When the dreaded Brigadier Korolev - author of savage daily beatings - is bashed to death with a crowbar, Andreev, enjoying his turn to warm himself around a nearby fire with three other prisoners, does not even flinch:

Andreev maintained the same pose throughout the killing. None of the four men moved from where they were; none had the strength to abandon the elusive warmth of the fire. They all wanted to sit there right up to the last possible moment, until they were forced to move. But no one came to chase them off this time - after all, the Brigadier had just been murdered - and

Andreev was as happy about the whole thing as his comrades of the hearth.

Although such murders opened up career opportunities in Kolyma, Andreev had made a vow with himself 'never to become a brigadier; he would not seek salvation in the dangerous upper echelons of the camp hierarchy.' Instead, he manufactured an accident, got himself sent to hospital, and by the time he had recovered ('long comfortable days'), the war was over.

### 'V Banye'

Some of the dark jokes 'which only camp life could create' were reserved for the business of bathing, which 'no one liked':

How could this be? The refusal to bathe was a constant source of mystery for doctors and consternation for the bosses, who saw in it a form of general protest against the discipline of camp life, a sort of vague challenge to the established order. But a fact is a fact: [no one liked it. ...] What was the story? Could a person really reach such a state of moral annihilation that she could no longer be bothered washing away the filth and sweat which covered her dermatological conditions - at least to feel slightly cleaner for an hour? There is a Russian saying: 'Happy as if straight out of the bath.' There is real wisdom here, a celebration of the physical well-being which a person with a clean, washed body feels. Could people really lose their sense of themselves to the point that they failed to realise that a life without lice was better than a life spent in constant battle with them?

'Of course not,' Shalamov answers, but here the list of 'buts' begins: there was no extra time set aside for bathing (it was squeezed in either on the way to work or on the way home); the bathing experience itself (including the long queues) was almost always freezing cold, even by Kolyma standards; the empty barracks were 'disinfected' and ruthlessly 'tidied up' under the watch of the sanitary branch while the prisoners were bathing, which meant that patiently accumulated and vital objects for survival 'were routinely confiscated with official sanction'; there was not enough water to go around in the communal bath itself; the new

clothes one was given or forced to scramble for afterwards ('a lottery within a lottery') were more often than not dirty and wet ('it was excruciating to see grown men crying at the injustice'); and the 'disinfection chambers' for prisoners, heated with no temperature control, achieved no 'disinfection' whatsoever ('the doctors were perfectly aware of this, but of course there could be no [semblance of a patriotic] camp without them'). All in all, then, bathing day was a giant joke in which the individual prisoner could end up worse off than when she started, 'sacrificing sleep to dry her dirty new clothes near the furnace.'

### 'Klyuch Almaznyy' ('The Diamond Key')

*There are jokers in even the most desperate situations, because irony is the weapon of the weaponless.*

This seeming gift from heaven - not a literal key, but the name of a place with an abundance of firewood - allowed the narrator ('Shalamov' for short - it doesn't matter anymore who exactly it is) a break from the worst thing in Kolyma, namely the gold mine: 'The work in the mine killed people, and quickly. It's true you got a bigger ration, but in camp it was the big rations that were deadly, not the small ones.' Still, Shalamov was going to have to make do with one meal a day in his new Klyuch Almaznyy barracks, and the job - collecting firewood - was going to require progressively longer journeys into the surrounding wilderness (though of course 'longer marches meant less actual work'). The surprise, however, was waiting for him on the first evening: all those failing to meet 100% of their work quotas were to be denied bread the next day. Recognising the hopelessness of this situation ('such a regime was unheard of anywhere else in camp'), Andreev - we are now told it's him again - makes a run for it, and walks thirty kilometres in the early winter cold to a lumberjack station off the main road. The 'brigadier of the lumberjacks', Stepan Zhdanov, fed him and let him sleep by the fire:

He never asked me where I had come from or where I was going. I eternally cherish his discretion. I still remember the soup I had that night, the chocolaty smell of burnt porridge in the morning,

and the taste of the pipe he gave me to smoke on the road after wiping it clean with his arm.

I made it back to camp that evening, and sat down in the snow near the gate.

I'm about to go inside, and then it's over. Two delicious days of freedom after so many years of penal servitude. Now it's back to the lice, the frozen rock, the white steam, the hunger and the beatings. [...] 'You're off to the correctional mine,' I was duly told.

### 'Zelyonnyy Prokuror' ('The Green Judge')

*Why did he go back?* No one succeeded in running away: 'The exception proved the rule.' Pavel Krivoshey was a convicted fraudster, profit-hunting engineer and general philistine, the kind of minor psychopath unable to view culture as anything more than a means to the end of his own status and profit. The diabolically charming Krivoshey's wife Angelina chases him to Kolyma all the way from Kharkov, though of course she is unable to visit him when she gets there (meetings with imprisoned spouses were seldom arranged, but the promise of a meeting was naturally used to blackmail the women into sexual favours for local bosses). In general, wives - whether they too had been charged with crimes or had made the journey from desperation - were almost never put to work in the same place as their husbands, and transfers were quickly arranged if such a situation did by chance arise.

Angelina ends up in the seaside Kolyman capital Magadan; when the news of Krivoshey's escape breaks, he is assumed to have run to his wife, and she is duly arrested. But Krivoshey has taken the long road west instead, and ends up in Yakutsk after pretending on the way - plausibly enough to avoid suspicion - to be a geologist doing fieldwork. After duping the provincial Far Eastern authorities with his superficial knowledge of geology and foreign languages, he ends up settling in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol ('though of course he didn't go anywhere near his native Kharkov'). He survives in Mariupol for two years on forged documents before being discovered and sent back to Kolyma for another 10 years. 'Wars are won by those with stronger nerves,' Krivoshey was fond of repeating, but his wife was not as ruthless and cunning as he was in the war for survival. Krivoshey found ways to send

her money from Mariupol (she had of course helped him to escape in the first place), but this is also how he was eventually caught.

As a recidivist fraudster, Krivoshey was not a political prisoner or 'enemy of the people' as such: in many ways he was just the sort of person the regime needed. This total lack of threat made it easier for him in Kolyma: 'He wasn't interested in politics at all. [...] It was material ease which interested him, not spiritual.' A lot of the civilian women in Kolyma took a shining to Krivoshey on his return, but he carefully avoided their advances ('he didn't want any illegal, dangerous, punishable relationships'). He managed to get a comfortable factory position with his background in chemical engineering, and then used that as a basis to obtain other advantages. He said he had stopped writing to his wife (who left Magadan at the first opportunity after he was arrested again), but of course 'who knew if that was true?' Not even a genius of duplicity like Krivoshey, in short, had managed to escape the authorities forever; he only succeeded in carving out a degree of comfort for himself within the prison system.

In the 'romantic' early days of the Soviet forced labour experiment (i.e. the '20s, before Kolyma was established in 1932), escape attempts were not even punished with extra years - 'it seemed natural that prisoners should try to escape, and that guards would stop them; this was a fully understandable and legitimate state of affairs between two human groups.' 'Runners' were matter-of-factly punished - whether with beatings or solitary - and that was that. Orders eventually came from Moscow, but still, extra punishment for escape attempts was not really an issue in Kolyma until 1938 because of the presence of Eduard Berzin:

Berzin tried - not without some success - to solve in one go the twin Soviet problems of 'colonisation' of the harsh terrain and 'rehabilitation' of prisoners. A credit system offered the promise of release after two or three years of hard work, even for those on much longer sentences. Food and clothing were excellent, the work day was limited to six hours in winter and ten in summer, and prisoners were able to earn money to send back to their families, returning home with heads high and pockets full. Berzin did not believe in the rehabilitation of genuine criminals [who were unwilling to accept this bargain]; he knew too well that some adults are lost causes. [...] But the Kolyma cemeteries in those early years were all but empty; one would almost have thought

that death was impossible there. No one tried running away; escape would have been an idiotic wager.

This all changed after Berzin was shot in 1938; Kolyma became a 'special camp' for 'Trotskyists and recidivists', a place where 'enemies of the people' were to get the hell they deserved. After 1938, those who made a run for it did so in their first year, 'while they still had the blind hope... and the physical strength.'

Shalamov proceeds to offer a series of individual anecdotes, 'small lyrical episodes in the uniformly dark story of escape attempts from Kolyma.' The new goldmine in Chay-Ur'ya, past which Krivoshey had tramped years before, was slightly closer to Yakutsk and the path of civilisation ('the mainland' in camp jargon) than some of the earlier Kolyma outposts; as escape attempts via the 'green judge' of the vast Russian taiga increased, so too did official surveillance and retribution:

The green judge had always offered little hope, but over the years it offered less and less, until it promised none whatsoever. Located escapees were eventually shot on site. [...] Escape was in any case a major test of character - of physical endurance and spiritual willpower. [...] Hunger - acute hunger - was a constant threat. Even if members of an escape party were running precisely from hunger (and might have been expected to be used to it), there was always a vague danger of becoming food oneself. Such cases were naturally rare. But it did happen; most who spent a decade or more in the Far North in those years met a convicted cannibal. [...] A certain Solovyov talked willingly of the time he and a comrade, preparing an escape, invited a third person into the plot precisely 'in case we both got hungry'.

Which they did. But as throughout the book, Shalamov is reminding us that humanism simply cannot exist in extreme enough conditions: 'What can we ever reasonably demand of a hungry, hunted, half-human beast?' The limits of human endurance may vary from individual to individual, but they are real; questions of 'civilisation', 'morality' and 'meaning' only begin on something like a full stomach. And yet this 'civilisation' remains the common striving of all those who have once tasted it and been deprived of it:

All escapes were to the motherland, the continent, with the goal of breaking free of the taiga's tenacious paws and reaching *Russia* once again. [... There was] an imperative yearning for freedom, and a hatred of forced labour, physical labour; the camp could not inspire any other feeling in its prisoners. The same mocking words were to be found on the gates of every camp building, along with the name of their author [Stalin, 1930]: 'Work is a matter of honour, glory, valour and heroism.'

[...] This longing for freedom, this burning desire for the forest beyond the barbed wire, the guard towers, the rifles glistening in the sun, the beatings, the backbreaking and endless work, gives rise to a certain fatalism: I will be dead in a month or two anyway, just as my comrades keep dropping before my eyes. I might as well die in a moment of freedom instead of collapsing in a mine or ditch from exhaustion and hunger.

Of course, this 'forest' was also a suicide mission ('bears and lynxes are not the real problem; a person dies of her own helplessness in such a harsh clime'); it was in any case all but impossible to pool adequate resources for such a journey without arousing suspicion. Individuals like Krivoshey had slightly more chance, but it was not a coincidence that one of the more successful group attempts had been launched from a squad 'where there were no real old hands, no one so thoroughly poisoned and reduced by their Kolyma experience and oppressed by hunger, cold and violence as to be ready to turn the runners in for a mouthful of bread.'

After the war, the camp began filling with seasoned fighters and killers who had 'run from German, English and Russian captivity respectively.' The biggest and most ambitious escape plot, led by a certain Lt.-Col. Yanovskiy, ended in a 'war-like shootout' and mass punishment of the innocent. Not even those hardened by years of open conflict could escape the green judge's pitiless verdict: running away was a futile dream.

### 'Pervyy Zub' ('First Tooth')

This time Shalamov plays with the narrator device again by inventing a certain 'Sazonov' from whom he receives the draft of a short story. 'Not bad,' Shalamov says, 'but they won't publish it.' Shalamov's battle for

(literary) survival doesn't end with the death of Stalin, but continues right through to his own death in 1982. The Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras naturally offer respite from the worst excesses of the Stalinist system which Shalamov himself depicts, but the root of the unfreedom and self-censorship - the very logic of the Soviet enterprise - is the same, even if the stakes are now significantly less dramatic.

To illustrate this continuity, Shalamov goes back to his first prison stint in the Urals in the late 1920s, long before the horrors of Kolyma were known to him. The 20-year-old protagonist of the story (i.e. a young Shalamov) witnesses the beating of a dissident, and decides to stand up for his moral principles:

I suddenly felt as if my heart was on fire. I immediately understood that everything - my whole life - was being decided right in that moment. If I don't stand up now, then I will have gone to prison for nothing, lived twenty years for nothing.

[...] I went outside and shouted wildly: 'Don't you dare beat that man!'

[Commander] Shcherbakov turned and looked at me with great surprise.

'Go back inside.'

Shalamov eventually gets a routine beating for his troubles, losing a tooth in the process. The metaphor of the 'first tooth' is clear enough: there is no room for individual moral leadership of any kind in this system; such adolescent idealists will quickly learn their place in the pitiless pecking order. Truth has no value whatsoever in this world: when asked if there are any problems, Shalamov is forced, along with the other prisoners, to say 'no'. What culminates years later in Kolyma as the 'complete degradation of the human personality' starts here: wherever the price of whistleblowing is too high, hierarchical primate tribalism - with all the deceit and violence proper to it - eventually reigns, and the cancer of sadism spreads. Khrushchev and Brezhnev brought the bar of hypocrisy necessary for survival down alright, but nowhere near low enough for a flourishing humanism.

'Ekho v Gorax' ('Echo in the Mountains')

Shalamov's memories once again drift back here to the time of his first (i.e. pre-Kolyma) camp experience in the northern Urals (1929-1932). The clerk responsible for the bureaucracy surrounding the release of prisoners was 'naturally an important figure in a world where all life is oriented towards the minute at which the inmate receives the document which gives him the right not to be an inmate anymore.' This clerk was himself a prisoner: 'It wasn't easy to find willing staff for a camp in such - shall we say 'polar' in every possible sense? - conditions.' The camp's skeleton civilian staff, then, did not even cover this vital position; the camp bosses needed a trustworthy candidate from among the prisoners, and this person was not easy to find given the constant nature of the pressure from both above and below: prisoners were always trying to engineer blackmail schemes to get themselves released, and the cost of releasing the wrong prisoner at the wrong time could be disastrous for camp bosses.

Mikhail Stepanov was a veteran of 1905, a man capable of enduring Tsarist chaingang labour and of remaining chained to the same man - as it would happen, the socialist revolutionary and subsequent anti-Bolshevik peasant resistance leader Alexander Antonov (1888-1922) - for a year without disputes, a rare and major achievement:

There is an Henri Barbusse story which depicts the tragedy of two lovers chained to each other who grow to loathe one another completely. [...] With the chaingangs this process did not usually take long. [...] In order to avoid arguing with one's partner in chains, tremendous restraint was required of both parties, or else fierce admiration of the younger for the older and an equally keen desire on the part of the older fellow to give the best of himself - that is, of his soul - to his younger comrade.

Shalamov recounts this story partly out of nostalgia for a time when individual morality was still (barely) possible: Stepanov will later be ordered by the Bolsheviks to execute Antonov, but he agrees to let him get away if Antonov promises to stop conspiring against the Bolshevik authorities (to whom Stepanov remained fiercely loyal thanks to his connection with Sergo Ordzhonikidze, another former Tsarist-era prisonmate): 'It seemed as if everything was resolved, and Stepanov's conscience was clear - both regarding Antonov, whom he had saved, and towards the Soviet authorities, for Antonov and his followers were

now set to disappear.' Antonov, of course, did not uphold his end of the bargain, and Stepanov was eventually dobbed in by a junior officer who, with a wife and children in tow, was reluctant to take the rap for Stepanov's scheme.

Stepanov was the man chosen to take up the all-important vacant clerkship in Vizhaikha after a secondment from the notorious Solovki Prison Camp in the White Sea. It is not initially clear what Shalamov wants to achieve with this vignette, but the reader eventually understands why he shares it: Shalamov and Stepanov meet again by chance as free men - or as free as it got under Stalin - in Moscow's Pushkinskaya Square in 1933, though Stepanov is still limping from the scurvy contracted in his last days at Solovki. Is Shalamov primarily expressing admiration and pity for this most accommodating of men? Is he meditating on a more human time, a world where individual people could allow themselves the luxury of having their ideological and political commitments trumped by personal feelings born of intimate experience? Or is he above all angry that the Soviet system could find no better role for a man of Stepanov's moral stature? The lingering impression, however, is that the horrors of Shalamov's Kolyma were a big, qualitative step beyond the relative humanity still on display even well into the second decade of the Bolshevik experiment. From the perspective of 1959 (the date of the piece), Stepanov's fate - ten years of punishment for showing little more than human loyalty, a permanent scurvy-induced limp, and finally 'a job at the airport' upon his return to civilian life - are as nothing compared to what Shalamov will witness and endure in his Kolyma years after 1937. The 'echo in the mountains' seems to be of a time in Shalamov's mind, now past, before what Yelena Zakharova defined as 'the deformation of the human mind which happened in our country in the 20th Century' took complete hold on the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> Antonov's betrayal of Stepanov in the early 1920s, however, is a small sign of things to come, namely a culture in which means justify ends on the most horrific scale in all of human history, and in which lone consciences like Stepanov's - even and especially those loyal to the regime - are chewed up and spat out by cynical and desperate adversaries on all sides. Antonov's peasant revolt was never

---

<sup>7</sup> Stanislav Govorukhin's 1992 film *The Russia We Have Lost* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Aygl7ybmlg>, accessed 21/9/2021) offers a similar echo of a flowering reformist humanism, roughly coterminous with the reign of Nikolai Romanov (1894-1917), without in any way glorifying the brutality of Russia's tsarist past (against which Antonov and many other socialist revolutionaries were rebelling in the first place).

going to triumph over Bolshevism by copying the worst of its zero-sum, who-whom politics; the disasters of Leninism and Stalinism could only have been avoided, Shalamov suggests, by getting fundamentally decent ordinary Russians like Stepanov to see through Bolshevik propaganda. By breaking his promise to Stepanov, Antonov was betraying the very meaning of his own revolutionary cause; by keeping his, Stepanov offered an 'echo' of the thing which Shalamov can hear again by 1959, but which had been almost completely inaudible for years in the mines of Kolyma: a meaning beyond wild animal survival.

### 'Berdy Onzhe'

Shalamov offers another 'anecdote transformed into a mystic symbol' here. This is of course what all the stories in *Artist Lopaty* are striving to be, or rather, what they collectively become: a constant unfolding of a humanistic ethos which emerges and 'echoes' in us precisely in the myriad invisible connections *between* the multiplying stories. Every episode in Kolyma, however gruesome or mindnumbing, is part of Shalamov's life, which is itself part of something more, what he here calls a 'living reality' made up of past, present and future, real and imaginary figures. It took Shalamov himself a long time to grasp the intergenerational nature of this 'living reality'; as a young man he had tended to read literature from the brutal Tsarist period, for instance, as stories from another, bygone world - warnings for the present perhaps, but fundamentally separate from his own experience. What the 'artist of the shovel' realises, however, is that the futility of his situation does not imply separation from the 'living reality' of literature; on the contrary, he is busy all the while, making active contributions to it even if only in his own mind. Not all these private spiritual labours will survive in others of course, but the impulse to write them out *post facto*, the desire to add creatively to the ethos at the heart of the world by producing something coherent out of one's experience, at least for oneself, trumps all other concerns. One naturally hopes for a wide and grateful readership, but that is not the driver of the endeavour.

The story of 'Lieutenant Kurshakov' is openly presented as the product of Shalamov's literary imagination. An exemplary officer, a veteran of many long 'convoys' to the East and a recipient of a medal for military service on account of his reliable transportation of prisoners across Siberia, Kurshakov has finally lost one: the count is one short as

the convoy arrives at Novosibirsk Station. As this is 1942, Kurshakov needs to worry about much more than his officer's ration: if he can't find his man, the lieutenant is very likely to be sent to the front (or worse). Shalamov would meet this 'runner', a Turkmen by the name of Berdy Onzhe, three years later in a Kolyma hospital. Naturally, this was not in fact Onzhe, but a recent Turkmen immigrant named Tосhaev who had been kidnapped by Kurshakov's soldiers in the Novosibirsk bazaar and made to pass for the escaped prisoner. Tосhaev, who after three years in Kolyma had learnt enough Russian to tell his story, was surprised that Shalamov 'understood the essence of it so quickly', most particularly the *rabskiy strax* or 'slavelike fear' of Kurshakov and his sergeant major Lazarev in the face of their bosses.

The long metaliterary preamble to this chapter reminds us that it doesn't really matter if 'Onzhe' or 'Tосhaev' or even 'Shalamov' ever really existed: if a person can imagine it in the present, then it exists as part of 'living reality' anyway, whether it caused past pain or not. Shalamov could easily have extrapolated from his other Kolyma experiences to make this story up and make it seem plausible; the fact that he actually met Tосhaev in person and heard the story from Tосhaev's mouth in broken Turkmen-inflected Russian in a Kolyma hospital ca. 1945 is almost irrelevant; what matters is that a society could be persuasively *imagined* to exist - e.g. by Shalamov here - in which the rights of a person like Tосhaev are completely ignored - and where *rabskiy strax* is the common problem of everyone. It is only by actively imagining or 'experiencing' this oneself - through time travel in the 'living reality' of literature - that one can hope to find the energy to guard against the emergence of such a society in one's own daily life. For the reader of *Artist Lopaty* who has made it this far, Tосhaev's story is already completely believable and terrifying in its simplicity long before Shalamov admits that he heard it first-hand from the protagonist. If 'Berdy Onzhe' is a 'mystic symbol' rather than just another 'anecdote', however, then the ethos the story represents - or rather intensifies - is one of humanistic protest to the conditions of its own possibility in all future times and places. On its own, this is just a one-off sad story or 'dark joke': it is the *accumulation* of stories - or rather their creative juxtaposition beyond mere accumulation - that gradually forges the humanistic iron in the reader's will and calls her to her own acts of free creation. Far from diminishing the unique value of 'Berdy Onzhe' as a particular 'mystic symbol', the connections - implicit and explicit - to the

other 'mystic symbols' in *Artist Lopaty*, and beyond into world literature and human culture *in toto*, actually strengthen it.

### 'Protezy' ('Prostheses')

This short and simple story from 1965 also takes the form of a joke: Shalamov is one of six camp leaders rounded up for a stint in the isolation chambers 'under some [Kafkaesque] higher order or other'. The cells are close enough to each other that shouts can be heard, but guards patrol, and disruptive prisoners are denied meals (*no one* wants her stint in solitary to last longer than it has to). Prisoners are forced to remove all clothing before entering; the first five each have their own 'prostheses' taken from them: a corset, a wooden leg, an artificial hand, a hearing aid and a glass eye respectively. The laughing guard looks a naked Shalamov up and down and says: 'What are *you* going to give me? Your soul?'

'No,' Shalamov says deadpan, reminding his reader that his joke is no joke at all: 'I won't part with my soul.' This is no anachronistic Orthodox superstition; it is rather the very essence of a 'spiritual humanism' which has survived the secular threat of modernity - even the extreme and sadistic version posed by Stalin - intact. The 'soul' may be a Christian metaphor, but it is a metaphor with transcultural implications well beyond any subversive *samizdat* context: our individual lives matter as single, coherent wholes, and are more than just successions of meaningless materialistic sense impressions. Shalamov may be reduced to pure and exhausted animality for long periods of his camp life, but his sense of cosmic responsibility to himself is frozen, not destroyed, by the Kolyma ice. Like Auschwitz survivors Primo Levi and Viktor Frankl, Shalamov possessed a desire to write - a sense of personal mission - which predated his awful camp experiences. It is not the case that he 'turned' these hideous experiences into saleable literature; it was rather that he felt compelled to write about them by something transcending his own fame.

### 'Pogonya za Parovoznym Dymom' ('Chasing the Locomotive Smoke')

'Yes,' Shalamov admits: his 'dream' was to hear the sound of the locomotive horn and the 'living engine' pulling him out of Kolyma and

back to the 'mainland'. After three years of 'not free, but civilian' life as a paramedic in Kolyma following the end of his second prison term there in 1951, Shalamov is finally unable to bear the isolation and -50° winter temperatures, and decides to do whatever it takes to leave. Return to the 'mainland' was of course made deliberately difficult for everyone: even after Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet authorities wanted 'civilians' as well as prisoners to stay on as long as possible in the Far East, and did everything they could to dissuade released prisoners like Shalamov from ever trying to leave. This chapter details the endless bureaucratic hurdles and petty sadism of the local authorities, the extended bribery and chicanery required to get Shalamov from Kolyma to Oymyakon Airport and on to Yakutsk, and then from there to Irkutsk and civilisation ('Yakutsk was not yet a city; [...] there was no trace of locomotive smoke'). If it was dangerous to waste calories by thinking too much in the cold, the extremes of Kolyma eventually brought forth irresistible hallucinations of hope.

### Poezd ('The Train')

The train station in Irkutsk represents the end of the ordeal for the Moscow-bound Shalamov. He has sewn his money into a belt long ago fashioned for this very purpose, 'not because I was afraid to lose the money - I wasn't afraid of anything anymore - but because it was better to be with money than without it.' He even allows himself the luxury of falling asleep under the bright station lights as he waits for his train:

The light poured straight into my eyes, but I had dealt with this thousands of times [in Kolyma], and I had learnt to sleep soundly even in the bright of day. [...] Everything [at Irkutsk Station] was as normal: the sound of the trains coming and going, the uniformed staff, the neighbouring bazaar. It was as if I were emerging from a single dream. I suddenly broke out into a cold, terrified sweat at the realisation of my desire and ability to forget. I saw that I was ready to bury everything, erase nearly two decades of my life. And not just any old decades! Once I'd understood this [temptation] for what it was, I was able to overcome it: I knew that I would not let myself forget everything I had seen. I calmed down and fell asleep.

Shalamov wakes up from his train station nap and, seeing several hours still ahead of him, heads into the city, 'my first urban stroll in 17 years'. He goes in and out of shops, enjoying 'unspeakable pleasure at standing in line and paying for things'. He decides not to buy any books until he reaches Moscow, but 'standing in bookshops and holding books in my hands was like a good meaty soup, a glass of living water.' Standing on a bridge, he surveys the hurrying passersby and realises 'how important the idea of cities was to me':

In that moment I understood that the dearest and deepest thing in any person - prior in time to the romantic love and children that come afterwards - is the sense of human civic belonging that emerges in childhood and early adolescence. My heart gathered itself up; I sent a greeting to Irkutsk with my entire soul.

Boarding the shambolic train proves more stressful than expected; in the midst of the 'turmoil', he even misses 'the symbol of the continent, of civilised life itself', namely the sounding of the horn as the train left the station. But at least he was on it: 'I finally forced myself to believe that I was on my way to Moscow.'

Even so, Shalamov doesn't trust himself, or his luck, enough to get off the train anywhere along the way: 'I had enough food with me, and I felt sure that the train would leave me behind if I got off. Something bad had to happen; happiness can't last forever.' The long train journey, however - with its cast of drunks, prostitutes, swindlers, loud children and other unsavouries mixed in with all the decent folk - affords Shalamov a sustained dose of 'the unbreakable happiness of freedom' before he finally arrives in Moscow, 'the city more home to me than anywhere in the world':

My wife's familiar and unchanged face was there to meet me, just as it had been when I had come back from many previous voyages. This time the jaunt had lasted almost two decades. Except of course that it had been no jaunt: I was returning from Hell itself.

### 3. Ōe Kenzaburo's *Watanabe Kazuo o Yomu*<sup>8</sup>

*I hope Orwell would not raise an objection if I used the word 'decent' as a synonym of 'humanist' or 'humaniste' in French, because both words share in common qualities such as tolerance and humanity. Among our ancestors were some pioneers who made painstaking efforts to build up the Japanese identity as 'decent' or 'humanist'. One such person was the late Professor Kazuo Watanabe (1901-1975), a scholar of French Renaissance literature and thought. Surrounded by the insane ardour of patriotism on the eve and in the middle of the Second World War, Watanabe had a lonely dream of grafting the humanist view of man onto the traditional Japanese sense of beauty and sensitivity to Nature, which fortunately had not been entirely eradicated.*

Ōe, Nobel Lecture (1994)

There is an assumption that Nobel Prizewinners get to have their Complete Works translated. Ōe Kenzaburo's 1984 homage to his great teacher, the full title of which is *Nihon Gendai no Yumanisuto Watanabe Kazuo o Yomu (Watanabe Kazuo: A Modern Japanese Humanist)*, is an unfortunate exception to this supposed rule, most likely because it was understood by English-language publishers to be neither one thing nor the other: too personal for the academic book market, too academic for the literary one. We do what we can here to bring the work to life for a non-Japanese audience - and push our own story along.

#### 'The Prewar Essays and *The Diary of Defeat*'

Ōe had 'always wanted' to write about Watanabe, but in 1984 he finally found the time to go back and reread him from the beginning, an experience which elicited both deep joy and a certain anxiety: 'I didn't know how to write about him in a way that would do justice to him.'

---

<sup>8</sup> Ōe Kenzaburo, *Nihon Gendai no Yumanisuto Watanabe Kazuo o Yomu (Watanabe Kazuo: A Modern Japanese Humanist)*, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1984).

Watanabe was a marginal figure by the 1980s, even in Japan itself; this first of six chapters acquaints Ōe's reader with Watanabe's 'basic temperament' and 'view of human nature' as these emerge in his prewar essays, before moving on to analyse the *sensei's* unique deployment of 'rhetorical resistance weapons' in his wartime diaries. The source of Ōe's longstanding unease about undertaking this 'Watanabe project', however, lay in his inability either to imitate his master's style or to achieve the academic rigour of translators and scholars like Ninomiya Takashi (1928-2002). He resigned himself to following a 'third way' for which he would have no choice but to rely on 'the strength of my own impressions'. By Ōe's own admission, this kind of 'episodic' or novelistic approach risks 'distorting' or otherwise instrumentalising Watanabe's life and work for the literary purposes of the 'so-called author' (as I may be accused of doing with Ōe here). And yet what sweeter fate or truer mode of existence for a dead scholar than creative transformation in the beating heart of someone still living, a Nobel Prize-winner no less? A great teacher never knows where her influence stops; while Nietzsche was terrified at the realisation that his words could be uncontrollably 'twisted' by posterity, this did not dissuade him from writing altogether. This would not be an intimate biography of a beloved *sensei* by a great Japanese author, however, without a suitably self-deprecating introduction.

Ōe had already encountered Watanabe on the page as a Shikoku high-school bookworm before meeting him in person as a University of Tokyo undergraduate in 1957. This choice of study was owed in part to Watanabe's sheer ambition, but also to the charisma of the translated Rabelaisian 'laugh which cuts through hierarchies', as Ōe describes it in his 1994 Nobel Lecture:

The way Japan had tried to build up a modern state modelled on the West was cataclysmic. In ways different from - yet partly corresponding to - that process, Japanese intellectuals had tried to bridge the gap between the West and their own country at its deepest level. It must have been a laborious task or *travail* but it was also one that brimmed with joy.

[...] Watanabe studied in Paris before the Second World War. When he told his academic supervisor about his ambition to translate Rabelais into Japanese, the eminent elderly French scholar answered the aspiring young Japanese student with the phrase: 'L'entreprise inouïe de la traduction de l'intraduisible

Rabelais' ('the unprecedented enterprise of translating into Japanese untranslatable Rabelais'). Another French scholar answered with blunt astonishment: 'Belle entreprise Pantagruélique.' In spite of all this, not only did Watanabe accomplish his great enterprise in a poverty-stricken environment during the War and the American Occupation, but he also did his best to transplant into the confused and disorientated Japan of that time the life and thought of those French humanists who were the forerunners, contemporaries and followers of François Rabelais.

In both my life and writing I have been a pupil of Professor Watanabe's. [...] I learnt concretely from his translation of Rabelais [...] to seek literary methods of attaining the universal for someone like me born and brought up in a peripheral, marginal, off-centre region of the peripheral, marginal, off-centre country, Japan. [...] In Watanabe's humanism there is] an idea which is also perceptible in Milan Kundera's definition of the spirit of the novel.

Ōe's first lecture with Watanabe proves transformational: 'My life was decided in those two hours, even if I was too young to realise it at the time. But gradually, over the course of the year, [the magnitude of the encounter] began to dawn on me.' Ōe had been primed over several years spent with Watanabe on the page, but even so, the *sensei's* lectures made the young university student feel 'as if my life had a purpose which I was now living': there was something 'excruciatingly admirable' in the man's voice and general aura. Watanabe's very inimitability encouraged Ōe to seek out the 'living principle' behind his teacher's charisma, and thereby to follow his own burgeoning sense of vocation as a writer (*not* as a scholar). A lot of drudgery, indeed, was involved in teaching Renaissance French literature in the pre-photocopier age; Watanabe's early-rising commitment to his craft, and his gift for answering student questions 'indirectly', thereby opening up new fields of inquiry and doubt rather than simply confirming existing prejudices, inspire and transform Ōe even as he realises he could never emulate them: 'A great teacher creates his successors,' Ōe concludes, and as Watanabe himself believed: no longer satisfied with the idea of 'learning a little bit and becoming a provincial schoolmaster', Ōe's 'sweet feelings' for Watanabe harden into 'patience and determination', not to

ape the unapable, but to undertake his own vocational journey in earnest.

Watanabe's prewar essays reflect a young man with 'dark sides as well as bright and strong'; Nagai Kafū's translation of Baudelaire's *Le mort joyeux* (translated by Nagai as *Shi no Yorokobi* or *The Joy of Death*) was a treasured companion. For all his gregariousness and interest in 'the humanity of human beings' - and all his 'encouragement of self and others to live well' - death was a 'fundamental' presence in Watanabe's life and work, even in the very early days before scholarly interest in Rabelais's 'grotesque realism' took hold. This 'bedrock of darkness', Ōe argues, lent 'exemplary balance' to Watanabe's spirit, distinguishing both his character and his writing. The young researcher's diary of his time in Paris (1931-33) contains many light-hearted vignettes of the women and casual racism he variously encountered, but also records the brutality of the contemporaneous Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Watanabe's writing in this period is 'surprisingly brave' given the level of censorship operating at home: his observation that stereotypes and prejudices exist *within* as well as between countries, for example, is deeply subversive of official Japanese fascist propaganda. Individual friendships across party or country lines, such as Watanabe's bond with Parisian editor Édouard Champion (1882-1938), make a mockery of the identitarian claims of malign political forces left, right and centre: the possibility of such spontaneous friendships with foreigners proves that we are, or can be, more than our prior group affiliations.

Watanabe recurs frequently in his writing to an idea, often misleadingly translated as 'tolerance' but really closer to 'generosity of spirit', 'breadth of understanding' - or even, as Ōe suggests, Orwell's idea of 'decency'. Like Orwell and the 'American moralist' Kurt Vonnegut, Watanabe uses this concept of 'decency' as a launchpad to critique 'modern civilisation' in general and Japanese fascism in particular. Watanabe's 1942 text 'Dialogue in the Dunes' shows that this capacity for what we might follow Ōe and Orwell in calling 'decency' begins, unavoidably, with one's relationship with oneself. Ōe identifies a 'light' and 'dark' Watanabe as the protagonists of this seaside existential struggle in the midst of war: as a younger man, Watanabe had loved the sea, but now all he can sense is a 'vain and sorrowful momentum' pulling the world along. And yet his bright side reminds his dark side that deciding in advance on the 'powerlessness of good human intentions' is a form of 'self-abuse' ultimately tantamount to 'suicide': Watanabe's solution to this spiritual disease, following French Romantics like

Senancourt and European contemporaries from Miguel de Unamuno to Albert Schweitzer, is to 'create room for more and more people in your heart'. Although this conviction was forged in the hopelessness of Japan's war effort, Ōe stresses that it remained with Watanabe throughout his life: despite the wartime propagandists' best efforts to crush it with crude and constant friend-enemy distinctions, such generosity still survived in Japanese hearts. Even in the face of our individual and collective mortality, it is possible to cultivate, as Watanabe describes it later in his *On Humanism* (1973), 'a heart that tries to live like a human being' by actively incorporating foreign human experience into itself. This path to freedom from the animal immediacy of the present requires the development of 'an eye that sees through the times' - and beyond the horizon of one's immediate place in the jungle of the world - to embrace the experience of others.

'This society has been extremely lenient with the words of madmen, but the laments of the healthy have proven too painful to be heard,' Watanabe bravely complains during the war, finding fuel (and cover) for his anger in Cervantes's *El licenciado Vidriera* as the 'reckless rogues' and 'ignorant gamblers' in charge of the war effort in Tokyo push his country into the abyss. Thanks to Franco, recourse to a Spanish author was a 'safer' option, Ōe drily points out, than a French or English source; nevertheless, Watanabe openly describes the French capitulation in 1940 as 'the first of two great national defeats in my life': the Vichy regime 'went against everything' that French culture at its best had ever stood for. The work of Romain Rolland (1866-1944) and Paul Valéry (1871-1945) sustain Watanabe through the 'twin disasters' of Nazi aggression in Europe and Japanese aggression in Asia; Rolland's cosmopolitan *Déclaration de l'indépendance de l'esprit* and lifelong engagement, described in a 70th-birthday speech in 1936, to 'replenish the energy stocks of the best France, the best Germany, the best Europe' were naturally unpopular in a climate of fervent European nationalism, but his realisation after World War One that 'the world was now larger' than Europe, and that a generation would be urgently needed which saw itself not only as 'world citizens' but as *Weltarbeiter* or *travailleurs du monde* ('workers for a [new] world'), led Rolland to Tagore, Gandhi and modern Indian letters in particular, and also to the following general conclusion (not least since Paris was now as close to New York as his native Clamecy had been to Paris in his childhood): 'All peoples must now understand' what had always been true but was now increasingly manifest, namely 'that they are but a single people, a single

person.' Valéry, meanwhile, reminded his readers that European humanism was a historical achievement of the pre-1914 era, and that any contemporary humanism would have to reestablish a living connection to that heritage in an age - the 1930s - of 'spiritual crisis and catastrophe', in which 'the very concept of a human being' was being lost amid legalistic and scientific modern modes of education. As Adolf Hitler was busy nextdoor honing his recipe for dissolution of the individual human being in blind service to the collective, Watanabe followed Valéry in worrying aloud about the ability of a 'modern culture of spiritual freedom', based on the best of the old humanist tradition, to resist the totalitarian surge from across the Rhine, especially given its own internal state of disarray and anomie after the 'meltdown' of the First World War. Nevertheless, such worries were themselves evidence of the remedy's survival: Watanabe stopped short of believing that a permanent capitulation of European humanism to its slavlike opposite would or could really happen, even after the 'robot occupation of Paris's fine soul' in 1940. Any other Axis victories, he believed - painful and terrifying as they were in the moment - would be short-lived.

Watanabe's *Diary of Defeat*, written in French and recovered posthumously, was translated into Japanese by Ninomiya Takashi in 1977, long after Watanabe had made clear in other writings how grateful he was for his 'second life' after the end of the war. The Ovidian epigraph - '*odero si potero, si non, invitus amabo*' - nevertheless translates a feeling of bitter and reluctant despair at watching the country of one's birth go down the drain in every possible regard. As his painstaking Japanese translation of Rabelais's *Pantagruel* is consumed by flames among millions of other precious subjects and objects, Watanabe nevertheless resists the very real 'temptation of suicide' by reminding himself, in the company of authors like Rolland and Valéry, that surviving to witness the collapse of fascism was a matter of 'service to the history of the world'. This 'responsibility of intellectuals' to bear witness - and to survive to rebuild their countries anew - jostles for position in Watanabe's war diaries with a sense of total spiritual alienation from his homeland and a desire to quit Japan if the war ever ends. Henri Troyat's 1940 biography of Dostoyevsky, moreover, reminds Watanabe with its depictions of Siberian exile that 'human life is something inside us, not in our surroundings', and that human beings add, or should add, a spark of their own to the worlds they inhabit.

By the end of the diary, indeed, Watanabe has discovered anew the 'joy' of writing in his native language; if a mixture of disgust, survival

instinct and Francophilia had led him to prefer French *during* the war, he would return to Japanese with a 'new determination' after it, even as he worried whether this future would ever actually come to pass. Watanabe's first postwar article, devoted to the Japanese Catholic theologian and pioneer of intercultural dialogue Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko (1904-1945), points to hope in a generation of intellectuals 'polished by hardship' - smelted into diamonds, as we might say, by the pressure of war. The winter of 1945-46, which began with Yoshimitsu's tragic death from illness at the age of 41, nevertheless left Watanabe bitterly disappointed at the state of his country; with noble exceptions, the Japanese intellectual classes were unable to grasp either the real reasons for the war or the reality of foreign occupation which now confronted it, sensing instead a fuller 'liberation' than history had yet granted. Japan's cultural problems - chiefly a 'barbarous lack of spiritual freedom and cosmopolitan refinement' - had preceded the war; beyond the patient's willing cooperation, what was needed was 'surgical' intervention from without, or at least from Japanese intellectuals who, like Watanabe himself, had studied some of the urgently needed medicine abroad.

### 'Towards a Concept of Spiritual Generosity'

The etymologists will tell me whether, as I suspect, the Chinese word *kuanrong* is a recent import from the Japanese *kan'yō*, which itself looks suspiciously like a recent post-Enlightenment import from the West. I don't need this confirmation, however, to make my primary case here, which is that the two Chinese characters in question (宽容 or 寬容 or 寬容 depending on where exactly in East Asia you are - Korean and Vietnamese would also seem to have their own versions) are hard to translate (back?) into English or French: the usual 'tolerance' misses the nuance of *breadth*, the willingness to welcome or 'let in' foreign influences, not reluctantly, but as a matter of spiritual course. Watanabe was born not only into a country, but into a whole East Asian region confronted with Western colonial encroachment and cultural dominance driven by the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution; the Meiji Restoration of 1868 had offered an example to neighbouring countries of a 'Western science and local essence' development model, a pact with the devil to 'apply' his knowledge in order to compete with (and eventually outcompete) him without being spiritually corrupted by his

values. Zhang Zhidong's 1898 *zhongtixiyong* slogan (uncharitably translatable as 'using the [industrial technology of the barbarian] West to strengthen the Sinic body [without tainting it]') took this Meiji principle and applied it to China; there is a strong argument that, for all the twists and turns it has taken since 1949 in particular, this cultural chauvinism is still an important driving force behind 21st-century Chinese educational and economic policy, as witnessed in the enduring influence of, among many others, Zhang Dainian ('the Chinese nation is the main body of building a new socialist Chinese culture; socialism is the guiding principle of China's new culture; science and technology are all serving the main body of this nation, and they all serve socialism') and Fang Keli's *mahunzhongtixiyong* ('Marxist spirit, Chinese body, exploiting the West'). Japan, however, reached the *Stunde Null* of its toxic nationalism in 1945; for all the fascist aftershocks experienced in the work of Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) and others since the war, and for all the reflexive xenophobia befitting an island nation, Japan has acted for decades as a *bona fide* and often exemplary member of the global dialogical community. If few contemporary observers of the People's Republic of China would grant it the same friendly and relaxed status (recent 'Dialogue of Civilisations' rhetoric and noble individual exceptions notwithstanding), Ōe wants to thank teachers like Watanabe for helping to make this night-and-day *Gestalt* shift from siege mentality to citizenship of a global republic of letters possible in postwar Japan. Rabelaisian humanism may not have been exactly what the Meiji reformers had in mind when they embarked on their project of wholesale translation and importation from the West in 1868, but Watanabe's life's work is nothing if not a monument to the law of unintended consequences.

When his *Pantagruel* translation is finally redrafted and published after the war, Watanabe makes a solemn pledge in his preface to 'devote myself singlemindedly to Heaven's work of preventing frail and fleeting human knowledge, with all its forged commandments and false prophecies, from ever again usurping the place of the transcendent, the source of my trust and hope, on my watch.' This defence of free individual spirituality from the 'utopian' lies of organised religion and nationalist politics envisions literary culture as an openended and cosmopolitan exercise in creativity; Rabelais, if he is to be valued properly by posterity, ought never to be immortalised, even as he survives in the grateful hearts and minds of future generations encountering him for the first time: these future people will make their

own 'frail and fleeting' contributions on his shoulders, and on indefinitely into a future where all Pantagruels and Watanabes are dust, even as something of the spirit they brought into the world survives. Watanabe had sought to bring Rabelais's stinging critique of the 'heretic as non-citizen' model, so familiar to the Reformation-era Europe about which he was writing, to a Japanese audience in the throes of the same exclusionary fanaticism; even though the translation would have done little to change the course of the war, Ōe still describes the burning of the text and subsequent delay in publication as 'tragic'.

A key episode in Japan's postwar democratic 'reformation' (and 'the most surprising event' of the 1935-born Ōe's own youth) was Hirohito's *Humanity Declaration* on 1 January, 1946, in which the Emperor renounced all claims to superhuman ancestry and power. Japan's full and immediate transformation from Meiji-era '*parvenu* among colonial powers' to a 'nation of culture' in Watanabe's cosmopolitan sense, however, was always going to be something of a 'vain prayer'; the radical *son'nōjōi* spirit of wartime propaganda ('respect the Emperor and kick the foreigners out!') was preceded by the other side of the same coin, symbolised in Ōe's eyes by the *Rokumeikan*:

The *Rokumeikan* ('Deer-cry Hall') was a large two-story building in Tokyo, completed in 1883, which was to become a controversial symbol of Westernization in the Meiji period. Commissioned for the housing of foreign guests by the Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru according to a general Westernization policy, it was designed by Josiah Conder, a prominent Western architect working in Japan.

Inoue intended to use it as a diplomatic cultural tool to renegotiate unequal treaties forced upon Japan by Western powers. Despite the Western architect's recommendations to add Japanese components, the *Rokumeikan* was built, with \$27 million (in today's monetary value), as a Western style facility without any Japanese cultural element. While Japanese people understood the need for Westernization in the areas of technology, science, infrastructure, and other areas, they did not accept their spiritual or moral superiority; the Western powers were seen as barbarous and disrespectful. As the *Rokumeikan* appeared as a cultural symbol that glorified the West, some

perceived it as humiliating and others questioned its diplomatic use.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the untold opportunities for cultural exchange that it indirectly promoted, the Meiji Restoration had above all been a nationalistic, *fukokukyōhei* drive for ‘a rich nation with strong soldiers’: the only real question was what to import from the West - and what not to import - in order to achieve that aim. The disaster of the war would force a paradigm shift in Japanese intellectual life, but it was never going to be possible to achieve a complete revolution right away in 1946; the arrival of names like Albert Schweitzer and Miguel de Unamuno may have been the chance by-product of cynical Meiji politics, but it would take Japan decades even to begin to digest the meaning of such modern European humanism and to explore possibilities for the creative transformation of such humanism on Japanese soil.

Watanabe, of course, was interested above all in the deep Reformation-era roots (mainly French) of this culture; Ōe nevertheless allows himself the luxury of a brief detour - proper to any humanism - through Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem* and Wilfred Owen’s First World War poetry before turning back to Watanabe’s postwar writing. In contrast to such profound trench tragedy, the hyper-romantic Meiji-era *Seikinha* (‘Star and Violets’) school, with its ‘overindulgence in present sensation’, had helped Japan down its path to perdition. The role of an intellectual, Watanabe strenuously argues in the early postwar years, is more than this, and would have to be urgently rethought before Japan and the world found itself in another deep crisis. Events from the Gandhi assassination to the emergence of Kim Il-Sung and the rehabilitation of ‘top-ranking war criminals’ in Japan itself left Watanabe nervous for the future of his country and humanity as a whole; beyond his work translating Sartre and other contemporary French intellectuals, Watanabe was above all concerned, in the early postwar years, with ‘updating and passing down’ Guy de Maupassant’s anti-imperial message from the 1880s:

We like the look of a Chinese city: to take it, we will massacre 50,000 Chinese and send 10,000 of our own best men to their deaths. The city won’t even be any good to us. [...] Those who will perish there will be young men who could have worked,

---

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Rokumeikan> (accessed 15/9/2021).

produced, been useful. Their fathers are old and poor. Their mothers, who adored them for twenty years as mothers do, will be told in six months that their sons, the grown sons they raised with so much effort, money and love, have fallen in the reeds in a hail of bullets. Why? The mothers won't know. Why then? [...] Because a minister who doesn't know her got a kick out of taking a city off the Chinese.<sup>10</sup>

This 'hideous materialism' of colonial governments, rooted always in 'an absolute jungle right to lord it over others', must be resisted, Watanabe argues, by civil society and cultural institutions in all countries, not simply replaced with an equally brutal and materialistic dictatorship of the proletariat. Exchanges with the leftist author Nakano Shigeharu (1902-1979) revealed Watanabe's simultaneous hopes and doubts for a human future beyond bellicose ideologies of left and right, one in which the spiritual resources unleashed by the Renaissance could somehow be creatively recombined to meet the demands of human beings raised on a full diet of industrial modernity. Since the war calamities of Japan and her Axis partners, however, had been caused above all by deluded optimists, Nakano and Watanabe committed to a 'combative humanism' which was both pessimistic enough not to get carried away with itself and energetic enough to oppose its various enemies.

The publication of George Orwell's *1984* in 1949 allowed Watanabe to sharpen his thoughts on human freedom in general, and modern man's chances of 'avoiding the fate of machines' in particular. Human beings more often than not fail to realise the humanistic potential inside themselves; the pressure to worship 'the majority's idols' has been faced by budding intellectuals or 'free thinkers' in every generation since Adam, or certainly since the possibility of such an autonomous spiritual life became conceivable among our tightknit tribal forebears. Romain Rolland is once again cited as an example of what modern intellectuals, for all the principled pessimism proper to them, can do in this regard (the 'Manifesto of the Ninety-Three', by contrast, is held by Watanabe to be a low-water-mark in modern intellectual history). After the Somme, and certainly after Nanjing and Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the only plausible position that any intellectual can take *vis-à-vis* a government calling for war is that 'war itself is evil': Hitlers and Konoos may make such war inevitable, but that is no excuse to forget what wars

---

<sup>10</sup> See Guy de Maupassant, 'La Guerre', *Gil Blas*, 11/12/1883, <https://www.retronews.fr/journal/gil-blas/11-decembre-1883/121/258485/1> (accessed 15/9/2021).

mean: always a collective failure, never an opportunity for human success. A 'machine' in modern humanist terms is any person who fails to grasp this, preferring instead the warmth and propaganda of her particular tribe to any vision of a higher, self-critical cosmopolitan synthesis.

Watanabe's 1951 article 'Should Tolerance Become Intolerant in its Opposition to Intolerance?' reflects on what Ōe describes as 'a problem for every era'. Watanabe's preferred approach is to 'multiply the tolerant cohort one person at a time' without labouring under the illusion that pacifism can save decent people from murderers. A 'tolerance with balls' must entail more than an attitude of welcoming those who have already arrived at the 'humanistic endpoint' of civilisational progress; as events since 1989 have shown us, the 'end of history' is no downhill one-way street, and 'democracy' is as nebulous a concept now as it was when Ōe's hero Orwell wrote the following of it in 'Politics and the English Language' (1946):

In the case of a word like *democracy*, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of régime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of the absurd situation where every modern nation from New Zealand to North Korea can describe itself as 'democratic', Watanabe calls for a global political culture which 'offers less breathing space to reactionary and regressive opinions than to progressive ideas'. As with German legal theorist Gustav Radbruch (1878-1949), the experience of war offered Watanabe the proof of relativism's inadequacy: laws and institutions which fail actively to promote the principle of equality which lies at the heart of human justice ought to be opposed. Ōe observed a gradual decline in Watanabe's willingness over the years to let petty indiscretions - like the theft of library books by his students - slide, presumably on the grounds that such a 'broken windows' stance was in fact the best bulwark against the chaos of injustice and inequality which can tear societies asunder if given too much room to sprout. In any

---

<sup>11</sup> See George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/> (accessed 15/9/2021).

case, 'humane reflection' on this dilemma of tolerance by every responsible citizen was for Watanabe 'an absolute necessity'; lawless anarchism would never be enough to guarantee the security necessary for individual flourishing.

Ōe ends this second section by focusing on Watanabe's reaction to the suicide of his friend, the Canadian diplomat E. Herbert Norman, in Cairo in 1957. Born and raised in Japan, Norman was a 'case study in the possibilities of humanism', an individual who retained faith in 'the persuasive power of sympathetic understanding'. Surrounded, however, by the 'zealotry, prejudice and intolerance' of the early Cold War, Norman chose to take his own life in a gesture of sacrifice and protest as post-Suez negotiations threatened to spiral out of control - in a world still learning how to grapple with the threat of nuclear war. 'Somebody like that can't kill herself,' Ōe decides: 'she can only be killed by circumstances.' Even then, the memory of these dead souls is kept alive in the hearts of the living, not in some clichéd and meaningless way, but for real, in art; Watanabe's 1958 'Letter to the Dead' links Norman with the countless thousands of Japanese and other men and women forced to sacrifice themselves before their time in recent world wars. The letter serves as a metaphor for Watanabe's entire humanistic enterprise (and ours): the juxtaposition of flawed but exemplary human individuals creates something greater than the sum of its parts. Ōe's tribute to Watanabe follows the master's lead, introducing the reader to figures like Jean Tardieu (1903-1987) and Masao Maruyama (1914-1996) along the way. Even the most educated reader of *Watanabe Kazuo o Yomu* will be called to explore dozens of new names over the course of the book - Japanese, French, Canadian and beyond - and to practise the 'spiritual generosity' that Ōe's book does not preach so much as embody.

### 'Makers of the French Renaissance'

Ōe begins the third section of *Watanabe Kazuo o Yomu* by asking the 'how to live as a humanist' question at the heart of Watanabe's various attempts to bring the French Renaissance to his Japanese audience in the first two decades after the Second World War. In Watanabe's writing from this period, Ōe observes a subtle migration from philological researcher at the height of his scholarly powers to senior professor striving to reach new generations of students by making the scene of the

Renaissance hang together from one inspiring figure to the next. This art of answering students' questions in such a way as to allow them to expand their knowledge of human spiritual geography - beyond what they thought they were asking - was a key feature of Watanabe's teaching craft; as Ōe experienced first-hand at the University of Tokyo in the 1950s, Watanabe sought to provide an optimised and 'integrated' account of the many individual voices which contributed to the French Renaissance, and which - as Watanabe and enthusiastic students like Ōe agreed - were specifically relevant to young people in postwar Japan.

Watanabe's work on the French Renaissance offered a young Ōe the kind of real moral education which transcends slogans and allows emotional identification with more and less 'healthy' characters (Watanabe's discussions of the relative human merits of St. Peter, St. Paul and other biblical figures with E. Herbert Norman are cited by Ōe as an example of the spirit which Watanabe brought to his own teaching and writing on the Renaissance). Instead of issuing wild accusations of heresy, a humanist knows how to separate religion from politics, and how to face new facts (as well as her own doubts about herself) with bravery. The 'scepticism' or Keatsian 'negative capability' implicit in this humanistic stance does not - as the art and thought of the Renaissance make plain - lead to an absence of spirituality or a lack of trust in a transcendental dimension; on the contrary, the 'humanists' of the 16th Century were seeking, in their various guises, precisely to reaffirm what the Catholic Church had threatened for centuries to make impossible, namely the freedom of thought and inquiry necessary for mature spiritual life in the first place. If the word 'humanism' did not, as Ōe and Watanabe remind us, emerge as an -ism until the 19th and 20th centuries as a response to declining European Christianity, Watanabe wants to remind his (primarily Japanese) readers that the answer to the 'how to be a humanist' question is not to embrace a secularism or atheism devoid of spirituality, but rather to revel in the bravery and meaning of lives like that of theologian and doctor Michel Servet (1511-1553), one of many Renaissance humanist characters that Ōe and Watanabe invite us to go and discover for ourselves. Even the educated European reader who knows Servet well (Servet was born in Spain and burnt at the stake in Geneva after studies in France) will find his legacy and her own spiritual identity multiplied by first Watanabe's, then Ōe's, and now hopefully *my* fresh engagement with it, and so on down into the unwritten annals of tomorrow's world literature.

Watanabe's map of the French Renaissance begins with classicist polymath Guillaume Budé (1467-1540), who used his political connections and access to François I to create a 'refuge for humanists' at the Collège de France, and medical pioneer Ambroise Paré (1509-1590), doctor to kings and surgeon extraordinaire. This initial juxtaposition serves to highlight one of Watanabe's central historical insights: freedom of humanistic and scientific inquiry go hand in hand (Ōe cites Günter Grass's 1969 novel *Örtlich betäubt* in passing as a kind of modern tribute to Budé and Paré, emphasising as he does so Watanabe's lifelong attachment to the embodied, 'manual' nature of human work from surgery to calligraphy). Watanabe's Paré also reminds Ōe, author of *Hiroshima Notes*, of Shigetō Fumio, the heroic director of a hospital charged with treating victims of the atomic blast; like Paré, Shigetō finds himself with knowledge which can benefit all parties despite their violent disagreements with each other. The potter and Protestant man of science Bernard Palissy (1510-1590) is another deeply admirable 'hands-on' figure whose life offers 'lessons' to an age which may have overcome the Reformation-era European mania for 'killing each other in God's name', but which is still part of a 'living family history' which can be understood as 'variations on a theme', or in other words as an ongoing and neverending struggle for humanistic liberation against shifting backdrops of space, time and social hierarchy, to which great individuals like Palissy brought lasting colour for their descendants from all countries. Moved by Palissy's violent death, Watanabe also admired the great ceramicist's ability to draw lessons from nature for collective human flourishing despite the extreme violence and seeming hopelessness of the era through which he was forced to live. The vain efforts of Michel de L'Hospital (1507-1573) to prevent religious war also touched Watanabe in the same manner as the Gospels and the Myth of Sisyphus: the moral legacies of individual human beings transcend the tragedy of their circumstances. Whether he is discussing Nostradamus and the 'art of self-preservation' or lamenting the death of a great humanist martyr like Étienne Dolet (1509-1546), Watanabe warns his Japanese readers and students to read him with care: given how much the master does not - and in part *cannot* - know about his Renaissance subjects, these portraits are better understood, Ōe agrees, as 'novelistic' impressions than as academic biographies. The hero of Watanabe's 'novel', Ōe shows us, is the Renaissance itself: Orientalist Guillaume Postel (1510-1581), for example, is singled out by Watanabe because his 'geographical expansion' of humanism 'from Paris to Peking' fulfilled

a new 'linking role between East and West which represented one of the Renaissance's most deeply meaningful achievements'. Another was the culmination, in 1598, of a century of civic struggle with the signing of the Edict of Nantes by Henri IV, a document which at last codified the Renaissance principle of 'spiritual generosity' for which so many 16th-century French humanists had sacrificed.

Ōe argues that the most striking feature of Watanabe's Renaissance canvas (one which acquired heightened meaning after his friend Norman's suicide) is the juxtaposition of Servet, Sébastien Castellion (1515-1563), John Calvin (1509-1564) and Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). With his slow, fiery murder of Servet ('the midnight of his life' in Watanabe's judgment), Calvin proved that the Reformation could be as fanatical and cruel as the ossified Catholicism whose intolerance it had set out to reform. Castellion's famous indignation over the Servet affair - 'you don't prove your faith by burning a man at the stake, only by being burnt for it' - should have been familiar to a man like Calvin, who grew up reading Seneca and other treatises on tolerance, and yet just such an educated and refined person had been corrupted, to Watanabe and Ōe's joint amazement and fascination, by a lethal cocktail of political power and distinctly ungenerous religious zealotry. The three great conversion stories of the era - Calvin and Luther on one side of the Reformation, Loyola on the other - all suggested certain pathological elements, all-too-human psychological frailties which manifested themselves in unhealthy vehemence. Watanabe's preferred model is clearly the humanist Castellion, ready to deploy 'conscience' against such self-assured 'violence' (Stefan Zweig's 1936 book *Castellio gegen Calvin: Ein Gewissen gegen die Gewalt* is mentioned by Ōe as recommended reading in this context). Once again, however, the question of 'tolerance of intolerance' is raised in all its thorny complexity: Ōe is only ready to follow his master in granting Castellion qualified praise. Loyola meanwhile, for all his Counter-Reformation 'fanaticism', remains an 'intriguing' and 'charming' figure: Ōe's patience for Castellion's relative indecisiveness, meanwhile, wears thin over the years, much as Zweig's for Erasmus does in his *Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam*.

With his *Makers of the French Renaissance*, Watanabe shows that these great and flawed lives mutually reinforce each other through the very diversity of their examples. The Renaissance is no more reducible to one person than literature is; no individual feat of heroism or genius cancels out others, but rather, each offers a unique and creative

contribution to a story far greater than itself. A great teacher like Watanabe can help us, Ōe shows, not by spoonfeeding us a formula, but by granting us intimate access to the literary realm where such wisdom is obliquely contained, not just in individual ‘case studies’, but above all in the myriad connections, stated and implied, *between* them. Watanabe’s struggle for an account of such ‘intellectual generosity’ in the first two postwar decades (which coincided with the ‘peak’ of his intellectual powers) is described by Ōe as ‘bitter’ at times, but only because Watanabe knew first-hand how big the costs of a collective failure of such generosity could be. Watanabe would return to the well of Rabelais in particular over the course of his lifetime as a ‘source of encouraging nourishment’ in this regard: few individual authors were able to make such light and pleasant work of the humanistic ‘connection imperative’. But Watanabe’s broader academic endeavours on behalf of Renaissance Studies in Japan, Ōe concludes, represented a ‘strong cocktail’ in their own right.

### ‘The Master’s Conversational Writing Style’

Ōe begins this chapter, which covers Watanabe’s work on the Hundred Years War, by reminding his reader that academics and historians will approach these writings in a different way to novelists like him. Watanabe himself, acutely aware of his status as a professor with a few ‘wild ideas’ beyond his polite tenured station, was subjected to criticism by colleagues for a lack of academese; his tone, in other words, was insufficiently dull for some of his peers. It should go without saying that Ōe takes it upon himself to defend his master’s legacy against such critics. Much of Watanabe’s written work took the form of (more or less hastily) converted lectures which read as such. Watanabe’s true calling, in other words, was neither as an academic historian nor as a novelist, but rather as a *lecturer*, a teacher who poured his energy first and foremost into his oral craft. Part of the *raison d’être* of Ōe’s book is to preserve this transient essence; it is sad that Watanabe was not born 50 or 100 years later into a world where he might have reached millions with lively and charismatic podcasts.

Watanabe’s creative ‘translations’ of early 15th-century French diaries will be worth reading carefully, Ōe argues, for different reasons than his *Makers of the French Renaissance*: instead of foregrounding the more or less simultaneous heroism and genius of a few outstanding

individuals, Watanabe will delve here into a prolonged period of violence, madness and superstition, a state of affairs which was closer to Watanabe's own biographically conditioned view of human sociality under most historical circumstances. Even the famed heroine of the period, Joan of Arc (1412-1431), should be viewed soberly against this 'realistic' backdrop, not through 'rose-tinted glasses'. Joan's horrific martyrdom and subsequent rehabilitation are to be understood as two sides of the same hagiographic, 'apocalyptic' coin; the dangerous 'neuroses' which lead most people, most of the time, to think and act as if they are 'living through an especially mad period' worthy of extreme violence must be countered by education of the kind that the humanities alone (history and literature in particular) can provide. A healthier relationship with the present would allow us to overcome any illusion that we are living at the unrepeatable crossroads of history, that God is willing us to a specific action, or that we are in some other crucial sense the centre of the universe. A human being must have such dictatorial tendencies if she is to survive in a hardscrabble world (and so evolution has unsurprisingly hardwired them into us), but a mature humanism will move its bearer towards the humble pleasures of (almost always anonymous) contribution, which are of course much more sophisticated: they require both an embodied knowledge of the ancestors to whose legacy one is contributing and an active imagination of the countless future generations who may yet add their own creativity on our (and many other) shoulders.

As a novelist, Ōe regarded it as 'a good thing' that Watanabe brought his own feelings and judgments into his translations of these period diaries, even if this entailed 'reading deeply' into them in ways that academic historians and translators would find unacceptable. Ōe permits himself a novelistic digression into his own life at this point, comparing the descriptions of Siamese twins born in the 15th-century *Diary of Troubled Times* to his own family experience of fathering a disabled son, and connecting all this to contemporary (and specifically Mexican) artwork on the subject (Ōe spent six months in Mexico City in 1976-77). Depictions of the grotesque - e.g. Siamese twins - can 'open people's hearts', especially in 'turbulent' historical contexts like early 20th-century Mexico - by conjoining the powerlessness of the victims of civil conflict with the suffering of parents like Ōe, who are likewise forced to confront circumstances wholly beyond their control. Watanabe's firm insistence on the darker aspects of human existence on a chaotic planet serves as a constant reminder that, for all the differences in our shifting

present levels of individual material comfort, in the long run 'we are all tied to one another in the same spiritual boat' irrespective of our private 'worldviews' and temporary 'modes of feeling'. When a 15th-century Parisian diarist reports the blooming of violets out of season, for example, human readers in all times and places are reminded not only of the chaos raging in a France consumed by the Hundred Years War, but also of our common dependence on a universal 'macrocosm' represented in local form by the earth and sun, and above all by the delicate balance of the relationship between the two. While we might one day forge a new home in other places or alleviate the urgency of our struggle for survival on this planet through clever innovation (or indeed destroy ourselves trying), the fundamental contingency of our existence, Watanabe stresses, will never change, no matter where we go or how long we are able to prolong the health of our aging bodies. Our spirits are organically tied to these shifting - and sometimes 'strange' - macrocosmic surroundings in such ways as to make a meaningful inner life wholly divorced from them unthinkable. Even if our underlying feeling of alienation from the surrounding order may somehow seem worse when a disaster is manmade - as Ibuse Masuji (1898-1993) captures with a similar 'absurd' episode of flowers blooming out of season in the aftermath of the Hiroshima atomic blast - our grief will fundamentally be the same if our loved ones die in an earthquake. Like all great novelists, Ibuse enriches the umbilical relationship between human beings and the universe; the illusion of possible liberation from this labyrinth of unforeseeable risk is an omnipresent danger, Ōe argues, to the humanist enterprise, which welcomes the alleviation of suffering through ingenuity (or even brute luck), but not the idea that meaning and beauty could be found in narcotised divorce from the world.

Watanabe focuses on the sheer animal horror of Joan's burning at the stake; that she was dressed in a man's clothing somehow reinforced the fact that she was 'neither a man, nor a witch, nor a devil', but a simple woman among millions of others in history. That a Church might take decades or (in the case of Galileo) even *centuries* to 'rehabilitate' such perceived mortal enemies strikes Ōe as 'dreadful', because it accords a demonic power to individual human beings which is beyond all healthy proportion (the 'sanctification' racket is of course the flipside of the same phenomenon). When exploring the work of another French diarist during the reign of François I (1515-1547), Watanabe seizes on the inklings of a new mentality, even as the world's capacity for 'monstrosity' remains fundamentally unchanged. The experimental

method pioneered a couple of generations later in England by Francis Bacon (1561-1626), which regarded all aspects of 'nature', however terrible, as worthy objects of sober empirical investigation, did not arise out of thin European cultural air: behind the biggest names of the French Renaissance (most notably Rabelais himself), François I's 'deep understanding' of the humanists' overall project, together with the inspiration and support of other crucial enablers like his sister Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549), created the ferment out of which modern science as we know it was born. 'Before Bacon, roughly speaking, deformities always had a [moral] meaning. Misfortunes in the world were taken as manifestations of human sin,' Ōe writes. Both sides of the Reformation struggle indulged in propaganda which reflected this anthropocentric prejudice; even as European intellectual elites were beginning to liberate themselves from its clutches, such demonisation remained an effective strategy when it came to winning over the uneducated masses.

Not quite a novelist himself, Watanabe nevertheless provided the young Ōe with a wealth of inspiration for his craft and general future learning. Watanabe's Renaissance-era diary translations, for instance, led Ōe to Mircea Eliade's initiation theory, allowing him to understand Japan's own hitherto morbid fascination with its Emperor in a global historical context. Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque also enabled Ōe to situate Watanabe's portraits of Renaissance France against a nuanced backdrop still rich in pre-Christian agricultural influences. All the while, however, Ōe the artist is busy cross-fertilising past and present in the cauldron of his own creativity: Hirohito's reign is juxtaposed with that of François I for the obvious parallels between Emperor's *Humanity Declaration* and Renaissance humanism, but also as a modern case study of a people struggling to put its violent recent past behind it. The comparable turbulence of François's France and Hirohito's Japan - and the two leaders' common failure, despite their relatively tolerant individual dispositions, to avoid terrible bloodshed in the societies they governed - left Watanabe, and by extension Ōe, 'deeply shocked'. Watanabe's creative diary translations of 15th- and 16th-century French citizens reflect the permanence of this 'voice of lamentation' traceable throughout human history: moderate, generous people in every era are caught up in events beyond their control, contexts in which 'peaceful reform' may be impossible. Mature scholarship in the humanities, Ōe argues, is not conducted in a laboratory-style emotional vacuum; Watanabe maintained his 'scholarly

attitude' even as he clearly sought parallels with his own biography in his Renaissance digging. If Ōe is frustrated that Watanabe has not received the recognition he deserved within Japan's intellectual community, he nevertheless remains optimistic about a gradual 'deepening of appreciation' for the meaning of Watanabe's efforts, an acknowledgment comparable with that of the better-known (in Japan at least) Hotta Yoshie (1918-1998), who likewise sought to understand Japan's insane war experience - via the testimony of ordinary citizens, to be sure, but also on the shoulders of European giants like Montaigne and Goya.

### 'Translating Rabelais'

Watanabe's 'lifelong project' interests Ōe because, among other things, it is 'a mystery poem shining down on posterity'. Watanabe's diaries from his first days in France reflect a young man who already knows that this task belongs to him; running between the bookshops and libraries of interwar Paris, Watanabe had already assumed the burden of discipline proper to any serious Rabelais scholar of the era. For all his respect for such a monomaniacal scholarly disposition, Ōe admits that he does not share it (the author endured a similar painful realisation of his unfitness for academia while working under Nabokov biographer Brian Boyd). Just as the young New Zealander Boyd slept on overnight Greyhound buses between stints at American libraries before he was taken in by the recently widowed Vera Nabokov (and given some of Vlad's old clothes), Watanabe's time in Paris prepared him well for his research on the desperate poverty of the Renaissance humanists (Rabelais chief among them); such unmonetisable work has always depended on patronage in one form or other - and bravery in the face of its absence. In a 1942 piece titled 'The Penury of the Humanists', Watanabe reminds his readers that starving to death was as real a risk for Rabelais and his peers as burning at the stake; the master exhorts young Japanese in the midst of war to remain 'secretly flexible' in their 'resistance', and to find ways to survive and carry on their own life's work. If stressing that Watanabe's perennial labours 'revolved around Rabelais' was really just 'an exercise in stating the obvious', such a clear calling was nonetheless 'rare and admirable' in Ōe's eyes.

First and foremost, Watanabe sought to retain the 'playfulness' of Rabelais's original in his Japanese rendition; a work like *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, in which advice is freely dispensed about the pleasures of

wiping one's backside with a live goose, should not be totally ruined by academic hairsplitting, and certainly not in the main body of the text. If Edo-era comic authors like Shikitei Sanba (1776-1822) offered rich inspiration, a modern idiom was nevertheless required, one which conveyed the sheer plurality and energy of Rabelais's work to a contemporary Japanese audience. Above all, translation of a card-carrying Renaissance humanist like Rabelais required a style which reflected the 'positively decent mode of thought' he embodied; beauty, not philological rule-following or didactic sermonising, would be the ultimate measure of such an endeavour's meaning and success. The 'Ponocratic method' depicted by Rabelais in *Gargantua* privileged the 'corporal and spiritual liberation' of the individual over the dry rote learning preferred by Sorbonne theologians of the day (Meiji-era poet and reformist intellectual Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902) pioneered a similar pedagogy for native Japanese circumstances); what Rabelais offers above all, however, via figures like Frère Jean, Panurge and myriad other 'companions' to his two giants, is a satire of all sides, including any humanists who might be growing too sure of themselves. The ludic 'do what you want' Thelemite utopia is spurned by Rabelais in favour of a still playful but ultimately socially responsible vocational ethic. To what, then, does such 'decency' feel responsible? Rabelais's dreams of religious and educational reform are perhaps best encapsulated in his digressive, self-contradictory style; Watanabe's work in general, and his translations of Rabelais in particular, are characterised by a similar tone, one which Ōe himself strives to capture for his readers by pretending to digress from the question at hand.

Even Watanabe's notes to the main text are 'good fun', full of dry jokes and interesting tidbits. By 'standing on the shoulders of history', he is able to bring the text to life for new Japanese generations, offering commentary from the present instead of simply assuming a readership of period experts. This business of 'illuminating the future', in which all art consists, is enabled both by direct contact with the past - in this case, Rabelais - and by the creative cross-fertilisation of that past with fresh elements. A too earnestly museumified treatment of Rabelais, in other words, would undermine the very spirit of the Rabelaisian *oeuvre*; a suitable para-academic form must be found. Ōe cleverly pivots here to that other great 20th-century Rabelais reader Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), pointing out the diametric opposition between Bakhtin's formalist roots and Bolshevik socialist realism, in which the 'bourgeois illusion' of form was squashed under the jackboot of revolutionary

content. As with Watanabe, Bakhtin's lifelong passion for Rabelais preceded, outlived, and was reinforced by the ruthless insanity through which he was condemned to live; in Rabelais, he found a polyphonic, carnivalesque, partly pre-Christian antidote to disastrous Stalinist determinism. For Watanabe, meanwhile, Rabelais provided the ultimate reminder that 'history exists' and 'people suffer in it'; deep reading of Rabelais offered a chance for 'immersion in one chapter of that history', not only as a private coping mechanism for the ills of 20th-century Japan, or as a mythic symbol of that suffering (or of something else), but above all for its own sake as a source of spiritual self-liberation and self-enrichment through contact with the lives of other human beings. Whereas Bakhtin celebrates Rabelais's 'subversion of the sacred' via carnivalesque manifestations of peasant truth to power (uncovering in the process a certain pre-Christian 'truth of the universe' in healthy opposition to the 'king's truth' of institutional Christianity), Watanabe's notes to his Rabelais translation recognise that 'history is made by all social classes'. Without disparaging Bakhtin's insights, Ōe suggests that Watanabe's humanism offers the reader an even brighter panorama of Rabelais's world.

Ōe regards Watanabe's translation of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* as a milestone in Japanese cultural history, a work with the power, he hopes, to 'change the course of Japanese literature' much as Spanish translations of Rabelais influenced Latin American authors like Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa. Ōe's compatriot Kazuo Dan (1912-1976) and Korean poet Kim Jiha (1941-) are cited as modern East Asian inheritors of a certain Rabelaisian carnal spirit, but Watanabe's polyphonic style - his ability to integrate Rabelais's full formal range from carnivalesque elements to battle scenes and kings' speeches - represented a revolution at the level of language. The astute Japanese reader of Watanabe's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* will conclude that 'the scholar was an artist in his own right.'

### 'The Biographies'

Without subscribing to the Great Man Theory of History, Watanabe nevertheless reserved special interest for outstanding individuals, both for their own sake and for the light they cast on those around them. His late biographical portraits of high-ranking Renaissance women, from *Heptameron* author Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549) to her daughter

Jeanne d'Albret (1528-1572), the incomparable Marguerite de France (1553-1615) and Henri IV's favourite mistress, Gabrielle d'Estrées (1573-1599), offer both internal diversity of character and a panorama of Watanabe's beloved 16th-century France. Ōe reminds his audience that the master's celebration of these great women's plurality of hats - writer, diplomat, mother, sex symbol, mistress - was no accident, but rather 'reflected his characteristic breadth of interest': humanism emerges out of all this life as a fresh froth, not as a sterile distillation of principles. In a corresponding act of generosity, Ōe, following the 20th-century Japanese literary fashion made famous by the likes of Tanizaki and Kawabata, grants his teacher the right to a final burst of septuagenarian 'eroticism': Queen Margot's famed beauty and Gabrielle's untimely death precipitate Watanabe's thoughts and feelings about his own mortality to an extent that even the courtiers of the period, most notably Brantôme (1537-1614) in his *Vie des dames illustres* and *Vie des dames galantes*, would fail to match. In Margot, Watanabe saw a woman whose famed sensuality - nymphomania to the critics and gossip-mongers - was in fact the outgrowth of a rich spiritual life in an age of religious innovation and uncertainty. This earnest search for 'beauty and euphoria' - in the ego-marginalising sense implicit in the Japanese *bōga* ('forgetting oneself') - is encapsulated in the French phrase '*rien de si doux, s'il n'estoit si court*' ('nothing so beautiful if it were not so short'), a moral (or rather aesthetic) which, as Ōe is quick to remind us, applies to Margot's attitude to life and letters as a whole, not only to her transient love affairs. Such 'shards of God's beauty' penetrated Margot, Watanabe argues, in part thanks to her contact with the work of early humanist thinkers such as the Italian neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499); the vestiges of this mysticism have 'stubbornly' survived into modern times, Ōe adds, via Romantic poets like William Blake (1757-1827). The 'disillusionment' which characterised so much of Margot's life - the 'forest' of war, death and defeat through which she was forced to march in a turbulent century - could be compensated by the briefest of moments.

In his inimitable Japanese prose, Watanabe captures another symbol of the sensuality of the epoch (reflected in artworks like the anonymous *Gabrielle d'Estrées et une de ses soeurs* (1594)), but here too the legacy of the human being in question transcends her sex appeal to the powerful men around her. Gabrielle, as Ōe shows, used her physical charms to make an important contribution to Henri IV's signing of the Edict of Nantes, a milestone of humanism, despite the fact

that she herself was 'not overendowed with learning'. Evidence of Gabrielle's bravery - physical and moral - abounds from the annals, but so too do a taste for pleasure and an appetite for life and love which make her 'suspicious death' in 1599, at the age of 26, all the more painful. If Ōe's status as a 'layman novelist' leaves him open to one or other satisfying explanation of the mystery, the scholar Watanabe was left at the end of his career contemplating the 'spiritual loneliness' of Gabrielle's final hours as his thoughts turned to his own looming extinction.

### 'Farewell'

Ōe recounts the kindness of Watanabe and his wife as the master neared the end in 1974-75. What survives of this life a decade on (the lectures which Ōe adapted for the book were delivered in 1983) is Watanabe's 'indescribable literary achievement' in capturing the French Renaissance humanists' 'determination to overcome religious wars'. Naturally enough, this determination, though fed by events, was not narrowly instrumental; political progress is paradoxically achieved, Watanabe shows us, by victories of private form rather than public content. A humanist republic of letters, in other words, requires a commitment to individual style on the part of its citizens long before a subscription to any specific ideological program. Watanabe did more for Ōe than simply to point this out: he embodied this style for a whole generation of Japanese students.

Something in Watanabe's approach to his chosen chunk of history resembles Emma Rothschild's approach in *An Infinite History: The Story of a Family in France Over Three Centuries* (2021). Rothschild's drama starts in the 18th Century, but as David A. Bell argues in his brilliant review,

although she has historical arguments to advance—about France's overseas expansion, the French Revolution, and the French economy—they have a secondary place in the book. What matters most is the voyage itself, as one piece of evidence leads serendipitously to another. In this lyrical Michelin Guide to a now-vanished Angoulême and its people, everything 'is worth a detour'. Some critics might see this preference for the idiosyncrasies of her subject matter at the expense of an overall

thesis as a shortcoming of *An Infinite History*, and perhaps of the microhistorical approach in general. It is better, perhaps, to see it as a welcome challenge to a profession that has long been infatuated with different varieties of social and cultural theory. It can sometimes be a good idea to let past individuals, as much as possible, speak for themselves, rather than force their messy, irregularly shaped lives into grids borrowed from the theoretical literature. [...] While not literally constituting an 'infinite history', the webs of connections in her book quickly expand far beyond the capacity of any single historian to map out. [...] 'The history of Marie Aymard and her family,' she notes, 'is also my own journey,' but she never really elaborates on that statement. [...] Yet even if Rothschild does not wish to draw personal connections, those familiar with her long career will find many echoes of it in *An Infinite History*. Trained as an economic historian, she has written about the transformations in the American auto industry and about economic thought in the Enlightenment. Drawing on this background, she has studded *An Infinite History* with short, fascinating meditations on the nature of economic change in the 19th and 20th centuries.

[...] For all the insights it provides and the vivid sense it gives of successive generations, Rothschild's impressionistic method does have some costs. [...] Of course, no history book can recreate the totality of past experience. Mid-20th-century European scholars did try to write so-called total histories, mostly of early modern European societies. But these attempts foundered on the shoals of source material that, like Rothschild's, was both impossibly vast and frustratingly fragmentary. Paradoxically, it was this failure that led a subsequent generation of historians to experiment with microhistory, drastically reducing the scale of their observations so as to draw the fullest possible portraits of a single small town, a single family, a single life—as William Blake put it, 'to see a World in a Grain of Sand.' It was this work that so impressed the young Emma Rothschild. Although there are things, inevitably, that *An Infinite History* has missed, the book still represents one of the most successful attempts to put Ginzburg and Poni's 'science of the lived' into action, connecting life to life to life, and by doing so illuminating what the Italian

scholars called the ‘invisible structures in which living experience is articulated.’ It is not the totality. But it is an illumination.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> David A. Bell, ‘Web of Connections: Can One Tell the Story of a Country Through One Family?’, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/emma-rothschild-infinite-history/>, 23/8/2021 (accessed 29/8/2021).

## May Ziadé's *Al-Musāwā*<sup>13</sup>

*Espoir ! tu es la vie et toute la nature ;  
Sans toi rien ne pourrait alléger notre ennui ;  
Toi rêve du présent et toi chanson future ;  
Espoir qui montres Dieu pour nous tourner vers Lui !*

*(Hope! You are life and nature as a whole;  
Without you nothing can lighten our soul;  
The present's dream and the future's song,  
You have shown the way to God all along.)*

May Ziadé, 'Espoir' (1911)

Please excuse the liberality of my English rendition here. Like Watanabe Kazuo, May Ziadé (1886-1941) wrote in French in her early years, but she also translated into Arabic from English, German and Italian. Ziadé's love for European literature gradually pushed her back to the Arab tradition; the influence of Sufism is obvious in her later writing. Even in 1935, despite the deep trauma caused by the loss of her parents and above all by the death of the chaste epistolary love of her life (Khalil Gibran), Ziadé is nevertheless able to affirm: 'I love Egypt and the East; my spirit is in you. But I love the West in the same way. I love humanity in all the best senses of that word, and I believe in God.' This is no mean feat for someone abandoned to psychiatric institutions by family and friends; as the life and soul of Cairo's most famous 1920s literary salon, our liberal Palestinian-Lebanese outsider deserved better of the many big-ego intellectual admirers who claimed to love her. Ziadé remains a dustily remembered proto-feminist Arab icon, but she refused to subsume her art to any political cause, preferring instead to see herself and her work as a 'bridge' between worlds. 'May's Salon' was just that: a stable but exhilarating platform where opposing intellectual currents would meet each other and emerge mutually edified.

Ziadé's *Al-Musāwā* (1923) is written in this spirit: a rich conception of human 'equality' emerges from her critical coverage of a range of experiments in political organisation.

---

<sup>13</sup> May Ziadé, *Al-Musāwā (Equality)*, <https://www.hindawi.org/books/82646393/>, 1923 (accessed 1/9/2021).

## 'Tamhid' ('Preamble')

*I thank those who have shown me compassion during my life, just as I thank anyone in advance who shows me compassion once I am gone.*

May Ziadé (1935)

Near the end of her days, Ziadé admitted that, literary soirées aside, she had spent her life 'among pens, typewriters, books and studies.' In all her mental activity, she had 'remained in search of the Highest Example'; as the 2016 *Al-Jazeera* documentary on Ziadé's life further puts it, 'May wanted freedom for every individual, not only for women but for men as well, and for all nations.'<sup>14</sup> The French Revolution of 1789, a veritable 'Copernican overthrow' of feudalism, marked the end of the beginning of this 'civilisational' striving: the revolution's first principle, from which Ziadé begins her 'Preamble', was that 'human beings are born - and remain - equal and free before the Law.' The 'old feudal disparities concerning rights and duties' would henceforth give way, among other boons, to 'women's insistence on defining their own destinies and works in the world', and to an ever-deeper general triumph of human solidarity over Social Darwinist ideologies. Nevertheless, equality remains 'the mother of all human problems' because it cannot be solved by a simple redistribution of extrinsic wealth and honours, but only by a thoroughgoing 'revolution to overthrow ignorance'. Although Ziadé sympathises with the English working-class notion of equality as 'ten shillings a day', she sees such wage and welfare activism as necessary rather than sufficient:

Along with freedom and brotherhood, equality is a concept which stirs my soul. I have touched the edge of the meaning of equality ever since my spirit began its journey, but now I want to analyse every impulse, every impression.

---

<sup>14</sup> 'Farashat al-Adab: May Ziyada', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X8FY1sVng> (accessed 30/8/2021). This Arabic documentary provides a succinct overview of Ziadé's life and times.

*What is equality, where is it, and is it possible?* This is what I would like to clarify in the coming chapters, in as unrushed and unbiased a fashion as possible, with the sincerity of a person harnessing the full range of her spiritual and intellectual powers and calling on everything which nature, science and history might offer to guide her.

### 'The Social Classes'

Ziadé begins her meditation on the problem of equality by citing Hindu mythology: on the one hand, the division of social labour envisioned by the Indian caste system is horrifying because it makes citizens 'prisoners of diversity by force', but on the other hand, civilisation is only possible - and only desirable - because of a *voluntary* division of labour. The art of equality immediately presents itself as the maximal liberation of individuals to define their own rightful place in the 'orchestra' of human striving, but this metaphor implies both the presence of a conducting paternal hand and a certain autonomously positive attitude to the fact that human beings are condemned to be a part of the 'great plurality' of the universe - 'with its planets and spaces in between, its land and water, trees and rocks, fertile meadows and barren deserts.' The problem for Ziadé is that individual people come to exist in this world 'whether they like it or not'; beyond the annals of human history, the animal kingdom is full of examples of species 'imposing' social orders on their individual members. Human tribes emerged in this animal way, 'shaped invariably by the natural resources on offer.' Eventually these tribes developed to the point where 'the self-awareness of individuals within the group grew, if ever so slightly'; still, these early modern societies found themselves largely pursuing the same goal - 'whether they knew it or not' - in the form of warfare made more and more sophisticated by developments in agriculture and trade. Out of this experience of mass combat and expansionism came what Ziadé calls 'the ecstasy of sovereignty' and the corresponding 'pain of slavery', which in hunter-gatherer times had been at best local and short-lived, and hence had not hardened into intergenerational and international injustices of the modern, structural type. 'Greed for dominion' and 'a striving for superiority', Ziadé admits, have nevertheless been with us from the beginning, a 'deep-rooted' legacy of an evolutionary past we cannot simply wish away, but at best shape into prosocial forms.

Those seeking such hegemony over others in the modern world understood that the key to success was 'property - or as we call it these days, capital.' Indeed, 'the whole first phase of the economic history of humanity,' understood as the phase in which we are still trapped, can be defined as having 'revolved around the terrible axis of money accumulation.' Modern 'democracy' is understood by Ziadé in Weberian terms as the formation of materially self-interested political parties; even Communist parties fetishise 'property' by reducing politics to the struggle for its abolition. While stressing the ease with which such materialistic mentalities can be passed down within families and class communities, Ziadé also argues that, beyond the 'illusory heavens' cynically purveyed to the uneducated masses, a humanistic 'light of individuality' has gradually grown in educated circles, allowing those exposed to it to imagine, for the first time, an end to this first phase of human history and its obsession with 'property' as a ticket to 'superiority'. This humanist insight - namely that a modicum of material ease wedded to education is in fact a potential means of *liberation* from status anxiety and the wheel of constant wealth accumulation - must be maintained against the observable fact that 'self-interest lurks behind all deeds, in all corners of the universe, as an essential element for the preservation of existence.' Ziadé is not suggesting that material comfort is unnecessary, only that it is insufficient for a full human life, and beyond a certain point superfluous to spiritual growth. One important question is the exact level of material income at which it becomes superfluous, but this is a question to which she, and we, will return.

Differences between individuals and groups are 'built into creation'; any meaningful notion of equality, Ziadé argues, will be 'founded on such respect for individuality'. A return to 'noble savagery', however, will not solve the equality problem: in such a state the individual human being, deprived of scientific and humanistic training for her mind, is 'enslaved by ignorance' and 'imprisoned by superstition' in all the animal clichés of instinct. This 'veiling of the human spirit in illusion' can only be undone by a willingness to press ahead with the humanist project ('even over the corpses' if necessary, as Ziadé says in reference to Goethe). There could be no civilised life, no refined individual experience without a plurality of stimuli and an aesthetic education which trains our powers of differentiation, so the first challenge for any true egalitarian is to overcome the desire for an illusory abolition of difference - a sublimated form of the will to power - in favour of an active embrace of the differences (yes, even the superiorities) of others (as well as a

recognition of the sublime force of nature itself) as fuel in one's own quest for self-perfection. Human equality will hence be registered in our common creative 'attempts to cross-fertilise these differences with the determination and talents that we ourselves have been given' - not in order to subjugate one's rivals and live forever in a lonely castle in a mirage of impenetrability, but rather to improve the fragile human family of which we are a part. Ziadé's egalitarian may still wish to enjoy the peace and quiet of her own home at regular intervals, but such a home is a base for exploration and spiritual regeneration, and should not really be bigger or more lavishly adorned than it needs to be for those purposes.

### 'Aristocracy'

'If this were a historical study,' Ziadé begins her second chapter (thereby reminding us that it isn't), 'I would start with aristocratic conceptions, [...] especially those theocratic ones in which the aristocracy derives its authority (and property) from God' (the Arabic words for lordship and private property are etymologically entwined; both derive from the same M-L-K Semitic root). Ziadé's interest in mythology is connected to this suspicion of aristocratic interest in offering prescribed mass solutions to the problem of an 'unknown reality'; the price of such false religious certainty is economic and spiritual subjugation, the prolongation of a state of ignorance in which no true 'equality' is possible. A successful theocracy will naturally feed its subjects, but always in such a way as to remind them who is boss, and hence to whom their gratitude is owed; far from liberating individual citizens for autonomous (and hence equal) spiritual lives, theocracy prevents those lives from ever really getting started. The modern Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest, for all the dangers inherent in its perversion by right-wing ideologues, is a useful threat, Ziadé decides, to theocratic modes of social organisation: if all good mythologies involve inspirational elements of bravery, then perhaps there will always be newer and greater acts to come, acts which will call the divinity of the origin story into question. Modern 'constitutional systems' of government offer the promise of mass liberation from the hypnotic power of such stories, and from the illusion of absolute authority which derives from them: constitutions are fragile human things, always open to revision.

Ziadé reminds her audience in this context that the humanistic 'art of criticism' and the 'art of compromise' inherent in intellectual activity in a fallen world are not the same thing:

Voltaire, one of the drivers and stylists of the French Revolution, a champion of respect for human thought and sacraliser of individual freedom, corresponded with the kings of Europe and accepted their friendship. There is nothing necessarily objectionable in that, but he would end his letters with expressions of reverence, attachment and obeisance, placing himself 'at their feet'. The bold reformer Qasim Amin [1865-1908] fawned over Abbas II in his introduction to *The Liberation of Women*. Even the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, that great prophet of existential unity, accepted a knighthood from the King of England. There may be many explanations for all this, but strengthening the foundations of humanism is hardly one of them.

Tagore may have renounced his knighthood in 1919 in protest at the Amritsar Massacre, but Ziadé's point stands: even in a post-theocratic world, humanists will be tempted to play it safe with power, both as a means of securing their own material needs and - crucially - because of the shallow 'aristocratic' pleasures which status and association may afford them. 'May's Salon' perhaps appeared to offer its guests a version of this frisson of superiority, but Ziadé herself was clear: human gatherings can be pleasurable and meritocratically elitist without being snobby. Love for human excellence, in other words, is no threat to equality.

'If this were a historical study,' Ziadé begins again, 'I would explore the conditions of countries where there is no aristocracy, like Greece, Romania or Serbia', but instead she proceeds to praise Princess Patricia of Connaught (1886-1974), the granddaughter of Queen Victoria, for her decision to marry down 'with the son of a humble Lord', smitten as she was with his wartime bravery and altogether with a 'love that smashes through class barriers, honouring everything it touches with its invisible fingers.' Patricia gave up her title as Princess - and the automatic income associated with it - to become 'humble Lady Ramsay', still a very comfortable life, but well behind 'the Princesses, Duchesses, Marquises and Countesses' now ahead of her in the royal status hierarchy. Ziadé can't resist a dig at the Egyptian royal family here, obsessed as it is with its titles; in contrast, 'the granddaughter of the

greatest empire and the greatest nation in history so far is known as nothing more than Lady Ramsay.' A lot is hidden behind this 'so far': the British Empire is far from perfect, Ziadé knows, and it is still an empire, but there is a strength in this culture, embodied by Patricia of Connaught, which will survive the Empire's decline. Egypt, by contrast, at least as reflected in the status anxiety of its aristocratic élites, offers little fuel for humanism's coming postcolonial future. The British Empire still belongs fairly and squarely to the regrettable 'first phase' of human history, but at least it has shown inklings of something better.

Ziadé's problem is not with necessary self-interested behaviour; it is with the second-order complicity of monarchs and aristocrats who, unsatisfied with the 'enormous human willingness to deny beauty, evade its call, and take the shortcut to get paid', feel compelled to create a whole superfluous and cynical architecture of titles and honours in a bid to 'reward service and entrench loyalty'. Ziadé reserves equal scorn for the servile type who falls for all this,

the honourable individual who weighs the tones of her voice, counts her steps, and measures her utterances, yearning to serve the boss both publicly and privately. If such a person is lucky enough to be seated near her lordship at some official ceremony, she hastens to kiss his feet, bring his food, fill his cup with wine or water as desired, and carry his orders to others in the manner of the café or restaurant waiter, not merely as a job so that she can eat [or out of respect for the achievements of the person in question], but in active pride at her proximity to power.

Ziadé's 'equality', then, will require an aristocracy of the spirit, not in the sense that only 'few' members can by definition gain access, but at least insofar as these two hideous extremes - the sadistic pleasures of rule and the masochistic pleasures of being ruled - are to be avoided. A conception of human excellence is 'necessary for the preservation of the qualities which constitute the wealth of the nation, because each part has a vital force entrusted to it'; this is by no means to defend a hereditary class system, but on the contrary to ensure the social mobility which allows 'talent' to flow 'to its rightful place in the universe'. Ziadé is particularly concerned with those of 'low birth' who may, in their anonymity, be led to doubt their own abilities and generally to 'sink into an abyss of mistrust' concerning the world and their rightful place in it; it is 'in the clear interest of specific peoples, but also consistent with the

concept of humanism in general' that such wastes of talent be avoided. Though she does not mention Grammar Schools directly, Ziadé once again praises the 'unique' English aristocracy for opening itself up to just such meritocratic regeneration from below, and hence for opening the way to its eventual abolition in a second phase of history - not in favour of an amorphous comprehensive mediocrity, but rather a self-regulating social organism which allows free individuals to navigate their own paths to service - not of power, but of their own self-chosen vocations.

Again and again Ziadé defends the plurality of nature against attempts to flatten it: that one sun shines on us all does not mean that we are the same shape and size, or that we have the same unchanging goals under it. One need not accept Schopenhauer's brutal and false distinction between born geniuses and born fools to reject the excessive sycophancy of intellectuals (Ziadé cites Boileau's grovelling to Louis XIV here) as unnecessary and even 'unnatural'; Ziadé's 'equality' is to be found first and foremost in a certain relationship with *oneself*, not in shallow comparison with others, and certainly not in gratuitous flattery of them. Many may fail in this *jihad* (an Arabic word Ziadé uses decades before its politicisation in English), but as long as the human striving for spiritual excellence remains, no amount of levelling-down political reform or self-interested courtly intrigue will be able to prevent the emergence of 'natural' leaders in all spheres of human activity.

### 'Slavery and Serfdom'

*Torture ensures submission, never cooperation. The difference is that a person who submits to the will of another will do anything to make the torture stop, say anything whether it is true or not. Cooperation is truth.*

Ali Soufan  
Former FBI Special Agent  
Joint Terrorism Task Force

If Ziadé surprises her *bien pensant* reader by celebrating a certain meritocratic conception of spiritual life, she shocks her outright by defending slavery as a milestone of human civilisation: the realisation

that prisoners of war could be worth more alive than dead facilitated the division of labour which drove the agricultural revolution and everything which flowed from it. In other words, on this historical account, slavery itself created the conditions under which slavery could one day be abolished. After a whirlwind global tour of ancient servitude in its various (Indian, Chinese etc.) guises, Ziadé reminds her readers that even the philosophers of Greek and Roman antiquity, 'many of whom tasted slavery themselves', failed to repudiate it: 'The only thing that distinguished Plato (who had been a prisoner in Egypt and Sicily until a friend paid his ransom) was that his philosophy and letters softened his heart to the point that he would entrust the beating of his slaves to others.' In general, pre-modern philosophers 'were uninterested in equality for equality's sake, but rather in overcoming the state of servitude so as to be able to lord it themselves.' Even in medieval Europe, 'large open-air slave markets from Lyon to Rome traded in black and white stocks,' and this before Columbus and the Portuguese *descubrimientos* globalised the scope of the business. Ziadé distinguishes between slavery (away game) and serfdom (home game), but only insofar as to foreground the 'great earthquake' of the French Revolution alongside broader cultural developments in England.

'Over the last century, slavery has been abolished in country after country and colony after colony,' Ziadé continues. While the New World was relatively quick to absorb the lessons of the old ('the United States in 1865, Brazil in 1888' etc.), Ziadé joined the chorus of global intellectuals who chanted that 'the sweat of shame had been washed off the brow of humanity by the French Revolution and the mettle of a handful of English intellectuals.' Much like Nazi gas chambers a generation later, however, something about the industrial scale and methodology of the Negro slave trade conducted by post-Renaissance European imperial powers made it worse than the more intimate and emotionally entangled forms of bondage which had hitherto existed in virtually every human society: 'There is no punishment, no religion, no crime that can justify it; it was nothing but the hunting down of human beings by human beings for money.' For all their various textual defences of slavery, Christianity and Islam - and world religions in general - 'have been at the forefront of educating spirits' for a second phase of human history characterised by equality. A key aspect of this education has been psychological, not least a growing modern awareness that exploitation can take the form of 'flattery and pampering, kindness and endearment'. Marriages are as much potential sites of

subjugation as slaveships and feudal estates, and not only of women by men: 'Are you sure that every woman does justice to her husband and does not from time to time embezzle the product of his efforts, or at least some of it?' Ziadé asks provocatively, reminding her reader that marriages have been 'social contracts' since time immemorial, and even as she laughs at the jewellery on her own wrist as a symbol of a certain subconscious submission to male-driven aesthetic standards, a form of control by money in which women 'content themselves with the yoke of servitude' in return for a steady supply of unnecessary luxury goods from their male guardians.

The formal abolition of slavery, Ziadé contends, is an addendum to the French Revolution, the end of the beginning of the history of human spiritual development. In her more disturbing daydreams, Ziadé not only hears the cries of the oppressed 20th-century creature - the political prisoner and sweatshop worker - but above all the 'perpetual slavery' inherent in the uneducated human condition common to all centuries: 'Men and women, old people and children, wealthy and destitute, [...] slaves of diseases, slaves of ignorance, slaves of illusions, slaves of greed, slaves of need, slaves of shame, slaves of vanity, slaves of lies, slaves of envy, slaves of parents, slaves of children, slaves of strangers.' Rather than seeing the problem of slavery as historical and solved, Ziadé understands it as one to be faced by every generation, every new human being: 'Chains and shackles are among the least shocking symbols of slavery. The real shackles are in our blood, our people, our everyday conventions. The shackles are in our own desires and needs. The shackles are in our very inherited architecture as human beings.' Significantly, however, Ziadé reaches this conclusion in imagined dialogue with herself, thereby embodying her own solution to the problem as restated a century later by Shaan Sachdev:

In the last ten years, I have changed in ways both small and extreme. I also fluctuate internally on a daily, sometimes quarter-hourly, basis. Among my most dynamic, complex and even antagonizing conversations are those I have with myself. In her colossal investigation of consciousness, *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt calls this the 'experience of the thinking ego.' More colorfully, she refers to such inward conversations as '*the two-in-one*'—my own, impassioned italics—'that Socrates discovered as the essence of thought and Plato translated into

conceptual language as the soundless dialogue between me and myself.’

This capacity for self-interrogation, for being both questioner and answerer, is not an idiosyncrasy of solitude. The very essence of self-consciousness requires that we acknowledge and engage with ourselves, that we *other* ourselves.

‘The two-in-one become One again when the outside world intrudes upon the thinker and cuts short the thinking process,’ Arendt writes. When we are around others, to put it another way, we are seen as one—from the outside. Away from the world, we can turn once again into ‘the two-in-one’. We can use the peace and quiet to gain some distance from our bodily appearances and become conscious of ourselves.

When I assent to my complicated inner life, I do indeed find myself a puzzled spectator of my own body. Sometimes my body and I are in harmony, sometimes it is like a tug-of-war: I struggle to placate its whims, it struggles to accommodate my desire to think. While this makes for discomfiting moments, it has also permitted some liberation from impressions of physical and demographic uniformity. I don’t feel ‘brown’ or ‘queer’, ‘male’ or ‘foreign-born’, all the time—I don’t even feel them often.

The duality of the thinking ego, Arendt concludes, ‘explains the futility of the fashionable search for identity. Our modern identity crisis could be resolved only by never being alone and never trying to think.’

We ought to be careful, with this in mind, not to *other* each other in simplistic ways, nor to dramatize or diabolise at the expense of gray areas, as if we’re our true selves only when we are being seen and not when we are alone. Arendt insisted that every person possesses—and should engage with—a dialogical inner life. ‘It is a slippery fellow,’ she wrote, ‘not only invisible to others but also, for the self, impalpable, impossible to grasp.’

A critical portion of each person, in other words, has no racial or sexual or national identity. It is ineffable. Empathizing in a productive rather than a hysterical direction might start with according each other a complex philosophical life in addition to

political and physiological ones. There is something in each one of us that demands to be approached freshly every time.<sup>15</sup>

### 'Democracy'

Ziadé's focus on individual character naturally leads her to the Aristotelian view of government: monarchy, aristocracy and democracy can all be corrupted (into tyranny, oligarchy and anarchy respectively) if those in charge find themselves 'enslaved' to one or other source of spiritual malnourishment. Much of what survives into modernity at its best - 'the age of continuous creativity' as Ziadé describes it - was passed down from monarchic and aristocratic ages when enlightened leaders built cultural and legal frameworks which allowed pockets of human freedom to flourish (Ziadé even extends this praise to some of the better Egyptian Pharaohs, from whom 'we still draw inspiration in everything from engineering to administration and spiritual philosophy'). The default egalitarian preference for democratic structures should not be overextended, Ziadé suggests, to obscure the fact that human societies depend on the individual spiritual excellence of the many in order to flourish in a world of natural forces in constant interplay with one another: no amount of democracy (or aristocracy or monarchy) will save a society rotting from the inside out in the form of the corruption of its individual members. Rather than resting on modern democratic platitudes, Ziadé's committed egalitarian seeks to understand and celebrate the best of former civilisations from Mesopotamia to Phoenicia, Persia and beyond, not least the spirit of openness with which these civilisations drew from each other in their advancement (Ziadé goes so far as to cite Confucianism here, the dialogical precepts of which are 'no less beautiful than the highest principles known to us'). Such a humanist focus on 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' ought in no way, however, to minimise the brutality and injustice with which past civilisations conducted the majority of their affairs: 'Wide swathes of darkness threaten to eat up the the thin rays of light in the history of civilisations, a history which typically fails to count the lives of all worthy individuals, immortalising instead the names of famous powerbrokers who bought their renown with the blood of armies and the corpses of slaves.'

---

<sup>15</sup> Shaan Sachdev, 'Hysterical Empathy: On Identification and Interventionism', <https://thepointmag.com/politics/hysterical-empathy/>, 2/9/2021 (accessed 4/9/2021).

Limited Greek and Roman experiments with the rule of law, however, rediscovered and adapted in medieval England under Magna Carta, would coalesce with the remains of a retreating Byzantine culture after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to produce a decisive Renaissance across Europe:

Literature and the arts flourished, ideas shone brightly, science advanced, and Columbus discovered the American continent. Human minds realised that the world could be made other than it was if the dignity and talent of individual people were respected. This new spirit naturally clashed with the established order; Luther's religious reforms were one important front in the struggle. This Reformation was a daughter of the broader intellectual Renaissance and its ally, but the two projects parted company after a time, as the Reformation leaked into territories the Renaissance did not. [...] Although horrendously bloody battles were fought in its name, the Reformation helped to liberate human thought by releasing it from its institutional chains and showing that individual criticism of religious authority, and hence an autonomous spiritual life, were possible: a faith forged in the cauldron of reason and conscience is worth infinitely more than a creed swallowed on the basis of ignorance, delusion and submission. The invention of the printing press, [moreover], facilitated the dissemination of opinions within and among nations.

'God only knows' what lies ahead for the various modern manifestations (anarchist, Bolshevik, American etc.) of this general liberation; Ziadé wants simply to foreground what she regards as the two lasting political monuments to the Renaissance, namely the English 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 ('philosophers and reformers have continued to draw from the well of this constitutional monarchy's freedoms') and above all the French Revolution of 1789 ('if France won national unity during the reign of Louis XIV, the people were dissatisfied with the continued division of the nation into inbred, hereditary and unfair classes').

The key driver of the 'social' aspect of this democratic revolution was the new 'ease of education', which 'brought the classes closer to each other, [...] liberating individuals to develop their talents and display them without fear of being squashed' for doing so by jealous aristocratic

guardians of the *status quo*. This atmosphere of respect for ability and achievement is worth more to Ziadé than participation in political processes, which is more an effect than a cause of the 'democratisation' of literacy. 'Is there a more perfect democracy,' Ziadé asks, 'than the one which educates children from the lower classes, cultivating their personal competence and soundness of mind, thereby allowing them to occupy the most prestigious positions in society on sheer merit?' There is nothing utopian here; as in nature, individual differences will always prevent the Rawlsian 'problem of envy' from being overcome in its entirety (I would love to have been tall enough to be a professional volleyballer, for instance), but Ziadé is carefully dancing around the problem described by Michael Sandel in *The Tyranny of Merit*: it is painful to lose in meritocratic competition, but it is more painful still to be told that there is a level and meritocratic playing-field when there isn't one. Ziadé's 'equality' assumes there will always be individual differences, both natural (e.g. my height) and social (e.g. my parents): education should simply give a fighting chance to everyone, in particular by allowing young people the chance to identify their talents and passions and develop them in a supportive atmosphere without fear of poverty:

The main difference between ancient and modern democratic experiments lies in the fact that, until recently, there had always been a lower class educated for menial work and service, and an upper class for governance and leadership. The individual at the bottom belonged to a master, tribe or clan (as we still see here among the Bedouins), and prided herself in saying 'we', as if she had no opinion, and no value, as an independent human being. Our era, in contrast, insists that every individual 'I' has a value of which it should be proud. [...] Trade unions on the left and corporations on the right have no business suggesting otherwise. [...] Such humanist universalism] was never a given before, and if we accept it without amazement, it is because we are already living it. Future historians will focus on this fact and see it for what it is: the beginning of a brand new era.

And yet, Ziadé asks bitterly, 'with all this freedom and all this progress, did the individual obtain her desired happiness? Was there peace and contentment for all? Did democracy come with all that was expected of it?' Modern 'individualism' has brought 'new forms of enslavement', both

individual (to consumption etc.) and international. For all the energy invested in the League of Nations idea after the First World War, colonialism and other forms of structural injustice endured within and among nations 'big and small': 'It is understandable that the great nations express their desire to awaken the small nations from their ignorance and lethargy, and to pull them together down the great path of civilisation,' Ziadé admits, while also recognising such rhetoric as a cynical new form of imperialist propaganda. If the United States offers the closest approximation of Ziadé's ideal because of its youth and relative freedom from class barriers, 'has this prevented white scorn and contempt for the black population there?' Rather than wishing their neighbours all the joys of education, most people everywhere remain trapped, either in fear of open global competition or in inferiority, real and imagined, to a dominant ruling class: 'Is the attitude of contemporary workers to the capitalist owners of money really so different to that of the common people towards the aristocracy a century ago?'

Ziadé quotes Solon's famous claim that the Athenian democracy he helped to institute was 'the best system of which the Athenian people are capable'; the implication here is that no philosophy of history or set of institutions on their own could possibly rescue people from their 'fundamental differences, natural antipathies, and the general necessity of struggle' common to plant and animal life on our warming, cooling rock. Given that no permanent or utopian solutions to the 'problem of equality' are possible, the best that can be managed is a fragile shepherding of young souls through the various minefields of slavery, an education or 'leading out' of individual human beings everywhere which can never be expected to end. At least with the French Revolution, Ziadé concludes, this process can be said properly to have begun.

### 'Democratic Socialism'

Ziadé naturally regards Marxist historical materialism in its purest form ('a distortion of Hegelian philosophy') as a threat to her view of equality: instead of accepting the reformist view that 'the world has gradually been improved by intellectual, moral and ethical innovations' made possible by education, 'Marx denies this, and seeks to prove instead that every development in politics, legislation, ethics and philosophy results automatically from economic change.' This wouldn't be so bad if

Ziadé shared Marx's optimism regarding the eventual triumph of communism in a world of raw material power, but she doesn't:

Global production is the work of an army spread throughout the world, many of whose soldiers writhe in poverty with limited means of escaping it, and no real confidence in tomorrow's bread supply. If we are really in a new, industrial phase of global production, why do the conditions of work remain so precariously pre-industrial for so many? Why do profits accrue to so few? [...] Why do wealth and poverty, opulence and beggary, knowledge and ignorance, happiness and misery continue to live cheek by jowl in our cities?

Ziadé is happy to form strategic alliances with misguided 'historical materialists' who are at least busy fighting to break the 'nationalisms, religious fundamentalisms, accumulated fortunes and networks of privilege' which pose a continuing threat to the liberation of the working classes for education and equality, but she observes with horror the emergence of a Leninist arrogance which makes all talk of democratic compromise impossible. If socialism has been a Western literary trope from Plato to Thomas More, and if proto-socialist experiments with deep spiritual roots have sprouted here and there throughout the post-Axial world, there is now a fundamentally new, global strain of socialist materialism

the terrible goal of which is the overthrow of governments and systems everywhere, and the demolition of society from its foundations - not just in one country, people, race, or continent, but everywhere - in order to establish a new hegemony and extend its dominion to all parts of the globe, and all in the name of comprehensive socialist unity and a brotherhood of complete equality. This great socialist experiment is the first of its kind in history, as is the self-important zeal with which its adherents claim its absolute validity and legitimacy as the only natural arrangement or outcome of history, thereby dismissing *everything* at odds with it as arbitrary, tyrannical, and a tacit manifestation of man's exploitation by man.

Aware of doctrinal differences between competing Marxist groups, Ziadé nevertheless concludes that 'they all agree on the essential issue, which

is the demolition of individual property and the establishment of communal ownership of the means and ends of production. This implies, however, that the individual human being as an independent entity controls nothing.' The emergence of democratic or 'peaceful' socialist alternatives to Bolshevism in Western Europe is a cause for relative optimism ('pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' in Romain Rolland's formulation, borrowed by Antonio Gramsci), but the Gramscian 'long march through the institutions' amounts to the same end-threat to both freedom and equality: a socialism rooted in dialectical materialism rather than the democratisation of humanistic education is a dead end, even if Ziadé shares Gramsci's broad view that 'the old [world] is dying and the new cannot be born' until major cultural reforms are undertaken in one form or other.

In her brief comments on the Egyptian socialist debates of the day, Ziadé's identity as the organiser of Cairo's most famous cultural salon comes to the fore:

The Egyptian Socialist Party announced its program last August. The conclusion of the debates surrounding it can be summarised as follows: the conservative is justified in aspects of his conservatism; the moderation of the moderate is understandable; and those who would go further with their progressive reforms have good reasons for wishing to do so. Human thought encompasses hundreds of broad doctrines in which a sliver of sense can be found. Individual opinions may express the most pressing local needs, but Truth has never been monopolised by a single human source. Nor is humanism the property of any closed group.

Is Ziadé a 'democratic socialist'? Let the reader judge:

Egyptian socialism will undoubtedly develop a unique character due to the influence of the Egyptian environment and the Egyptian mood. We cannot and do not wish to define these special features here. Rather, our hope is that it will embrace the task of bringing the classes together beyond the petty animosities that hold them apart. The comfortably wealthy person should not perceive a threat from us; our excessive wealth and poverty are the product of our present system, and socialist redistribution will strengthen the rights of this citizen in the long run by

guaranteeing her a life free from the worries of animal survival at the cost of only an hour or two of extra work a day. I think it is possible to convince a large number of well-off but well-meaning citizens of the superiority of socialist redistribution over the present capitalist system, such that socialists do not need to adopt a hostile posture in general towards the rich.

Ziadé is not an economist, but she recognises Egypt's need for industrial development in order to meet the legitimate human needs of the country's growing population. What interests her above all is how to achieve this development in such a way that it is matched by a general increase in well-wishing for the freedom and equality that *education* above all, not money (at least beyond a certain point), can offer. Radical materialist philosophies - whether of left or right - seem unable to provide the necessary impetus for such humanism on their own.

### 'Revolutionary Socialism'

As well as criticising 'Marx and friends' for a certain lack of philosophical originality, Ziadé chides them above all for 'maintaining a state of war among classes' with their fiery rhetoric - the opposite of what is needed for her idea of 'equality'. The whole purpose of a 'modern' economy in Ziadé's eyes is to allow the free and educated individual human being to 'be productive in the kind of work she is good at'; her egalitarian humanist wishes such meaning and fulfilment for all, and is ready, as we have seen, to give up 'an hour or two' of her own day if necessary in order to ensure it; any free and decent human being's conception of her own vocation, Ziadé suggests, would surely extend so far. Modern democratic reforms which have secured political rights - the formal abolition of slavery, for example, or the extension of suffrage - have typically stopped short of this ideal,

missing the point that there is an economic subjection every bit as terrible as political servitude. What use is political freedom to the person too hungry to appreciate it? Yesterday's serfdom at least granted the serf food, housing, and clothing, but today's 'freedom' has robbed him of these guarantees. [...] The person who has nothing remains a slave to the those who have something; he continues to work for long hours, spending his

strength in toil and the stress of insecurity. Why should he wish to remain in such a state?! He remains enslaved because governments to this day have fostered production, which is now more or less abundant, and neglected distribution. Misdistribution gives unearned excesses to some, who become lazily loyal, and deprives others, who become bitterly alienated: in other words, a new class system emerges in which, as in pre-revolutionary France, there are those who enjoy themselves without having to do anything in particular, and those who spend their lives tied to obligations they regard as merely instrumental to their survival, without the freedom to enjoy and express themselves, and without wider hope or consolation.

The internationalist argument - namely that socialism needs a violent global revolution because otherwise its peaceful sprouts can be picked off one by one by global capital - is exposed by Ziadé as the disingenuous nonsense it always was: far from being a necessary outcome of blind and inevitable material forces, 'the [egalitarian] spirit of socialism is to be found in the depths of individual human beings, and that is where its hopes and aspirations will be settled. [...] The historical materialism of Marx and his followers is fundamentally hostile to these intimate and personal strivings.' Ziadé's 'second phase' of human history, if it is properly to get going, will be marked by individual human beings, not by a one-size-fits-all global formula for 'equality' imposed by a brute force which 'will oppress many innocent people and destroy untold amounts of potential beauty'. The following translation is a paraphrase even by my standards, but it encapsulates the gist of Ziadé's general opposition to violent, overly self-assured revolutionary rhetoric:

I am someone who trusts in the future irrespective of the faults of the present.

[...] What lies beyond tomorrow, when the socialism that the best of us can envisage today enjoys its moment in the sun, will only emerge when our descendants reach that horizon. This is what humanism is: a constant impossibility of perfection and a permanent striving towards a Higher Example.

'Anarchism'

*When Larry had guests, he provided for their nights: he kept his bookshops unlocked. So when sleep failed, as it often did, I would leave my bed for the deserted streets, where the only activity was the changing light at the crossroads, and ramble in the entirety of our literary civilization until dawn. Sleeplessness was never sweeter. My only responsibility was to turn the lights off. On my walk home my head swam with the rewards of serendipity, with the unexpected phrases and images and names and ideas that I encountered in the nocturnal sanctuary that my friend had created for people like us, but mainly I thought: I love this man, who keeps the lights on.*

*[...] It should not take a sage to recognize that there are no 'replacements'. The uniqueness of what has disappeared, its gorgeous specificity, is precisely the source of the pain. [...] If there is such a thing as species-love, it is not the highest love, or the most strenuous love, or the love that gets one through the night. [...] Sorrow befits the sage. Anyone who has ever loved may speak in praise of inconsolability.<sup>16</sup>*

Leon Wieseltier

Peter Kropotkin's anarchist critique of the Bolshevik Revolution - namely that such socialism 'magnifies the collective as if it were indifferent to the individual except as part of a group which is everything in its estimation' - interests Ziadé briefly here. Radical anarchism, however - the desire to tear down all forms of government in a bid for individual liberation - ignores the 'Hobbesian' animal fact that individual human beings can enjoy no freedom or security (and hence no equality) without the insurance of law and guaranteed access to a modicum of material resources (e.g. through the defence of a more or less fair system of property rights). The very concept of 'tyranny', Ziadé reminds her reader, originates in the all-too-human desire for protection from external threats to this baseline security; if the Proudhonian ideal of manly embrace of anarchist independence and self-responsibility in a world without the

---

<sup>16</sup> Leon Wieseltier, 'The Wise, Too, Shed Tears', <https://libertiesjournal.com/articles/the-wise-too-shed-tears/>, Vol. 1, No. 4, 2021 (accessed 7/9/2021).

security-blanket of property is more attractive to Ziadé than the historical materialist insistence on ‘the strictness of fate and the cruelty of inexorable development’, the ‘anarchism in practice’ of Mikhail Bakunin and other post-1848 revolutionaries has been too self-servingly scornful of the accumulated achievements of civilisation. Just as Leninism justified horrific means, so too have modern anarchists tended to ‘legitimise every attempt to exterminate the current regime and assassinate its leaders’ even though the very basis of the anarchist idea at its most attractive is an attitude to law and order in which ‘people will be treated with consolation and fraternity instead of punishment and imprisonment, and everyone will rise in comfort and independence to unknown spiritual heights.’

A keen observer of nature, Ziadé doesn’t quite believe this anarchist promise, seeing instead a secret will to power behind the rhetoric of individual liberation. This ‘inflated individualism’, fixed on ‘circumventing law altogether’, is ‘perhaps more a character disposition than a doctrine,’ Ziadé decides. As with all political movements, anarchism has attracted a motley crew of adherents, from ruthless criminals and proud guerrillas to those, like Bakunin and Kropotkin, with loftier spiritual aspirations. But it is by and large a sad and misguided ideology:

Cesare Lombroso [1835-1909] examined many of the anarchists of Chicago and elsewhere, and saw that their default state is one of helplessness and dissatisfaction; the appearance of courage and self-sacrifice is nothing but the ‘steadfastness’ of the weak and reckless. [...] On the pretext of entering the promised utopia, [these anarchists] cut people down and pile the corpses high.

Though it has not been with us for long, anarchism is already a blood-soaked creed.

### ‘Nihilism’

Ziadé’s ‘anarchism’ and ‘nihilism’ resemble each other in their ‘exaggerated affirmation of individualism and denial of every authority, restriction and law.’ Nevertheless, a certain strand of self-proclaimed ‘nihilist’ thought in 19th-century Russia, dismissive of orthodox religion, had much to recommend it, and not only because it contributed to Tsar Alexander II’s abolition of serfdom: the best of these ‘nihilists’ focused

on 'literary and cultural reform rather than short-term political targets, seeking a liberation of the individual from the shackles of religious indoctrination and the tyranny of polite society in general.' After attacking these 'staid creeds and conventions', however, some 'nihilists' went further - too far - to question the very meaning, for example, of family life. Ziadé singles out the 'noble and innovative' Piotr Lavrov (1823-1900) as one Russian 'nihilist' - a left-leaning positivist by today's standards - who got the balance between anger and respect in the face of tradition more or less right: as a committed social scientist, Lavrov was at least willing to consider the evidence, even if he remained imprisoned to some extent in the scientific 'fatalism' of his era. The healthy dose of 'respect for the individual human being' which Ziadé nevertheless finds in elements of the 19th-century Russian nihilist tradition should serve in the 20th above all to combat the enduring fad of historical determinism, and to remind contemporary intellectuals everywhere that 'concrete people', not blind historical forces, 'created a present that was thought impossible yesterday.'

Lavrov understood that, for all the complexity of modern social life, the primary site for the cultivation of mature human beings remained the family unit:

Lavrov's modern view of freedom and equality was inextricably tied to the notion of family. While he rejected all forms of arbitrary authority and prophesied the decline of organised religion as a blunt instrument of social control, he was the last thinker to wish away the positive aspects of sociality. Rather, he called on every individual to educate herself [within this nurturing environment] and to embody the best of her education in her working life. [...] This struggle of individuals everywhere to raise the bar of humanism was a kind of sacrament for Lavrov. Although he identified as a radical nihilist, he defended his principles with such purity of conviction as to change the very meaning of nihilism - no longer a simple rejection of everything, but a protest at the 'pathological elements' of traditional society and 'the past's continued violation of the future'.

Ziadé accepts that 'any intelligent person in any age' would qualify as a 'nihilist' on this definition:

Every enlightened teenager knows that life goes on, and that society for some strange reason continues to bow down before dead conventions and superstitious appendages. Every age will require cultural and legal reform. What soul suffers, or sees others suffering, and does not wish to protest in some way? And who can qualify as great, who will be remembered down the generations, if not the person who eliminates the old and harmful in the realm of art, science, or social organisation, and creates something new and beautiful in its place?

Nihilist politics has nevertheless overstepped these boundaries of humanism: 'Not everything that is new is beneficial, and not every act of insurrection is justified. How much rebellion is nothing but arrogance!' The assassination of Alexander II in 1881 was the paradigm example of the 'reckless risk' and 'bloody mad terror' which can engulf a body politic and undermine legitimate reformist ambition; if Alexander's policies did not go far enough, or lacked sufficiently competent implementation, that did not justify the 'crime' committed against him, and in fact undermined all that could be worth preserving in the 'nihilist' cause.

Ziadé quotes at length Alexander Herzen's 'prophecy' that the future of Europe would be decided in a battle of new ideas between the United States and Russia: if the anarchist and nihilist embrace of terror in late-19th-century Russia had regrettably spilled over into the Bolshevik Revolution in the 20th, there was nevertheless something in 'the power of the tumultuous Slavic soul', encountered in individual Russians she meets, which attracted Ziadé to the idea that the Soviet Union might yet become a fount for human improvement. In the aftermath of the First World War, such generalised and globalised cultural progress - a continual bringing together of the highest examples in the education of new human beings - was as urgently needed as it always will be, for a 'savage instinct' is entangled in the DNA of human beings in all times and places:

I met a priest at the end of the war who was a beacon of righteousness, intelligence and wisdom. He had fought on the front line, distinguishing himself there with medal-winning acts of bravery. When I told him that his story had moved me as much as any I had read from the Front, he smiled, and proceeded to describe the grotesque pleasure he had taken in bayonetting his enemies. Whoever had tasted this rush of animal adrenaline, he

continued, would be inclined to seek it obsessively in his life from then on, irrespective of the risks involved. [...] In his view, the greatest evil of warfare was the release of this wild bloodlust in man, and the offer of a licence to satisfy it.

As any perpetrator or victim of 'road rage' knows, this mad (but evolutionarily very useful) energy is seething away just below the polite surface of everyday life. Only a fool incapable of looking in the mirror, Ziadé repeatedly suggests, would wish to do away altogether with the conventional checks and balances which prevent most of this energy from boiling over most of the time, allowing us instead to pursue more constructive projects. Any political creed in which 'the glory of the end is used to justify the violence of the means' is hence rejected by Ziadé as anti-egalitarian and self-serving: 'Members of destructive sects claim for themselves the right to exercise that instinct which the majority rightly suppresses.' Political activity rooted in resentment or a politics of recognition for recognition's sake is harmful to Ziadé's quest for equality because it plays at the edges of the same emotional game:

It is good to sympathize with the unfortunate and to grieve for the calamities that befall the lives of others and our own lives as well. It is a pleasure and a duty for us to strive, each in our own way, to make our brothers and sisters happy, and also to liberate ourselves, provided that we accept human nature and learn how to treat its open wounds.

It is this last 'provided that' which proves decisive for Ziadé's egalitarianism: a constant and cynical poking at the worst of people for private gain - whether economic or psychopathological - eats away at the social fabric which clothes us all.

Ziadé admits the necessity of revolution (e.g. the famous French one) *in extremis*: 'Some social problems are not solved without threatening the perpetrators of corruption, just as some chronic diseases are not cured without surgical operations.' Any such procedures, however, must be undertaken with the corresponding care and reluctance, not least because the idea that human nature is uniformly, boringly and predictably good is an illusion: unintended consequences, some of them unpleasant, will be a feature of any brusque change. A century on from the degeneration of the French Revolution into Jacobin terror, late 19th- and early 20th-century experiments in abrupt political

transformation confirmed to Ziadé that such romantic overestimation of human instincts is as dangerous a threat to her vision of 'equality' as any feudal shackle.

### 'Talking It Out'

*The world's most influential cosmopolitan philosopher, Immanuel Kant, never left his hometown Königsberg. While plenty of wealthy people make a big show of international charity work, one would search in vain for advocates of what in political philosophy might possibly be called genuine global justice. And we should not forget that, in the 1990s and early 2000s, globalisation was justified not by emphasising its beneficial effects on the world but the advantages it would bestow on individual nations. [...] Globalisation has not brought the end of nationalism but opportunities to retreat selectively from society – something from which economic and financial elites (again, not particularly liberal in their views) have especially benefited. They appear to be able to dispense with any real dependence on the rest of society (though of course they still rely on police, halfway-usable roads, and so on). With the globalisation of supply chains and trade regimes, workers and consumers do not have to be in the same country, and, as a consequence of the shift away from mass conscript armies, one also does not depend on one's fellow citizens to serve as soldiers. [...] Some citizens do take themselves out of anything resembling a decent social contract, for instance relying on private tutors and private security for their gated communities. [...] Such a dynamic is not entirely new: writing about French aristocrats, the 18th-century political theorist the Abbé Sieyès observed that 'the privileged actually come to see themselves as another species of man'. In 1789, they discovered that they were not.<sup>17</sup>*

---

<sup>17</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, 'Why Culture Wars Are An Élite Device', <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2021/09/why-culture-wars-are-elite-device>, 1/9/2021 (accessed 8/9/2021).

The end of *Al-Musāwā* takes a dialogical form. I refrain here from disclosing whether this is a literary innovation or a transcript of real human exchange, not least because it matters little for our purposes, which are to penetrate and enjoy the garden of Ziadé's humanism. If she chooses to add these appendices - the first of which is a 'debate' among nine participants (only one of whom is called 'May') - then it is because she finds them worthy of inclusion in all the ambiguity in which the reader encounters them.

May's former teacher Mrs. Jalila joins this conversation *in medias res*, praising May for the articles she has written on 'equality' (i.e. the chapters the reader has just read) and expressing her excitement at the pending conclusion where Ziadé ties everything up into a single, neat definition. 'If my work so far leads you to believe that I only have one thing to say,' May replies, 'then I have failed to explain my interest in this unruly subject in the first place.' The running discussion, in which May is 'attacked' by several gentlemen attempting to 'solve the unsolvable problem of difference' among themselves, is itself proof of the animal context in which all human dialogue and interaction takes place: May's mocking call to Mrs. Jalila to 'defend' her from these gentlemen, 'incarnations of the monstrous allegiance between justice and injustice', contains all the coquetry proper to a 1920s Cairene literary salon. If Ziadé preaches a noble indifference to recognition - a willingness to stick to one's guns in the midst of criticism or, worse, inattention - as a necessary feature of a mature intellectual life as a 'modern' individual, she does not altogether wish away the pleasures of such recognition, or at least of conversation among equals in which one plays a living and hence unequal part, standing out and being passed over in turns. The spiritual horizon Ziadé is imagining here is one where human beings of the future can enjoy praise and recognition without needing it, and endure criticism or obscurity without becoming in any way resentful. This is an extremely delicate emotional and ethical balance for a species with such a complex evolutionary legacy: not one of us gets through infancy without automatically crying for someone to help us, and that, of course, is just our first and most primitive inherited weapon for survival and reproduction in the attention economy (three-year-olds are already fiendishly good, needless to say, at getting their parents to do what they want). Ziadé's humanist idyll - the alternating pleasures of writerly

solitude and salon conversation in a warm and secure egalitarian republic of letters - is unashamedly grafted onto this chaotic mash of evolved and scarcely egalitarian impulses.

Reading back over her Preamble, May squirms in anguish at her own arrogance: as if her quick survey of the 'historical and scientific evidence' could lead her above the fray in discussions of human equality! Mrs. Jalila's son, 'a noble young socialist', exhorts May to leave her writing desk, go down into the streets of Cairo, and bathe in the proletarian nobility of those

minds thirsty for the nourishment of education, upon whom the doors of schooling were closed, thereby depriving them of books, art, and the other panoramas of beauty and refinement which human beings at their best have opened. [...] Instead of asking 'Where do I stand on the question of equality?', you will be immersed in the socialism for which you were created.

Another of May's interlocutors, a world-weary man of letters named Arif ('the one who knows'), mocks Mrs. Jalila's son for his preachy sophistry (Arif is further described as 'hiding a warm, honest and benevolent nature behind a thick veil of invective and sarcasm'). Others lose interest in the conversation altogether.

Jalila's son is further revealed as an imperfect mixture of warmth, good humour, and resentment; Arif has heard such socialist railing against 'the monopolists and their allies' before. Sa'id Bey, the director of a charitable foundation, condescendingly joins the conversation 'from the lofty height of his status', proceeding to tell his audience what concrete human need looks and smells like, and how privileged they all are in comparison. Arif retorts that such foundations as Sa'id Bey's create perverse incentives; Blanche, a 'French-speaking fashion victim' from May's school days, whispers to her neighbour Antoinette how 'fine' Arif is, while Antoinette replies that, alas, his shoes are a disappointment, all while mocking his Arabic accent. This *comédie humaine*, Ziadé suggests, is the right backdrop for any serious discussion of the problem of equality: no single voice can carry the conversation on its own. Even Arif hesitates between support for the capitalist order, with its concomitant tax-avoiding network of private foundations piously devoted to improving the lot of the poor, and the international socialist alternative of the day, the goal of which, as Mrs. Jalila's son defines it, is 'to enable each individual to develop his natural

talents to the maximum and enjoy the fruits of his labour according to what he needs.' The problem is that two people will make very different uses of the same situation or opportunity: what proves salutary and motivating for one person may be overwhelming or demotivating for another, or for the same person on a different day: any resulting distribution (or redistribution) of resources, Arif suggests, will be unfair in some sense, and something in this very irresolvable unfairness and deprivation, if it is not experienced as excessive, can provide a spur to individual genius: 'People's intelligence and strength is a latent fire that needs struggle; it needs the friction of iron and flint to ignite its spark,' Arif says. Abstract socialist theorising, in other words, underestimates the extent to which education - the driver, as we have seen, of Ziadé's 'equality' - is an intensely personal and idiosyncratic business, an *ad hoc* mixture of carrots and sticks, assigned homework and free play, frustration and fun. The very dream of an 'ideal' or 'student-centred' pedagogy is a dangerous one, even if we can agree that freedom from basic material want is a common desideratum for everyone. What comes on top of that is much harder to say - or perhaps that is already what equality is.

Arif is busy distinguishing himself as May's favourite conversation partner (even Blanche and Antoinette, unable to follow the details of the discussion, are enjoying the spectacle of him):

I am the first to call for fair treatment of workers, and to insist on the necessity of reform. A socialism within reasonable limits has an important role to play there, but I deny the very possibility of equality in this sphere. A pure socialist utopia would result in nothing but injustice and perversion, a grotesque new form of unfreedom. People are born contributors, but the nature of their contributions will always be different; not even the same person will make equally brilliant and valuable contributions all the time. A certain degree of pressure on children, the uneducated and the unrepentant is good for those on the receiving end of such benevolent coercion, as well as for all those around them.

How to guarantee 'freedom from want' without killing the very problem-solving and competitive pleasures that human beings have evolved? How, in other words, to refine our instincts in safe and productive channels when these instincts, by definition, evolved in an unsafe and chaotic world? Sport, games and music take their place alongside the

humanities and sciences as the extracurricular addenda to the modern school day (and may attract small numbers of paid and committed professionals), but it would be a mistake to think that such pleasurable pursuits can become the meat of an entire society; as the philosopher Prof. Sami adds after a long silence, human beings grow bored, and will always be tinkering with things. Arif largely agrees, adding: 'The emergence of the gifted individual is an incitement to the whole species, a quick reminder of the urgency of our time on Earth.'

Mrs. Jalila thanks May for her invitation, adding that such gatherings 'sharpen the wit' and encourage new generations of women (like May) to stop listening and reading and start 'voicing their own questions'. After Blanche and Antoinette are savagely parodied for their shallow fixations and general inability to partake in the discussion, and after Arif and Mrs. Jalila's son are lightly ribbed as they jostle in unwitting condescension for May's attention, the guests leave, and May retires to the solitude of her balcony beneath a 'crumbling' Cairene dome: 'I am alone, oh night, make me understand what I must perceive! Here I am, ready, oh life, you will show me where I must go!' May shouts to herself, half-mockingly invoking the trees and stars around her. The root of Ziadé's conception of equality, in other words, is an intimate and ironically self-aware sense of cosmic vocation which must be cultivated via education; otherwise human beings risk ending up in Blanche and Antoinette's miserable shackles, or worse, in the throes of messianic and narcissistic conviction, in which one's historical 'mission' is thoroughly prescribed, and in which one remains the boring central hero in one's own self-centred story.

### 'Arif's Letter'

Ziadé chivalrously gives the last word in her 'equality' story to Arif, who in turn claims to understand her invocation of the night: it would be a mistake to assume that 'vice is entrenched in palaces and virtue resides in huts', or indeed that any partial, class-rooted perspective on the problem of equality could replace the God's-eye view which human beings will only ever come close to achieving in critical dialogue with one another, and ultimately with themselves (or 'the night', if one prefers). Solving material need, difficult though it remains, is still relatively easy in comparison to more complex psychological inequalities; intangible human miseries, Arif suggests (recognising a

certain 'aristocratic comfort bias' in his own voice), may endure long after such basic economic rights have been guaranteed: 'I have suffered on many levels in my life, and from the sum of inheritances gathered in me which might be called "my soul". I have experienced the injustice of society, on the one hand, and the injustice of life on the other.' No amount of economic redistribution or security, in other words, could hope to alter the individual spiritual 'struggle' for meaning at the heart of even a perfectly just or 'equal' society; far from trivialising the struggle for basic economic justice, the fact that no amount of bestowed 'equality' can liberate the individual from this private *jihad* makes the quest for such basic justice *more* urgent, not less:

Humanity's struggle to liberate itself from the oppression of the unconscious instincts it has inherited is taking a long time, as it requires freedom not only from the material emergencies of nature, but also from the terror of the strong, the oppression of the authorities, the insolence of cowards, and the envy of the idle. Today we are in the era of highfalutin speech, in which words like 'honour', 'greatness', 'freedom', 'independence', 'chivalry', 'charity' and 'cooperation' resonate. We all demand our 'rights', but few of us are as interested in performing the duties for which these rights are bought. Perhaps, alongside the revolution against capital, we need a revolution against hypocrisy and vanity.

If more people, in other words, could follow Arif's lead by admitting their material privileges and biases, a path to basic economic justice - and hence to spiritual 'equality' - could be ploughed: as long as a culture of exaggerated respect for property rights on the one hand - or insufficient respect for property rights on the other - is allowed to reign, the 'natural efficiency' that a healthy, functioning society is 'obliged to develop' in order to 'provide care and share benefit' among its members is unlikely to flourish.

How much material comfort, then, is enough for everyone to fulfil her unfulfillable but nevertheless meaningful struggle for the Highest Example, as opposed to merely slaving? The answer is clearly finite - there will never be a set figure which is the same for everyone, and societies will change - but Arif has some concrete proposals, the costs of which are to be 'borne by the government or society': a ban on begging; safe and nourishing shelters for the homeless; free primary

education; jobs for anyone willing and able; serious child welfare institutions; free and equal cradle-to-grave medical care, including funeral costs ('as long as men are equal in their last breath, let their burial be a manifestation of equality, not differences of rank'); free legal services ('to prevent corruption'); and a strict but humane justice system. As for the significant taxes that will have to be raised to pay for all this, Arif is confident that 'people will pay willingly' one day; the problem for now is that lasting spiritual equality - in which the rights of all are guaranteed - is impossible without a generalised sense of duty, not to a feudal master or parents or the state, but to one's own private and freely cultivated conception of the Highest Example:

I believe that real benevolence to people does not consist in merely giving them money, food, and clothes. [...] Rather, it involves opening their eyes to the potential inherent in them, thereby alerting them to the relationship between rights and duties. [...] In this regard] it is imperative that society perform every service it can for its members, but so far in history it has been largely ineffective. Society demands many rights and performs few duties. No wonder its members follow suit.

Arif's, and by extension Ziadé's, final message is hence the opposite of the rhetoric of personal responsibility so familiar in the right-wing precincts of our time: it is precisely by guaranteeing people their basic political, economic and educational rights - which, alas, are expensive, and not so 'basic' - that a spirit of 'duty' or sacrifice - not to others, but to one's own sense of the 'Highest Example' - can best be expected to emerge. Solving this chicken-egg dilemma remains the primary challenge of 21st-century humanistic economics.

## Quarter to Midnight

The title of this book is a kind of joke, but it also reflects my desire to tell a story that could - if the reader so chooses - be digested in a single day: a long morning chapter when one is at one's sharpest; some harrowing afternoon scenes to ward off the post-prandial dip; a short and exotic journey just before dinner; and some drawing-room philosophy for the evening session. It is above all to this tired and committed reader that I dedicate the following remarks.

The knife's edge on which our civilisation rests is not only physical - the stars and gravity and chemical elements all aligning to keep us breathing. 'It is not the fact of liberty, but the way in which liberty is exercised, which ultimately determines whether liberty itself survives': Dorothy Thompson's immortal formulation of the educator's dilemma will remain contemporary for the rest of humanity's time. The good of a free society can only be maintained, in other words, by betting on the private tastes and preferences of individuals, which by definition cannot be coerced. Instead of forcing us to serve others (or the collective), modern liberal humanism as I understand it asks us merely to serve our own private senses of meaning, trusting that the result will not be self-destructive of the species as a whole, and on the contrary will allow humanity to flourish better than any system where displays of loyalty are required. But - and this is the catch - you can't use this instrumental argumentation about the welfare of the species to defend the liberal creed. The apt biblical analogy is found in both Matthew and Luke: you have to be willing to give up your life in order to save it. The whole thought that we need art and the humanities to motivate enough citizens to take enough responsibility to keep the ship of freedom running is part of the problem: young people eventually figure out that they are being manipulated, and rebel. The responsibility of any teacher in a free society is to make students and readers expect the best *of themselves*, but paradoxically she can only begin to do this by making them believe that she thinks that she herself, and her own aesthetic preferences, matter first, for she too is an autonomous agent, and if she treats herself as a mere vehicle or functionary for the transmission of existing, socially useful knowledge, she instrumentalises both herself and her audience. The social benefits of my self-cultivation are organic and collateral; they cannot in any way be pre-planned.

A whole series of chance discoveries and events led me to bundle these four authors together in this way at this specific time. Other authors active around 2020 are naturally beaver away on similar terrain; if I had to pick out four (three guys and a girl again), then they might be Pankaj Mishra, Martin Hägglund, Michael Clune and Agnes Callard. Mishra first:

I still haven't lost the conviction—echoed in [Hägglund's] *This Life*—that Marx was concerned above all with securing spiritual freedom. The doctrinaire aspects of the later Marx can be tedious. What remains perpetually fresh and regenerative in his work is its double inheritance of Christianity and Romanticism, which allows us to acknowledge new realities, such as widespread environmental degradation, and to break out of economistic frameworks that emphasize redistribution without really trying to overthrow oppressive modes of labor. What I found very attractive about Hägglund's book is his reinterpretation of Marxism for a secular age and secularised audience without losing Marx's vision of a broader spiritual liberation from modern forms of coercion.<sup>18</sup>

Clune, who kindly took the time to talk to me in 2019 about his forthcoming book project *A Defence of Judgment*, has finally had it reviewed by Nate Klug:

For Clune, literature offers a 'form of value beyond market determination'. Capitalism promises the consumer an endless series of alterations governed and affirmed only by her choosing—tiny changes that, because they reflect her existing preferences, don't amount to change at all. Aesthetic education, where 'one suspends one's current values in the expectation of acquiring better values,' can lead to more authentic transformations and attitudes of resistance.

To really change, one needs judgment. In the crucial step of his argument, Clune dismantles the proposition that all desires must be treated as equal, an idea that runs through Amazon marketplaces and humanities departments alike. The triumph of

---

<sup>18</sup> Pankaj Mishra, in Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, 'The Liberal Establishment Is 'A Stranger to Self-Examination'', <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/qa-pankaj-mishra-bland-fanatics/>, 23/11/2020 (accessed 15/9/2021).

capitalism—and of the theories of neoclassical economics—at the end of the nineteenth century led to a society in which our only agreed-upon source of value is individual preference. My desire, whether for a Toni Morrison novel or a trending Netflix show, is worth no more or less than yours, and to insist there might be any ‘better’ way of spending one’s time or money comes across as snobbish and paternalistic.

Clune uses Karl Marx’s ‘Critique of the Gotha Program’ to argue that our modern struggle against inequality ‘cannot be advanced through adherence to the principle of equality’. Viewing all human desires as equivalent makes it harder for us to distinguish between the consumer goods whose production is killing the earth and the goods (such as leisure time spent reading poems) that might help us thrive.

In a highlight of the book’s first section, Clune returns to Marx in order to engage with the arguments of Martin Hägglund’s book *This Life* (2019), which drew a straight though subtle line from ‘secular faith’ to democratic socialism. Clune contends that Hägglund’s ideological commitment to equality over and against judgment ultimately undermines his own socialist project, since ‘the distinction between better and worse ways of spending our time is a precondition for a robust vision of a transformed work world.’

[...] Central to Clune’s vision of aesthetic education is a strong notion of what he calls, borrowing from John Keats, ‘negative capability’. Keats coined this phrase in a letter where he was trying to express what he valued most in Shakespeare: a capacity for ‘being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’ Following the philosopher Agnes Callard, Clune takes this essential ingredient for poetic creativity and applies it to learning in general. As Callard writes, in aesthetic education ‘[teachers] aren’t selling [students] something they already want; instead, we are trying to help them learn to want something.’ Once a student accepts that some desires might be more important than others, she can aspire to fashioning a self.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Nate Klug, ‘Learning What To Want’, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/learning-what-want>, 8/9/2021 (accessed 15/9/2021).

There is another way of saying the same thing: something went badly wrong in Western modernism, and we are still dealing with the fallout. Terry Eagleton, here reviewing Fredric Jameson's *The Benjamin Files*, hints at where the rot set in, namely with a kind of unholy alliance between academia and the avant-garde art scene:

[Walter Benjamin's] account of German baroque theatre, translated into English as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, was written in the early 1920s as an academic thesis, though it was later published as a book. Since the examiners couldn't understand a word of this stunningly original work, Benjamin withdrew it, putting paid to his hopes of a university career. Instead, he lived a hand to mouth existence in his native Berlin as a cultural journalist, eventually leaving his fascist homeland in 1933 for Paris, where he stayed for the most part until his death in 1940. [...] Wittgenstein published only one book, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which he thought resolved all problems in philosophy. It, too, was first presented as an academic thesis, and like Benjamin's tragedy book was greeted with bafflement. Wittgenstein, however, had better luck with his examiners than Benjamin: one of them, the philosopher G.E. Moore, drily reported that the *Tractatus* was 'a work of genius, but be that as it may' met the requirements for a PhD.

[...] Wittgenstein was a spiritual vagrant, wandering from a hut on a Norwegian fjord to a cottage on the west coast of Ireland. Benjamin was fascinated by the flâneur, the Parisian dandy who strolls the streets with no particular purpose in mind. [...] Benjamin was never an academic, and Wittgenstein was a deeply reluctant one. He gave away a fortune to live the simple life, whereas Benjamin lived the simple life because he was chronically short of money. Benjamin thought of writing a book consisting entirely of quotations; Wittgenstein contemplated writing one consisting entirely of jokes. [...] Academic works are meant to be reasonably lucid, mostly conceptual in content and written from a specific point of view. A good deal of modernist art, by contrast, prefers multiple viewpoints and discontinuous narratives. Artists may opt for obscurity rather than lucidity, or prefer the image to the concept. Books are also supposed to be unified, but in the eyes of the more avant-garde modernist, unity is a discredited notion.

It is striking how original a move this is. From Aristotle to I.A. Richards, the work of art is expected to form a coherent whole. It is not until the rise of Futurism, Constructivism, Surrealism and so on that this arbitrary diktat is really challenged. From the Dadaists to Brecht, there is an urge to dismantle rather than integrate, to reveal conflict rather than resolve it. Unity [becomes] a political concept.<sup>20</sup>

I wanted, as I said at the outset, to tell a *story* out of my reading and translating experiences, not to construct or deconstruct a theory. These experiences seemed more and more coherent and important to me as I accumulated them, but 'modernism is among other things a crisis of narration, as the world ceases to be story-shaped. History is no longer informed by the plot once known as progress. Progress and continuity are fictions of the ruling class. They are also the delusions of those socialists who believed that capitalism was doomed to collapse, and that fascism was its death throes.'<sup>21</sup> This total politicisation or 'economisation' of academic and literary culture - the abolition of aesthetic experience in favour of raw materialism - casts mortal suspicion on the very idea of art as a place where one human being can reach another by critically sorting through her own experience and sifting out 'the best that has been thought and said' on her watch:

We think of the past as finished and the present as open-ended, but this is not Benjamin's opinion. In his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' it is the past that is incomplete, and the present that has a chance to bring it to fruition. What happens, happens, and does so irretrievably; but the meaning of such events is in the custodianship of the living. [...] We can also ensure that those in the past who were defeated in their fight for justice and friendship did not die in vain – that in Benjamin's phrase, the names of those anonymous men and women will be mentioned in dispatches on Judgment Day. The dead cannot

---

<sup>20</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'The Marxist and the Messiah', <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n17/terry-eagleton/the-marxist-and-the-messiah?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faldaily.com%2F>, 9/8/2021 (accessed 15/9/2021).

<sup>21</sup> Eagleton, 'The Marxist and the Messiah'.

literally be compensated for their suffering, but that suffering can be invested with new significance by our actions in the present.<sup>22</sup>

If your suspicion of my motives with this book is so strong as to force you into thinking that I must be conning you (or myself) by so delivering it, then I don't see how any of our ancestors' experiences, let alone their suffering, can possibly be transmitted between us. *Of course* I hoped that readers who had never heard these four names - Héctor Abad Faciolince, Varlam Shalamov, Ōe Kenzaburo, May Ziadé - might discover them here, but I have been reporting and ordering my experience *to myself* first; any eventual audience for these words is a kind of bonus. Liberalism survives on our spontaneous desire to share good things for free (or at most for a fair fee), but *I* have to do the work of deciding what's good in the first place; I can't outsource that. As you prepare to turn out the light after what must seem like a long day, please rest assured: no part of what you have just read is a conspiracy of manipulation. No publisher, no organisation, no career motive has pushed me into it; on the contrary, the whole thing has been compiled at the secret margins of a day-job I have been lucky enough to have since the beginning of the draft, and that I should be able to cling onto for as long as I want it, thereby enabling me to continue financing an autonomous spiritual life. I wish the same for you, but as a natural extension of the one I must first secure for myself. Any sacrifice I may yet have to make will be to extend that dignity of autonomy.

My stint on our planet is naturally coinciding with a series of global developments with which I must reckon as a human being with a living conscience. My last book was written in, and heavily focused on, China; I have somehow managed to leave her out of this one (for the most part), but as I look back over what I have compiled in the 12 months since *Peking Eulogy*, I realise that there is an observable continuity of geocultural concern, reiterated this year by Thomas Piketty:

As the Chinese Communist Party celebrates its 100th anniversary, Western countries are still struggling to define their attitude to the Beijing regime. Let's just come out and say it: the right response involves an end to outmoded Western arrogance and the promotion of a new emancipatory and egalitarian horizon for the entire globe, a new form of socialism which is democratic

---

<sup>22</sup> Eagleton, 'The Marxist and the Messiah'.

and participatory, ecological and postcolonial. If they maintain their old didactic posture and their insistence on a worn-out hypercapitalist ideology, Western countries risk having massive problems in their dealings with the Chinese juggernaut.<sup>23</sup>

The honest reader will decide whether the journey she has just undertaken - Colombia, Russia, Japan, Egypt - was wideranging enough to evoke 'the entire globe'; if not, well, I've tried bigger samples before. But this book was not - or at least not primarily - the product of an urgent geopolitical crisis or a direct attempt to solve it. I admit that I used the chapter on Watanabe (which took by far the longest to write) to force myself to work on my Japanese; the reason I wanted to work on my Japanese in the first place, however, was to access a written culture which, as I vaguely sensed in advance, might contain nourishment *for me* and allow me to fulfil my responsibilities *to myself* in the years ahead. That I was not disappointed in this or any of the other choices made in the writing of this little book means only that I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the many wonderful teachers who have been generous enough to point the way to *their* teachers, all of whom enjoyed autonomous spiritual lives of their own. One of those teachers, Tu Weiming, entrusted a short translation of his colleague Chen Lai to me earlier this year, with which I took my usual liberties, and from which I draw the following excerpt for my own literary purposes:

Throughout Confucian history, scholars have affirmed the integrity of the individual, first and foremost the freedom of the individual to oppose political oppression. 'Not even the humblest can have their will taken from them,' as Confucius himself puts it in the *Analects*. At a deeper level, however, Confucians have stressed freedom *vis-à-vis* wealth, status and other extrinsic temptations. Mencius insisted that individual free will can be defined as the ability not to be corrupted either by 'money and attention', 'power', or 'poverty'. These are three distinct and serious 'tests', and Mencius heaps praise on those exemplars who overcome them. Individual dignity in Confucianism is always measured as a degree of independence from these external factors. There is, moreover, a stark contrast between Confucian

---

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Piketty, 'Face au régime chinois, la bonne réponse passe par une nouvelle forme de socialisme démocratique et participatif', [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/07/10/thomas-piketty-face-au-regime-chinois-la-bonne-reponse-passe-par-une-nouvelle-forme-de-socialisme-democratique-et-participatif\\_6087784\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/07/10/thomas-piketty-face-au-regime-chinois-la-bonne-reponse-passe-par-une-nouvelle-forme-de-socialisme-democratique-et-participatif_6087784_3232.html), 10/6/21 (accessed 10/6/21).

'free will' and what we might call the 'Wall Street' credo of solipsistic, Gordon Gekko-style individualism. Confucian free will is not freedom from moral constraint or social impulses, but rather the freedom to achieve an integrated relationship with a moral order beyond oneself; while it may seem that Confucianism advocates a kind of dissolution of the individual in ritual, social practices are in fact vital for the education of free personalities. The individual autonomy required for Confucian self-cultivation does not imply separation from the social order. An alienated loner will never be able to achieve a truly independent personality. [...] On the one hand, Confucianism stresses the importance of self-cultivation and individual effort, but it does so without downplaying the facilitating influence of the wider social order on individual moral will. [...] Human existence on this account is social in its very fabric; individual moral self-realisation can only occur at this level. The main current of Chinese culture does not place excessive emphasis on individual rights and private interests because it is the synthesis or realisation of the free individual within the social fabric which matters, not the individual as an alienated or amputated abstraction.

Achieving a stable balance between individual rights and duties has been the elusive goal of global civil society since the end of the Cold War. It underlies Hans Küng's Global Ethic Project, the 1998 Universal Declaration of Human Duties and Responsibilities, and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development agenda. And yet law and policy devoid of humanism motivates no one; telling me that I have a duty convinces me in no way whatsoever, because I am not a child anymore: I will decide for myself what my human responsibilities are. If I can take advantage of the law to defend my rights, I cannot look to it in the same way to define my duties. I must choose and embrace these duties for myself - not alone on a desert island, but on the basis of contact with the best that has been thought and said by others. Out of this contact, facilitated by the education my society provides, I will fashion my own autonomous and evolving sense of belonging, making what I can of myself in the time allotted to me.