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Nostalgia – Daydreams under Changing Skies, Marcel Proust

## Nostalgia – Daydreams under Changing Skies

So the poet's habit of living should be set on a key so low that the common influences should delight him. His cheerfulness should be the gift of the sunlight; the air should suffice for his inspiration, and he should be tipsy with water.

– Emerson\*

1

### Tuileries

In the garden of the Tuileries, this morning, the sun has dozed on all the stone steps in turn, like a blond teenager whose slumber is immediately interrupted by a passing cloud. Against the old palace, the young shoots are a vivid green. The breath of the enchanted wind stirs into the perfume of the past the fresh odour of lilacs. The statues, which in our public squares are as alarming as hysterical women, here dream away in their arbours like wise men under the glowing verdure which protects their whiteness. The ponds in whose depths the blue sky lolls at ease gleam like shining eyes.

From the terrace at the water's edge one can see, emerging from the old Quai d'Orsay district, on the other side of the river and as if in another century, a passing hussar. Bindweed overflows in rank disorder from the pots crowned with geraniums. Yearning for sunshine, the heliotrope burns its perfumes. Outside the Louvre spring up groups of hollyhocks, as weightless as masts, as noble and graceful as pillars, blushing like young girls. Iridescent in the sunlight and sighing with love, the jets of water mount skywards. At the end of the Terrace, a stone horseman, launched on a headlong but immobile gallop, his lips glued to a joyous trumpet, incarnates all the ardour of spring.

But the sky has clouded over; it's going to rain. The ponds, in which the azure sky has ceased to shine, seem eyes empty of life or vessels filled with tears. The absurd jet of water, whipped by the breeze, raises

faster and faster skywards its now derisory hymn. The futile sweetness of the lilacs is infinitely sad. And over there, dashing headlong, his marble feet rousing with a furious and immobile movement the dizzying and static gallop of his horse, the unconscious horseman endlessly blows his trumpet against the black sky.

2

## Versailles

A canal which makes the most eloquent conversationalists dreamy as soon as they draw near it, and where I always feel happy, whether my mood is sad or joyful.

– Letter from Balzac to  
M. de la Motte-Aignon)\*

The exhausted autumn, no longer even warmed by the fleeting sun, loses one by one its last colours. The extreme ardour of its foliage, so filled with flame that the whole afternoon and even the morning created the glorious illusion of sunset, has completely faded. Only the dahlias, the French marigolds and the yellow, purple, white and pink chrysanthemums are still shining on autumn's dark and desolate face. At six o'clock in the evening, when you walk through the Tuileries uniformly grey and bare under the equally sombre sky, where the black trees describe branch by branch their powerful and subtle despair, you suddenly catch sight of a clump of autumn flowers that gleams richly in the darkness and does voluptuous violence to your eyes, used as they are to those ashen horizons.

The morning hours are more mellow. The sun still shines, occasionally, and I can still see as I leave the terrace at the water's edge, along the great flights of stone steps, my shadow walking down the steps, one by one, in front of me. I would prefer not to evoke you here, after so many others have done so,\* Versailles, great sweet and rust-coloured name, royal cemetery of leaves and branches, vast waters and marble statues, a truly aristocratic and disheartening place, where we are not even troubled by remorse at the fact that the lives of so many workers here

served only to refine and enlarge less the joys of another time than the melancholy of our own.

I would prefer not to utter your name after so many others, and yet, how many times, from the red-hued basin of your pink marble ponds, have I drunk to the dregs, to the point of madness, the intoxicating and bitter sweetness of those last and loveliest autumn days. The earth mingled with withered leaves and rotten leaves seemed from afar a yellow-and purple-mosaic that had lost its gleam. Walking by the Hameau, lifting the colour of my overcoat against the wind, I could hear the cooing of doves. Everywhere the odour of boxwood, as on Palm Sunday, intoxicated me. How was it that I was still able to pick one more slender spring bouquet, in gardens ravaged by the autumn?

On the water, the wind blew roughly on the petals of a shivering rose. In the great unleaving in the Trianon, only the delicate vault of a little bridge of white geranium lifted above the icy water its flowers barely bent by the breeze. To be sure, ever since I have breathed the wind coming in from the sea and the tang of salt in the sunken roads of Normandy, ever since I have seen the waves glittering through the branches of blossoming rhododendrons, I have known how much the vegetable world is made more graceful by the proximity of water. But how much more virginal was the purity of that gentle white geranium, leaning with graceful restraint over the wind-ruffled waters between their quays of dead branches! Oh silvery gleam of old age in the woods still green, oh weeping branches, ponds and lakes that a pious hand has placed here and there, like urns offered to the melancholy of the trees!

3

## A Walk

Despite the sky so pure and the sun already warm, the wind was still blowing just as cold and the trees were still as bare as in winter. To build a fire, I had to cut down one of those branches that I thought were dead, and the sap spurted from it, spattering my arm to the shoulder and betraying a tumultuous heart beneath the tree's icy bark.

Between the trunks, the bare wintry ground was strewn with anemones, cowslips and violets, and the rivers, which even yesterday were dark and empty, were filled with a tender, blue and living sky lolling in their depths.

Not that pale and wearied sky of the fine October evenings which, stretching out in the water's depths, seems to be dying of love and melancholy, but an intense and ardent sky on whose tender and cheerful azure sheen there passed at every moment, grey, blue and pink, not the shadows of the pensive clouds, but the glittering and gliding fins of a perch, an eel or a smelt.

Drunk with joy, they darted between the sky and the weeds, in their meadows and under their forests that had, like ours, been filled with dazzling enchantment by the resplendent genie of spring. And flowing freshly over their heads, through their gills, beneath their bellies, the waters also rushed along, singing and chasing merry sunbeams before them.

The farmyard where you had to go for eggs was no less attractive a sight. The sun, like an inspired and prolific poet who does not disdain to shed beauty over the humblest places that had seemed hitherto to fall outside the remit of art, was still warming the beneficent energies of the manure heap, the uneven cobbles of the yard and the pear tree, its back bent like an old servant woman.

But who is this personage adorned in royal vestment advancing towards us, through this rustic farmyard scene, on the tip of its toes, as if to avoid getting dirty? It is the bird of Juno, gleaming not with lifeless jewels but with the very eyes of Argus\* – the peacock, whose fabulous luxury here takes us by surprise. Arrayed as on some feast day, a few moments before the arrival of the first guests, in her robe with its multicoloured train, an azure gorget already tied round her royal throat, and her head adorned with sprays, the hostess, a radiant figure, crosses her courtyard before the marvelling eyes of the curious onlookers gathered outside the railings, to go and give one final order

or await a prince of the blood whom she is to receive on the very threshold.

No: it is here that the peacock spends its life, a veritable bird of paradise in a farmyard, between the turkeys and the hens, like captive Andromache spinning wool among the slaves, but unlike her not forced to shed the magnificence of the royal insignia and the hereditary jewels, an Apollo easy to recognize, even when he guards, still radiant, the herds of Admetus.\*

4

#### A Family Listening to Music

For music is so sweet,  
It fills the soul, and like a choir, with heavenly art  
Awakes a thousand voices that sing within the heart.\*

For a family that is really alive, one in which every member thinks, loves and acts, a garden is a really welcome possession. On spring, summer and autumn evenings, everyone, now that their day's task is ended, gathers there; and however small the garden, however close its hedges, they are not so high that they prevent you from seeing a great expanse of sky to which everyone can raise his eyes, without speaking, as he dreams. The child dreams of his future plans, of the house where he will live with his favourite playmate from whom he need never again be separated, and of the mysteries of the earth and of life; the young man dreams of the mysterious charm of the woman he loves; the young woman dreams of her child's future; the wife who was once troubled at soul discovers, in these deep and lucid hours, that beneath her husband's cold exterior is hidden a painful regret, which fills her with pity.

The father, following with his gaze the smoke rising over the roof, dwells on the peaceful scenes of his past which the evening light illuminates with a distant magical glow; he thinks of his imminent death, and the life his children will lead after his death; and thus the soul of the entire family ascends with religious feeling towards the

setting sun, while the great lime, chestnut or pine tree casts over them all the blessing of its exquisite odour or its venerable shade.

But for a family that is really alive, one in which every member thinks, loves and acts, for a family which has a soul, how much sweeter it is, when evening comes, for this soul to be able to find embodiment in a voice, in the clear and inexhaustible voice of a young girl or a young man lucky enough to possess a gift for music and song. The stranger walking past the garden gate when the family is sitting in silence would fear, if he approached, to disturb the almost religious dream that each of them harbours; but if this stranger, without being able to hear the song, could see the gathering of friends and family listening, how much more he would imagine they were attending some invisible mass; in other words, despite their diverse postures, how much the resemblance between the expressions on their faces would demonstrate the true unity of their souls, attained for a few moments by the attraction they feel for one and the same ideal drama, by their communion with one and the same dream. Every now and then, just as the wind bends the grass and makes the branches sway to and fro, an unseen breath bends their heads or makes them look up suddenly.

Then, as if a messenger invisible to you were recounting some exciting tale, all of them seem to be anxiously awaiting, listening with delight or terror to the same news which nonetheless arouses different echoes in each of them. The anguish of the music reaches a peak; its moments of aspiration suddenly collapse, only to be followed by even more desperate aspirations. Its boundless glowing expanses, its mysterious darkness, represent for the old man the vast spectacle of life and death, for the child the urgent promises of land and sea, for the man in love the mysterious infinity and the glowing darkness of passion. The thinker sees his inner life flow by in its entirety; the dying falls of the melody are his own dying falls, and his whole heart lifts and leaps forward again when the melody resumes its flight.

The powerful murmur of the harmonies makes the rich dark depths of his memory quiver. The man of action starts breathing heavily at the clash of the chords, and the gallop of the vivaces; he triumphs

majestically in the adagios. Even the unfaithful wife senses that the error of her ways has been pardoned, infinitized – an error which also took its divine origin from the dissatisfaction of a heart that had not been assuaged by the usual joys and had gone astray, but only because of its quest for mystery; its vastest aspirations are fulfilled by this music, full to the brim like the voice of church bells.

The musician, despite claiming to enjoy in music only its technical side, also feels these meaningful emotions, but they are enveloped in his sense of musical beauty, a feeling which conceals those emotions from him. And last but not least, I myself, listening in music to the most vast and universal beauty of life and death, sea and sky, I also feel in it everything that is most individual and unique in your allure, my dearest beloved.

5

The paradoxes of today are the prejudices of tomorrow, since the coarsest and most unpleasant prejudices of today had their moment of novelty, in which fashion lent them its fragile grace. Many of today's women want to free themselves from all prejudices, and by "prejudices" they mean "principles". That is their prejudice – a burdensome one, even though they adorn themselves with it as though it were a delicate and somewhat strange flower. They think that nothing has any hidden background; they put everything on the same level. They enjoy a book, or life itself, as if it were a nice day or an orange.

They speak of the "art" of a dressmaker or the "philosophy" of "Parisian life". They would be abashed if they had to classify anything or judge anything, and say: this is good, this is bad. In former times, when a woman behaved well, it was as it were an act of vengeance on the part of her moral being – her thought – over her instinctual nature. Today, when a woman behaves well, it is an act of vengeance on the part of her instinctual nature over her moral being, i.e. her theoretical immorality (see the plays of MM. Halévy and Meilhac).\* Now that all

moral and social bonds are growing really slack, women drift from this theoretical immorality to that instinctual goodness.

They seek only pleasure and find it only when they are not seeking it, when they suffer involuntarily. This scepticism and this dilettantism would be shocking in books, like an old-fashioned piece of jewellery. But women, far from being the oracles of intellectual fashion, are rather its belated parrots. Even today, dilettantism pleases them and suits them. If it warps their judgement and corrupts their behaviour, it undeniably gives them an already tarnished but still likeable grace.

They make us feel, and even delight in all the ease and mellowness that existence can provide in highly refined civilizations. Their perpetual embarkation for a spiritual Cythera\* where the feast would be less one for their blunted senses than for their imaginations, their hearts, their minds, their eyes, their nostrils, and their ears, gives a certain voluptuousness to their postures. The most exact portraitists of this period will not show them, I imagine, looking particularly tense or stiff. Their lives spread the sweet perfume of hair that has been let down.

6

Ambition intoxicates more than fame; desire makes all things blossom, and possession makes them wither away; it is better to dream your life than to live it, even though living it is still dreaming it, albeit less mysteriously and less clearly, in a dark, heavy dream, like the dream diffused through the dim awareness of ruminating beasts. Shakespeare's plays are more beautiful when viewed in a study than when put on in the theatre. The poets who have created imperishable women in love have often only ever known humdrum servant girls from taverns, while the most envied voluptuaries are unable to grasp fully the life they lead, or rather the life which leads them.

I knew a young boy of ten, of sickly disposition and precocious imagination, who had developed a purely cerebral love for an older girl. He would stay at his window for hours on end to see her walk by, wept if he didn't see her, wept even more if he did. He spent moments with

her that were very few and far between. He stopped sleeping and eating. One day, he threw himself out of his window. People thought at first that despair at never getting close to his lady friend had filled him with the resolve to die.

They learnt that, on the contrary, he had just had a long conversation with her: she had been extremely nice to him. Then people supposed that he had renounced the insipid days he still had to live, after this intoxication that he might never be able to experience again. Frequent remarks he had previously made to one of his friends finally led people to deduce that he was filled with disappointment every time he saw the sovereign lady of his dreams; but as soon as she had left, his fertile imagination restored all her power to the absent girl, and he would start to long for her again.

Each time, he would try to find an accidental reason for his disappointment in the imperfect nature of the circumstances. After that final interview in which he had, in his already active and inventive fantasy, raised his lady friend to the high perfection of which her nature was capable, and been filled with despair when he compared that imperfect perfection to the absolute perfection on which he lived and from which he was dying, he threw himself out of the window. Subsequently, having been reduced to idiocy, he lived for a long time, since his fall had left him with no memory of his soul, his mind or the words of his lady friend, whom he now met without seeing her. In spite of supplications and threats, she married him, and died several years later, without having managed to make him recognize her. Life is like this girl.

We dream of it, and we love what we have dreamt up. We must not try to live it: we throw ourselves, like that boy, into a state of stupidity – but not all at once: everything in life deteriorates by imperceptible degrees. Within ten years, we do not recognize our dreams, we deny them, we live, like an ox, for the grass we graze on moment by moment. And from our marriage with death, who knows if we will arise as conscious, immortal beings?

“Captain,” said his orderly, a few days after the little house had been made ready for him to live in, now that he had retired, until the day he died (a heart disease meant that this would not be long), “Captain, perhaps now that you can no longer make love, or go into battle, a few books might provide you with some entertainment; what should I go and buy for you?”

“Don’t buy anything; no books; they can’t tell me anything as interesting as what I’ve done, and since I don’t have long for that, I don’t want anything to distract me from remembering it. Give me the key to my big trunk; its contents will give me plenty to read every day.”

And from it he took out letters, a whole sea of letters, flecked with white and sometimes grey in hue. Some of these letters were very long, some of them just a single line, written on cards, with faded flowers, various objects, notes to himself to help him remember what had been going on when he received them, and photographs that had been spoilt despite his precautions, like those relics that the very piety of the faithful has worn away with too frequent kisses. And all of those things were very old, and some of them came from dead women, and others from women he had not seen for over ten years.

In all this there were small things that bore the precise memory of episodes of sensuality or affection fabricated from the most insignificant circumstances in his life, and it was like a vast fresco, depicting his life without narrating it, selecting only its most colourful and passionate moments, in a way at once very vague and very precise, with great and poignant power.

There were evocations of kisses on the mouth – that young mouth where he would unhesitatingly have left his soul, and which had since turned away from him: these made him weep for a long time. And despite the fact that he was very weak and forlorn, when he emptied at one draught a few of these still-vivid memories, like a glass of warm wine matured in the sunshine that had devoured his life, he felt a nice

lukewarm shudder, of the kind spring gives us when we are convalescing, or the winter hearth when it warms our languor.

The feeling that his old worn-out body had all the same burnt with the same flames gave him a new lease of life – burnt with the same devouring flames. Then, reflecting that what was stretching out its full length over him was merely the immense and moving shadow of those things – so elusive, alas! – and soon to be mingled together in eternal night, he would start to weep again.

Then, even though he knew that they were only shadows, the shadows of flames that had flickered away to burn elsewhere, and that he would never see them again, he nonetheless started to worship those shadows and to lend them a cherished existence, as it were, in contrast to the absolute nothingness that lay in wait.

And all those kisses and all those locks of hair he had kissed and all those things of tears and lips, of caresses poured out like an intoxicating wine, and the moments of despair as vast as music or eventide, filled with the bliss of imagining that they could touch the infinite and its mysterious destinies; this or that adored woman who held him so tightly that nothing existed henceforth except that which he could employ in the service of her adoration... she held him so tightly, and now she was leaving him, becoming so indistinct that he could not hold her back, could no longer even retain the perfume that wafted from the fugitive hems of her mantle: he made every effort to reliving it all, trying to bring it back to life and pin it down in front of him like a butterfly.

And each time it grew more difficult. And he had still not caught a single one of the butterflies – but each time his fingernails had scratched away a little of the mirage of their wings; or rather, he could see them in a mirror, and banged vainly against the mirror in his attempt to touch them, but merely tarnished it a little each time, so that the butterflies simply became blurred and less enchanting to his eyes. And this mirror of his heart was so tarnished that nothing could wipe it clean any more, now that the purifying breath of youth or

genius would no longer blow over it – by what unknown law of our seasons, what mysterious equinox of our autumn?...

And each time he felt less sorrow at having lost them – those kisses on that mouth, and those endless hours, and those perfumes that once had made him delirious.

And he was filled with sorrow at feeling less sorrow; and even that sorrow soon vanished. Then all his sorrows left, every one; no need to send his pleasures packing; they had fled long since on their winged heels, without looking round, holding their flowering branches in their hands; they had fled the dwelling that was no longer young enough for them. Then, like all men, he died.

8

Relics

I have bought up all of her belongings that were put on sale – that woman whose friend I would like to have been, and who did not even condescend to talk to me for a few minutes. I have the little card game that kept her amused every evening, her two marmosets, three novels that bear her coat of arms on their boards and her bitch. Oh, you delights and dear playthings of her life, you had access – without enjoying them as I would have done, and without even desiring them – to all her freest, most inviolable and most secret hours; you were unaware of your happiness and you cannot describe it.

Cards that she would hold in her fingers every evening with her favourite friends who saw her getting bored or breaking into laughter, who were witnesses to the start of her liaison, and whom she threw down to fling her arms round the man who thereafter came every evening to enjoy a game with her; novels that she would open and close in her bed, as her fancy or her fatigue bade her, chosen by her on impulse or as her dreams dictated, books to which she confided her dreams and combined them with the dreams expressed by the books that helped her better to dream for herself – did you retain nothing of her, and can you tell me nothing about her?

Novels, she dreamt in turn the lives of your characters and of your authors; and playing cards, for in her own way she enjoyed in your company the tranquillity and sometimes the feverishness of intimate friendships – did you keep nothing of her thoughts, which you distracted or filled, or of her heart, which you wounded or consoled?

Cards, novels, you were so often in her hands, or remained for so long on her table; queens, kings or knaves, who were the still guests at her wildest parties; heroes of novels and heroines who, at her bedside, caught in the cross-beam of her lamp and her eyes, dreamt your silent dream, a dream that was nonetheless filled with voices: you cannot have simply let it evaporate – all the perfume with which the air of her bedroom, the fabric of her dresses and the touch of her hands or her knees imbued you.

You have preserved the creases left when her joyful or nervous hand crumpled you; you perhaps still keep prisoner those tears which she shed, on reading of a grief narrated in some book or experienced in life; the day which made her eyes shine with joy or sorrow left its warm hues on you. When I touch you, I shiver, anxiously awaiting your revelations, disquieted by your silence. Alas! Perhaps, like you, charming and fragile creatures, she was the insensible and unconscious witness of her own grace. Her most real beauty existed perhaps in my desire. She lived her life, but perhaps I was the only one to dream it.

9

## Moonlight Sonata

I

I had been worn out less by the fatigues of the journey than by the memory and the apprehension of my father's demands, of Pia's indifference and of my enemies' relentlessness. During the day, the company of Assunta, her singing, her kindness to me (even though she barely even knew me), her white, brown and pink beauty, her perfume

which continued to hang in the great gusts of wind from the sea, the feather in her hat, the pearls around her neck had taken my mind off those problems.

But, around nine in the evening, feeling overwhelmed with fatigue, I asked her to go back in the carriage and leave me here to rest awhile in the open air. We had almost reached Honfleur; the place had been well chosen, against a wall, at the start of a double avenue of great trees which gave shelter from the wind; the air was mild; she agreed, and left me. I lay down on the grass, my face turned towards the dark sky; lulled by the sound of the sea, which I could hear behind me, without being able to see it clearly in the darkness, I had quickly dozed off.

Soon I dreamt that in front of me the sunset was shedding its light on the sand and the sea in the distance. Twilight was falling, and it seemed to me that it was a sunset and a twilight like all twilights and all sunsets. But a letter was brought to me; I tried to read it and couldn't make anything out. Only then did I realize that in spite of this impression of intense and widespread light, it was in fact very dark. This sunset was extraordinarily wan, glowing without clarity, and on the magically illumined sand, the darkness had become so deep and dense that I had to make an intense effort to recognize the shape of a seashell.

In that twilight particular to dreams, it was like the setting of an ailing and discoloured sun on some polar strand. My sorrows had suddenly evaporated; my father's decisions, Pia's feelings, my enemies' bad faith still held me in their thrall, but they no longer crushed me; it was as if they were a natural and now indifferent necessity. The paradox of this dark gleam, the miracle of this magical truce granted to my problems inspired no mistrust in me, and no fear – but I was wrapped, bathed, drowned in a growing sweetness whose intense delight finally awoke me. I opened my eyes. In wan splendour, my dream stretched all around me.

The wall in whose shelter I had curled up to sleep was brightly lit, and the shadow cast by its ivy fell as clear and vivid as if it had been four in the afternoon. The leaves of a white poplar, quivering in the barely

perceptible breeze, glittered. Waves and white sails could be seen on the sea, the sky was clear, the moon had risen. Every so often, light clouds passed in front of it, but then they became tinged with a delicate blue, whose profound pallor was like that of a transparent jellyfish or the heart of an opal. And yet my eyes could nowhere grasp the brightness that was shining all around. Even on the grass, which shone with a mirage-like intensity, the darkness persisted.

The woods, or a ditch, were totally black. Suddenly, a slight noise rose as slowly and surely as a growing anxiety, rapidly grew louder, and seemed to come rolling across the wood. It was the rustle of the leaves quivering in the breeze. One by one I heard them unfurling like waves against the vast silence of the huge night sky. Then even this noise diminished and faded away. In the narrow meadow stretching before me between the dense avenues of oak trees, there seemed to flow a river of light, contained within these two riverbanks of shadow.

The moonlight, as it conjured up the gamekeeper's house, the foliage or a sail from the night in which they lay buried, had not awoken them. In the silence of sleep, it illumined merely the vague phantom of their forms, without it being possible to distinguish the outlines which restored them to me in their full daytime reality, oppressing me then by the certainty of their presence and the permanency of their banal proximity.

The house without a door, the foliage without a trunk and almost without leaves, the sail without a ship seemed, instead of being a cruelly undeniable and monotonously habitual reality, the strange, inconsistent and luminous dream of the sleeping trees immersed in the darkness. Never, indeed, had the woods slept so deeply; the moon gave the impression of having taken advantage of their slumber to throw a great but subdued party, sweetly spectral, silently unfolding over the sea and the sky.

My sadness had vanished. I could hear my father scolding me, Pia making fun of me, my enemies hatching plots – and none of this seemed real. The only reality lay in this unreal light, and I summoned it

with a smile. I did not understand what mysterious resemblance had united my sorrows to the solemn mysteries being celebrated in the woods, on the sea and in the sky, but I felt that their explanation, their consolation, their pardon was being proffered, and that it was quite unimportant that my intelligence had been left out of the secret, since my heart understood it so well. I called my holy mother night by name, my sadness had recognized in the moon her immortal sister, the moon shone on the transfigured sufferings of night, and in my heart, whence the clouds had dispersed, there had risen a great melancholy.

## II

Then I heard steps. Assunta was coming towards me, her white face hovering over a vast dark mantle. She said to me, almost under her breath, "I was afraid you might be cold, my brother had gone to bed, I came back." I went up to her; I was shivering, she took me under her mantle and, to hold it in place, put her arm round my neck. We walked a few steps beneath the trees, in the deep darkness. Something shone in front of us; I did not have time to step back and went round it, thinking we were going to walk into a tree, but the obstacle vanished beneath our feet; we had walked into a pool of moonlight.

I leant her head against mine. She smiled, I started to weep, I saw that she was weeping too. Then we realized that the moon was weeping and that her sadness was in unison with ours. The gentle, poignant accents of her light went straight to our hearts. Like us, she was weeping, and, as is almost always the case with us, she was weeping without knowing why, but feeling her sweet and irresistible despair so deeply that she dragged down into it the woods, the fields, the sky – which was again reflected in the sea – and my heart, which at last could see clearly into hers.

The way novelists or their heroes hark back to their defunct love affairs, so touching for the reader, is unfortunately quite artificial. This contrast between the immensity of our past love and the absolute nature of our present indifference, of which a thousand material details make us aware – a name recalled in conversation, a letter discovered lying in a drawer, an actual meeting with the person or, even more, our belated and, as it were, retrospective possession of that person; this contrast, so painful, so full of barely contained tears when represented in a work of art, is something we can register with cold detachment in life, precisely because our present state is one of indifference and forgetfulness, because our beloved and our love no longer afford us any pleasure other than an aesthetic one at most, and because, together with love, our emotional turmoil and our faculty of suffering have disappeared. The poignant melancholy of this contrast is thus merely a moral truth. It would also become a psychological reality if a writer were to place it at the beginning of the passion he is describing and not after its end.

Indeed, when we begin to love, it is often the case that, forewarned by our experience and our sagacity – despite the protestation of our heart which has the feeling or rather the illusion that its love will last for ever – we know that one day the woman the thought of whom constitutes our whole life will be as indifferent to us as are, just now, all other women apart from her... We will hear her name without any thrill of pain, we will see her handwriting without trembling, we will not change our route to catch a glimpse of her in the street, we will meet her without being affected by the encounter, we will possess her without ecstasy. Then that sure foreknowledge, despite the absurd and yet powerful premonition that we will always love her, will make us weep; and love, the love that will still be hovering over us like a divine morning, infinitely mysterious and sad, will offer to our pain some of the expanse of its great and strange horizons, in all their depth, and some of its enchanting desolation...

When we are filled with sorrow, it is sweet to hide in the warmth of our beds and, now that all effort and all resistance have been abandoned, pull our head under the blankets, and completely let ourselves go, groaning like branches in the autumn wind. But there is an even better bed, filled with divine perfumes. It is our sweet, our deep, our impenetrable friendship. When my heart is feeling sad and frozen, I shelter it in our friendship, shivering in the cold. Burying even my thoughts in the warmth of our affection, perceiving nothing more of the world outside and no longer seeking to defend myself, disarmed, but by the miracle of our tender affection immediately fortified, invincible, I weep with pain, and with the joy of having a trusting soul in which I can lock it away.

12

### The Ephemeral Efficacy of Sorrow

Let us be grateful to the people who give us happiness; they are the charming gardeners thanks to whom our souls are filled with flowers. But let us be more grateful to the spiteful or merely indifferent women, and to the cruel friends who have caused us sorrow. They have laid waste to our hearts that are now strewn with unrecognizable debris, they have uprooted the trunks and mutilated the most delicate branches, like a desolate wind, but one which sowed a few good seeds in the uncertain hope of some future harvest.

These people have, by breaking to pieces all the brief moments of happiness that concealed the extent of our misery from us, and by turning our heart into a naked and melancholy courtyard, made it possible for us to contemplate our heart and judge it. Plays with sad endings do us good in a similar way; so we should consider them as greatly superior to plays that end happily, which cheat our hunger rather than satisfying it: the bread from which we must draw sustenance is bitter to the taste. When life is going well, the destinies of our fellows do not appear to us in their reality, since either interest masks them or desire transfigures them. But in the detachment

afforded by suffering (in life), and in the feeling of a painful beauty (in the theatre), the destinies of other men, and ours too, force our attentive souls to hear at last the eternal unheard message of duty and truth. The sad oeuvre of a real artist speaks to us with the accent of those who have suffered and who force every man who has suffered to drop everything else and listen.

Alas! Our feelings brought these insights to us and our capricious feelings take them away: sadness, a higher quality than gaiety, is not as enduring as virtue. This morning we have already forgotten the tragedy which last night elevated us so high that we were able to view our life as a whole and as a reality, with a clear-sighted and sincere pity. After just a year, perhaps, we will be consoled for the betrayal of a woman or the death of a friend. The wind, amidst this flotsam of dreams, this scattered chaos of withered joys, has sown the good seed and watered it with tears, but those tears will dry too quickly for it ever to germinate.

(After *L'Invitée* by M. de Curel\*)

13

### In Praise of Bad Music

Detest bad music if you will, but don't hold it in contempt. As it is played and sung much more often and much more passionately than good music, so much more than the latter has it gradually been filled with the dreams and tears of mankind. For that reason you should venerate it. Its place, insignificant in the history of art, is huge in the sentimental history of societies. Respect for – I do not say love for – bad music is not merely a form of what might be called the charity of good taste or its scepticism, it is, more than that, the awareness of the importance of the social role of music. How many melodies, worthless in the eyes of an artist, become the confidants chosen by a whole host of romantic young men and of women in love. How many “golden rings” and “Ah! Sleep on, sleep on, mistress mine”, the pages of which are tremulously turned every evening by justly celebrated hands, and watered by the most beautiful eyes in the world with tears whose

melancholy and voluptuous tribute would arouse the envy of the most stringent maestro in the world – ingenious and inspired confidants who ennoble sorrow and exalt dreams, and, in exchange for the ardent secret confided to them, give the intoxicating illusion of beauty. The working classes, the bourgeoisie, the army, the nobility, just as they have the same postmen to bring news of some grief to afflict them with sorrow or some happiness to fill them with pleasure, have the same invisible messengers of love and the same cherished confessors – in other words, bad musicians. The irritating refrain, for instance, that any refined and well-trained ear will immediately refuse to listen to, has been the repository for the riches of thousands of souls, and keeps the secret of thousands of lives, for which it was the living inspiration, the ever-ready consolation, always lying half-open on the piano's music stand – a source of dreamy grace for those lives, and an ideal. Those arpeggios too, or that “re-entry” of the theme, have aroused in the soul of more than one lover or dreamer an echo of the harmonies of paradise or the very voice of the beloved woman. A book of bad romances, worn out by overuse, ought to touch us like a cemetery or a village. What does it matter if the houses have no style, if the tombs are overladen with inscriptions and ornaments in bad taste? From this dust there may arise, in the eyes of an imagination friendly and respectful enough to silence for a moment its aesthetic disdain, the flock of souls holding in their beaks the still-verdant dream that gave them a foretaste of the other world and filled them with joy or tears in this one.

14

### A Meeting by the Lakeside

Yesterday, before going to have dinner in the Bois, I received a letter from Her – a rather frigid reply, a week after I had sent her a despairing letter, to say that she was afraid she would not be able to bid me farewell before leaving. And I, quite frigidly, yes, I replied to her that it was better like that and that I wished her a pleasant summer. Then I got dressed and crossed the Bois in an open carriage. I was extremely

sad, but calm. I was resolved to forget, my mind was made up: it was just a matter of time.

As the carriage moved down the avenue to the lake, I spotted at the very far end of the little path that goes round the lake, fifty metres from the avenue, a solitary woman walking slowly along. I did not at first make her out clearly. She gave me a little wave, and then I recognized her in spite of the distance between us. It was her! I gave her a long slow wave. And she continued to gaze at me as if she had wished to see me stop and take her with me. I did nothing of the kind, but I soon felt an emotion seizing on me as if from some external source and holding me tightly in its grip. "I knew it!" I exclaimed to myself. "There is a reason unknown to me which has always led her to pretend to be indifferent. She loves me, the little darling!" A boundless happiness and an invincible certainty overwhelmed me; I felt as if I would faint, and I burst into tears. The carriage was approaching Armenonville, I wiped my eyes and over them passed, as if to dry their tears, the sweet wave of her hand, and her gently questioning eyes gazed steadfastly on mine, asking to get into the carriage with me.

I arrived at the dinner in a radiant mood. My happiness overflowed on everyone in the form of a joyous, grateful and cordial affability; and the feeling that none of them knew what hand, unknown to them (the little hand that had waved to me) had lit within me that great fire of joy whose blaze everyone could see – this feeling imbued my happiness with the added charm of a secret pleasure. We were waiting only for Mme de T\*\*\* and she soon arrived. She is the most insignificant person I know, and despite quite a good figure, the least likeable. But I was too happy not to forgive each of her failings and her ugliness, and I went up to her with an affectionate smile.

"You weren't so friendly just now," she said.

"Just now?" I said in astonishment. "Just now? But I didn't see you."

"What – you didn't recognize me? It's true you were some way away; I was walking by the lakeside, you passed proudly by in your carriage, I

waved to you and I would really rather have liked to get into your carriage so as not to be late.”

“Oh, it was you!” I exclaimed, and I added several times with an expression of great sorrow, “Oh, please forgive me! Please forgive me!” “How unhappy he looks! My compliments, Charlotte,” said the hostess. “But cheer up, young man, you’re with her now!” I was devastated; my happiness had been totally destroyed.

Well, the most horrible thing about my mistake was that it refused to go away. That loving image of the woman who no longer loved me changed for a good long while my idea of her even once I had recognized my error. I tried to patch it up between us, I took longer to forget her, and often, in my pain, to try and console myself by forcing myself to believe that those hands had, as I’d at first sensed, belonged to her, I would close my eyes to see again her little hands waving to me, hands that would so nicely have wiped away my tears, and cooled my brow, her little gloved hands that she gently held out to me by the lakeside like frail symbols of peace, love and reconciliation while her sad, questioning eyes seemed to be asking me to take her with me.

15

Just as a blood-red sky warns the passer-by that there is a fire in the distance, certain fiery glances, of course, can betray passions that they serve merely to reflect. They are flames in the mirror. But sometimes, as well, indifferent and cheerful people have eyes as vast and sombre as sorrows, as if a filter were held out between their souls and their eyes and as if they had so to speak “filtered” all the living content of their soul into their eyes. Henceforth, warmed only by the fervour of their egotism – that likeable fervour of egotism which attracts others just as much as incendiary passion repels them – their shrivelled souls will be little more than a factitious palace of intrigue. But their eyes, ceaselessly inflamed with love, and soon to be moistened with the dew of languor that will make them gleam, swim and drown, without being able to extinguish them – their eyes will amaze the universe with their tragic blaze. Twin spheres, henceforth independent of their soul,

spheres of love, burning satellites of a world that has frozen over for ever, they will continue until their death to cast an unwonted and deceptive gleam, false prophets, and perjurers too, promising a love with which their heart will not keep faith.

16

## The Stranger

Dominique had sat near the now extinguished fire as he waited for his guests. Every evening, he would invite some great lord to come and dine with him, together with some witty guests, and as he was well born, rich and charming, he was never alone. The candles had not yet been lit and the day was fading away in the melancholy gloom of the bedroom. Suddenly, he heard a voice addressing him, a distant and intimate voice saying, "Dominique"; and merely hearing it uttered, uttered so far away and so near – "Dominique" – he was frozen by fear. Never before had he heard that voice, and yet he recognized it so easily; his remorse recognized so clearly the voice of a victim, a noble sacrificial victim. He tried to think what old crime he had committed, and could not remember. And yet the tone of this voice was certainly reproaching him with a crime, a crime that he had doubtless committed without being aware of it, but for which he was responsible – this much was attested by his sadness and his fear. He looked up and saw, standing in front of him, grave and familiar, a stranger of ambiguous but striking aspect. Dominique greeted his melancholy and undeniable authority with a few respectful words.

"Dominique, could I be the only man you will not invite to dinner? You committed crimes against me, old crimes, and you need to make reparation for them. And then I will teach you to get by without other people who, when you are old, will come no more."

"I do invite you to dinner," replied Dominique with an affectionate gravity that he had never suspected in himself.

"Thank you," said the stranger.

There were no insignia inscribed in the gemstone on his ring, and wit had not glazed his words with the brilliant needles of its hoar frost. But the gratitude in his steady, fraternal gaze filled Dominique with an unfamiliar and intoxicating happiness.

“But if you wish to keep me with you, you must send away your other guests.”

Dominique could hear them knocking at the door. The candles had not been lit, the darkness was complete.

“I can’t send them away,” said Dominique. “I can’t be alone.”

“And with me, you would indeed be alone,” said the stranger, sadly.

“And yet you really should keep me. You committed old crimes against me and you need to make reparation for them. I love you more than do any of the others, and I would teach you to get by without them, for, when you are old, they will come no more.”

“I can’t,” said Dominique.

And he sensed that he had just sacrificed a noble happiness, following the orders of some imperious and vulgar habit, which no longer even had any pleasures to dispense to him in reward for obedience.

“Choose quickly,” resumed the stranger, in a suppliant and haughty tone.

Dominique went to open the door to the guests, and at the same time he asked the stranger, without daring to turn his head:

“So who are you?”

And the stranger, the stranger who was already starting to vanish, told him:

“The habit to which you are sacrificing me again this evening will be even stronger tomorrow thanks to the blood from the wound that you are inflicting on me to nourish it. More imperious for having been obeyed one more time, each day it will turn you away from me, will force you to make me suffer even more. Soon you will have killed me. You will never see me again. And yet you owed more to me than to the others, who, very shortly, will abandon you. I am within you and yet I

am forever far away from you; already I barely exist any more. I am your soul, I am yourself.”

The guests had come in. They passed into the dining room and Dominique tried to relate his conversation with the vanished visitor but, given the general boredom and the visible effort the host was forced to make in trying to recall an almost faded dream, Girolamo interrupted him, to the satisfaction of all, including Dominique himself, and drew this conclusion:

“One should never remain alone – solitude engenders melancholy.”

Then they started drinking again; Dominique chatted gaily but joylessly, flattered, nonetheless, by his brilliant guests.

17

Dream

Your tears flowed for me, my lips have drunk your tears.

– Anatole France\*

I can effortlessly remember what my opinion of Mme Dorothy B\*\*\* was last Saturday (four days ago). As chance would have it, it was on that very day that people had been talking about her, and I was sincere when I said that I found her without charm or wit. I think she is twenty-two or twenty-three. In addition I hardly really know her, and when I was thinking about her, no vivid memory rose to the surface of my attention; I merely had the letters of her name before my eyes.

On Saturday I went to bed quite early. But at around two o'clock the wind became so strong that I was forced to get up again to close a loose shutter that had woken me up. I cast a retrospective glance over the short period in which I had just been sleeping, and was delighted to see how restorative it had been, without discomfort or dreams. Hardly had I climbed back into bed than I was again asleep.

But after a certain while – it was difficult to say precisely how long – little by little I awoke, or rather I woke little by little into the world of

dreams, indistinct, at first, just like the real world when we wake up in the ordinary fashion; but it soon became more precise. I was lying on the beach at Trouville, which was simultaneously a hammock in an unfamiliar garden, and a woman was gazing at me with a fixed and gentle expression. It was Mme Dorothy B\*\*\*. I was no more surprised than I am in the morning, when I wake up and recognize my bedroom. But nor was I surprised at the supernatural allure of my companion and the transports of simultaneously sensual and spiritual adoration that her presence aroused in me. We gazed at each other in mutual understanding, and a great miracle of happiness and glory was in the process of being accomplished, a miracle of which we were fully conscious, for which she bore a shared responsibility, and for which I was infinitely grateful to her. But she was saying to me: "You are crazy to thank me – wouldn't you have done the same thing for me?"

And the feeling (in fact, it was a sense of perfect certainty) that I would indeed have done the same thing for her exalted my joy to the point of delirium, like the manifest symbol of the closest union. She made a mysterious sign with her finger and smiled. And I knew, as if I had been both within myself and within her, that it meant, "All your enemies, all your problems, all your regrets, all your weaknesses – are they now quite gone?" And without my having said a word, she heard me replying to her that she had easily been victorious over everything, had destroyed everything, and most pleasurably mesmerized my suffering away.

And she approached, stroking my neck, and gently playing with the tips of my moustache. Then she said to me, "Now let us go to the others, let us enter into life." A superhuman joy filled me, and I felt within myself the strength to realize this virtual happiness in its entirety. She wanted to give me a flower, and from between her breasts she drew a rose whose bud was still closed, yellow and bedewed, and attached it to my buttonhole. Suddenly, I felt my intoxication increased by a new pleasure. It was the rose which, fixed to my buttonhole, had started to exhale its odour of love into my nostrils.

I saw that Dorothy was disturbed by my joy and filled with an emotion that I could not understand. At the very same moment as her eyes (and I was certain of this, thanks to the mysterious awareness I had of her own individuality) experienced the slight spasm that precedes by a single second the moment when one starts to weep, it was my eyes which filled with tears – with her tears, I might almost say. She came up to me, placed her head to my cheek, throwing it back so that I could contemplate its mysterious grace, its captivating vivaciousness, and, darting out her tongue from her young, smiling mouth, gathered all my tears on the edges of my eyes.

Then she swallowed them, making a slight noise with her lips, which I experienced as a strange new kiss, more intimately disturbing than if it had touched me directly. I suddenly awoke, recognized my bedroom and, just as when a storm is close a clap of thunder follows immediately after the flash of lightning, a dizzy memory of happiness coincided with, rather than preceded, the crushing certainty of its falseness and impossibility. But, in spite of all rational argument, Dorothy B\*\*\* had ceased to be for me the woman she had still been the day before.

The little furrow left in my memory by the few occasions on which I had met her had almost been effaced, as after a powerful tide which had left unfamiliar traces behind it as it withdrew. I had a huge desire, disappointed in advance, to see her again, and an instinctive need to write to her, restrained by a cautious mistrust. Her name uttered in a conversation made me start, and yet merely evoked the insignificant image that would alone have accompanied her name before that night; and while she was a matter of indifference to me just like any other ordinary society woman, she attracted me more irresistibly than the most beloved mistresses, or the most intoxicating destiny.

I would not have taken a single step to see her, and yet for the other “her” I would have given my life. Every hour effaces something of the memory of this dream that is already quite disfigured by my relating it. I can see it less and less distinctly, like a book that you want to carry on reading at your table when the declining day no longer sheds enough light, when night falls.

If I wish still to perceive it, I am obliged to stop thinking about it for a few minutes, just as you are obliged to close your eyes at first if you are to continue to read a few letters in the book filled with shadow. However much it has been effaced, it still leaves a great turmoil within me, the foam of its wake or the sensuality of its perfume. But this turmoil itself will vanish, and I will see Mme B\*\*\* without it bothering me. And anyway, what would be the use of talking to her about these things, of which she has remained quite unaware?

Alas! Love has passed over me like this dream, with a power of transfiguration just as mysterious. And so, you who know the woman I love and who were not part of my dream, you cannot understand me – so do not try to give me any advice.

18

### The Genre Paintings of Memory

We have certain memories that are, as it were, the Dutch paintings of our memory, genre pictures in which the characters are often of the middling sort, taken at a perfectly ordinary moment of their lives, without any solemn events, sometimes without any events at all, in a setting that is in no way extraordinary and quite lacking in grandeur. The natural quality of the characters and the innocence of the scene are what comprise its attractiveness, and distance sets between it and us a gentle light which bathes it in beauty.

My regimental life was full of scenes of this kind that I experienced quite naturally, without any particularly intense joy and without any deep sorrow, and which I remember with much gentle affection. The rural character of the location, the simplicity of some of my peasant comrades, whose bodies had remained more handsome and more agile, their minds more original, their hearts more spontaneous and their characters more natural than was the case with the young men I frequented previously as well as subsequently, the calm of a life in which one's occupations are more regular and imagination less

enslaved than in any other, in which pleasure keeps us company all the more continually as we never have the time to flee from it by running after it – everything concurs to make, now, of this period of my life a series (admittedly filled with gaps) of little paintings imbued with charm and a truth bathed in happiness, on which time has shed its sweet sadness and its poetry.

19

### Sea Breeze in the Countryside

I will bring you a young poppy, with crimson petals.  
– Theocritus, 'The Cyclops'

In the garden, in the little wood, across the countryside, the wind deploys a crazed and futile ardour in scattering the flurries of sunlight, harrying them along as it furiously shakes the branches of the coppice where they had first flung themselves, all the way to the sparkling thicket where they now tremble, all aquiver. Trees, clothes hanging out to dry, the outspread tail of the peacock, all cast, through the transparent air, extraordinarily clear blue shadows that fly along before every gust of wind without leaving the ground, like a kite that has not taken off.

The helter-skelter of wind and light makes this nook of the Champagne region resemble a coastal landscape. When we reach the top of this path which, scorched by the light and swept by the wind, climbs up in the dazzling sunlight, towards a naked sky, is it not the sea that will soon greet our sight, white with sunlight and foam? In the same way, you had come every morning, your hands filled with flowers and the soft feathers which a wood pigeon, a swallow or a jay had dropped onto the avenue as it flew past. The feathers tremble in my hat, the poppy in my buttonhole is shedding its petals, let's go home, this very minute.

The house groans in the wind like a ship, you can hear invisible sails bellying out and invisible flags cracking outside. Let this clump of fresh

roses continue to lie across your knees and allow my heart to weep between your clasped hands.

20

### The Pearls

I came home as day was dawning and, shivering in the cold, went to bed, all aquiver with a melancholy and frozen frenzy. Just a while ago, in your room, your friends from the day before, your plans for the next day (so many enemies, so many plots being hatched against me), and your current thoughts (so many hazy miles I would never be able to cross) separated you from me. Now that I am far away from you, this imperfect presence, the fleeting mask of eternal absence (a mask which kisses soon lift) would, it seems to me, be enough to show me your true face and to fulfil every aspiration of my love.

I had to take my leave; how sad and frozen I remain when far from you! But by what sudden enchantment do the familiar dreams of our happiness again start to rise up, a thick smoke mounting from a clear and burning flame, climbing joyfully and uninterruptedly in my head? From my closed hand, as it warms up beneath the blankets, there again wafts the odour of the rose cigarettes that you had given me to smoke.

I plant my lips on my hand and draw in, deeply and slowly, the perfume which, in the heat of memory, breathes out dense whiffs of tenderness, of happiness, of you. Ah, my beloved! At the very same moment that I can so easily do without you, as I wallow joyfully in your memory – which now fills the bedroom – without having to struggle against your insurmountable body, let me tell you, absurd as it is, let me tell you, for I cannot help it, that I cannot do without you. It is your presence which imparts to my life that subtle hue, warm and melancholy, with which it also imbues the pearls that spend the night on your body. Like them, I live on your warmth and sorrowfully take on its subtle tints, and like them, if you did not keep me on you, I would die.

21

## The Shores of Oblivion

“They say that Death makes beautiful those whom it strikes down and exaggerates their virtues, but in general it is much truer to say that it was life that failed to do them justice. Death, that pious and irreproachable witness, teaches us, in accordance with truth and love, that in every person there is usually more good than evil.”\* What Michelet here says about death is perhaps even truer of that death which follows a great unhappy love affair. Take a person who, after making us suffer so much, ceases to mean anything at all to us – is it enough to say, as does the common expression, that such a person is “dead for us”?

We weep for the dead, we still love them, for a long time we are subject to the irresistible attraction of the enchantment that survives them and which often causes us to return to their tombs. But the person who has made us feel every emotion, and by whose essence we are saturated, can no longer even cast on us the merest shadow of any sorrow or joy. Such a person is more than dead for us. After considering such a person as the sole thing of value in this world, after cursing him and despising him, we find it impossible to judge him, the features of his face are barely discernible to the eyes of our memory, exhausted as they are by having gazed on him for too long.

But this judgement on the loved one, a judgement which varied so considerably, sometimes torturing our blind hearts with its sharp eyes, sometimes itself turning a blind eye to any failings so as to overcome the cruel discord, must undergo one last swing of the pendulum. Like those landscapes which are revealed to us only when we have reached the summit, from the heights of forgiveness there appears in her true value the woman who was more than dead for us, having once been our life itself. We knew only that she did not return our love, we understand now that she felt real friendship for us. It is not memory which makes her more beautiful, it was love which failed to do her justice.

To the man who wants everything, and to whom even everything, were he to obtain it, would not suffice, to receive but a little appears as no more than a cruel absurdity. Now we understand that it was a generous gift from her whom our despair, our irony and our perpetual tyranny had not disheartened. She was always kind. Several of her remarks, mentioned to us only today, strike us as indulgently exact and full of charm – remarks made by the woman we thought incapable of understanding us because she did not love us.

Whereas we spoke about her with so much unfair egotism and severity. In any case, do we not owe her so many things? If that great tide of love has withdrawn for ever, nonetheless, when we take a walk within ourselves, we can pick up strange and magical shells and, raising them to our ears, hear with melancholy pleasure and without any pain the vast roar of bygone days. Then we dwell, with a sudden feeling of tenderness, on the woman who, as our ill fortune would have it, was loved more than she loved. She is no longer “more than dead” for us. She is a dead woman, whom we remember with affection. Justice requires us to redress the idea we had of her. And by the powerful virtue of justice, she is raised in spirit within our hearts, to appear before that last judgement which we deliver far from her, tranquilly, our eyes filled with tears.

22

## Real Presence

We loved each other in a remote village of the Engadine, with a name of twofold sweetness: the dreaminess of its German sonority faded into the sensuousness of the Italian syllables. All around, three lakes of a mysterious green bathed forests of pine trees. Glaciers and peaks barred the horizon. In the evening, the diversity of perspectives made the effects of light so varied and gentle. Will we ever forget the strolls by the lake of Sils-Maria, as the afternoon drew to its close, at six o'clock? The larches, so black in their serenity when set against the dazzling snow, held out towards the pale blue, almost mauve water their branches of soft and shining green.

One evening the hour was particularly propitious to us; in a few moments, the sun, as it sank, made the water pass through every hue and our souls partake of every successive delight. Suddenly we made a movement, we had just seen a little pink butterfly, then two, then five, leaving the flowers on our shore and flutter over the lake. Soon they seemed an impalpable haze of pink as they swept away; then they reached the flowers on the far shore, and returned, recommencing their hazardous crossing, sometimes hovering as if tempted by the lake's wonderful and subtle tints, like those of a great fading flower. It was too much for us, and our eyes filled with tears.

These little butterflies, as they crossed the lake, passed to and fro across our souls – our souls, quivering with emotion at the sight of such varied beauty, ready to vibrate – passed to and fro like the bow of a sweet violin. The lightness of their flight did not graze the waters, but caressed our eyes and our hearts, and at each beat of their little pink wings we felt faint. When we saw them coming back from the far shore, thereby revealing that they were playing, and taking their pleasure as they floated across the waters, we could hear a delightful harmony; meanwhile, they gradually came back, taking a thousand whimsical detours that varied the original harmony and drew the outline of a melody filled with magical fantasy. Our souls, like sounding boards, could hear in their silent flight a music of enchantment and liberty and all the gentle intense harmonies of the lake, the woods, the sky and our lives accompanied it with a sweet magic that made us dissolve in tears.

I had never spoken to you and you were indeed far from my eyes that year. But how much we loved each other at that time, in the Engadine! Never could I get enough of you, never would I leave you at home. You accompanied me in my walks, you ate at my table, you slept in my bed, you dreamt in my soul. One day – can it be that some sure instinct, some mysterious messenger never alerted you to those childish amusements with which you were so closely associated, and which you lived through, yes, truly lived through, so much did you have within me a “real presence”? – one day (neither of us had seen Italy), we were as

if thunderstruck by these words which someone said about the Alp Grüm: "From there you can see right into Italy." We set off for the Alp Grüm, imagining that, in the spectacle laid out before the peak, just where Italy started, the harsh reality of the landscape would suddenly end, and that, against a dreamlike background, a deep-blue valley would open up. On our way, we reminded ourselves that a frontier does not alter the terrain and that even if it did, it would happen so imperceptibly that we would be unable to notice it easily or all at once. Somewhat disappointed, we nonetheless laughed at having been so childish a few moments before.

But when we reached the summit, we were dazzled. Our childlike imaginings had come true before our very eyes. At our side, glaciers sparkled. At our feet, torrents zigzagged down a wild, dark-green Engadine landscape. Then there was a rather mysterious hill; and after that, mauve slopes afforded and then withheld glimpses into a real, blue land, a sparkling avenue stretching towards Italy.

The names were no longer the same, and immediately harmonized with this new soft sweetness. Someone pointed out the lake of Poschiavo, Pizzo di Verona, the Val di Viola. Then we went to an extraordinarily wild and solitary spot, where the desolation of nature and the certainty that we were here inaccessible to everyone, invisible and invincible too, would have heightened to a frenzy the pleasure of loving each other in that very place.

Then I plumbed the depths of my sadness at not having you with me in your material species, other than enrobed in my nostalgia, in the reality of my desire. I went down some way as far as the place, at a still high altitude, where travellers came to take in the view. In an isolated hostel there is a book in which they write their names. I wrote mine and, next to it, a combination of letters that was an allusion to yours, since just then I found it impossible not to provide myself with some material proof of the reality of your spiritual closeness. By putting something of you into this book it seemed to me that I was relieving myself to a corresponding degree of the obsessive weight under which you were suffocating my soul.

And then I had the immense hope of taking you there one day to read those lines; and then you would climb even higher with me, to avenge me for all that sadness. Without my having to tell you anything about it, you would have understood everything, or rather you would have remembered it all; and you would let yourself go as you climbed up, leaning on me a little so that I could feel more fully that this time you were really there; and I, between your lips with their slight but persistent savour of your oriental cigarettes, I would find perfect oblivion. We would utter senseless words aloud, just for the sake of shouting without anyone in the far distance being able to hear us; tufts of short grass, in the gentle breeze of the heights, would quiver alone.

The ascent would make you slow down your steps and get rather breathless, and my face would draw near so that I could feel your breath: we would be quite ecstatic. We would also go to where a white lake lies next to a black lake as snugly as a white pearl lies next to a black one. How deeply we would have loved one another in an isolated village of the Engadine!

We would have let only mountain guides near us – those men who are so tall and whose eyes reflect things that are not seen by the eyes of other men and are as it were of a different “water”. But I no longer care about you. Satiety came before possession. Platonic love itself has its points of saturation. I would no longer like to take you to this country which, without understanding or even knowing it, you evoke for me with such a touching fidelity. The sight of you preserves but one charm for me, that of reminding me all at once of those names with their strange sweetness, both German and Italian: Sils-Maria, Silva Plana, Crestalta, Samaden, Celerina, Juliers, Val di Viola.

23

### An Interior Sunset

Like nature, intelligence offers us an array of sights. Never have sunsets or moonlit nights, which have often made me melt into a frenzy of

tears, surpassed in the passionate outburst of tenderness they provoke in me that vast and melancholy blaze which, during my walks at the end of the day, then casts its hues on the waves in our soul, as numerous as those the setting sun makes shine on the sea. Then we press on more quickly through the gathering night.

More than a knight filled with intoxication and giddiness by the accelerating speed of his adored mount, we yield trembling with trust and joy to the tumultuous thoughts which we feel hold us in their thrall more and more irresistibly the more we possess them and can direct them. Filled with affectionate emotion we make our way through the dark countryside and greet the oaks filled with night, like the solemn field, like the epic witnesses of the momentum that impels us forward and fills us with rapture.

On looking up skywards, we cannot fail to recognize, exultantly, in the gaps between the clouds still touched by the sun's farewell, the mysterious reflection of our thoughts: we plunge deeper and deeper into the countryside, and the dog which follows us, the horse which carries us, or the now silent friend (less, at times, when there is no living creature with us), the flower in our buttonholes or the walking stick waved about joyfully by our feverish hands, receive in glances and tears the melancholy tribute of our frenzy.

24

### As by Moonlight

Night had fallen; I went to my room, now too filled with anxiety to remain in the dark without seeing the sky, the fields and the sea gleaming in the sunlight. But when I opened the door, I found the room lit as if by the setting sun. Through the window I could see the house, the fields, the sky and the sea, or rather it seemed to me as if I could "see" them again in a dream; the gentle moon reminded me of them rather than showing them to me, shedding over their outlines a pale splendour which did not scatter the darkness that lay as dense as oblivion over their shapes. And I spent hours gazing into the courtyard

at the memory, mute, vague, enchanted and pallid, of the things which, during the daytime, had given me pleasure or pain, with their cries, their voices or their persistent hum.

Love has faded, I feel afraid at the threshold of oblivion. But here, tranquil now, a little pale, quite close to me and yet distant and already vague, as if in the moonlight, are all my past times of happiness and all my healed sorrows, gazing at me wordlessly. Their silence fills me with affection while their distance and their wavering pallor intoxicate me with sadness and poetry. And I cannot stop gazing at this interior moonlight.

25

### A Critique of Hope in the Light of Love

Hardly has an as yet future hour become the present for us than it is divested of its charms, only to recover them, it is true – if our soul is wide and deep enough and able to arrange a fine set of perspective views – when we have left it far behind us, on the roads of memory. Thus the poetic village, towards which we were spurring on our impatient hopes and our weary mares, once again breathes (as soon as we have passed the hill) those veiled harmonies, whose promises the vulgarity of its streets, the jumble of its houses – brought so close together that they flowed into one another on the horizon – and the lifting of the blue mist that seemed to imbue it, had all belied.

But like the alchemist, who attributes each of his failures to an accidental cause (a different one each time), far from suspecting an incurable imperfection in the very essence of the present, we accuse the malignity of particular circumstances, the responsibilities of this or that envied position, the bad character of this or that desired mistress, the poor state of our health on a day which was to have been a day of pleasure, or the bad weather or the bad hostelries on our journey, of having poisoned our happiness. Thus, certain that we will manage to eliminate these causes that destroy all fruition, we ceaselessly appeal,

with an at times muted but never entirely disillusioned confidence, from a realized (that is, disappointed) dream to a dreamt-of future.

But certain reflective and sorrowful men, even more radiant than others with the light of hope, discover rather quickly that – alas! – this light does not gleam at the hours when we expect it, but emanates from our hearts overflowing with rays that are unbeknown to nature and which pour them out in torrents over hope without managing to kindle any fire. These men no longer feel the strength to desire what they know not to be desirable, or to wish to fulfil dreams that will wither in their hearts as soon as they try to pluck them outside themselves. This melancholy predisposition is singularly strengthened and justified in love. Imagination, as it ceaselessly and repeatedly goes over its hopes, wonderfully sharpens its disappointments. Unhappy love, which makes it impossible for us to experience happiness, also prevents us from discovering how null and void that happiness is. But what lesson of philosophy, what advice of old age, what foiled ambition can surpass in melancholy the joys of a happy love affair? You love me, my darling girl; how could you have been so cruel as to tell me? So that is the ardent happiness of shared love, the mere thought of which made me feel giddy and my teeth chatter!

I undo your flowers, I lift your hair, I tear off your jewels, I touch your flesh, my kisses cover your body as tumultuously as the rising sea beating against the sand; but you yourself elude me, and with you goes happiness. I have to leave you, I return home alone and sadder. Accusing this latest calamity, I return to you for ever; it is my last illusion which I have torn down, I am doomed to unhappiness for ever.

I do not know how I had the courage to tell you this, it is the happiness of my whole life that I have just pitilessly rejected, or at least my life's consolation, since your eyes, whose trusting happiness still sometimes filled me with intoxication, will now no longer reflect anything but the sad disenchantment of which your sagacity and your disappointments had already warned you. Since this secret, which one of us was keeping hidden from the other, has now been uttered aloud, there is no longer any happiness for us. We no longer even have the disinterested joys of

hope. Hope is an act of faith. We have disabused its credulity: it is dead. Having abandoned the quest for fulfilment and pleasure, we can no longer derive any enchantment from hoping. Hoping without hope, which would be so wise, is impossible.

But come to me, my darling girl. Wipe your eyes, just to see... I don't know if it is tears which are blurring my view, but I think I can make out over there, behind us, great fires being lit. Oh, my darling, how I love you! Give me your hand, let us go towards those lovely fires, but not too close... I think that it is indulgent and mighty Memory which wishes us well and is at this very moment doing so much for us, my dear.

26

### Undergrowth

We have nothing to fear, but much to learn from the vigorous and pacific tribe of trees which endlessly produces for us fortifying essences and tranquillizing balms, and in whose graceful company we spend so many fresh, silent and enclosed hours. During those scorching afternoons when the light, by its very excess, evades our gaze, let us go down into one of the Normandy "estates" from which rise supple, tall and thick-leaved beeches, whose foliage parts that ocean of light like a slender but sturdy barge, and retain of it no more than a few drops that tinkle melodiously in the black silence of the undergrowth.

Our spirit does not experience, as it does by the seaside, in the plains, or on the mountains, the joy of spreading over the world, but the happiness of being separated from it; and, hemmed in on every side by trunks that can never be uprooted, it flings itself upwards, as do the trees. Lying on our backs, our heads resting on the dry leaves, we can follow from the depths of our deep repose the joyful agility of our spirit mounting, without causing the foliage to tremble, to the highest branches where it settles at the edge of the gentle sky, next to a singing bird.

Here and there, a patch of sunlight stagnates at the foot of the trees which, at times, dreamily dangle, in the golden light, the leaves on the tips of their branches. Everything else, relaxed and immobile, remains silent, in a sombre bliss. Soaring and erect, amid the vast offering of their branches, and yet rested and calm, the trees, through their strange and natural posture, invite us with grateful murmurs to feel kinship with a life so ancient and so young, so different from ours and yet appearing as its dark and inexhaustible reservoir.

A light breeze momentarily disturbs their brightly flickering but sombre immobility, and the trees tremble slightly, balancing the light on their tops and stirring the shadows at their feet.

– Petit-Abbeville (Dieppe), August 1895

27

### The Chestnut Trees

In particular, I loved to pause under the huge chestnut trees when they were turning yellow in the autumn. How many hours I spent in those mysterious green-hued grottoes, gazing at the murmuring cascades of pale gold over my head, as they poured out freshness and darkness! I envied the robins and the squirrels who could live in those frail and deep pavilions of verdure amid the branches, those ancient hanging gardens which each springtime, for two centuries now, has covered with white, sweet-smelling flowers. The branches, imperceptibly curved, swept nobly down from the tree to the ground, as if they were other trees planted into the trunks, upside down. The pallor of the remaining leaves set off even more strongly the branches that already appeared more solid and blacker now that they were bare, and attached to the trunk in this way, they seemed to hold in place, like some magnificent comb, the lovely profusion of sweet blond hair.

– Réveillon,\* October 1895

28

### The Sea

The sea will always fascinate those for whom world-weariness and the lure of mystery preceded their first sorrows, like a foretaste of reality's inability to satisfy them. Those who need rest even before they have experienced any fatigue will derive consolation from the sea, and a vague sense of exaltation. Unlike the earth, the sea bares no trace of the labours of man and of human life. Nothing remains on it, nothing passes by except fleetingly, and of the ships that cross it, how quickly the wake vanishes! Hence the great purity of the sea, which earthly things do not possess.

And that virgin water is much more delicate than the hardened earth, which you need a pickaxe to break open. A child stepping into water makes a deep, hollow furrow in it, accompanied by a bright "plop!", and the smooth gradations of the water are for a moment broken; then every vestige is effaced, and the sea is again as calm as it was in the first days of the world. He who is weary of the earth's paths or who guesses, after trying them out, how uneven and unrewarding they are, will be seduced by the pale sea roads, more dangerous and more gentle, uncertain and deserted. Everything here is more mysterious, including those great shadows that sometimes peacefully float on the bare fields of the sea, without home and without shelter, cast by the clouds, those hamlets of the skies, those vague branches.

The sea has the allure of things that do not fall silent at night-time, and grant our unquiet lives permission to sleep; a promise that everything is not doomed to disappear for ever, like the night light of small children who feel less lonely when it glimmers. The sea is not separated from the sky as is the earth; the sea is always in harmony with the sky's colours, and affected by its most delicate tints. The sea gleams in the sunlight, and every evening she seems to die with him. And when the sun has disappeared, she continues to miss him, to preserve something of his glowing memory, unlike the earth which is dark all over. This is the time when her melancholy reflections gleam, so sweet that you feel your heart melt as you gaze at them. When night has almost fallen and the sky is dark over the blackened earth, the sea still faintly gleams by

we know not what mysterious and glowing relic of the day that has sunk beneath the waves.

She refreshes our imagination, because she does not make us think of the life of men, but she rejoices our soul, because she is, like our soul, an infinite and powerless aspiration, a forward momentum forever failing, an eternal and gentle lament. She thus enchants us like music, which unlike language does not bear the trace of things, and tells us nothing of men, but mimics the movements of our souls. Our heart, as it rushes forward with their waves and falls back with them, thus forgets its own failings and takes consolation in an intimate harmony between its sadness and that of the sea, which melds its own destiny with theirs.

– September 1892

29

## Seascape

I have lost the sense of certain words: perhaps I ought to learn it again by listening to all those things which have long opened a path leading inside me, one that has been neglected for many years, but one that can be followed again and which, I firmly believe, is not for ever closed. I would need to go back to Normandy, not making any particular effort, but just going to the coast.

Or rather I would take the wooded paths from which you occasionally catch sight of it and where the breeze mingles together the smell of the salt, damp leaves and milk. I would ask nothing from all these natal things. They are generous to the child whose birth they witnessed, and they would of their own free will teach him the things he has forgotten. Everything, its odour first of all, would tell me that the sea was near – but I would still not have seen it.

I would hear it faintly. I would follow a path of hawthorns, once so familiar to me, with tender emotion, and with anxiety too at the prospect of suddenly spotting, through a gap in the hedge, the invisible,

ever-present friend, the madwoman at her eternal laments, the old melancholy queen, the sea. Suddenly I would see her; it would be on one of those days of somnolence beneath a dazzling sun, when she reflects the sky that is as blue as she is, only paler. Sails white like butterflies would be dotted over the motionless water, happy not to move any more, almost swooning in the heat. Or alternatively, the sea would be rough, yellow in the sunlight like a great field of mud, with swells that, from such a distance, would appear stationary and crowned with dazzling snow.

30

### Sails in Harbour

In the harbour, narrow and long like a watery highway between its low quays along which gleamed the lights of evening, passers-by stopped to gaze at the vessels that had assembled there like noble strangers who had arrived the day before and were ready to set off once more. These ships, indifferent to the curiosity they aroused amongst a crowd whose vulgarity they seemed to disdain or whose language, quite simply, they did not speak, preserved, in the liquid lodgings where they had stopped for the night, their silent and immobile momentum. Their strong stems spoke no less eloquently of the long journeys they still had to accomplish than the signs of wear and tear on them spoke of the fatigues they had already withstood on those gliding roads, as ancient as the world and as new as the passage that cuts them and which they do not outlive.

Frail and resistant, they were turned with a sad pride towards the Ocean which they dominate and in which they seemed so lost. The marvellous and skilful intricacy of the rigging was reflected in the water like an exact and far-sighted intelligence plunging headlong into the uncertain destiny which sooner or later will break it. So recently withdrawn from the terrible and splendid life in which they would again be immersed the very next day, their sails still drooped from the wind that had made them belly out, their bowsprits bent out over the water just as they themselves had done so only yesterday, impelled by their

forward momentum; and, from stem to stern, the curve of their hulls seemed to preserve the mysterious and flexible grace of their wake.

The end