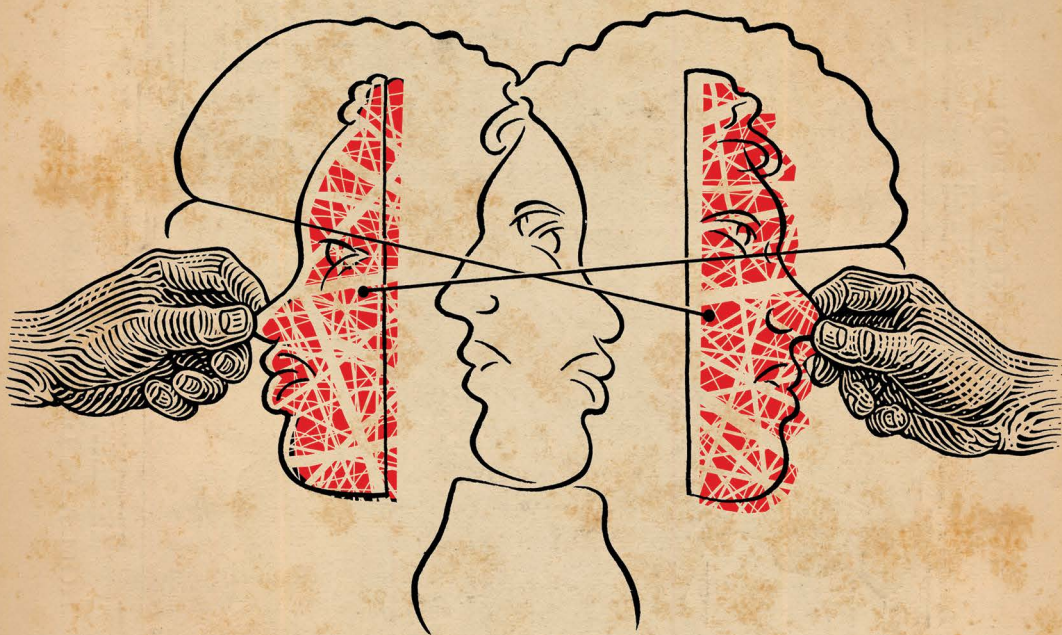
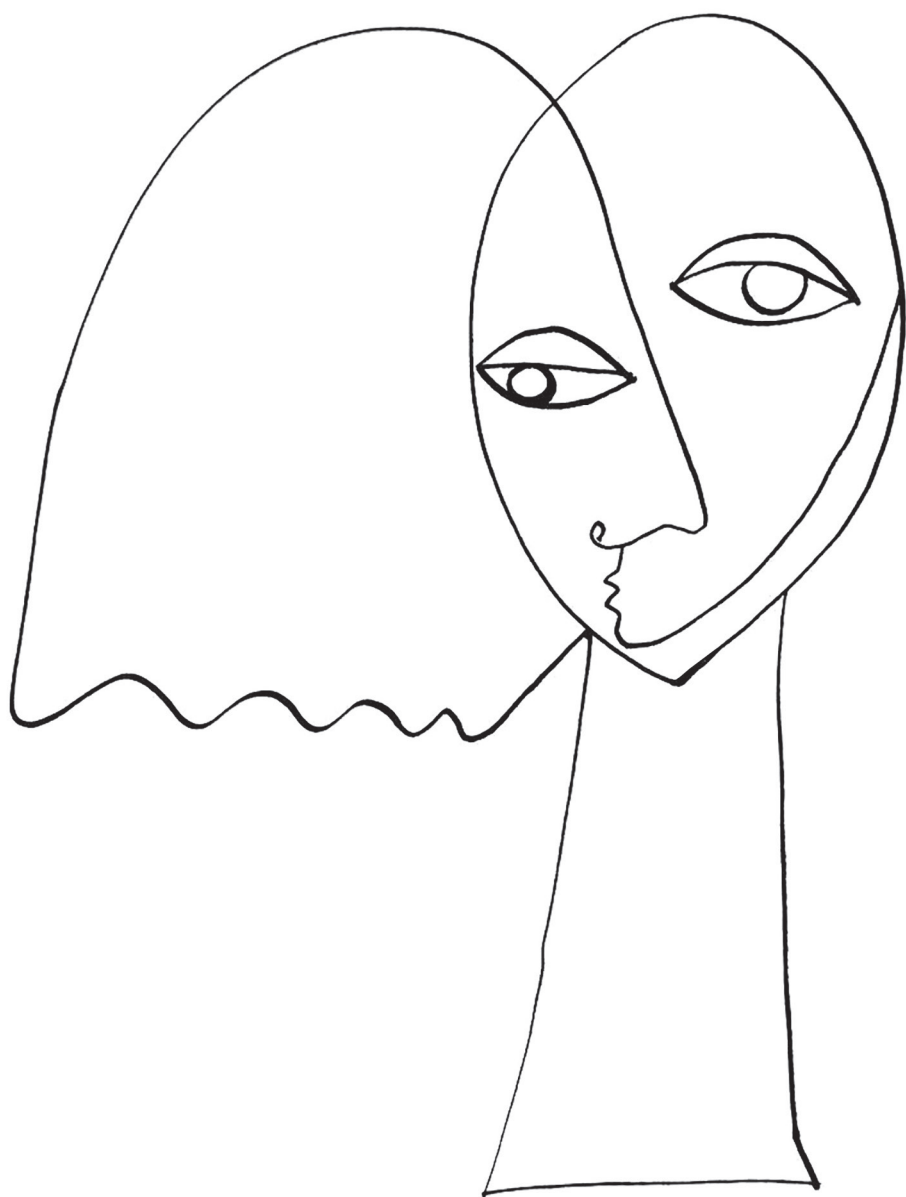


# Miklós Szentkuthy



## Chapter on Love







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*Bentkintz*



TRANSLATED BY

Erika Mihálycsa



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# Chapter on Love

Women that are things against my fate...

(Th. Randolph, 1638)

## I. The Mayor

### 1.

They had started building the cathedral so close to the near-vertical mountain slope that during construction the girlish counter-gothic of the branches, leaves, and foliage arced inside the white gothic ribs. The town lay among short, cozily, sweetly bloated tree crowns: five rabbits squatting in a pentacle around a cabbage stalk would offer such a view of their ovoid spines. The sole exception was Monte Solario, which could be called neither a mountain nor a hill: it was a solitary, rusty stage, on whose upper fringe shrubs and trees suddenly erupted, dipping their wild long hair in the wind. At the bottom of the wall the cathedral in progress resembled a skeleton propped up by the side of an ostrich-feather fan of the latest fashion. Monte Solario was the enemy of time and of the passage of the parts of the day: in the morning, when the surrounding meadows had already melted in the sun like the host in a devout mouth, this shaggy scenery still retained the dawn, laying its quadrangular shadow (at the moment, one single square cut out of a chessboard) across the whitely chirping town like an envious mask. The skylarks were swirling in the dawn light like the shower of gold over Danae's Eros-harbors, but the envious mountain slammed a black mask on Danae, in vain the skylark-shower sizzled, drizzled above her. Likewise, in the evenings, the mountain carved the town out of the dusk concert flooding the horizon: the forests were already crumbling in the yellowish evening mist, like Pythia's sobriety above the divine fumes; silence was setting in the shape of violet butterflies on one swing-grass meadow after another, all the rivers were embalming their bodies with sweet death — yet the town still preserved the day; although its environs were more lit by the whimsical glass

blooms of sunset, and the town was blacker than the mountain's shadow, the town was the day, and around it, the landscape was the silent swoon. It was now midnight, but the Nessus-shade tailored to the town's slender body had not yet disappeared completely; the hills around it swelled up from the garish moonlight like veils from the wind or the womb of mythical virgins from unheard-of birds, but the town itself was untouched in the moon-deluge. The moon soaked everything: it stood among the woods, towers, barriers, stars, sleeping birds and kiss-mowing bats like foam in the hair undone by a shower — if by accident it ended up in the tidal path of some selfish, childish star, it was absorbed in it as a weary kiss is absorbed in a wider embrace.

That morning the town's most illustrious son, the pope, died. In the wee hours when the lean hands, asleep in the clock face's white lap, are still trying to convince that it is night, and only the trembling of the horizon (no light yet, just the inner trembling of darkness — the way the skin of sleeping animals sometimes twitches) signals the coming of a new day, a knight stopped at the town hall's entrance. On the empty square, man and horse felt uneasy. Tubs lay scattered in disarray by the well, the funereal urns of yesterday, and the rusty vertebrae of the well's chain thrust upwards like the skeleton of the long-disclosed gossip of women now fast asleep. Startled, the horse gave a loud, whooping neigh.

The mayor was still up. They said he spent half an hour each with his frolicking guests, then in the council chamber, and so it went from ten in the evening until four or five in the morning. When the clock struck the hour in the gloomy council chamber, he carefully folded his documents, took his candle, and stumbled all alone along the moldy conservatory of stairs and secret passageways into his own quarters, drank and sang, then when the clock struck there too, he groped his way back to the town councilors, now green in the face with the effort of staying awake.



On only one occasion was he late, having dropped his candle. When the messenger arrived, he was with the councilors. One of them was just venting his incredulity that the mayor returned home every time he left them: they were convinced that every half hour he visited another mistress, that he had vowed to cuckold five husbands or deceive five fathers in one night.

That he had cavorted with his guests during those half hours was no more true than it was that he had visited one lady after another. Whenever he left the council chamber, he had three errands: first — to console his ailing wife; to aid the handmaid with the poultices; to check what medication she should take; second — to make the envoy of Pistoia fall head over heels for his daughter and son: the three of them were sitting in a *studiolo*, rather drunk, the boy with a notebook and a long plume, the girl with whimsically unbuttoned, semi-undone clothes. She had a peculiar technique (no doubt extremely useful in politics) of unbuttoning something after almost every glass the Pistoiese drank, freeing pronouncedly large buttons from pronouncedly large buttonholes distributed in pronouncedly important places, or of unthreading broad, spectacularly colored ribbons from dramatically trimmed holes, and in the wake of these unbuttonings and unthreadings, strikingly white patches of skin, or strikingly inner-looking inner silks of lingerie, gushed forth, all that without the girl becoming in point of fact any more naked or “relaxed.” This female was all openings, hanging ribbons, ripened buttons turning loose from their holes, lace-foam and shoulder-exhuming, exhibiting all the symptoms of depravity — and yet she was properly, moreover: modestly dressed. That diplomatic dress created by the father was soon to become famous in all of Italy. One could hardly imagine a gentler, more childish scene than the two siblings with the half-drunk envoy. The sister is all pseudo-nakedness: with rapture she abandons herself to the pleasures of imagined real nakedness and demi-monde manners;

her pseudo-coquetry drives her to wild hyper-coquetry — whereas the brother, with a sizable spectacle, keeps jotting down on the spot, with his caricature-size plume, under the very nose of the inane Pistoiese, the deceitfully learnt secrets. This was the mayor's second errand: to check on his two children in the playroom of diplomacy, to read from the notebook the news they twisted out of the envoy, and to put them to immediate use in the council.

The third errand took him to another sickbed, this time of a former mistress. Perhaps it was the most important of all, although the mistress in question was quite insignificant as compared to his wife and children. Still, such a visit is worth looking into, because in her house there was *silence*, so there he could pore for the lengthiest time over this or that unsettling element of his life.

## 2.

On one such occasion the mayor was sitting in the antechamber with his long, thick walking stick, in his tall, beribboned, and buckled silk hat. The chair he took at the insistence of the housemaid was very small, its legs shaky, so sitting on it was more tiresome than standing. The mayor enjoyed great respect in the coquette's house, at least he was much curtsied and groveled to, which made him feel with particular intensity what a caricature he was on the premises: he knew all too well that the ceremonial respect paid to his standing made sense only when he was exercising his rank and profession, in his office — the deep curtsying and greetings, the titles luxuriating in yellow bunches, and the deceitful invocations seemed to him farcical tricks in his own home, let alone here. His apparel was also carnivalesque, the ill-matched rags of an old, amateurish Pierrot: half affected mask, half affected sincerity, striving at secretiveness, while at the same time showing off his standing.

What was the main source of comedy or tragedy here? Everything, we might say: his clothes, his office, his desired-undesiring desire, the huge walking stick, this awful and barren reed-tower of luxury and terror, his age, the day's age, the late afternoon, the fact of waiting. To be waiting for a woman: can there be anything more laughable, more murderous to desire? There are only two things that are real: to be relentlessly acting, moving, working, lying for the woman, and when the leaf of the last lie had burnt out to the edge, to be with her straightaway, to possess her. But waiting? In those moments of waiting that interposed themselves between desire and consummation, resembling neither, one realizes how little desire is a thought oriented toward a *purpose*: how much it lacks in elements of reason and will — that desire is nothing else but fantastic anticipation, the barren mythology of possessing the woman, in which we do not want, do not seek, do not look for the woman, because there is no need at all for that looking-for, since the woman is already present in desire, albeit in an exaggeratedly colorful fantasy-world driven to a paroxysm of excitement, but nevertheless already present — only the waiting embosses it on our consciousness that that presence is not yet the real, but only the anticipated one, and when that awareness should prod us to start wanting, looking for, calling, and ordering the woman around, we feel little inclination to do so: the love instinct is so realist, it shows such a deathly unhedging lucidity & undeceivability, that it knows this primitive alternative alone: woman is either here or is not here — and if now (during the water-air-colored interregnum of waiting) she is not here, then woman is the everlasting Not-here herself, the Olympian demon of negativity, the everlasting No, absence inescapable in the world. That is why one cannot “wait for” a woman, and generally for anything, that's why longing (which is already a concrete form of possession, even if only in fantasy) and waiting (which is simply a pause in being, cannot be oriented toward anything, because its

essence is precisely the radical disconnectedness from any cause or purpose) are mutually exclusive: this is why the mayor, too, had felt his present role in the antechamber to be a folly, quite extraordinarily laughable. To be waiting: now, now you should be purpose-made, O woman, and yet this will quite obviously never succeed! Can something beautiful, something pleasing, be “purpose”? No, no, and yet again no. The beautiful always exists *now* — beauty is a thing inseparable from the present, from the *hic*-most *hic* and the *nunc*-most *nunc* — it is always being embroidered on the inside of the instant’s dark curtain with its luxuriating *praesens*-inflorescences, *praesens*-shadows, with the not-to-be-temporalized richness of its now-now-now perfume; woman, and all beauty, is always the becoming-more-existent of an already existing state, the ripening and blossoming of the now into all-too-now — it is never something-yet-to-come, something to succeed. The “future,” the “tomorrow,” the “will your lordship kindly return in half an hour” can be legal protocols, maneuvers, now and again history or drama, but never: beauty, woman, bliss.

What cut-and-dry schemata, what lackluster, distorted formulae the black vegetation of desire and the proximate reality of the actual woman were for the mayor: the morning desire, when with unexpected clarity, in the nakedness of possibility, the woman came to his mind: he didn’t touch, didn’t see her eyes, mouth, the self-sabotaging ring of her hips, but only thought of them as mathematical signs of possibility; and that is verily the most inflammable oil of love, the precision not of reality, but of possibility. But where was that pathos now, when every second they might let him in to her? Fulfillment? What an empty word.

## 3.

The setting sun shone in through the half-open window: the landscape was already in a profound torpor; the waters, houses, hills were dark green: warm, mute, and full of sleep-swamped loathing. Above them, the sun was radiating red, aslant, haughty, vociferating its gibberish, its rays short like sunflower petals: what does this dark, provokingly and musically tragic late afternoon want from him, poor mayor, who had forgotten to align his desires, born in the morning bed, with the advancing hours, to mold them into morning, noon, afternoon, sunset desires, and now felt at this idyllically dark and ghostly "late" hour (it's much later in the afternoon than in the evening) as though he were still in his nightshirt: waiting had rendered all his desires past, old-fashioned, strangely inelegant.

Because the mayor's life was decidedly not easy: with strange and obdurate simultaneity he strove to turn his love into poetry and elegance, lyric and cosmetics, death and mannerism. Something unspeakably difficult: his very looks testified to the difficulty and striving. His silk hat was the geometric god of ceremoniousness, rank, gentility; his lace cuff was the embodiment of irony toward all eros-dispossessedness and eros-crucifixion; his awkwardly vertical walking stick, held out as far as possible before him, was ceremoniousness, posturing, and etiquette self-imposed to the point of sadism: in sharp contrast to those, the shrunken, pale cheeks, the greenish fate-hollows under his eyes, his trembling hands, his shoes' upward-curling toes (as though he never dared touch the soil, the steady ground of life, just as he shrunk from hot or too cold water) all spoke of the consuming world of poetry, of metaphors, of beauty.

Where was the morning pathos? How clumsy to have misunderstood desire and conformed to it, coming here! He felt a slight nausea at the odor of his wife's powder and perfume, which he always applied abundantly before visiting his mistress, for fear

his wife would discern on him the latter's ointments; there would be no time to cover himself properly in that servant's mask on his return home. It was the drag of fidelity and infidelity: the perfume of his wife brought home to his mind, as though it were not perfume but the organic-most vapor, fume of Catholic morality — yet at the same time that home was unreal; uncreditable; a lie. What if the mayor died here, in the coquette's waiting- or consulting-room? His corpse would be like a nauseating flower, the smoking lily of fidelity: when they unbuttoned the shirt above his heart and peeled the silk stockings from his knees, his wife's perfume would puff forth in ever-renewed clouds of unprecedented strength — what used to be the discrete accessory of his home, a trembling, matronly, melancholy nuance, would on this dead, aged body be an ostentatious, foolish, and whorish bluff, a nearly blasphemous degree of hypocrisy. Isn't that the most beautiful symbol of my fidelity: to die in a coquette's waiting-room, but almost intoxicating everybody with my wife's cosmetics? My wife had never been vain; perfume was on her body like the distracted replay of the last chord of bathing, a farewell rather than a hail to her body — she had certain gestures which gave that odor a touch of askesis, of the balm destined for the corpse, of the resentment-fuelled withering addressed to the husband, a defiant, stylized autumn; and now that melancholy odor, psychologized back and forth with matronly restrictedness, suddenly becomes pungent, a signboard, a buffoonish gesture, under which her husband lies, stiffened into eternal infidelity.

What is my faith? This perfume-hypocrisy and perfume-sincerity: my wife, like the crucifix, cardinal, or abstract point of reference, compared to which everything else is a lie; as compared to which nothing can ever be what it is; the flowers', seas', stars' hot need for sincerity appears all distorted, travestied, diseased and crippled — I couldn't furrow my nose into the snake-Gorgon-like, earthworm-writhing petals of a single chrysanthemum,

knowing all too well that whoever has a wife cannot really smell a flower, because that odor kills God, woman, child, and those beings thrust out from my life like thorns on a leafless, flowerless stalk — I could not dance to the call of one single star spurting forth from beneath the dark blue shirt like the sky's nipple, because I know that he whose legs have once started that Artemis-cold star-jig will never return home; for that reason I baptized the chrysanthemum a "beautiful flower," planted it in my garden, and kept telling my acquaintances in an artificial tone, "It smells nice, doesn't it?" — that's why I only dared look askance at the stars, those large, solitary, fraying-edged buds, and waited for my wife to say distractedly — while waiting for the carriage at the gate —, "Look, what a beautiful star!" to which I answered with a scared "Yes."

I have lied to you, my wife, about the flowers and, what is even more sinful, I have made the flowers lie. But at the same time I have been faithful to you, as one cannot but be true to the crucifix and to abstract points of reference: I liked it that you made me and the whole of nature a lie, knowing and consequently intuiting that that lie is the essence of the world, the divine-most marrow of young branches, the stone of cherries, the gaping, glacier-green navel of love. Because I was born to be every moment a defender of faith and a heretic, an inquisitor and the anarchist of the goldfish dancing in the vases, of women toppled into bed, of tousled, undulated nights. And much as I hated you for making it impossible for me to become the utterly free martyr of chrysanthemums and stars, I adored you, because in that way I indeed sensed the whorish nature of chrysanthemums and stars, because I saw that whatever I considered divine was also sophistry, and what I considered real was also hypocrisy. And now as I sit here, perfumed to death with your "spousely" odor, have I perhaps not found the ultimate symbol of my fate: I am hypocriticking with your odor, but it is so strong that me into yours it kills,

your odor is a masquerade on me: a grotesque nose or *wurstchen*-lips, a carnival drag, but also the deathly degree of your reality, my cloud-coffin, my grateful and humble incense offering to you.

#### 4.

O, let me enjoy to the fullest all the tragic beauty and burlesqueness of my position and, since love turned out to be my destiny-most destiny, let me live to the fullest what is so typical of love in the life of men and women: what they coin their obscene jokes, puns, pornographic images from, and from which they draw most of their arguments and potions for death, for the overlong, myriad-colored mosaic-like neuroses, blasphemies, despairs. I am not long for this world, I am old and sick, so I can afford the luxury to single out an hour of the late afternoon and decree it to be of symbolic value, the hour when I feel my amorous infelicity to be at the same time a joke and a tragedy, the most exquisite ethical metaphor and fishwives' silliest gossip: I long for both perspectives, because the whole of mankind longs for them; I reach up with ten fingers among the leaves, almost oily now with the sunset, into the landscape, which is the first and last form of beauty, into the inhuman metaphor of destiny, into the soulless, redemptive world of sunbeams, fish, flower-silhouettes, but with these same fingers I long to put the crimson of the most laughable parody, the lowly grimace of all mockery, on myself; I want to see myself and all love as joke, filth, a pagliaccio's hokey-pokey.

Who can decide which? Who can decide, what was in fact the birth of Venus? Did the sea toss ashore the corpse of a filthy sea-dog, or did the divinity indeed become a woman on a shell's cloven fringe? We would need to daub both those awful hypotheses on the wall of the coquette's salon: the dumb corpse, and the redeeming, morphinizing-into-nature feminine apparition.



Is there any more beautiful expression of the *landscapality* of love than a female face immersed in deathly silence? Is there a better expression of the *burlesqueness* of love than scandal — for instance, that I am discovered in this salon?

The lukewarm air, like body and spirit in the dying, started decomposing into coagulated warmth-blots and cold breeze-ribbons, as if the whole world were now falling apart to illustrate with histrionic brutality the theologians' eternal discourse: "What is made of parts will perish, only the One will be preserved forever." The huge sun now spurted directly into the room, all sharp, murderous redness, and yet ineffably diaphanous, quiet and transient; the salon took on the bloody judge's robe of some unknown charge, indeed of a sentence, but at the same time intensifying the room's quiet, its being-beyond-life and beyond-partisanship, its quiet scent of moral insanity, its feminine decadence & academic whorehouse-nature — like the face of a slightly feverish man falling quietly asleep: flushed, but smoothed out; more inflamed and bolder, but at the same time more dreamlike and inert.

The nuance! Doesn't it also belong to that forcedly symbolic amorous afternoon? Isn't it the crown witness of love's vain trial? The nuance of sunlight between riotous redness and sweet narcotic, the nuance of the soul, the nuance of time — the evasion of impressions, the paradox of feelings, the spring-wreath of hypotheses, the endlessness of self-analysis? That, that too I will have to have daubed here — the old mayor thought, who in his lordly absent-mindedness was starting to take the brothel for a museum —, the goddess of nuance and the goddess of the simplest instinct (is there such a thing?). Don't we sometimes feel that love is nothing more than one single tremor of a sole nerve-end of pleasure, and fail to see anything else there with the best intentions? And don't we at other times feel that love is the most complex of complexities, the pandemonium of logical and natural self-contradiction, the demented tapestry of psychology and theology?

## 5.

This, for instance, is such a typical “love”-whatsit: the wild-dull red “nuance” on the armchairs, vases, and on the weary stone, lacking-in-sunlight-appetite, of my fever-withered ring. And yet there hangs under my clothes, deaf and dull, the organ: the one-and-only industrial instrument, the democratic-minded foe of nuance, the purple-nosed demagogue of Shakespeare’s plays. Let both run their course: let love be today a million poetic sophisms, logical shadow-puppetry, and let it equally be urination’s foul-smelling little brother.

And you, setting sun, watch over this dual play: because inescapably you are a part of it. You are the other end of love, whose one end is within us: in the shape of psychology, in the misshapen larvae of crooked, twisting anthropomorphisms. And the other end is you: the star, the farthest inhuman substance, so alien, so selfish, so nihilistically a flower, that everybody worships you as a god. There is something hymnic in my old invocations, which in my present position is rather poor style, I’m afraid, but exactly what is needed: primal, deathly, *non-plus-ultra* poor style. That is the true face of Eros: murderous pastiche, the carnivalesque burial of “taste.”

On the armchair’s velvet upholstery (this abundance of velvet in the coquette’s room spells out old hags, *bel-esprits*, moss, cold flourish, artificial pleasure) the late sunlight became almost mauve, as if all the violets had turned into magic mist, into air: I can see not a single violet, there is nothing visible or tangible, but their scent’s dew-iced and opiate-dreamy tide becomes all the more overwhelming, and my “violet-disposition” (what passions you harbor, old bucko!) all the more pervasive: the unexpected skin-pleasure of my fingers as they touch one another, withdrawn from the glove’s insides, in my lungs the air’s blossoming-into-flower and strangulation-into-buds in the two great half-acts of breathing, my body’s prolonged, swaying, towing ashore and

anchoring in the slackish port of my shirt and stockings — all of this is some kind of violet-consciousness originating in the mauve that lurks in the sunrays — all those little neuroses that we hesitate to call metaphors of the nervous body, or logical feeler-tests, those tiny sensitivizations, decorative psychological images and style-affectations: they are all part and parcel of love.

## 6.

O, Sun: shall I cite the broad-berthed stanzas of your legends, or shall I rather apply myself to your small psychological influences; O, Love: shall I drag forth drab, brutal female shapes, Danae-beds dished up in the street, or shall I diligently weave the human lace of your psychologies? Enough, enough of both. Enough of this tableau: of the birth of Venus — of the sea splashed and foamed-all-over with gold, swinging huge wave-roses, wave-chains and wave-vases, wave-lamps glowing with the sea's Neptunian indiscretion, and wave-vines between the twin pillars of night and sunset — now the waves seem to besiege the horizon's Euclidean dam, they hurl themselves on its geometrical edge like supple green panthers on their prey, they twist themselves around it as a python enamored of a tiny hummingbird twists itself around a palm tree, they cut into it like a sparkling knife, melt it, lick it as the male tongue licks the half-open female lips — in one moment it indeed seems as though the horizon were falling apart like an orange with loosened sections, in the next moment it again appears sharp, like the white border ribbon, suggestive of hips, of Plato's idea-world; and beyond all that raving there you are: red, myth-drunken, myth-snobbish, and myth-martyr Sun (I know that I am sitting in a slightly passé salon in a silk hat, with my freshly ironed gloves smoothed out on my knees, but in love there is and shall be no separate bourgeois salon and separate myth of poet-beasts, there shall be no separate Venus and separate

space-filling *petite femme*): the waves thrash upon one another like black hawks or gigantic, steel-green leaves, the feathers are flying and the forest-smell is evaporating in plaited threads — it's impossible to tell if the cause of your stupor and your reddening is that sea in labor, that sea combing its hair, or if the sunset color is the dropping banner of your foreignness, of your anti-humanism and anti-sea-ism. And next to you is night: the wave, the peel of whose silky back has mirrored your late purple, suddenly slips off your optical foot-stool, to drop into the blue chalice of the approaching night — snakes can perhaps flash with such deathly and barren flirtatiousness from a red leaf to a blue flower in the jungle —, on foam-baroque oxygen's toupee all your apocalyptic crimson glitters still (O Pindaros! ... my silk hat), but in the focal point of glass breasts, night's wondrous blue already started thickening. It is on that sea, in that hour, that Venus was and is being born, forever: night-blue, sea-mourning, sun-blood — that is your staffage.

It is to you that I pay homage, in my meticulously polished shoes that the skivvy had such a hard time shining: because neither of us can stoop anymore with our rheumatic lumbagos, to help her get at it more easily I, with great difficulty, placed my foot on a kitchen stool, but couldn't keep erect and, thrown off balance, I tumbled against the wall: it is to you I pay homage with this slender green flask in which the dubious, foolish acids of the potion against venereal diseases glow — the apothecary pours it in those thread-thin glass tubes purposely, so it is easier to wear: it is to you I pay homage with those whitish pills in the snuffbag where they play hide-and-seek like tiny bird eggs in a too thickly padded nest — an excellent medicine against the conception of children: it is to you I pay homage with these documents that are the symbols of my lie — at home they believe I left for the town council: it is to you that I pay homage with those dried, chamomile-scented leaves that I start chewing in the darkness of nup-

tial chambers, for they stop the vehement urge to defecate that as a rule follows my amorous gymnastics: my whole ramshackle, repulsive chemist's store, my low-caliber, demeaning lies, my imbecilely ornate, stiff apparel: they all pay homage to that Venus born of storms, Sun, night — Venus is one, love is one: even in the troubadours' stage-perfect kisses there stinks my mean chemist's store, there rattle my gaudy phials, over-commented with dog-eared paper slips; and it radiates in my rheumatism, in my calculated crippled embraces, in my nuptials shrunken to amateurish chemistry, it wreaks havoc, uncompromisable and young, the one and only troubadour to the one and only Venus.

Who dare draw a line between Brueghel's sorry dens and Adonis' sun-anointed body, between Danaë's shower of gold & the thick sweat drizzling down on my mistresses?

That is not the contrast between beauty and ugliness, between the myth of the "Eros-fit" and the revenge-realism of those slowly drowning in impotence — that is perhaps the wrestling of God and the devil: of an utterly hysterical, unearthly lunatic fakir-idealism and an utterly infernal, suicidal resignation, a rolling in the impossible, into the limits, into the nasty absurdity of all love.

Be then born, Venus, in spite of everything, be born here, whoop your evening song above the antique filigree clavi-cembalo, let the waves thrash their fins above the loose-legged whorehouse chairs like dying sharks, let the sea's salty and Venus' Olympian odor be mixed here and now with the odor of my stale-going medicine — from now on I will cease to pay such pedantic heed to love.

## 7.

How beautiful you are, nascent Venus: the waves are in awe of you — when your yellow knee first surfaces from under the falling eyelids of two waves, like the embodiment of the vision of love,

like the sea, the world's first-ever "gaze": then the waves suddenly roll back on themselves, the way in which stiff folios take up the form of their case the moment they are released by the hand, rustling into a ring — they even withdraw their voice with a ululation: all of a sudden everything is heard in reverse — they deliberately bleach their color, their cowardice drills strange, whistling whirlpools, in other places flat surfaces appear as dim, unmirroring mirrors — perhaps the murmuring waves had cascaded apart before the Jews as they now do before your knees.

Your knees! Of course you have to start from your knees, not from your breasts, your portrait, or your ankles: your ankles are beauty, your lap death, your portrait human, your breasts a landscape — yet you are love, that is, the hardness of the knee-bone and the knee's shapelessness, semi-roundness, semi-cubism, an animal knot, wreck, white patch of skin, and crippled-even-in-sanity, inhuman, naked, senseless: *eros*. You are born from the sea, but the sea repudiates you: perfumed, banished embryo in that giant, puritanical womb of Aeschylusian boorishness. Even the fish flee from you. When night's near-blue darkness illuminates far ahead (a color with extreme color-ambition and with more luminosity, even if dark, than colorless brightness) the waves smoothed into awe, one can see in long white lines, like a threadless, slender row of pearls or petals blown in the wind, the Venus-eluding, fleeing fish — that crowd of fish and snakes running away from you in a straight line almost reminds one of a constantly intensifying scream. Above you large birds swing like flying waves rolling over your body: they are not gulls, bohemian initials of the sunrise at sea, but ravens that believe that the sea has thrown up a white-anointed corpse, the relic of some shipwreck, perhaps Helen murdered by the Greeks, that sign-board of the brothel of Troy. The shell on which you traveled from the depths to the surface has also left you. Its bluish rim has submerged in the dark like a second dream into the first one:

who cares about you, who summoned you, goddess, whose birth is accompanied by the shadows of death's birds? The Sun cannot set or rise to a new life — it is almost paralyzed in its large poppy-mask: one moment it is loud musical compassion, the next a speechless executioner. In that moment the ships fall into confusion on every sea — the seamen are pulling with ghostly anxiety at the pallid bareness of the veils —, in the ports the tide swelling in disjointed time rubs in the boats among the houses — everybody is scared and cursing, and not even you, Venus, know what to check first: if you have smeared enough paint on your lips, or if you still have the obulus for Charon that a loitering mortician put into your mouth after your death.

## 8.

And how boring in you that death-sex duality, how unbearably flat your paradox has now become to me — even more unbearable than your vulgar simplicity: were you flower and nothing but flower, or death and nothing but death, I could take that simple-minded homogeneity better — but that mythic mingling of life and *nihil*, of peasant antics and Hades-mourning that appeals to poets, philosophers, founders of religion and the slightly refined: that trick (for it is one!) is what I can least suffer in you, Venus. Your “refinery,” that internal contradiction, that provocative, flashing “eternal dilemma” of yours: that is your most vulgar adornment. Now, when you appear in the shape of a corpse on the sea's million-winged, roaring catafalque: your corpse-ness is just a cosmetic maneuver — the priests and poets who with “profound” insight sense death in your kiss and infernal venom in your womb's secret flower, don't feel real death but only a decorative, aestheticist cardboard death that has nothing to do with real death — which is not the opposite of kiss and of your womb's torchlike, flaring-up fecundity: for that death (your

present death-mask included) is simply identical to life, with kiss — *merely* a linguistic device, a technique of phrasing for a more emphatic expression of life's lifelikeness. So many painters painted Aphrodite on one wall of the salon, and Thanatos on the opposite: were they opposites? No. Did those painters have an inkling of death, real death, when they were speaking about and daubing how, in love's embrace, the ovary thirsting for the seed of the grave gapes open? No. There was æsthetic in it, "tragedy": and tragedy is nothing other than the ballroom mask of death, its etiquette, substitution, euphemism.

Now, as I am sitting here, in a brothel's shabby "parlor" (in such a place, "parley" takes on an eerily parodic sense): once again, and perhaps for the last time, you, Venus, appear to me like beauty and like death, although I won't let you get at me as æsthetic and as "death" (the two are the same thing). Yes, you are beauty, yes, you are death: but such beauty is unknown, mysterious, unavailable with the worthless instruments of art and with the doltishly self-deluding ones of intuition — it cannot be trusted to the conceited tracks of symbols, or to the impotence of metaphors: perhaps it is simply life's most basic stimulus, the vibration, the divine radiation that on the blind and mute mirror of non-being made the first crease, the first barely noticeable, but infinitely significant wave (sex-appeal understood simply as *to-be-appeal*) — and yes, you are death: prosaic, repulsive non-being, base-beyond-all-realist-and-verist-guttersnipe, stupid, senseless, nauseatingly misshapen death. Your real rouge and grave-hole lie beyond the dualism of the phrase "rouge and grave-hole." And now you can go on boasting about your would-be-death for all I care.



## 9.

At long last some skivvy-like creature came out to the mayor and told him that soon he could go in — the woman was indisposed, and feeling particularly sick at the moment, but she would be fine in a few minutes. The high-born guest should definitely not leave. The mayor, however, was of the opinion that he should leave — there is not much to do with a sick coquette. He didn't opine so from the merciless point of view of the lecher, but on the contrary, from that of the moralist: bodily suffering is so sacrosanct that his presence could only profane it: an occasion might be created for some unbearable tragicomedy, or for some sentimentalism unworthy of suffering — what is more, even for some rough blackmail. In the next instant the woman herself cried out from her room in a screeching voice, "Don't go, don't go!" The skivvy asked him drowsily if in the meantime he would like to have another woman, not in a separate room, but here in the parlor. Then, when the mayor turned down that offer with some awkward and unself-conscious gesture, she said curtly: "Tip." The mayor rummaged in his pockets, dug up a yellow coin, and tossed it to her.

What is more repulsive in love: money, or psychology? When everything is about the tip, or when everything is about ethics? Which is the greater lie: pudenda exchanged for currency, or pudenda exchanged for spirit?

The thought that the coquette was sick filled him with peculiar anxiety and bitterness, because his wife also happened to be sick: she had asked him not to go to the council but he, pale servant of conscientiousness, went all the same. And now he finds sickness even here. Can the one without body also get sick? His wife didn't provoke in him the slightest bodily pleasure, but even so, and perhaps precisely because of this, she was a bodily reality, whereas the women in the brothel who only featured with their bodies remained forever schemes, mere abstractions — can such formulae ever be sick? All of a sudden he somehow found

the fact of sickness repulsive: at home his wife, himself, or his son were sick — but here there was no living, real, bodily person whom sickness could beset, the brothel's inhabitants were not human beings, so if sickness made an appearance here, it was not somebody who was sick, but "sickness" being present without its human pendant. When the woman cried out to him through the door, "Don't go," it was not a woman but sickness calling. So, dehumanized, sickness seemed vulgar and dumb: sickness requires intelligence, which of course here was entirely absent. Sickness will cast a stupid person into unfathomable depths of stupidity — that sent a shudder down the mayor's spine.

How ridiculous he looked between two sick women — his wife's illness turned into morals, every cough, vomit, or sweated-through poultice of hers was the rash of life's inextinguishably ethical nature (an ethics independent of good or evil, obscure and indefinable, but still sorely present), whereas that woman of the brothel was but sickness as nature's bogus error, without any moral or bodily meaning, physical evil for its own sake.

On the one hand, there was a world of difference between his wife's and his mistress' sickness — the former representative of inhuman moral(s), the latter, of inhuman error; on the other hand there were many awkwardly outward similarities: medicine in identical-looking flasks from the same pharmacist on the skivvy's tray, the same shade of silence, the same sounds of vigil, worrying, indifference — why did he come here? For denying his wife's sickness, or revisiting it? That newly-learnt sickness humiliated his wife in thought, something she on no account deserved, but his wife's sickness rendered the coquette's ailment elevated, distinguished, tragic, something the latter could by no means claim a right to. All in all, how basely, weedily selfish was his role, of performing psychological color-blending, play analysis (is there any other?) on two women's suffering.

## 10.

He picked up the silver coin that he had dropped on the carpet when he gave the tip. That small movement bathed him in two worlds: first in the late sun's unexpectedly hot, red-purple sheaf (actually golden), then in his own countenance, for the silver coin lay before the shadow-veiled mirror. Whenever he bowed down, blood rushed to his head, he felt his whole body, his innards and slowly paralyzing limbs, becoming one vast black collar tightening around his neck, pressing into his head, and growing the foliage of transitory death's thick toupee on his brow — his whole body (not his blood) was thickly flowing into his skull. That triggered a strange mood in him: he felt death's precise fingerprint in it, something that scared him, but at the same time he was aware of its voluptuous distance from death, and knew that it was something so momentary, mechanical, and derived from natural causes, that it could have nothing to do with death — he was even glad that he would get used to the idea of death in its idyllic form: that very "O, this is not yet death" would become his death-style proper, or death-habit, so to say; at such moments he could feel all his bodily functions in his head: he could feel his stomach, heart, and footsoles like his nose or eyes — they were no longer "shading" his consciousness in the shape of moods, but bumping into his blood-swamped brain with sculptural, solid surliness, and that condensed humanity filled him with satyric humor, nauseating self-complacency. When he reached for a fallen spoon, napkin, or for a document blown off the table to give a hand to a woman or clerk, they could see a new man rising.

In its swoon-like unconsciousness the head, filled with blood to bursting point, suddenly became hyper-sensitive to ephemeral traces of smell, color, or heat: inner darkness and stifling pressure, while dumbing him down, apparently blunting him into an object, liberated him in the next moment: he was swimming, hovering in the infinite bounty of ephemera and nuances; he felt that

he was at the same time a pig bloated tenfold and a decadent poet composed solely of nerve junctions — even now, as he reached for the coin that had rolled under the mirror, he felt all the paralysis and swollenness of a stroke, but the warmth of the sun on his aged skin, the late color of time on his hesitant, wing-like, fluttering eyelids, opened a free butterfly existence for him: on top of his diabetic, arteriosclerotic, dense organism, this butterfly-like mood of freedom appeared like an unexpectedly vivid, slender flower on the end of a hideous, swollen cactus.

He had heard that extraordinarily sensitive people, the familiars of soul-perfumes and mimosa-poetry, are all nerves, their bodies porous, a mosaic threatening to fall apart any minute, whose splinters are only kept together by capillaries that look like a leaf's veins: the whole person is nothing but one transparent, yet densely woven net or sieve, through which life's phenomena can flow unhindered, touching now one thread of the net, now another. He knew that if ever there was a man who could claim no such comb-body, it was he: even when he wasn't forte-d by the piano pedal of brain hemorrhage, he knew his body to be an impenetrable, componentless dough, incapable of any sensitivity. And now he realized that he had been wrong throughout — moreover, he couldn't even imagine how anyone could be eminently irritable by physical, natural stimuli if their body was not so swollen and homogeneous: when he felt all his blood pressing directly on his skin, he found its nerve-less, psyche-less "animal" stiffness to be incapable of any mimicry, its stroke-tension to be much more sensitive to the impossibly fine shades of heat and (through his eyelids) of color.

That is wholly natural: real "sensitivity" is not a matter of nerves but, on the contrary, of "chemical stains." He couldn't have given an exact definition of where he saw the physiological essence of "chemical stains" in the body, as opposed to nerves — perhaps he had always seen in nerve-sensitivity something

altogether human, almost rational, whereas in chemical sensitivity he saw a sensitivity free from any human relation, the “senseless,” impossible-to-psychologize and impossible-to-symbolize alteration of certain chemical compounds under certain chemical conditions. The best example is to think of the skin (and what else do humans have in the end?) — there are nerve-skins and chemical skins, or in other words, mimicry-skins and landscape skins: compared to the latter’s unbound sensitivity, the former can hardly be called “sensitive.”

The mimicry-skin is capable of accompanying any, ever-so-slight psychic experience with tiny shifts of wrinkles: it is liable to quivering, permanent proliferation, all in all, to the boundless spatialization of *plastic* shades. Primarily, it follows one’s “inner” life with a fast-paced, elastic change of its forms, and only to a very small extent with an alteration of *colors*. The main characteristic of such skins is an abundance of small wrinkles and an even color, preserved under however extreme climatic changes — as a rule it sits loosely on the face.

The chemical skin (and such was the mayor’s skin, especially during the swollenness of bowing down) is, in contrast, thick, non-malleable — its muscles don’t in the least follow the owner’s will or psychic life: it is not felt to be skin but armor, an accursed mask independent of its owner, who is incapable of smiling or moping with such skin; on it, in place of a smile, a paranoia-grimace, in place of crying, a wound-torso appears — but under the impact of whatever slight heat, light, or touch, it reacts with the full range of its external and internal components: from the comb it gets white blisters, from daffodils, tiny bluish blackheads, from the sun, moldy-looking rashes, from the briefest sleep, waxen pallor, from a fleeting sexual arousal, scarlet stains, from washing, peeling-off rags, from the lack of washing, greenish-brown strips. Those are not “psychic” matters and not metaphors: they are made possible precisely because, strictly speaking, the psyche,

consciousness, doesn't go skin-deep; the skin is all alone, left to itself, indifferent to human life, playing out its chemical spectacles for their own sake. And that latter is the real "sensitivity": "real" in the sense that with it, one can learn, perceive a lot more from the external world than with the mimicry-skin.

Those two skins correspond to two human types, and what is more, to two types of culture: to the culture whose keyword is "nerve" and its central rite, psychoanalysis, and to human-less culture whose keyword is "chemistry," and whose central occurrences are the most basic exchanges of substances, electrons, valences. The most characteristic gesture of the nerve-skin owners is startled "shuddering," their sound the "whine" — but that "sensitivity" can hardly mean much for the intellect: the jar on the nerves, skin-shock, are barren things that don't transmit anything about the world. The subject of the chemical skin doesn't whine, is by and large no princess on the pea — phenomena do not touch it as the point of a needle touches a membrane, or a key touches a thin chord, but rather, as water touches the rag, ink the blotting-paper, smell the air. That is why the expression "chemical stain" came into his mind: there is in that pre-stroke sensitivity something primarily not punctiform or linear, something counter-ornamental — always a cloud, diffuse, but more concrete, singular and precise at the same time.

Consequently, the mayor saw clearly the mood style of his old age with its small acts of promiscuity, about to be abandoned — old age also meant a swollen body & sensitivities beyond the human: his body had grown heavy, his belly had become rather too much of a belly, his rheumatism-banded knee the utmost of a knee; his body didn't wither, didn't decay, but on the contrary: ripened into a fruit, became a selfish and unavoidable, lascivious mass (perhaps a stroke is more of a birth than being propelled out of the womb), the positive-ad-nauseam drag of "masculinity" — but out of that rude example of masculinity, precisely due

to its “rudeness,” an unsuspected richness blossomed from the chemical capacities of perceiving the outside world; when his body had paralyzed into itself (became a “wreck”), it became the purest and most tireless mirror (for the skin is a mirror) of the reality (for him certainly) never available to knowledge. That is how he awaited, again, the bed: as if he were going to a drugstore, and listening to Orpheus’s unintelligibly-real melodies.

## 11.

The bed? If he remembered well (a long time had passed since he was here last), the coquette’s chamber had no bed but a divan, or more precisely, a large area in one corner of the room covered in pillows and bedspreads and not delimited in any way from the rest of the room. As if the eternal difference between divan and bed were proclaiming the eternal difference of mistress and wife: the divan is always ready in a minute, is not linked to a separate sleeping-place — the divan is free, simple, unlimited, and mundane. In the mayor’s mind few things were as different as bed and divan. First of all, the bed always meant the dry opposition, beyond the realm of colors, of black and white; in the darkness of the night, some greyish-white stain, like the withered petals of a flower sunk into a well. The bed is something mystical, something legal, something deathlike: approaching it is always ceremonious, reserved, portentous. We approach it for sleep, for nuptials, or for illness — are there any more awkwardly pathetic things than those, the three figurative versions of the ancient theme of death? By the bedside, stripping is always ghostly — ghostly if, in shedding our daytime clothes, we cover our body in the superstitious shroud of our nightshirt, and ghostly even if we consciously choose to be naked. The bed’s canopy columns, curtains, bedspreads reminiscent of the grave or of a half-open envelope, slow down the pace of the stripping, thwart it into sanctimoniousness.

The bed swallows us like some Moloch or a whirlpool: it is not we who strip by its side but the bed that pulls off our clothes with its magnetic eyes; it is not we who get into it but the bed that catches us as the candlelight catches a moth. The bed does not, cannot belong to life: lying down in the bed is getting to a nunnery, renunciation, detachment from everything. There is something nauseatingly tragic in its clumsy anthropoid proportions: the pillow for the head, the spread for the body's skin (here these two are the "hat" and "clothes") — what a simplification, what a distortion comfort is. Because the bed is comfortable. One can move at ease in it, the mattresses, pillows, bedspreads are so obedient, so subserviently malleable. But who has never felt that that comfort and freedom is the relaxation of death, of utter annihilation?

In contrast, the divan is not the organ of such liturgical peculiarity, house rules, matrimonial rights, night measured out in hours, and of stylized death, but the eternal *à propos*, the thoughtful minimum necessary for lying down; in fact it is merely the handle of horizontality. It always merges easily into the day, its limbs are not permeated by the clock-strikes of a long night or by the overlong months of some sickness: the divan always means minutes, blossoming ephemerality, the little time-melismata stuck distractedly into the day's buoyant, airy praesens. The divan is the mistress' indispensable ground, her vase: that is where she feels truly at ease. The divan's appearance changes little in the course of its service — the bed always ages like a human being. Is there a more awkward sight than a freshly made bed? Is there a more awkward sight than a slept-in bed in the morning? The divan doesn't know such distinctions. Bed sheets! Fresh bed sheets! However fresh they are, I still have the feeling that the bed got dissected and its white innards are laid out to me, like the dismembered infants' limbs at the fabled mythological banquet. During the day, the bed is somehow bearable — on its spread



bloom a couple of fairyland birds, watched over by the family's dragon coat-of-arms, but in the evening, it is dissected — whatever is beautiful on it is taken off, laid elsewhere, offering only its turned-out, cold entrails. How can it inspire people to rest that something alarmingly, clinically anatomical is exposed to their gaze? And if in the evening the image of the bed, “made” (sadistically vivisected), is so depressing and numbing, in the morning it is no less piteous: all crumples, hollows, stains, shiftings-apart, smell. Can that indeed be the symbol of rest, of restedness with humans? Jacob's body could be no more broken and torn after his wrestling with the angel than such a human bed after someone has taken a “sweet nap” in it. How many rags, how many wrinkles, how much agony-yellow and agony-sour there is in such a bedroom! Is that indeed the mandatory milieu of health, that legality, the wife's prescribed stage?

The divan is not such a blindly humanized object: it has no mask during the day and no anatomy in the evening — it has no old age, no psychologized-to-death mimicry in the morning like the bed: the divan remains largely unchanged, it is “just a place” as compared to the chosen places. The bed is on the one hand something far too legal, article-like, and on the other hand something far too vital (that is, too closely related to death and reproduction): the divan, the mistress' flying throne, does not serve the law and does not serve life. The real mistress is no instinctual being and no lustful being: she is equally alien to all kind of morality and to all characteristically biological gestures: stormy feelings, perversities, leaden faithfulness.

In a man's life it is always the wife (the bed) that is the biological, and the mistress (the divan) that is the more abstract matter. The mistress cannot be but abstract, since her principal trait is that she is always *going to be* — in opposition to the wife, who always *is*. The mistress is eternal seduction, sex appeal incarnate, which on such occasions is a hundred times more valuable to the

man than his wife's (as the case may be) concrete and extraordinary beauty. The divan is the well-tuned and dedicated instrument of that fictitious "going to be," of this abstract "appeal": the eternal "eventually," the symbol of the "perhaps now," "maybe here" unfolding, scintillating through the day, the transient vessel of dressed-up and never-quite-getting-undressed people.

How different are bed and divan under the aspect of luxury and ornament: even the most ornate divan and the most ornate bed can never meet for as much as a moment, not even on the shared plane of decoration. The ornate bed is always something robust, static, traditional: if it's a cage, ornament makes it more cage-like; if a medieval romantic well, ornament makes it more bottomless. In the gravity field of the bed the airiest ornamental figures suddenly acquire leaden weight: so does the rainbow become a pillory and the rejuvenated feathers of phoenix birds, hailstones. It is the exact opposite with the divan: there, luxury is always ethereal, fleeting, dressing gown-like (for the lesson, compare a silk dressing gown to a man's nightshirt), daytime, fanciful. Because only the day breeds phantasms, only mundaneness leaves room for hallucinations and Euripidean "eidolon"-Helens: night is vital and legal, that is, fixed and unalterable to the highest degree. Between an ornate bed and an ornate divan, a first essential difference is, that in the case of the bed, one can always sense the bed separately, to which decoration was added as an afterthought, while in the case of the divan, the ornament is the divan itself: in a room with a divan we feel that there can be no more beautiful spatial ornament than a place for lying down, that life's greatest luxury is horizontality: "*Oh fleur d'espace: coucher avec ...*"

What was his life if not a ceaseless vigil between bed and divan? He could have looked for other symbols, equally expressive as bed and divan, but those happened to come to his mind first while waiting. Perhaps "symbol" is not the right word because, after all, the slimy, patterned reptile scale on the snake's spine

is no snake symbol, just as neither its antlers nor its forest are a stag “symbol.” Wife and mistress are no less different than stag and snake: it is not two women of the same type in two different social positions, but two creatures belonging to utterly different species — one can’t even call both women. The one has grown into the divan, is identical to it — and of the other, the bed is not a chance location, but her body, essence, organ, or symptom. As you like.

That is the way it goes with the other “symbols” too: they are *not* symbols. The two kinds of redness for instance: the redness of the divan-woman is rouge, eye shadow, blush — that of the bed-woman is blood, that is, the chosen fluid of life and morals. The mistress doesn’t have blood, merely make-up: the ancient organ of mask, lying, ephemerality, exaggeration, play, decoration, hypothesis. The wife has no make-up ever, only blood: the ancient organ of self-sacrifice, death, child, fight, sincerity, horror, truth, sickness. The gesture of the mistress applying rouge and the blood-drawing suicidal gesture of the abandoned wife are not symbolic but organic movements: how much the shape of the blunt rouge stick (a mixture of chalk, seal wax, and broken twig), its ingredients (brittle and sticky, waxen-melting and clay-stiff), the trace of its trajectory on the mouth, its rhythm, interruptions, self-correction, self-assured arc and cautious groping, mean the whole mistress, everything that the *maitresse* is. And next to her, the suffering wife’s blood pouring on the bed: as the divan’s space-frivolity had already included the rouge’s eternal flight (the most classical act of that certain “going to be” and “appeal”), so in the crumpled bed sheets’ human tornness and sweat there had already been included all the defiance of the gushing blood, all its muddy drowsiness, its morals distorted into intrigue-mongering, all its maternity-residues, all its biological selfishness. The trajectories of the rouge running emptily on the mouth and of blood streaming, gurgling in the folds of pillows, are equally eternal:

not in their metaphysical but in their geometric concreteness — there is in the mouth's arc *qua* arc some inexhaustible undulation, soaring and descent, momentum and withering, which refuses to be completed, being so much the divine breathing, pulse of divine symmetry — and in the blood gushing from the wound we find the boundlessness, the tragic insatiability of all springwells of every life shapelessly and abundantly pouring forth: the death- and life-muses entangled into one another in blood cannot be stopped — there is no limit to amorphousness: it is the divine breathing and pulse of divine nonsense. A pair of lips arching into proportion-refinery — is that what “remains” of the one? (What a curious instinct or convention, to use the word “remain” when talking about the increase, and not the diminishing, of something!) And the other: an unstoppable, blind biological stream? Such questions are important, what is more, defining here and now, in the coquette's antechamber: for, after all, he is an old man who would like to find out before his death what, in the deepest roots of his roots, “wife” and “mistress” had been. And why he had needed both equally, why choosing between them had been impossible.

Divan-bed, rouge-blood: what else? Perhaps mirror and night: the mistress always sees herself in the mirror, is always doubly with herself — the wife is always in the night, can't see herself, is always by herself without herself — is the mistress one more and the wife, one less, if they are one? In that very moment too he was standing before a mirror (when he picked up the coin) and for a moment felt dizzy from the reflections of all the mirrors he had ever seen at his lady friend's: for a moment his whole life became identical to the frantic yes-ing of the Mirror, as though he had never encountered any other phenomenon that bestowed happiness. A huge mirror in a huge room in which a female head, proffered up in one sole reflection, is surrounded by blind-bright space — ornate Venetian mirror where the flow-

ers glowing in from the outside and the female hair form one single light-tiara, rolling glass-tow; a palm-slender, ribbon-like mirror by a pool, steamed over by the water's lukewarm vapor and signaling only one or two stretching blots of the toweling, nude body; a little pocket-mirror which only illuminates a tooth, a rash, a mislaid hair, while the face remains a shapeless stage setting; jocose altar-mirror, triptychs and glass pergolas in which daylight stands white and scintillating, geometrical and pseudo-virginal, like ice-cold water in sunlit glasses: all that is but disappointment, illusion, chaos, logic — glass walls drifting apart in candlelight, moonlit "*nosce te ipsum*" settings, the missal stand-like tin boards of proletarian rooms, the spheric and icosahedron mirrors of alchemists and doctors: all that is the mistress' realm, all that is the mistress. Always twice and always less-than-once: and as a result of that doubling, always lighter, more worthless, nothing-er. The mistress: perspective without human presence. The mistress is an optical flowering, as opposed to the biological flowering of other species: view without plasticity, color without life's thick-set chemistry, movement without strength. And when, following those mirror-visions, he had trans-imagined the wife's self-cancelling ethos-night, he asked himself again, like one who didn't get one step further in his insatiable investigations:

## 12.

What was that, what were they in his life, those two worlds, the world of the wife and the world of the mistresses? Were they opposites — were they women? How did those worlds begin, live, end? For it was certain that now it was over — love's arching bridge had crossed over to the last pillar: the river quietly reflects the image, wearing the shade like a chastity belt or funeral diadem: the bridge is ready. Indeed, his whole life appeared to him not as "life" but as bridge — a haughty, fountain-like arched

water-jet whose cool and prickly pellet-dew he felt splashing on his skin, whose shadow, moving like a snake's tongue, taking small bites of the night, he could sense on his way, on his plate, and on his office desk: the women were compasses, waving in vain in the direction of strange poles — those had shaped his life the way it had been: them he had to thank for all his thoughts and gestures, and yet, those women had somehow never been — his love life had been no life, least of all *his* life.

The wife's world began with a flower: with a solitary, huge calla in a squeezed-in, overcrowded garden — that garden was perhaps smaller than a room, but rich and inwardly unlimited (after all, it is not the infinite horizons that give one an overwhelming experience of the greatness of space, but the very inward-placed "inwardness," the landscapes with a very umbilical-whirlpoolish center) like a jungle — some indefinite hybrid between an aquarium and a dream, a womb and a jewelry casket. Here he once waited for the young lady of the house: rain, about to abate, was rattling down on the glass roof like transparent metal blood, gaudy sunlight was already pressing down in the grooves, but inside everything was brown, mossy-smelling, and nauseatingly warm. He didn't know what he found more pleasant — being in oak parks diluted with vast lawn-trays, or in that stifling, root-psychologizing lair. The calla stood alone, quite high on an artificial little mound: the sheer fact that it didn't grow on the ground, from the height of his feet, but in line with his hips, was strange — if one sees a flower at this height, it is usually not growing from the ground but bathing in a vase like a bored Leda.

With that flower, the wife began: it was a mysteriously singular and superb flower — with one sole petal and one stamen. Is that the expression of the indissolubility of wedlock, of destiny's sore unambiguousness, the emblem of monastic life — or is it the expression of murderous perversion lurking in nature, of shameless "frivolity," of hysteria ceaselessly striving toward the very

essence of essentials? She is my wife: this sentence, resolution, or completion in effect independent from him, hovered at all times on his lips like a hesitant silk-worm on a half-gnawed mulberry leaf.

Simplicity! Is simplicity simple? Does that one petal not achieve to be simple, one-petaled rather than three- or five-petaled, and thus “complicated,” along the most artificial, affected, what is more: *crippled* lines? What is that flower: Eros or counter-Eros? There are people who, sickened by the sloppy sweat odor of kisses and embraces, take refuge in flowers: from the uncontrollable saliva dripping from a kiss, to dew; from perfume, to smell; from the bed’s corkscrew-like, copulation-kneaded darkness to the roots’ earthly darkness, from the self-lacerating frankness of desire to the flower-cups’ senseless openness: could they be right? Is the calla’s dew, smell, root-Styx and openness really the pure “idea” of what in love can only feature as pathology or caricature? Or is flower, on the contrary, the parody, and love, the pure realization? There is an absolute relation between the two, not only in the broad community of colorful vitality, but also in the minutest, microscopic details.

And up to the point when the girl’s family put to him the question, when the wedding should take place, in fact little more happened than the vision of that lone flower in the botanical trinity of mysterious conservatory-life, ice-cold morality, and *recherché* lies. What on earth did the calla’s silken-snowy, broad collar, its orange-gold pineapple-mosaicked, quivering giant stamens have to do with the scene that played in the small corner-room between him and his bride’s mourning family?

## 13.

It was late afternoon. He was vexed: that very morning he learnt that the mayor had chosen him as his secretary. The mayor had received him in his office before a vast mural depicting an extraordinarily important town council meeting: a splendid garden of colorful clothes, somber clouds, hovering feathers, and shiny weapons. Public life! Will it be as festive, as carnivalesque, as much a lust-concert as this painting, or as festive and responsible ad nauseam as the mayor's manners foreshadowed? Everything the mayor ever spoke about was, how every stroke of the pen can be fateful, how wars depend on every word uttered, how every promise tied you to the Vatican like an underworld umbilical chord: the public person's life is nothing but prudence, diplomacy, hypocrisy, and blind self-sacrifice. The poor boy was trembling like a dog dissected alive. How could you possibly reconcile so many things: the most resolute heroism and the most histrionic hypocrisy, the fatalistic sticking to your promises and eternal trickery? Which will it be, then? Instinct? Intuition? Nose? Now he almost burst out laughing when he thought about these qualities: he felt so annihilated, so completely paralyzed and dumb as if his whole bodily existence had been nothing but a continuous stammering, begun before the beginning of time and going on endlessly. What, then, about that jolly, parakeety, splendid image? There everything was so buoyant, so ballet-heroic and flower-like as though history were a germination and flowering of human seeds as whimsically spontaneous as it is of plant seeds. Whom should he believe: the decoration, or this deathly responsibility-masquerade? Which of his life's primal wells should he let loose in his political career: suicidal ethical instinct, or suicidal comedy instinct? What will he turn into, a civil servant or a buffoon?

Everybody around him would go on to become a politician the way poets become poets: they would compose aphorisms about Turkish battleships, chime rhymes on pope and emperor,



heap metaphor upon metaphor on reckless viscountly marriages and pseudo-excommunications; while history would foam around him “en fleur,” he would keep promises, watch over the authenticity of seals, stick to contracts. Even though the mayor didn’t in the least resemble the painting’s primal colorfulness, behind his official sanctimony he could nevertheless perceive a certain anarchy, a certain vegetally luxuriating moral insanity, Antichrist-freedom. He felt that public life bore the same emotional paradoxes as love: the eternal panorama of faith and faithlessness. Where are those delicate, evanescent borderlines where political honorableness & this unmistakable stink of primordial amorality meet?

A huge crucifix stood on the table; from one of its arms hung the mayor’s white glove, like Christ’s torn robes. He didn’t for a moment feel it to be an empty formality beside the mayor’s flabby frame: for there was certainly hidden, leaden suffering in his male lard and reasoning — the Antichrist was howlingly Christ-like. But the hanging glove, this tiny blasphemy, was also symptomatologically creditable: from behind the Christ-like eternal despondency and vanquishedness, irony radiated like a goldfish flashing from a pitch-black Japanese lacquer pool. All extremely unsettling, of course. Now and again servants and masters came in, some through a massive wooden door that was larger than the castle gates and thicker than a house-wall (all the more wonderful for closing so silently), others through some allegedly secret flush door. Sometimes they brought documents, at other times utterly feminine objects, pearls, flowers. In the two doors all love’s alternatives were enclosed: what was essential, sincerity or secrecy, and was secrecy not merely would-be secrecy? Do diplomacy’s many veils and its sexual-looking discretion indeed keep secrets quiet, or do they amount to nothing more than the artificial living-through of mankind’s ceaseless need of secrets — that is, of its utter lack of secrets? Or is secret in fact the real thing, and sincerity the posturing? Which one should he believe:

the wooden door or the little flush door? Mystification, mystification, he kept repeating to himself, while a houseboy led him to the stairs. But this "mystification" upset him; he could no longer recognize himself on the street; he was a changed man: if the mayor's office and manners had such an organic power, then calling it either humbug or value is mere wordplay. Awfully *intensive*: is there in fact any other sensible adjective for the matters of life?

#### 14.

Such thoughts were in his mind while he walked toward his fiancée's house to report his first visit to the mayor. As soon as he left behind the large bronze gate that in the sunshine appeared like a hedge trimmed after the French fashion, with its light-green rusts and molds and with the half-opening, half-blunted buds of its armored knobs, he met a group of lancers. First he took them for watchmen on their round; their weapons calmly pointed at the sky, like reeds sticking out of a forsaken lake's surface — those few metallic threads, terror's strings tuned with the sharpest of ears, made him forget the whole town: everything vanished, the bridges that almost rowed and sailed along with the ships, the sweetly throbbing pulse of the surrounding hills, the people's and church-towers' ring-fingers — those slowly quivering lances proceeding in parallel movement were as alone in the blue sky as the odd blade of grass grown too tall, when you lie in the grass looking up at the sky. Order cut off from everything: God, the life of cities, order which only exists for itself, with a million sensitive nerve-endings, entirely blind. Only when they got closer did he see that they were leading a man in shackles, in whom he recognized the town's fanatic insurgent, the unshaven, filthy Giampione, who according to some was trying to win over the town's down-and-outs to the side of the Duke of Urbino, and according to others was an idealistic religious reformer.

Whether henchman or founder of a religion, he fundamentally differed from the mayor of the bulky desk, sigil-keyboards, and the uncannily objective gloves.

This, too, is “history” — the young man slogging toward his fiancée said to himself — and I don’t know which lies closer to my heart: diplomacy or revolution, the etiquette of law, or the shapeless howl of suffering? Public life: that was the only ideal his father had inculcated in him, and he now felt it to be nothing but a dreadful lie, which did not mean of course that the mayor with his demonically calculating diplomacy were a “liar,” or the arrested anarchist were merely “posturing” — no: the mayor and the heretic (if he was really one) were both sincere, straightforward characters — lying was not the moral flaw of individuals but quite simply, a tragic and inescapable trait of existence, of all action, all moving out of passivity: everything was different from what it would have been worth being. If there is to be a dialogue between the mayor and the heretic, will it not be meaningless from the get-go? Which of the two loves the people truly: the virtuoso of legal acts, or this cellar-prophet? The young man’s head was swirling, burning — he had been launched on a career and had no inkling what to do.

His soul was chock-full of the infinitesimal differentiations of legal manuals, the enticing tapestry of game rules and gospel ethics, which brought his nuance-perverted rationalism to an almost raving ecstasy: he was a born mathematician for whom politics meant Euclidean tournaments — but his soul was also chock-full of the fantastic portraits of the slums’ down-and-outs, the Bruegelesque extras, the gnomes, whores, lepers, beggars, and women caught in labor in staircases, the disfigured dead of battlefields; it was chock-full of the hospitals’ perfume blended of Christ, alchemy, and sadism; he was a born folk tribune for whom politics meant eternal sexual-theological intercourse with all forms of suffering. Luckily for him, this inner struggle between

the diplomat and the rebel, the rationalist and the mystic, which would likely mark his life, was for the time being very far from any decisive situation: for to play it for him now were strangers, separate characters he had nothing to do with after all.

## 15.

The street exhaled the odor of fresh cherries, which only the humid smell of shady walls surpassed in pleasantness: benumbed, he could dip his spirit into it all, the sweet impressions of the senses, which are such a far cry from the fictions of public life. Odors vanish, the occasional vista of a house, flower, or woman is wiped out in an instant — and yet, what an extraordinary power, in this “evanescent perfume” bemoaned for the millionth time, of the irrefutable worthiness of faith, of almost-material eternity, in contrast to the dialogue between the mayor ratiocinating, and the heretic gesticulating, for the common good! With infinite gratitude he burrowed into the calm veil of “frivolous” impressions: he let his entire soul adhere to the stirring, reminiscent of a sleeping bird’s body, of a minute-hand, to the dull thudding of a street vendor’s rolling melons, to the hawsers’ putrid whiskers that a wave’s touch would now comb straight and now undulate and scatter in a thousand directions, depending upon whether they were hanging in the air, pulled down into a vertical whorl by the water’s weight, or ended up beneath a tiny surf; he entrusted his soul to the mess of the houses, to the quietly exciting fact that streets were not built in a straight line and the houses were not built at the same time and in the same color, but whimsically, as if they were not the result of human will but had been tossed ashore by the sea or wind, like broken shells or fallen leaves. Before him, the town was napping in the peaceful hues of chaos and idyll: when he looked at a fisherman smoking his pipe or a fishwife playing cards, he couldn’t imagine why anything like “public life,”

anything like politics, should exist at all, whether of the mayor or the founder of a religion, for everything was idyllic; when his eyes scanned the biological hodgepodge of the houses, he felt there was no need for politics at all, for there was no “polis” whatsoever, only the beyond-the-human free play of chemical substances, the chaos of flowers, fumes, deathless arch-rags.

How many worlds, and none of them knew of the others, although each wanted to influence the others; how many separate worlds that are so essentially foreign that they should obviously not as much as know of one another: the fight between the mayor and the anarchist; the fishermen smoking their pipes and playing cards; the arch-seaweeds in the depths of diluvial oceans; his own analytical and imaginary invalid body and soul; his bride’s family dead-set on marriage: are these really together in the world? Do they not absolutely repel one another? And yet they keep crossbreeding, mainly because humans are so naïve and insensible (they have no impressions, only thoughts) that they enforce such crossbreedings: of arch-seaweeds with marriage, polis-less fishwives with politics. When will they ever cease their senseless disharmonies? Or is this what makes life, that these mutually repelling worlds have to be mixed, whether we want to or not? Might the contrast of these worlds not be a real antagonism — are they perhaps not worlds at all, but merely perceived as worlds by a nervous young man’s musical soul, so that he would hear music, harmonies and dissonances, where there is no music of any kind? In this absent-minded eunuch mood he arrived at his fiancée’s house.

## 16.

They received him in a disused bedroom. Their sight made his head swirl: all were in mourning — women in long veils, men with ceremoniously vacuous smiles, an unctuous, mundane bishop with

two mud-green-faced friars, a tertiary priest with a doorknob-yellow skull and a Roman nose, keening women in all kinds of folksy lace headgears sucking on candies, and at the door in black, a group of mercenaries. Burial residues, apparently. The keening women were probably still waiting for tips, the friars (the company's naïve bear cubs) were about to start bawling some valedictory prayer, the bishop wanted to convey, through a half-gnawed sandwich, some shapely and chic consolation to the family who were listening with dumb shivers — what was he doing here? why did they let him in? whose is the death, where is the corpse, among the loitering soldiers, simoniac viveurs, holy friars, tear-dropping machines, beastly blind blood-relations and mute flowers?

His fiancée didn't feature much in his consciousness, being in fact merely a dissonant little symbol, the mis-struck chord of these two tones, two worlds: the biological riddle of the greenhouse calla and the mourning family's darkness. Without considering his two impressions "true," he dimly felt that all he could have to do with women in life would be to compile small variations from botanical & climacteric motifs (the word "climacterium" came to mind, because he felt this burial to be no "event," but the family's physiological history). Girls! Do girls exist? Supposedly they do, since he himself was "courting" (?) one; what is more, he had even heard people say that he had a "bride" — but the word and fact of "girl" and "beautiful girl" were for him at most social formulae, polite turns-of-phrase, the kind of euphemism behind which they hide the flower's secret and aging women's pathological degree of reality. His "courtship" had been an acquaintance with aging: in the girl's house he always found old people who harbored some utterly unearthly, fictitious image of "man," who always had to be martyr and merchant, ward and murderer. For this reason he didn't feel a "man," not even when alone with her: from the paintings on the walls, from the armchairs' lace spreads, from the honey-molten afternoon lights through

the half-lowered sail-colored curtains there poured forth, equally and ceaselessly, this utterly doltish fiction of manhood to which every clock hand and teacup expected him to conform. The only way of escape was in utterly primitive and soulless (if such is possible) sensuous play — although taking full bodily advantage of the girl seemed no less fictive and grotesque than the “ideal” about which the mothers caught in the vortex of their barrenness used to daydream.

Calla, old-age hysteria, mechanical sensuousness: there were no other elements to his “love” — and so it went for years. It was the same today, when with surprise he heard a houseboy announce that he was expected in a room he had not yet seen. Handing over his hat and cloak he felt it in his body how, in a matter of minutes, he was metamorphosing from a living human being into an algebraic sign of bridegroom prepared for the senile: in no other house in the world would he be expected to give up so wholly on life, the outer world, that is, on all the colorful uncertainties, and to only open his mouth when he could say something positive. This “positivity” (the pampered ghost of those divorced from reality, of melancholy, of old fogeys) scared him now more than ever, for his soul had never been so “decent folk”-loathingly wavering and problematic as after his visit to the mayor. They are going to interrogate him. What should he answer? He asked the houseboy if there were special guests in the house, and learned that they were funeral guests — his bride’s brother-in-law had died. This of course meant that the widow, the unknown sister, was here.

## 17.

The sister: for years she had lived far away, in a different city, & now that her husband was dead, she returned to her mother. He had not seen her yet. He had two decisive impressions con-

nected to her: her handwriting, and a painting that for weeks he had believed to depict her, when it turned out that in fact the model was no relative at all, but some Venetian painter's mistress. The painting hung in a completely dark salon like a little velvety orange blot inside a huge, blue-blind pansy. His relation with this painting and this salon was the sole thing remotely reminiscent of love, if indeed the word love has any logical contours, including a balance between a certain primitive physiological selfishness and a certain poetic nostalgia. The salon's Byzantine darkness, the portrait's golden luminosity, the awareness that this room had been the study of his fiancée's deceased father, the happy freedom that the presence of an unknown woman, the presence of distance meant in the somber house: all this, he thought, might resemble other people's love. He lingered here whenever he could. This sister would some day become his mistress — he lived this daydream for about three weeks. This was the time when the thought of marrying his bride didn't horrify him, when he wanted to become a member of the family, kept repeating aloud the word "bride," which to him had a lyrical, touch-me-not-yellow sound and feel, like early morning incest.

In his mind he could never separate the idea of the family from that of incest, and for him to have social intercourse with the wife's sibling meant incest. "Family" for him meant these two end-poles alone: either the petit-bourgeois idyll, some sort of protestant-puritanical respectability, a trade association for daily sloppiness — or a biological group whose members jollily mix their blood and seeds to the point of exhausting mathematical variations and combinations. The "sister's" likeness meant the latter: all of a sudden the bride's body became valuable, because connected by blood to the sister's body. Curiously, but also naturally, during these three weeks he didn't feel the slightest desire for the kind of clockwork-carnal taking advantage of his bride, which had taken up the better part of his afternoons for two years: the bride's body in and of itself was such a tiny



atom in the family's body that it could on no account constitute a sensuous stimulus, could not mean body. The bride was mere spume, sun-spark on the broad, spiritual, poetic body-wave, Venus-tide, which the unknown sister's portrait had opened to his eyes, and which also included the mother, beautified, embodied, together with her despondent grey-haired siblings.

The young man, disgusted as a rule by the very word relative, all of a sudden started looking for yet more relatives, for girls, matrons, little boys, and the defunct, so that he could finally feel "*one* body" between his fingers — the sole, ghostly nude of *one* family. Incest spiritualizes. The portrait bore a likeness to the bride's face: how wonderful that what in his bride's skin had long bored his fingers existed once more as the unknown — and this delighted him not out of selfishness, but out of rectitude, a goodness toward his bride: he didn't have to lie to her that she was beautiful, for indeed — through the unknown sister's portrait — he found her beautiful. Besides, one couldn't tell if he worshipped the portrait-sister because of her younger sister, or if he worshipped the latter on account of the older sister? The fine chemistry of known and unknown: one of the most important parts of love. The portrait was a secret that inebriated with the scent of the known; the bride was boredom from which glowed, enclosed like a flower, an unknown possibility, like a white mask from behind evergreen leaves. He lived simultaneously in an aquarium and on Plautus' stage: the two lookalike sisters brought the mysterious monotony of heredity, of thousand-year-old inertia to his mind, behind the two faces all of a sudden he felt a thousand faces forgotten-into-the-world with the self-same imperviousness: the two portraits were dulled into the sleepy rhythm of nature, annihilated into trite herrings. But this nihil was sweet, pathetic, & redemptive. On other occasions, however, his mind wandered to the comedies of mistaken identities — to the pleasure of mixing-up, the eternal excitement of quid pro quo. How entirely grand!

But what now? He was here. The age-old reaction, “run away from reality,” would be of little use. Hey, presto then, up to the old bedroom. The sister’s husband is dead: this belittled “the family” & much belittled the sister’s erotic chance. Before facing reality, he wanted to take one more look at her pseudo-portrait: to see it for the last time the way he had seen it so far, perhaps a bit for conspiring against reality, perhaps to promise that he would live for the image ever after, and for this reason tear the image to pieces: he, the boy, with his own hands, lest reality, the living woman, destroy the portrait with the usual reality-posturing. Let reality come second after his hands! He asked the houseboy to point him in the direction of the old bedroom, for he would go there later alone: first he would like to pass by the “dark” salon for a book he had forgotten.

The sister’s handwriting and portrait had always been opposites, so much so that he had never asked his bride if the portrait indeed resembled her older sister. He found out only by accident that it didn’t depict the sister. What was curious, or natural, was that this awareness hardly changed his relation to the painting: for him it remained the sister. Because for him “the sister” was some kind of biological abstraction — his soul and body were in acute need of some sister-like entity, an any-sister. When he reached the salon he found he could no longer establish any relation with the picture: by all appearances, reality got there first while he lagged behind — the simple, empty awareness that the sister was already in the house annihilated the picture: this was a proper in effigie execution. All he could see was the sister’s handwriting: her whole body, character, voice, was identical to her crow-feet alphabet, even her hidden-most joints were Ks, Rs, Fs. Who are *you* then, Venetian model? A countess, courtesan, æsthetic space-filler, or the myth of a life? Come, join me *against* the family!

## 18.

The painting managed to combine, with particular skillfulness, a kind of numbing, warm harmony with a constitutionally alien, distorting, tragic and grotesque style. The gaze merged into that melodic, golden “distance” that only painters can render: this distance is infinite, like a god’s undisturbed sleep; it has no purpose, no limits, and yet, despite its shapeless, eternal spatiality, it is idyllic, closed, like a lamp-shaped, lamp-glowing womb — young children imagine the immaculate conception like this: the infant Jesus hovers together with an idyllic park inside a golden, rainbowy soap bubble beneath the Virgin’s bowing, quietly leaf-shooting breasts. The portrait’s eyes looked into this essentially *painted* distance, that combined boundlessness and womb-enclosedness, having seamlessly adapted to the dual nature of space: the gaze was hesitant, splenetic, and vacuous, the affected piano-pianissimo pitch of vertigo, but at the same time it caressed every single object in the background and of the invisible but requested foreground, holding on to them, empathizing with pulleys, clouds, tackle. And curiously, all this psychic easement, dissolving, sorrowful softness emanated from an angular, gothically broken and twisted body: the brooding woman’s half-nude posture outdid the German peasants’ wooden crucifixes in its Art Nouveau-ish appearance. But one merely acknowledged this fact to oneself — the unwitting, inert expressionism of clumsiness didn’t thwart melancholia’s softly meandering lines in moving from the image to the spectators’ ingle-like eyes, on the contrary: it heightened them, unmistakably recalling such moments and positions of amorous embrace where both bodies are twisted and deformed to the utmost gothic extent, while the souls and lips, eyes and fingertips, exhale the most idyllic, most pampering goodness. The half-nude was surrounded by that certain background-landscape which, in the onlooker, forever erases the contrast of dream and realism, kitsch and “Pan revelations,” stylization and

narrow-mindedness, convention & heavenly excitement — this is simply beauty, composed of its eternal elements: nature, shady melancholia, truth, habit, pure sensation.

## 19.

For the young man the greatest significance of his acquaintance with his bride's family was the fact that it banished any fleeting impression devoid of practical use, most decisively, into the characteristically "male" world of sins and perversions. It never ceased to surprise him, this sensitivity on the family's part with which they intimated beforehand, from his gesture or breathing, whether the next sentence was going to be "sensible" or impressionistic, and if the latter, they either gestured at him to stop before he could utter it, or tried to wring out, with painful obdurateness, the "sense." The first time he felt this strikingly was when, at the beginning of their acquaintance, he praised the girl's clothes: he spoke about her lovely red blouse, red gloves, crimson shoes, in a tone of enthusiasm that was particularly repellent to the family — one that renders the superlative degree of delight in the object beheld by miming the spectator's impotence and utter defeat when faced with the wondrous phenomenon. "After such a red shoe-toe nothing remains to be seen," this was what his voice conveyed. But the ones impatiently waiting for the tirade's end asked nervously: "What then?" He wondered at this and, voice grown husky, could only answer: "That is all I wanted to say."

From this moment he withdrew into his cocoon and didn't talk about his impressions. The family had educated him well: they managed to stifle all his impressions into the world of sin. Because the young man was first and foremost a mime, a copycat: if he had spent two years planning the killing of his enemy and finally found him alone eating soup, instead of stabbing him in the back, he would at once start imitating soup-eating with his

rapier, sharpened for two years, attentively observing the spoon's sinking into the soup, its rise and journey to the mouth. And so it was with these old folks: he immediately imagined himself in the place of their grey blindness to impressions, & treated every object and fleeting color with this mime-like mimicry-blindness. In his perception the most abrupt duality was born: to see something meant henceforward to twitch into *en garde* at the first sensory stimulus, uttering with every inch of his body: "I don't see you," and store away the sight's violent optical self-offering, which went on nevertheless, in another constitutionally alien plane: into a definitely non-subconscious but rather, absolutely core-conscious layer, where the shades of an impression were barely more than known, but where no sentimental consequences were given space. The "no!" and some unfeeling sensorial "objectivity": into those two worlds the prospective relatives restricted his impressions. Now when for the last time he was looking symbolically at the sister's portrait, he set free the feeling-train of his impressions: how strong, foliage-, and silk-like, how "sinful" they were!

Sin, sin, sin: when, what did he in fact feel to be sin? This distracted question had no ethical stakes (nor could it, being so clearly subjective and æsthetic), and that was precisely the reason why it preoccupied him. There and then, in front of the picture, he answered his own question squarely and concisely: "sin" always meant something very logical and very sentimental — for him those were the sin-moods. Very *logical*: to this category belonged his amorous sins, his smaller or bigger so-called perversions. All "perverse" actions (so he believed) boiled down to somebody doing on certain occasions, with certain organs of theirs (since we must needs speak of these organs), what can be done with them, following the most natural *logical* deductions: they don't do what they theoretically should learn to do (that is, normal sexual intercourse), but what they readily imagine, with the help of primitive logic, to be the most simply and practically doable. In such situations the organ always features like a *logical*

premise, not a natural tool. Homosexuality is, for instance (to take only one of the otherwise not too many variants), simpler, more primitive, more *logical* than its normal counterpart — if one is ceaselessly thinking of his organ, then the first step is its quantitative enhancement, its mathematical multiplication: and this is a *logical* reflex procedure. (It would be preposterous to take the stressing of perversity's rudimentary, logical, barbarian-rational character for its apology: these "perverse" skills were so insignificant in the young man that it wouldn't even occur to him to worry about their attack, much less their defense.) Besides being a product of *logical*, not sensuous instinct, perversity is naively "practical," meaning that someone treats their sexual instincts and organs decisively non-sexually, just like the other objects of practical life: flowers, threads, pen, brush. There are obvious consequences of the well-known fact that for us, in the beginning (which coincides with the end) sexual life means an unknown *object* in our body, rather than the intimation of some unknown relation in our soul: and we certainly do not start from taking unknown objects to women, but investigate them in our own rudimentary laboratory "experiments." In addition to primitive *logic*, primitive *experimentation*. With some this goes smoothly throughout a lifetime, with others it gets enveloped in processes of conscience and blunt sin-perfume, due to the circumstances of their lives: this last one was the case of the future mayor.

But he felt the same sin-mood when he was very *sentimental*: when he felt the yellowness of a flower with all his nerve-fringes and wisdom teeth to be yellow, if he unexpectedly glimpsed again his memories whizzing in the direction of evening's cool pier, if he saw a grievance of his to be highly motivated, feeling its cause like a glistening mirror: on such occasions the emotion simply amounted to suicide, with the defiant morphing into yellow, memory, cause: with the total annihilation of humanity and individuality.

The portrait of the pseudo-sister kindled such sin-moods in him: a blue mountain as it melts, like sugar, between a cloud's lips, a paper-thin cypress that cannot make up its mind whether to definitely trade in its crown for its shadow; a lake reflected wanly, with "the realism of non-attention," which in its melancholy hide mirrors the mill's blades, blossoming into flowers of gravity, as a fainted or dying man's glassed eyeballs, impervious to the world, reflect a tassel of a pillow or a leftover cobweb on the ceiling — with the impotent acuity of unwillingness-to-look-evermore.

Minutiae! *This*, then, is forbidden to me; this is what I'm excluded from. How interesting: the mothers of girls as a rule loathe young men for their gambling, drinking, boisterous lies, for being vain and idle — that is, for having all too concrete and gross defects of character; me they loathe because I see almost microscopic details, atoms on, in, objects. The young man was no poet or painter, no artist of any kind; he was not absent-minded, nor a daydreamer by temperament; he dressed to perfection, fenced decently, his manners were dryly mundane; his only suspicious traits were these small observations: he would say of a pair of shoes not that it was durable or too wide or too tight, but that it was like a red wild flower — and of a red wild flower, not how long it would last and whether the gardener would know how to handle it, but that it was "red" (for this is indeed a microscopic, hidden trait of a red flower: surprising as it may seem, this was his only sincere experience in his conversations with his fellow human beings).

Of course, the elders' nose was not deceived: they smelled out unmistakably that *this* was the true enemy of women, the "harmful" male: not the Don Juans, not the bohemian artists, but these nuance-spotters. For they will be forever unable to see a girl as one concrete, ethical human being: the girl will always be a mere nuance, sex-shot, fabric pattern. For the Don Juans, the woman is at least a *human being* as long as they care about her — but for such a man, she's merely a cluster of optical stimuli.





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Written between Szentkuthy's first major work, *Prae* (1934), and the first book of the *St. Orpheus Breviary* (1939), *Chapter on Love* (publ. 1936) exemplifies well Szentkuthy's writing of excess. An attempt at polyphonic writing, it brings together the perspectives of an unlikely set of characters including the mayor of a doomed Italian city, given to debilitating "impressionism" — a penchant for observing and analyzing apart the minutest shades of reality —, a nihilistic pope, a hanged brigand, a courtesan and her decadent pubertal adorer. They pass through the pages of this quixotic and compelling book under the threat of imminent catastrophe, filling chapter after chapter with passionate, self-generating theorizing and (mock-)philosophizing on the margins of Empedocles, life and death, female stockings, endingness and changeability, ethics and aesthetics, vitality and law, chaos and social order grounded in *horror vacui*, the forever elusive other person — all enmeshed with well-nigh self-parodic, idiosyncratic feats of ratiocination and theorizing driven *ad absurdum*, which proliferate on the analogy of (free) association.

The common denominator of their analytical furore and the yarns they spin is love, which touches not only on the human being, but the whole of nature, from the realm of plants to that of minerals. Szentkuthy's book may don the costume of a historical novel, but it stands under the sign of the pseudo: its deliberately vague setting, somewhere in Italy toward the end of the Renaissance, is in fact but a mask which allows for anachronism (of realia, ideas, data, and even terminology) to ooze through, as the characters and their observations are our contemporaries in every respect.

Baroque and exuberant, of a sweeping melancholia and at times savage humor, a (mock-)treatise written with an abundance of striking, distant associations that evoke Surrealist practices, this strange novel tantalizingly shows a path not taken by experimental modernism, of the contrapuntal use of point-of-view converted into a contrapuntal use of analytic, essayistic observations of reality, and points towards Szentkuthy's monumental meditations on history *sub specie* *whatsit* in the *St Orpheus Breviary* epic.

