

Chapter V

I returned to my lodgings, not without difficulty. In spite of the reference-points I had committed to memory, I only recognized “my” dome thanks to the precaution I had taken on leaving of wedging a corner of my visiting card into its metal hoop.

I had not been back longer than ten minutes when I saw an old man emerge from the bottom of the stairway, as ancient as the ten or twelve others I had met in the course of my walk after the appearance of the first centenarian phantom, whom the crowd on the lawn had greeted with such dolorous respect.

Although it was melancholy and grave, my visitor’s face was less tragic than the faces of his contemporaries. Under his arm he was carrying a large folio volume, bound in some sort of supple and shiny bark. He sat down beside me without saying a word. I had decided not to be astonished by anything any longer. In any case, I discerned an evident sympathy in his gaze.

He opened the enormous book on the table. I cast a furtive glance over the parchment. A hymn of spontaneous and retrospective gratitude suddenly rang out in my heart for the worthy old professor who had once inculcated a taste for ancient languages in me. The pages displayed before my eyes were covered in Greek characters!

I am no Hellenist, to be sure, but even so, I still possess a few hundred words of the language of Homer in my memory. In a flash of enlightenment, I glimpsed the charitable intention of the noble old man, and the possibility that my meager classical baggage might allow me to escape the isolation that had begun to weigh upon me.

Indeed, the unexpected master pointed at a sentence that I read and understood without difficulty. Immediately, with a very finely-sharpened piece of green wood, he wrote the phrase in Greek letters on a piece of skin that he had laid out beside the book, translating it into the sounds of his own language.

Three weeks! It’s already three weeks since my old professor began to initiate me into the strange idiom of this strange country, making ingenious use of a language the knowledge of which is common to both of us, which he deploys with infinitely more acumen than me.

I have hardly left my lodgings during those three weeks. I have received a daily visit from my Hellenist savior, albeit at very different times of day and sometimes in the middle of the night. Like all his compatriots, he seems to have no notion of our hourly divisions, living at hazard and accomplishing the customary actions of existence without any regular order, in exclusive accordance with the appeal of his own needs or whims.

I have worked relentlessly and without respite after and before his daily visits. My progress has been rapid.

I am now capable of expressing myself quite fluently in the local language. For two days, the old man—doubtless judging that his lessons would henceforth be superfluous—has neglected me. He has disappeared.

I am striving to converse with this week’s serving-girl. I say “this week’s” because, in the four weeks that I have been resident in the city, four young women had come successively to take care of my household chores—all four, moreover, perfectly distinguished, careful of their bodies, modest and reserved, but all four, like he first, utterly devoid of any sense of modesty.

I cannot, even in these intimate notes, give precise details; it’s necessary to admit that these beautiful creatures, without any concern to conceal from me their adornment of charm and poetry, do not hesitate to utilize in front of me, without any embarrassment, the species of metallic channel that runs along my wall—while I, although accustomed to the cynical exhibitions of school and barracks, and the license of the war, suffer cruelly at certain moments because the doors and locks useful for isolation are completely banished from the usages of this continent.

A little while ago I engaged my temporary servant in conversation at the moment when, having finished her work, like the first, naked and graceful, she lunged into my bath. I judged the moment opportune to undertake an adventure that I had been meditating for some time. I dared not attempt it while I felt that I was too unfamiliar with the city. The faculty of self-expression, and the fact that

people had become accustomed to my presence gave me a greater boldness. I was considered now without curiosity; I passed unnoticed; I could take the risk.

My dainty chambermaid told me without difficulty that her name was Amya. In spite of her extreme facility in showing herself...without veils...she is certainly innocent and pure, for she remained, when I began the assault by opening fire in a sentimental vein, as bewildered as a Pyrenean shepherdess to whom one read from Claudel.¹ Nothing was able to extract her from a polite but cold impassivity.

Suddenly calmed by her coolness, I went out, prey to a great irritation and strange thoughts.

I wondered if I might be resident among a people simultaneously afflicted with eroticism and exhibitionism. The check that I had just experienced did not cripple that hypothesis. On every street-corner, in public, couples were in an amorous mood, and proving it simply by coming together at hazard, on the road side, without any preliminaries. In a number of houses into which I had penetrated, moved by curiosity, in accordance with the customary freedom of the locale, I had come across people occupied in demonstrating to one another that they belonged to different sexes without causing them the slightest embarrassment. It was the world of prostitution elevated to the height of a State institution.

I dare not even show astonishment in the conversations that I am beginning to have with various people; so natural are these mores to my friendly hosts that I fear offending them by some remark, or causing them to burst out laughing.

Two incidents today.

I have been the object of a disagreeable approach. A procession composed of old and mature men came into my home without any warning. That is the custom here. The one marching at the head addressed a speech to me deliberately conceived in simple terms, doubtless in order that I would be better able to grasp its meaning: a very civil discourse, moreover, even flattering. In conclusion, he asked me to give him my watch. I handed it to him without any apprehension.

Then the man, although perfectly respectable, deposited my worthy chronometer in the bowl on top of the tripod, on the lighting-stones. He poured out a few drops of the mysterious liquid that produces the light. The glass of my poor watch splintered with a noise that pinched my heart, and the metals—the gold and the platinum—melted; within a short space of time, they evaporated.

I must have had a singularly bewildered expression during that rapid operation, for one of the men in the group felt obliged to resume speaking and to give me a brief explanation.

“Brother,” he declared, “we apologize for having perhaps annoyed you, but the law of contentment is the supreme law of our city, and the science of passing time is the conception of death that plants itself within us.”

The conception of death! I have convinced myself, this very day, that these people are completely and absolutely ignorant of its bitterness. I was wandering, head in the clouds, around the great domes in the center of the park, which light what the indigenes call, in terms that I don’t understand: “the meeting-pace of the sage guides of the State and the guardians.” At the top of the staircase of a private dwelling I saw a gathering of curious individuals that astonished me. An enormous wooden tub, vaguely affecting the form of a bath, was placed to the right of the entrance.

Standing apart from the crowd, but close enough to see and hear, I paused momentarily, intrigued by the presence of the people, evidently gathered for a special ceremony. I was soon fixed to the spot. Although the faculty of astonishment has been weakened somewhat in me since my arrival in this world unsuspected by my peers, into which I am assuredly the first to penetrate, I was unable to repress a start—not of fright but of surprise—on seeing suddenly emerge from the top of the stairway, behind two young men who were hauling it... a cadaver!

A woman, some girls and a boy of about 15 emerged from the subterranean dwelling behind the dead man—incontestably the family of the deceased. A singular family, whose members were conversing with one another, or with their friends in the procession, in a manner that was not only

¹ Paul Claudel (1868-1955), a diplomat by profession and a devout Roman Catholic, became an outspoken devotee of literary Symbolism, elaborating scenes of human lovemaking as ostensible symbolic representations of divine love. Critics suspected that this reasoning was merely an excuse for dalliance in eroticism.

perfectly indifferent and detached, but often manifested an indecent and scandalous gaiety, which went as far as uttering bursts of cynical laughter over the poor corpse. One of the idlers in the street, who seemed to be acquainted with the family of the dead man, confirmed that these joyful individuals really were the wife and children of the departed.

“It’s probable,” I said, “that the man, when alive, was wicked, harsh, egotistical and odious to his relatives by virtue of his character and his vices. It is, however, rather cruel to laugh like that over his body, whatever his faults on Earth might have been. In my country, death absolves the wickedest, conferring serenity upon them and granting them pardon.”

“Ararizo,” my interlocutor replied, “was good and kind, indulgent and generous of heart. He dispensed affection and happiness to his family and they surrounded his life with love and tender variation. He has been a father, a husband, a brother, and a beloved friend, and no one in the city ever failed to cite him as an example.”

I no longer understood anything, and, at the risk of augmenting the scandal, exclaimed vehemently: “But why, in that case, far from experiencing grief, are his family rejoicing so scandalously?”

It was evident to me that the word “grief” was absolutely, totally and completely devoid of meaning to my interlocutor, failing to awaken the memory of any reality in his mind. The explanations I attempted to make him understand the term did not even arouse a suspicion of what I meant. The expressions “chagrin,” “distress” and “suffering” found no more echo in his intellect or sensibility. The most absolute and sincere incomprehension in his face affirmed as much. I could not admit any deception.

I finally succeeded in finding an explanatory circumlocution that allowed him to glimpse—oh, very vaguely—a state of mind troubled by opposition to the invariably happy equilibrium that was the ordinary and constant mood of the inhabitants of this world—which, since then, having found it to be exactly opposite to ours, I have privately named the *Inverted World*.

The man remained thoughtful for a long moment, confusedly considering what I had just revealed to him, which he could only glimpse effortfully, in a semi-conscious fashion.

“Why would you want Ararizo’s family to experience what you say?” he asked, finally raising his head.

Although I was used to seeing things happening, on this new and unexpected continent, in direct opposition to what I had previously considered to be the absolute and universal law of humankind, I nevertheless thought for an instant that it was an eccentric’s joke or a quibbler’s paradox. After all, death is death everywhere, in all latitudes: a tearing apart, a separation, a cruel mystery! The man’s gaze, however, was honest and sincere, even naïve.

“Why? Because he’s dead, of course! They will never see him again! He will no longer be the great loving protector of their household!”

“And you find that regrettable? Look, here is a basket of dead roses, which have lavished their perfumed soul upon you. They have been your friends. They have loved you and you have loved them. They are dead. You are not desolate. You will see others, but these delicate companions...never again.” Then, after a pause: “So you consider death to be a great misfortune?”

“Certainly.”

“But what do you think, then about the eternity of life?”

I misunderstood that question. I thought the man was talking about a dogma of his religion, which was still unknown to me.

Immediately, he added: “If Ararizo had been condemned to become immortal, his family would have had reason to mourn.”

This time, I did not understand at all.

“Besides,” the indigene continues, “the dead man was a function of our nature and of life itself. We are always glad when these functions are accomplished normally. We know only too well what it is to be abnormal and not to die. No, truly, I don’t understand your question—nor, entirely, what you mean by the word ‘mourn.’ We could easily avoid dying, if we wanted to, but it’s too terrible. Why, then do you think it more important to die than to live, and that it is more necessary to lament a dead man than a living one? It’s the same thing. A family does not ‘mourn’ when a child is born!”

I have certainly never felt such an extreme sensation of bewilderment. While I write these motes, mists of madness invade my poor brain, questions and hypotheses collide in a vertiginous whirl, in

which everything that has been, until now, the essence of my moral and intellectual being is compressed, jostling in my mind.

The eternity of life... not to die... ignorance of grief... love reduced to a public function...

I'm simply flabbergasted. I don't have any understanding—literally none—of these phrases.

While we were talking, and the family “in mourning” entertained one another, in foul weather and fair, mingling laughter with speech, the body had been plunged into the mysterious bath. I drew nearer. A viscous yellowish liquid was completing the dissolution and liquefaction of the cadaver!

Negligently, one of the dead man's daughters, a lively and supple creature scarcely twenty years old, came to cast a glance upon the almost-molten remains of her father. She was holding a cheerful young man by the hand. Under the eyes of her mother, her sisters, her brother, and before the liquid coffin that was absorbing the last vestiges of the dearly beloved, she drew him into one of those Cytherean arbors, from which, shortly afterwards, sighs informed us that the nature that kills is also the nature that creates.