

*H*e had been the deputy curator of the Louvre Museum for some years. A solitary soul, difficult to approach. He would shy away from contact with his colleagues. He was teased about his resemblance to certain Italian portraits, those by Francia or Raphaël whose pensive gaze seems to wander further than the thinking of their day. There was a family likeness between them. Although he was no longer young, his features had the indecisiveness of early adolescence. He liked to be forgotten; the only request easily granted by mankind. He was of the type who goes through life without luck, but without conflict, asking nothing of life that is coveted by others, searching only for that about

which others are unconcerned. Some said he had brought back with him from travels in Orient the habit of opium and hashish, a vague suspicion that remained unconfirmed. Others maintained, more plausibly, that he harboured feelings of frustration. There had been a time when he had frequented a highly attractive woman, much admired in the artistic circles; a shallow, coquettish, extravagantly beautiful woman, too deafened by the noise of her own success to hear a soul suffering in silence.

Was he suffering because of her? Was he suffering? One never can tell, with a naturally secretive person like him. If so, it must have been deeply and incurably, as from a wound with no outflow.

At the time that this was brought to notice, he would withdraw into his Louvre and appear to give all his attention to his paintings. He was given the credit for neither sound knowledge nor sure taste. He was in no way nettled by this, and no particular job attracted him. No-one could guess what he did with his time in the galleries. He just stayed inside, as one stays at home, with one's family. A certain magnetism drew him to this calm and beautiful world. Day by day he grew more accustomed to all these figures; each assumed, to his eyes, more expression, more individuality, each defined his own personality and history. In order to learn more about their lives, he began to read books

that told their stories; soon these absorbed him entirely, to the exclusion of all other reading matter. Unopened newspapers piled up on his table.

Thus his life altered and became remote; he transferred to another era all the commitment, the significance, the petty preoccupations that make up our daily existence. As he settled in the past, the present grew fainter and fainter, disappearing in a mist. When, by chance, he heard about contemporary news of the utmost importance, he accorded it no more than the kind of cold emotion and retrospective curiosity that the Battle of Pavie or the Camp du Drap d'Or might arouse in us. Every now and then some requirement of the job would compel him to mix with his colleagues; he would appear at their meetings like a ghost from another age unfamiliar with all that was being said. Once only had he been seen to become inflamed, and this was during a discussion. Somebody had mentioned the fable of Pygmalion. He maintained that it was a gross and badly conceived of legend. For him, the sculptor would never have consented to lower his creation into a world of flesh and destitution; since Pygmalion possessed a power of metamorphosis, he should have used it to change himself into marble, to be reunited with his Galatea in a superior and imperishable life. As he left after this outburst, his oddness was talked about.

A philosopher amongst them explained it like this: « There can be souls which are badly connected with their bodies; it would seem that, for them, the Great Creator had taken the wrong envelope or that He had attached them together too weakly; dissatisfied with their abode, they aspire to a freedom in space and in time; but this prison wall that entraps us only leaves one possible means of evasion, and that is behind us, into the past; that's where they try to escape to; unable to change their place, they change their era and thus find themselves a little freed.»

This exodus, both sentimental and intellectual, did not take effect in one full sweep and irrevocably. It would be arduous to analyse the imperceptible stages that transpose a man's way of thinking, his standpoint. It happened slowly and indecisively like birds migrating, when they wheel round, circle back, set out again, and take off together for a country in their memory. At times, everyday life would reclaim this destroyed soul from the rescuers who had taken him in. He was seen again, occasionally, at receptions of the person with whom, observers had done him the honour of imagining, he had an unhappy secret. She would remark, laughingly: «From which frame have you stepped today, black Venetian?»

He seemed, indeed, to be a stranger, brought there by some malevolent force. People knew that he con-

tinued his functions at the Louvre, that no particular incident had modified his existence; and yet at his appearance in this lady's salon, each guest felt, without knowing why, an uneasy astonishment, like at the arrival of a traveller who had been said to be, only the day before, in the heart of Africa.

As he was disturbed all day long by the numerous visitors to the museum, he had often thought how exquisite it would be to come in the evenings, at the time of day when one most needs the company of loved ones, to be with his own kind in complete freedom and solitude. One night, employees noticed with surprise a light moving in the galleries. Enquiries were made: it was the curator making an inspection. There was nothing abnormal about that; except that it started to happen so often. Almost every evening, he took the keys entrusted to him, a torch, and he sank into oblivion in his palace, sometimes sitting in front of a favourite painting, sometimes walking around in search of another.

The sought-after figure would emerge from the darkness in the beam of the torch, brought to life, animated, in the flickering light that shifted shadows from foreheads, illuminated gazes. Eyelids fluttered, women's lips parted in a smile. At times like this, he would understand fully every kind of thought, accumulated over the centuries, beneath these pale brows,

every living thing about these attentive faces of which the eyes never close. These eyes had been observing men for three and four hundred years. These eyes penetrated his own, during the silent nocturnal tête-à-têtes; they peered into the depths of his soul; they drew it out and imperceptibly devoured it, as eyes full of love can empty a soul of all its substance. These private nightly conversations never caused him to shudder or to feel discomfort; these onlookers could only inspire trust and goodness. For him, they were not ghosts but higher living beings. If ever he spared a thought for the living in the flesh, he saw them as ridiculous robots. Real life, with all its force, breathed here, in the black silence of the great gallery; he was subject to its increasing pressure. This place was filled with presence. Unwittingly he would listen, as if so much thought had to make some sound.

Only the hours fell away from the clock hidden in darkness at the end of the bay; their voice was not that of contemporary hours, pushing man along, urging him to act; they expected nothing, they measured deferred time, feeble and worn, burnt out. He did not listen to them; the paleness of his torchlight in the light of dawn was the only thing that reminded him to leave this sanctuary of rest. The next day, when the crowds came back into the museum, it was always, for him, painful and unanticipated. These creatures of another

breed, crude and clumsy, enthusiastic and talkative, threatened him like ghosts emerging suddenly into his real world. Usually, this crowd would appear to him as from a great distance, vague and on another level; a foreign people from whom you might withdraw and whose confused murmurs die away behind you.

This dual existence was physically wearing. His face was gaunt, he grew thin. One could not exactly say he was wasting away; this was not the impression that sprang to mind on scrutiny. It was more like the awkward shedding of a cumbersome outer skin. His kindly housekeeper, struck by this change, remarked to him one day: «Good Lord!

You're looking like one of your paintings; I'd swear your skin's turning to canvas. You can see through it!» This naïve talk neither saddened him nor did it frighten him; it even made him feel extremely happy.

One evening in December, on a moonlit night, as he began his usual round, a breath of air put out his lamp on the threshold of the Carré room. He did not attempt to light it again, so bewitched was he by the bluish column of light descending from the glass ceilings, in the emptiness of the long gallery. This half-light seemed natural for those living there. He was not surprised to be able to distinguish them even though the

walls where they hang were in darkness. He embraced in one glance the beloved figures; they approached into the lit-up space.

He could see them all and from afar, as though they had left their background. He kept losing them and finding them again in perpetual movement. Some appeared, others disappeared. Was it the moon following its course, veiled by clouds, a capricious game of light and shade? He did not try to understand. He who had accepted so easily that this world was alive, why should he now marvel to see it all in action? He did not wonder, even, when a gown or a mantle projected its shadow, so light, diaphanous, on the floor: a certain sign of life.

He gave himself up to the rapture of this silent dance, pursuing the familiar figures in their flight. They formed new groups; he could recognize, assembled in corners of the room, people from Venice, people from Florence, Flemish burghers, Spanish saints. Monks in ecstasy surrounding Virgins; men reverently contemplating with an undesiring, untroubled gaze, women of great beauty. More than ever, he could read on all these faces the interior joy of uninterrupted thinking, the immense sweetness of living in peace, forgetful of vice and of worry. He envied them but without bitterness, he felt close to them, won over by their tranquillity;



only he wished to communicate more, and for it never to end.

The following nights, the festivities were renewed. Each time, the fraternal creatures drew nearer to him and seemed to admit him more willingly into the mystery of their gatherings. What he did during the day, he could not say; he was weary, half-asleep, and insensible to outside occurrences.

It was Christmas day. By night-time the pale city was buried under a layer of snow. He entered by the Apollo Gallery. The moon rose high above a Paris of yore transfigured in its white veil. It shed streams of light obliquely through the wide corner windows; a light that embraced all the whiteness glowing on the roofs, on the river banks, on the pale waters flowing below the Louvre. The abyssal rooms were shrouded in a misty Elysian luminosity; it seemed an unreal night, more like an ailing dawn. Through the open doors he could see all his beloved figures calling him with their habitual courteous solemnity. As in the previous nights, they moved, harmonious and free. As he watched, contours, harsh and heavy, walls, ceilings, vanished behind limitless horizons; woods and wheat-fields, caressed by the watery suns of Ruysdaël; grey lagoons of Canaletti; sleepy seas of Van der Neer, Umbrian landscapes dreamed of by Pérugin, with their background of blue mountains and their ghostly, gold-

leafed trees, as slender as ferns from a primitive world. He scoured, one by one, these chimerical scenes blending with shadows and the changing silhouette of the City of snow outside. Time stood still, the clock no longer told it. And this arrest of Time gave him the impression of a definitive victory over human woes.

But what sound was this, disrupting the usual silence? The sound of bells, no doubt, coming from churches at midnight, as shrill and faint as a sigh; like the wintry ringing of a faraway church tower of which the chimes seem to descend from heaven into each household. Did this sighing come from the organ of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois? No, it was sweeter than the organ, fainter than the bell: a breeze rustling waves of reeds that whispered in unison. And now he could pick out words with German or Italian inflexions; although he had a good command of both languages, he could not understand; the words were incorporeal, elusive.

He strained to understand. At last, as he slowed down before the all-enveloping eyes of the Mona Lisa, he intercepted a whisper: «Realize your dream with us.» Further on, Rembrandt's two elderly alchemists read from their books: «We possess the secrets of life.» Van Dyck's Charles I murmured: «Here we reawaken and reign.» A virgin by Raphaël spoke out more clearly: «There is only one way to reach us. It is through suffering. You are at the end of yours. Come.»

Then he turned towards the beautiful company alive around the table of the Wedding of Canaan; and exclaimed, his hands clasped together: «Oh! Deliver me into your eternal peace. Defend me from the living. I am yours; let me take my place amidst you!»

*H*eads bowed, all smiled at him; hands reached out, lighter than breath itself. They swept him towards the bright light, in the Apollo gallery, where the procession of dignitaries stepped aside before him. But the gallery crumbled away. Forms wandered in white space, on the river's waters rising slowly, just there, onto which windows had opened earlier. Was it water itself, the watery light of the moon or the luminescence of all their watchful eyes? He could not tell. He followed them on this vague trail, lost with them in this element invading him with a delicious coolness. Something heavy flowed incessantly from within him: it was his suffering; something light entered: it was peace. The remains of his body were gently overcome by the current swarming over him, his lips immersed. He became impalpable, metamorphosed and unreal like them; empty at last of all suffering, and filled over and again with peace...

Leafing through newspapers of this time, we found in the same issue, dated the last day of December,

these articles lost in the flood of daily news. First, a piece of news in brief: «We brought recently to the attention of our readers the disappearance of one of the curators of the Louvre. We have as yet no trace of this civil servant. He was known to lead an orderly life. His colleagues are running out of conjectures. Today, for an instant it was believed that the key to the puzzle might have been found. Yesterday evening, upstream from the bridge of the Saints-Pères, bargemen pulled an unrecognizable body out of the river Seine; certain particularities of the clothing match the description of those worn by the missing person; but his features are too disfigured for these frail indications to be conclusive. There is, besides, a serious objection to this hypothesis: Mr X has been missing for six days at the most, and the doctors declare that the body examined has been lifeless for several weeks.»

Further on, in the Fine Arts page, we read: «In a few days, we shall have the pleasure of admiring a masterpiece of the Italian school, with which our national Museum has been miraculously enriched, and which will be the envy of all Europe.

Amongst the paintings to undergo restoration this year, the administration had selected a passably mediocre portrait by an unknown artist. On close examination, a craftsman discerned an earlier figure that had been crudely painted over by an unknown hand. One

of our most skilled restorers set to ridding the canvas of this alteration. Having carried out this delicate work successfully, he set before us a new portrait, a superb work of art, in which experts unhesitatingly recognize the manner of Leonardo da Vinci. The face is admirably expressive and lively, with the serenity that distinguishes the compositions of this great Tuscan artist. In the report made on this find, the Under-Secretary of the Fine-Arts rightly remarks: «It would seem that a soul, at long last delivered of its encasement, has revealed itself to us in its entire liberty and beauty. On our first viewing of the portrait, surrounded by connoisseurs, we overheard the following witty comments: 'The superiority of this kind of being,» an elderly painter was explaining, 'is that he possesses all our thoughts, all our feelings, and much more; only in him they are lighter, less burdensome. Thoughts torment us whereas they are at rest in him. As for what you just said, that you've seen this face somewhere, this type of perfection always leaves you with that impression: you think you've seen him before; he is part of you. I'm referring to Plato. By Jove!

Exactly like this other illustration from another age, for whom we should be damned!' And he gestured towards a beautiful person passing by, surrounded by a group of artists. She revelled in the attention she was attracting. In front of the portrait, she turned away sud-

denly, saying: 'Ah, I too have seen this face somewhere, but less handsome. Oh! What an exquisite portrait! How I love it! I must have it! I'd give anything for it!' Her companion smiled. 'That is your one whim which will not be satisfied. Those who enter here are sacred, guaranteed even from your fantasies. The State grants them a place held in perpetuity.'

'And I can tell you, if he were able, he would follow me. See how he cannot take his eyes off mine,' she continued as she glided past.

'That is the usual optical illusion. As it is a da Vinci, it is no surprise that this portrait has the same magical eyes as the Mona Lisa.'

'It's not true! I am the one he is looking for; I can feel it. His eyes are even moist; he is close to weeping...' The rest of the conversation got lost in her mirth.

For a moment, on this utterly calm countenance, there was a flickering movement, a hint of sadness in the eyes.»



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