

**Marguerite Porete,
source of Meister Eckhart's teaching**

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A Novel

Translation by Richard Clark

To my mother

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Preamble

A blind old man lived with the Dominicans at the convent of Saint Jacques in Paris. No one knew anything about him, since an order of silence had been issued concerning him. The Inquisition had long ago declared him anathema. An ancient slave of Satan, now deemed harmless. He wore a tattered cowl that he refused to let go of even at night.

A young monk was assigned the task of keeping him company. This was because the man had grown insane and people attributed to the young monk a talent for balancing humors. The young monk really had obtained some results at a hospital in Alsace, where he came from. He had observed that if one listened to a madman without replying, if one entered his game as one would the game of a child, the bitterness would flow out freely and the man would regain control of his imagination.

But the blind old man didn't speak. He didn't even move, or hardly. He smiled in a stupid way even when there was no one around him. For hours and hours, he whispered rumbling sounds that only the squirrels that came to visit him understood. Alas, as soon as the young monk sat down beside him on the edge of the well, he grew silent, but continued to smile in every direction.

He seemed aged, but was he really? It can happen that poverty wears out a man prematurely, but he had not known poverty; he had lain around the convent since no one knew when, and before that he had merrily gone astray with the loose women of the Escault basin. You would have to believe that sin ravages worse than poverty.

They called him "the women's dog". He was said to have been unwound, literally as well as figuratively, by some smooth beguines of the Free Spirit, before their condemnation by the Council of Vienne. Ulysses had asked to be tied to his ship's mast so as not to sink beneath the charm of the Sirens, but as for him, he jumped overboard. Now he was drinking the result of his crimes and the Church, always merciful, was hoping he would die in fear, repentance and penitence.

The putting aside of women is doubtless the Church's greatest accomplishment, its most powerful instrument of salvation. Thanks to this segregation, today civilization, purged of all femininity, is virile and healthy at last. Without this moral rampart, the forces of reason are exhausted. The community of preachers of Saint Jacques could guarantee that, since his arrival at the convent, our vagabond had been perfectly protected from all women. Nonetheless, he didn't get over it. For us Dominicans, this was a warning.

It is by the mercy of our community that he was still alive; he had lived among us, in our silence and austerity, our patience and our pity, without ever being able to right himself. When he was younger, the fathers kept him in his cell on ordinary days and freed him on Sundays and feast days for the Mass and the

offices. One couldn't treat a condemned man any better.

The effort was worth the trouble: if the guilty one ever regained his sanity and recanted the heresy of which he was more a victim than guilty, he would testify publicly to the beguines' ignominy. This was the young monk's mission. Yet, no sooner had he approached the madman, than the latter closed up like an oyster.

This went on until the day when five poor children entered the courtyard to learn to read. A wealthy woman from Brussels, currently staying in Paris at the hotel of the weavers' guild, a charitable woman if there ever was one, had deposited with the community's bursar a sum that was, to say the least, persuasive. The terror of the children when they first saw our old lunatic is something I cannot describe. We were used to him, but he was terrifying.

He was contradiction itself. His hair and beard formed a yellowish-gray felt that left exposed a broad forehead traversed by a purple scar, a nose misshapen by a long-ago fracture, and a toothless mouth. His face seemed to have been trapped in suffering, and yet his full and sensual lips smiled with a desperate constancy, despite a gash which had never totally healed.

His deepset eyes, veiled but always wide open beneath overhanging eyebrows, seemed tirelessly to rejoice in novel beauties. He who had, more than any other man, lived in sin, was not only not harassed by any feeling of guilt; he appeared already immersed in the greatest beatitude.

How do you save a happy man?

After several days, a particularly brave child dared to approach him and playfully and innocently dropped a small pebble in his bowl. The man froze even more in his expression of perpetual silly happiness, yet his eyes moistened, a trickle of water began to slide down a furrow in his cheek, and never stopped flowing.

The young monk seized the opportunity. He asked the children to sit down around the unfortunate man. After a long period of silence, the man began to whisper his usual rumbling noises. The brave boy dared to call him to account for this:

-It's not right to tell stories nobody can understand!

The old man once more grew silent. Nothing came out of him but a trickle of tears on a mask of joy. Despite this new setback, they decided to continue the same stratagem after every reading lesson. The progress was amazing. Some time later, he recounted his story, and the monk wrote it down.

In the end, the prior had a written text in front of him that was as coherent as it could be. The poor man returned to his silence. He had signed his confession. Hard as it was to believe, he was happier than ever. He had totally gone astray.

The young monk had failed. The dangerous paper would have to be burned, and the wretched man returned to his dungeon. The case had been decided. But it turned out otherwise.

The rich woman from Brussels had just donated an even greater sum to the convent. She wished to be received in the convent's inner courtyard. To remove the insane old man was out of the question, for the prior had boasted to her of his mercy for the heretic. Impossible to retreat.

The woman, escorted by two of the city's burghers, entered the convent courtyard. It was the morning of the first of June, 1325.

The door had not yet closed behind the noble woman when our arch-heretic stood up as if his master has just entered. The woman, however, had not spoken, had not made any sound. The whole community remained dumbfounded, incapable of the slightest movement.

His eyes gray and empty, the blind man slowly approached her, but without touching any obstacle, nor even disturbing a single pebble. If he could have smiled any more, he would have done so: his euphoria remained intact, though tears streamed down his beard. The woman, neither young nor beautiful, small, anemic, with deep wrinkles on a child's face, abruptly stopped. She was nothing more than a statue of salt. Her fine lips trembled, however. With eyes fixed, she remained imprisoned by the charm. Bewitched, her feet remained frozen. Her body inclined forward, for she was about to run toward him at the moment when she was petrified. What a marvel! Steeply leaning, she did not fall.

The blind old man reached out his hand to her. He came far enough ahead to touch her.

A guard intervened, and another, through who knows what reflex, took hold of the woman's shoulders. The old insane man staggered, his whole body trembling. Thunderstruck and shaken by convulsions, he stared at the woman as if he had regained his sight. Seized by a horrible pain, he collapsed, dead.

The woman fainted in the guard's arms.

We are telling it as we saw it. The woman made no movement either toward or away from him, seemed neither to fear nor to pity him. It was simply that, from the very first look, she was literally dumbfounded. And when the demon left the blind man, she fainted. No one touched the possessed man's corpse.

The next day, the body had disappeared; his stinking garment rested on the pebble pavement. The demon had probably inhabited the man for a long time, which would explain the corpse's speedy putrefaction.

A short time afterward, the woman departed for her country and the young monk was ordered to return to Alsace. He took with him the satanic manuscript his provincial wished to examine, probably in order to complete one of the numerous demonologies the Inquisitors used in establishing judicial precedents.

I, the undersigned, confirm the following testimony.

Signed at Erfurt, the 25th of July, 1328

Berenger de Mordacen, op

The Prophecy

Thus spoke the heretic at the Saint Jacques convent:

In the Hainaut, not very far from Valenciennes, on a steep hill, three enormous chestnut trees stretch skyward. On warm days, this high place caresses the heavens with its cockscomb and the clouds disperse. At the same moment, sheep appear in the green pastures. It might be said that the clouds have shrunk in order to come to earth and crop a little grass. Nowhere else on earth is the earth's joy so perfectly wed with the heavens' serenity. There, you climb to contemplate the fields, thickets and woods, find a peaceful moment, weep for a sorrow or ask for a maiden's hand in marriage.

Even so, at the top, the twisted trunks and curly crowns of the three colossi provoke the heavens and await the storm. On dark days, the truth falls there, on their heads. When a tempest threatens, the peasants approach the hill to study the signs. If the sky envelops the three titans in a vast coal-black skirt, if it shakes it with all its winds and its lightning streams down along the garment, if it lifts its muddy frills, if it lights up its knotted legs, then the goddess reveals her prophecies.

"The pains will be terrible", Maman had said as she returned from the hill. Father shrugged, showing his indifference to these old wives' tales. And she added: "The child is worth the trouble."

That's the whole question: Is the child worth the trouble?

Let's imagine that a child emerges from the human tragedy, let's imagine that the child is worth it, then it would be possible for men to forgive women for their love of life. Is it possible?

For that to be, the man would have to borrow from the future, for we experience the trouble, we know it and it is immense, while as for the happy child, we await it.

Years later, when I was the respectable secretary of an honorable presbytery, I too smiled at my mother, now deceased, however. She had made of one single sentence the principle of the world: "The fruit is worth the pain." She saw in it a logical and physical necessity that she experienced by altering Archimedes just a bit: "The weight of the volume of water displaced by Noah's ark was necessarily equal to the weight of the submerged volume of the ark of salvation, for if not, nobody would be here to testify to it! Our existence proves that the time immemorial preceding us has produced effects that have made up for the most harmful misfortunes every time, for if not, for a very long time there would not be anything where there used to be something!" To sum it up, if life were only an accident, we wouldn't be there to weep for the world's sorrows...

At that stage of Maman's explanation, Father's face morphed into a grimace that said more or less: "It's too beautiful to be true"...Even as his unflinchingly

amorous eyes added in spite of himself: "You are too beautiful not to be true."

Beauty, then, is right there in front of us, we accept it and hold it as natural, but "the child who is worth the trouble" resembles the horizon: if one advances, it retreats, and if one does not go forward, it stays out of reach.

Papa wanted an explanation. Maman explained nothing. They called her a midwife, a wise woman. And how can a woman find wisdom in sexual desire, in giving birth, in nursing, if there is no way out in this world? For a midwife, hope is not a virtue, it is a job requirement.

I wasn't seven the day she brought me to my first birthing. It was a beautiful day. When we arrived at the place, we stopped for a brief silent prayer. Maman asked me to wait outside and watch over a sheep that was there, tied near the house for milking.

I saw nothing of the mystery of birth, but I heard everything. The sheep did, too. The whole flock grazing peacefully on the hill half a league from the house-- it heard too. A horrible screaming! All the animals took flight. The sheep, for its part, made its rope snap, pulling so that it nearly strangled itself, stamping in place, returning and once again hurling itself to the end of its rope. I was afraid for it. The hemp disappeared in its coat; it came back toward the stake, inhaled, sent out a piercing bleat, turned and ran at full speed to hang itself at the limit of its freedom. It was going to die, scared by the scream of creation.

Did I have any choice? An axe was stuck in a log to be split. With the help of a stone, I struck the handle and the blade came out of the wood. I cut the rope. The sheep ran toward the flock as fast as its legs could carry it.

And then, nothing, not the slightest sound. A deadly silence. In this interminable silence another cry progressively took root, a cry that painfully forced itself out of suffocation. It was the baby. Then another unbearable silence.

-Come in, Guion.

I cautiously opened the door and approached the bed. It was then that she showed me the little animal, blood-streaked, gray, crumpled, and grimacing with suffering; all its energy seemed dedicated to keeping its eyelids closed, as if light represented for it an instrument of torture of astronomical proportions. I was terrified. In spite of my terror I saw, taking shape behind Maman's shoulder, the most surprising, disconcerting, unseemly thing that exists, the last thing one could imagine after such a concert of fears and pain: the smiling and completely moonlike face of a mother.

Some years later, when Maman, on returning from the three chestnut trees, announced her famous prophecy, it was the grimacing face of the baby that I saw, it was the mother's smiling face I discerned, but what I felt above all was the enormous gap between the two, and in this gap, the scared sheep strangling at the end of its rope. Fear is the scream of creation.

The paradox is there. How to have faith in the future when birth terrifies us?

It has to be said, man is attached to his thought by a solid rope. Our churches have been thought out, designed, reflected upon and constructed. We breathe inside them. They are stones, laws, habits, and morals. And the less we think about them, the more they inhabit us. We have installed in them stained-glass windows that reflect our fears and hopes. Above all, high up in the middle of the dome, visible from everywhere, we have inscribed the Eye in the Triangle. Thus, we are bound full circle within ourselves. Like the sheep, we are strangling ourselves out of fear of the scream of creation.

On that day, thanks to the grace of childhood, I looked for a long time at the baby and the mother. I went from one to the other, smothering my anxiety in my fears, breathing in the midst of doubt, but never completely leaving either the mother or the baby. Really! A thing that ugly, sticky, agitated, stinking and screaming is worth the trouble!

Just yesterday, I touched my face, that of a blind old man, I sounded my depths, I measured my thoughts, took stock of my actions... Conclusion: I still am uglier, emptier and more ignorant than a newborn baby. And yet, my hands discern a smile that in no way suits such a face. At the end of my life, this is what I am discovering: there is no longer any gap between the baby's grimace and the mother's illumination, the two faces are superimposed, welded together. It is my face.

And that is my heresy.

Everyone pretends to believe in himself, but no one believes for a single moment that a man, a woman, or him or herself is worth the trouble that Nature takes to make us, maintain us, and gorge us with such a crazy beauty. What! All these stars, this moon, this sun, these flowers, these trees, these mountains, these animals, these fantastic landscapes, this enchanted, magical, excessive immensity, this enormous bouquet of thousands upon thousands of miracles of life... all this for this ridiculous little two-legged animal who suffocates himself in his tiny church of thought! Frankly, no one can believe in that.

In the presence of a young monk, my only witness, I am going to relate a story that no one will want to believe. Certainly, I am a heretic of a terrible heresy, the heresy of a woman summoned before the "very holy" Inquisition, a woman who wrote this: "A true soul cannot speak of God any more than it can say where He is nor who He is. Whoever speaks of God when he wishes, to whom he wishes and where he wishes should know without any doubt that he has never felt the true heart of Love, for this seizes the soul by the middle without it being aware of it." But my heresy could break the eardrum of the churches and blind the Eye in the Triangle. It could break the rope.

In this epic world made of male heroes sacrificed in combat against others or in combat against themselves, in this world of warriors and monks, everything tells woman: "You aren't worth anything." Woman must yank her value up out of her own consciousness, she must be seized by the middle of her heart, and

raise herself to a value worthy of pleasure, happiness and love. And the fate of humanity will be horrible if woman does not succeed in this. For then the worst of vicious cycles will arise: the child

of a woman who isn't worth anything won't be worth anything either; not being worth anything, he destroys everything without even leaving his little church of thought, without even cutting his rope. He draws his value from the blood of others. His hatred of women, his scorn for children, his disdain for life will go as far as the murder of the earth. The stronger his church, the more ravaged the earth will be. Killing the feminine, destroying childhood, such is his enterprise.

This is the fate a woman wanted to tear us away from. However, for one who was witness to these outrageous events of the beginning of the fourteenth century, Maman's principle became doubtful, to say the least. Yes! We did recognize the extraordinary feminine breakthrough that gave hope for the child, but at the same time we witnessed its inexorable collapse. I knew Marguerite Porete, the initiator of the women's breakthrough, just as well as I did William of Paris and Philippe de Marigny, the promoters of the beguinages' fatal fall. I have experienced in my flesh and in my spirit the joys of emancipation and the return with a vengeance of the masculine curse...

Marguerite's ashes were scattered on the Seine and today nothing allows us to glimpse the smallest resurrection of her saving heresy. On the contrary, human madness has discovered new instruments of death. If the times that preceded us have, obviously, produced and preserved us, it is because we were not there, we the men shut up in our little churches. If we had been there, a long time ago there would have been nothing left living on the earth!

The Samaritan Woman

It is related in the Gospel that a fellow was going from Paris(Jerusalem) to Valenciennes(Jericho). (A lunatic surely has the right to adapt a parable.) The man fell among thieves who, after stripping and beating him, went away, leaving him half dead. It happened that a Franciscan passed by, saw the man and continued on his way. Later, a Dominican arrived and rolled him into the ditch, under the bushes. I must say that the man was soiled, he stank, and his swollen face was frightening. In the evening, the local bishop took the same road, smelled the stink and made a wide detour. Finally, during the night, a foreigner passed by, a Samaritan woman, and heard the man moan. You recall that the Samaritan woman had drunk the water of Love near the well of Sychar after Jesus had, paradoxically, asked her for something to drink. She drew near, kissed the unlucky man's forehead, poured oil and wine on his wounds, and bandaged them. She did not transport him to an inn for someone else to take care of him; better than that, she went to sleep beside him, warmed him with her body, cared for him for three more days and nights, sharing with him her bread and all her provisions.

That is what happened to me. But the story continues....

The Samaritan's husband passed by, surprised her, and dragged her off to Paris, accusing her of adultery. The next day, the entire Church was there. They delivered the woman to the secular authority and she was executed. No one can contest these facts; there are examples of the massacre of women every day and over more than four thousand years of history.

However, the man she had taken care of survived and recovered from his wounds. When he learned the news, he could not restrain himself and publicly testified in favor of the one who had saved him, saying: "Don't you recognize her! That woman, whom you are treating like a prostitute, washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and her hair. She loved him more than anyone, and you have slain her! She did the same thing for me. Is it not written that what we do for the poorest of men, we do for the Man as a whole!"

They seized him and threw him into a lightless dungeon.

In the year without grace and altogether ordinary of 1306, Philip the Fair confiscated the property of the Jews, tortured a large number of them, then banished them from his kingdom. More than a hundred thousand were exiled. He did the same with the Lombards. The money of the Jews and Lombards not sufficing, he proceeded with financial measures that incited riots. Paris was in an uproar, at the brink of revolt. The king took refuge in the Temple in order to be protected temporarily by the rich and famous monk-knights of the Church: the Templars. He remained there long enough for a part of his troops to return from Rome where they were keeping the pope in check (the latter was challenging the fiscal powers of the State). Contrary to all custom, the king

demanded to be named Grand Master of the Temple, with total authority over the fortune of the Church's famous fighting community. This was not granted him.

Some time later, he invited to his court the Grand Master of the Temple, Jacques de Molay. The king requested that he become the godfather of one of his children. On October 12th of the following year Jacques de Molay attended, at the king's side, the funeral of the wife of Charles de Valois, Philip the Fair's brother. Their friendship appeared to be sealed.

Then my master, Philippe de Marigny, wormed his way into the affair. This frequenter of bordellos could not conceive of the fall of the Temple without the fall of that women's movement called the beguines, for they had escaped the ascendancy of men. Really, what good would it do Philip the Fair to increase his power over men if he lost control of women?

It was then that a storm shook the Three Chestnut Trees. An enormous branch gave way beneath the thunder's axe. And an old woman prophesied: "It will no longer be possible to restrain the birds of prey. As soon as they see a woman, they see joy, lightness, they imagine children playing around a house, a garden, chickens, a cow, a future which opens and escapes them, a future better than they are and this they cannot bear. They are going to devour everything, even the earth, their primordial mother."

The Investigation

In those days, my business took me all around Paris. They called me Monsieur Monsignor the Informer's Secretary. Monsieur Secretary slipped through the crypts and gutters, carrying slander. I admit it, my pen was a sewer. I worked from dictation, I was the dictation of another. I ran through his veins, I breathed through his lungs. I set into motion his exceedingly powerful hands which, in order to reassure myself, I called: "justice".

My dark and jaundiced life weighed on me. Every evening was alike, this particular evening just as much as the others, an evening just a bit more purple, gleaming just a trifle more in the frame of my ambitions. Yet one man was going to block my path as a follower.

The water of the Seine formed small burgundy stripes, wrinkles caressing the sand of the Place de Grève. Place de Grève or Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, it's all the same, a bend in the Seine, the aortic arch of Paris, bringing wine and meat in and expelling filth and urine, a meeting place par excellence. I had arrived several hours early. According to plan, a barge lying on the shore bore the insignia of the king of France: Philip the Fair. I sat down in the shade of the barge. I stared at the water as it wrote and erased lines in the sand.

On the Seine, the sails of coasters fluttered in the wind. On the shore lay tired sails, and they seemed to be swapping gossip. Through all the noises, malicious rumors circulated from one man to another. I heard the muttering of tradesmen---prices, business, bargaining, the ordinary murmur of men, and in that murmur, the rumor that "justice" calls "information".

Behind me stood the platform, there where calumny, reaching its culmination, offers its victims to "justice". No one escapes the possibility of one day arriving under the axe of Monsieur His Majesty's executioner. That possibility is what we call citizenship: the right to be killed by "information". And that is something we particularly sense when our job consists of nothing but fishing victims' names out of rumor.

Behind me stood the stage on which the bans were published, the laws promulgated and the accused executed. No one is safe. No one. In vain does a monk hide away from the world; if a good bit of gossip hooks on to him and pulls him into the current of information all the way to a sufficiently competent authority, he is transformed into a living torch. The best escape is to finger another. To list names is even better. That was my profession.

Since winter was approaching, a canvas dome protected the post where the names of the wanted and the condemned were written. This is where the case should be decided, where all the important cases are decided, in one way or another. The meeting was supposed to take place in the boat, next to my ear. The interrogation, I should say! Philippe de Marigny will gently squeeze the lemon and I will collect the juice.

The story is always very simple: a man or woman is careless, comes out with some strange behavior, envious or anxious tongues go to work, and finally the person is offered to the beast. The details vary. But the conclusion never disappoints us. We are all under "justice's" rule.

As a child, once, only once, did I read over death's shoulder. I was armed with a slingshot. I had for several days been observing a squirrel, a small gray squirrel whose fur was worth money, or at least, that's what I believed. Mother will be proud of my prize, I thought; she will get a gold sou for it at the marketplace or will keep it to cover her lace collar. I had taken note of the animal's slightest behaviors and knew everything about it. The forest my prey lived in was located at the foot of a large hill of bare sandstone. In the summer, the rodent climbed his beech sometime before Angelus to go and nap in an inaccessible hole. He stopped three or four ells above the ground and looked attentively to the left and the right. I had discovered his blind spot. I would wait for him there, at the exact spot where he never looked, and fire my stone.

The right day arrived, calm and humid. I had taken every precaution. I had arrived well ahead of time and hidden behind a bush. I held it in my sights. And then suddenly, I understood. If I decided the fate of this animal, someone else perhaps, at that very moment, was deciding mine.

So, I, Guion de Cressonaert, did not release the cord of my slingshot. That day, I let the small gray climb all the way up the beech as far as its secret hiding-place. I gave death's winch some slack. And I felt my heart melt with joy.

I had become a judicial secretary. I worked for the king, so I worked for "justice". I wrote what I heard. In fact, I wrote above all what my master wanted to hear, Philippe de Marigny, a prelate who had received his prelicity from Philip the Fair, our king, and who served him better than anyone. I was proud of his nomination. The business that had been entrusted to us seemed to me impressive, and it was, but only much later would I discover in what sense it was so.

At that time, everyone had his own opinion on the question. It was a question of sovereignty, it is always a question of sovereignty in the world of men. Did the pope outrank the king or was it the reverse? Did religion surmount the State or was it the other way around? Nothing seemed more important. Let's be clear, the question of knowing who, king or pope, was going to win comes down to the question: who has the force? This is the fundamental tautology of all powers, and thus of all "justice". And the question of who is the strongest is perfectly clear: who can kill first?

As strange as it seems, I was completely unbiased. I had been hired by Monsignor de Marigny on behalf of King Philip the Fair. It was a matter of choice. I was going to find out at the same time as everyone else who would win: the king or the pope. It was not a political question, it was not a question at all, but the simple tautology of force.

The Temple affair, to which I had been appointed, could not but have serious

and decisive consequences for the fate of two sovereignties: the Church or the State. For nearly two centuries, the order of the Poor Knights of Christ, surnamed the Temple militia, exercised the supreme priesthood, war, in other words. Monks who were knights, chaste, poor, and obedient, as much determined to ruin the Saracens as resigned to die on the battlefield serving the pope. The Temple, liege army of the pope, Trojan horse within the States, resembled a spiderweb spanning the world from Orient to Occident, from North to South. Princes and kings felt caught in the pope's web.

Up to this point, nothing in the investigation could sow the slightest doubt about their courage. These men did death's work until death did them in. They liked nothing so much as sacrifice and suffering....if not victory and money, perhaps.

The poor Knights of Christ, Temple of the Church, were supposed to ensure the protection of the Holy Places of Palestine. It was their mission, their purpose. And they had accomplished that mission. They were supposed to protect the pilgrimage route. And they did it. At Haifa and in Caesarea they had kept open the perilous gorge of Nazareth. They were supposed to drive back the Moors who had made deep advances throughout the Iberian peninsula. They did it. They had been in all the battles: Ascalon, Ansur, Gaza, Darum, Ramlah, Damietta, Aleppo, the conquest of Majorca and so many others. One against a hundred, they hurled themselves at the enemy in desperate combat.

But in the end, they failed. Nine years ago now, at St. John of Acre, they held on almost to the point of extermination; eighteen returned.

Courage is not the same as force. They learned that at their expense. And it is force that rules in this world and not courage. They were going to learn it to the last man.

At each hour of the day, the Templar recites this prayer: "The Virgin Mary was the beginning of our religion and she will be the end of our lives: whenever it pleases God that it will be". For the master of death, everything is there: leave the feminine as early as possible, return to it only at the end, and between the two, avoid it at all costs. Such is the essence of their initiation, of their vows, of their struggle, and of their much-desired death. The knight wants the death of the body as a deliverance from his desire for woman.

Imagine, however, that a lady reclothes the knight with a new body, with a body lit up like a torch, I mean, with a body haunted by an immense desire for woman. This body he will give up also, though for a higher price, even for a very high price. A thousand times he will give up his body, a thousand times, he hopes. And a body charged with a never-satisfied desire doesn't give in easily. Love of death at the pope's service! A power dangerous for the king! And each time he gives up his body, he feels more immortal. Consequently, the knight has the habit of going out and brushing against some member of the gentle sex, setting himself on fire, and then running to extinguish that flame in a Saracen's chest. It is his personal victory. Though he may believe that giving himself willingly to every death procures him sovereignty, submission to the

pope is what it is in fact.

In front of me, the Seine. The sun had abandoned us, the moon alone was shining. A few torches had moved. Sounds, whispers... De Marigny was sitting in the boat with our first witness: Jean de Tourne, the treasurer of the Temple.

-I will speak to the king and no one else, Jean de Tourne demanded.

Certainly, you can be assured of that, de Marigny answered. But we must prepare this audience. You know the risk! Is there any substance in what you have to say? You must put my mind at rest on this subject.

I will be brief. At St. John of Acre, we lost too many knights. Our castles, our fortresses and especially the kraks of Palestine are no longer tenable. So the Grand Master Jacques de Molay decided to work out a strategic retreat toward the sinews of war: money.

We know that already.

- I'm coming to the heart of it. Listen carefully and you'll understand. Our provinces, all our provinces: Poitou, Burgundy, England, Aragon, Castille, Portugal, Sicily, Hungary, Magdeburg, Mainz, Trier, and especially our three great provinces of Jerusalem, Tripoli and Antioch, to which you must add Little Armenia, have always been banks and centers of influence after that. Donations, legacies, collections and taxes on our public markets, our mills, and our hunting lands are important sources of revenue. But more than that, our protection sells well and sells high. Our force comes from our allegiance to the pope, from our universality, in other words. Yes, we drive out the Arabs, the Turks and the Saracens, but above all we do business with them. We have become the biggest bank in the world. And our financial transactions, our loans, our money orders, our guarantees are in increasing demand....

- Not without usury...

- Of course! The risks are considerable.

- And the pope exempts you from taxes in every kingdom....

- To make a long story short, at the present time our possessions are greater than those of all the kings of Europe combined. We have captured the banking market because we were the principal protectors of the merchants of Europe and the Middle East. We furnished certificates of credit for all the traveling pilgrims and all the merchants going to the East. We kept the books for the Crusades.... Today we're the bank of kings, sultans and caliphs.....

- Including Philip the Fair....

- His debt is considerable....

- His powers exceed it. Isn't he our protector in France!

- The balance of power has changed, we are not unaware of that. That is why I am here....

- I still don't understand your intentions, Marigny said, and stood up.

- Sit down, I follow you. The nobles who enter the Temple become knights and give their heroism free rein. In that way they provide the whole institution with legitimacy and a good reputation. But if they had served as ministers of Finance, the Temple would have ceased to exist a long time ago. For the same reason, clerks and burghers don't enter the Temple. A few of them become squires, but many, if they find they're of no account as a knight, find a better "account" elsewhere. Pardon the play on words. The Temple is a commercial and financial network that has learned how to find shelter under chivalry's ideals. The knights don't get involved in our business. While the nobles perish in the Crusades, with considerable profit we exchange goods, money, manuscripts, and security services and we did it just as much with our Christian brothers, as with the Jews and Saracens.

- If I understand you correctly, in losing your knights, you have lost your legitimacy and your banking network is in serious difficulty. The Temple's burghers want a new alliance that would allow them to continue their commerce....

- You hit the mark, Jean de Tourne admitted.

- And the pope? Marigny asked mischievously.

- He has the prestige, but he no longer has the force. Now the force is on the side of the king of France. I'll stop there, Jean concluded, getting up.

Then he turned and, in a solemn voice, declared his intention:

- The chief banker of the Temple would like to discuss with the King an alliance without an officially declared vassalage, so as to keep our banking power, our independence and our universality, in other words. We think that if His Majesty could, thanks to our assistance, become Emperor, the power and the authority, the force and the prestige, the money and the aptitude would make good deals possible for both parties....

- We need figures, Marigny insisted.

- Here are some.

I had written these figures myself. Sums so enormous that they dramatically altered the course of the investigation. Philip the Fair no longer wanted to ally himself with the Temple; he wanted to completely absorb it. For that to occur, the Temple had to lose even the smallest shred of its reputation. All the blood of the martyred knights must rise up out of the earth and rain back down upon them like impious blood. We were no longer investigators, nor even spies; but inventors of calumnies, and it would be our duty to imagine the greatest scandal ever, great enough to cover the enormity of the crime to which I would be an accomplice

The Knight

On the 13th of October, 1307, three days after the presentation of the verbatim of our interview with the treasurer of the Temple, all the Templars in Paris and elsewhere were arrested and thrown into prison by order of Messire Guillaume de Nogaret, keeper of the seal. But the master of the affair could not and should not be anyone other His religious Holiness the Inquisitor general, William of Paris, or brother William as he, out of humility, preferred to be called. He wasn't really interested in the king's wishes; as Inquisitor, he was naturally on the side of the pope, but he was above all not interested in politics. Hunting Satan, as he did, in all his forms, he recognized him under the silkiest garments. He maintained that it is more to Satan's benefit to take over a saint than a common pervert. If he conquers a saint, he deprives God of a soldier and gains a superb knight. He infiltrates the saint. In him, he receives the perfect disguise, one that gives him the moral authority he needs to rule. Thoroughly installed in a saint, he has at his disposal the prestige essential for his work.

Brother William had recognized in Philip the Fair an ordinary man, an ordinary man just as perverted as any. But he had been suspicious of the Templars for a long time, for if Satan were able to infiltrate the most powerful and prestigious order in Catholic Christianity, he would hold the key to the world. So the preacher monk accepted the charge of Inquisitor from the father general. But he also had a mandate from the pope himself. He wouldn't be hunting the petty vermin; he would be attacking the fortress of the Prince of darkness: the champions of the Temple.

Philip the Fair really had liked brother William very much; he was the most effective ally imaginable. For brother William, Philip the Fair was no more than a pretext for his own work of purgation. For Philip the Fair, brother William was his legitimacy. Marigny took care of diplomacy. Nagoret led the infiltration and espionage operations and the coordination of the necessary secular forces.

Brother William was responsible for the souls. I had only met him once before the official interrogations, and he had made my blood run cold. Anyone who met brother William had felt as if he were approaching perfection in person, truth in operation, totally free of doubt. This monk despised the world, men, and the affairs of men. He had renounced himself in order to dedicate himself entirely to the business of Heaven.

Our meeting took place after vespers, at the castle. A roaring fire lit up the hearth. Brother William was standing in the cold. He was reading a report and, without raising his eyes, beckoned me to come nearer the fire so he could see me better. He was illuminated by a candle. His emaciated face, his coarse linen soutane shiny from wear, his eyes sunk into the skull like a dying man's made him already part of the beyond.

He arose and turned toward me. This walking corpse moved with an uncanny energy. He didn't care about the concerns of individuals; he didn't even see them. It was immediately apparent that he would never renounce his objective. And he stated this objective at the very start:

- Do you know what the holy Inquisition is?, he asked me.

- The institution responsible for flushing out and punishing heretics....

- Know that the holy Inquisition sees all and knows all. But much more than that, it is the Question, the Question insinuated into the heart to separate the light from darkness as on the first day of Genesis. It dismembers, it separates, it tears the soul from chaos. It is the greatest divine mercy, it is God's medicine for saving the lost soul... You are shaking. You will see that the body's suffering is nothing, it is the Question that matters. It worms itself into man like the violence of the first day of Creation.

The truth makes us all afraid. It purifies man of his feminine origin. Eve mixed what God had separated. She made us of us something composite, decomposable, perishable, putrescible. But the Cross saves us. Suffering should be welcomed as our second mother, the one who washes us clean of our first mother's stain. His holiness Innocent III clearly expressed it: "Woman is a cesspool, she conceives in impurity and stench, gives birth in anguish and pain..." We are going to give the knights a second mother.

He took a deep breath and continued:

- Can you imagine Hell, can you imagine even a century of Purgatory... If you can imagine the sufferings of Hell and Purgatory, then you can imagine the height, the width, and the depth of the Inquisition's mercy. The knights deserve to have their eternal suffering abbreviated by means of a bodily suffering that is simple, cold, and direct.

He turned away and returned to his bench:

- You stink of fear even more than of woman. De Marigny thinks you're reliable. Don't disappoint me. Compassion is intended for the soul, not the body, that carrion we must bear in this life because of our mother's sin...

He buried himself once more in his report. His scornful pout told a great deal about his opinion of my person. I understood that I need not wait for another signal. I left the great hall and went back to the immense common room where I was staying.

The first session took place, contrary to all custom, high up in the tower of the palace, at Paris. I myself had composed the confession in advance:

"To all those who will see and hear the enclosed, I, Geoffroy de Charnay, commander of Normandy, knight of the Temple militia, having all authority over the province, confess to my shame and without possible pardon, to have denied Christ and idolized Odin, Thor and Frijia in the form of an old man's head with a long beard, blasphemed the Church, spat on the Cross, colluded with the Muslims, and committed sodomy with the neophytes in the holy chapel

of the Temple, as a rite of initiation, in accordance with the secret rules of the Temple. I declare then, in the face of Heaven and of the earth, and I confess to my eternal shame, that I have committed the greatest crimes, insanities and the vilest impurities of the flesh. I testify that all this is true and that no suffering can save me but those experienced by Christ..."

High in the tower, I took my place as secretary of the interrogation, noting whatever could condemn the victim and ignoring what could justify him. The sky was splendid, a day fit for a wedding. The cold November air slapped the royal standard and, in the battlements, whistled a sort of joyous minuet. A downy snow covered the countryside in the distance and muffled the sound echoed by the morning's humidity. A bit of women's gossip, an infant's babbling reached us from below, softened, light, joyous, carefree... Exactly the atmosphere that brother William liked, he whom seldom went to the donjon's cellars to interrogate Satan. He breathed the good air, mounted a stage, sat down on a sort of curule chair decorated with sculpted serpents. Hands joined, he murmured a prayer of thanksgiving. He shone with a kind of supernatural joy.

Geoffroy, barely girded with a loincloth, was lying on a heavy table, his ankles held fast in irons, his wrists attached to the wheel by two chains. I was seated on a stool by his head, ready to write every audible word. I was shaking to the point of being sick.

A knight without his finery and his armor is a peculiar thing. Knotted with muscles, but white as a grub and covered with bruises and crush-marks, and with body hair almost entirely rubbed off by the friction of the armor's leather lining, you would think you were looking at an insect with its wings torn off. Once naked, a knight is no more than a mass of flesh kneaded by iron, an iron that protects him, but dents under the blows and compresses the flesh, which darkens; he is a bluish chrysalis; a walled-in body from which sweat does not evaporate, that stays wet and smells like urine; a body that does not know itself, that has never looked at itself, that never shows itself, that deceives with all the glitter of its coat of mail and its engraved armor. Suddenly, this future corpse was naked, spread out like an animal readied for flaying, vulnerable, shivering at the sight of the executioner's tools.

The unlucky man remained motionless, paralyzed, his eyes almost out of their sockets. His black hair glistened with sweat, a greenish foam slid down his forehead, his chest heaved, his lips murmured a prayer inaudible even to my ears that brushed against his mouth. I believe that he was asking for death. But in the universe where he had been thrown, this death was no more than a memory, a lost hope.

The executioner, a little man nicknamed Noiret, was checking his equipment and his installations: on one side the iron, the pincers, the tongs, the iron points, the torches, torture's necessities; on the other side, the water, the cloths, the clays, the muds, the ointments, the healing necessities. He was left to himself, master of his art, only one result was expected of him, and nothing

else.

Brother William had nothing to discuss with the executioner: the secular took care of the body, he, the priest, took care of the soul. Utterly competent, as concentrated on his work as a butcher, Noiret was reflecting on his plan of action. After the introductory prayer, the Inquisitor raised his finger and I understood immediately that the essence of the art of torture was the slowness of its execution. The torturer did indeed become suddenly still. This went on for an endless amount of time. Then, Noiret began to simulate the actions, but broke them off. He let Geoffroy's imagination go into operation. It was working. The knight's body writhed. Noiret didn't need to do anything.

The sun was shining. The cold was biting. William prayed. Noiret motioned to the blower to make the fire hotter, even as he placed a little icy water on the breastbone of his victim. If the purpose of music is to bring the body into time, torture consists of making the body leave time, of giving it to eternity, to the conviction that sweet death would never again be possible.

Noiret gave a sharp knock to one of the wheel's handles. The wheel creaked. He got up, took the cruet of oil and dripped a few drops into the hub. Next, he motioned to two valets to start the wheel. They applied all their weight to it. The body could be heard cracking. The elbows came out of joint, the kneecaps disappeared in the knees. Geoffroy opened his mouth, but not a sound came out. Bent by the machine's enormous traction, his ribs flattened his lungs. Geoffroy turned blue, and his eyes seemed to jump out of his skull. Noiret made a sign to relax the wheel.

- I confess, the knight sighed as soon as he could exhale. Mercy!

This made Noiret smile. Another sign and the valets went at it with just as much enthusiasm, only to let up immediately.

- Mercy!

Another blow of the wheel and a quick relaxation.

-Mercy, Geoffroy begged once more, his voice barely audible.

This went on until the sun made the shadows disappear and the blinding light of noon forced us to close our eyes. The knight had confessed a hundred times, but brother William sensed there was hope in this. The knight ought to lose even the memory of having had an honorable existence. He must be made to slide into an eternal degeneration. There is a place where a being can no longer know if what he says is true or false, a place where truth no longer exists and it is there that obedience can begin. Faced with the abyss, man surrenders.

Brother William knew one thing: it is at the moment when a man confesses that he is most ashamed. That shame should pierce him a thousand times. It takes time. His denial of himself should cover many long hours, hours made interminable by their pain. The repeated confessions banish the memories of the previous life, the worthy life. An immense space of time must be covered by these hammered-out confessions that betray all the values of a knight. All of

the values forming the cornerstone of his person must give way. The core must be broken.

It is in this bottomless depth that the condemned one condemns himself, that he swallows the bitter brew of what he has struggled against all his life. His softness, his weakness, his cowardice, the effeminate part of his soul must surround him to the point where he no longer has any other existence. When self-pity is all that remains of him, he can once again become that liquid element the Church requires like blood.

The knight will no longer be a knight, he will never have been one; he is a coward, he was a coward, he will eternally remain a coward. The one thing he was afraid of since his dubbing has now risen again into his guts, into his chest, into his memory, all the rest has disappeared. He had feared being a weeping female, he is one. He is no longer certain of ever having lived otherwise. He no longer has any worthy self with which he might one day be reconciled, thus he no longer has any future. Time's two sides have given way. The happiest, most solid, most decisive moments of his life on earth vanish in a swamp and this swamp includes precisely, point by point, all that he had loathed.

Never would Noiret or brother William insult the man. He and the executioner kept silent. Were they to speak, they might condemn him in the name of values that the knight does not possess. By their silence, the accused condemns himself in the name of his own values. He is judged by himself. And nothing, I assure you, nothing is less merciful than a man who, out of the dark depths of his beliefs, vomits up himself.

Toward three o' clock, the miserable knight fell silent. Geoffroy no longer existed. He was nothing any longer but a thing, broken and crawling on the wheel. He knew that his word was useless. All hope had left him. There is where he must be left, without adding too much or removing too much, to let time do its work, to devastate the soul in its own scorn for itself.

What is virtue? The vase containing what we think is good. Virtue is what we would like to be. Each one has his own uprightness according to his idea of the good. What is evil? It is all that we are afraid of being. It is the recipient of the vices that disgust us. Each one, in his belly, nurse his own Satan. Virtue and evil make up the two tautological foundations of our moral self. The Inquisition is our own eye above the dome of our own church.

The sun was going down. Geoffroy's resistance was crumbling. He no longer said a word, he moaned like a feverish child, he groaned at times like a dying man, he was plunging into the abyss. Yes, he had done the satanic act with the Grand Master himself and with all the novices for whom he had been responsible; yes, he had blasphemed and denied Christ; yes, he had betrayed all the ideals of the knight. He had more than fulfilled the lie I had written; he had become its truth.

The Inquisitor general arose, stepped down from his platform and approached Geoffroy's ear. Noiret asked to turn the wheel a notch. The wrists tore open,

and a black blood slipped along the iron chains.

- Hugues de Pairaud has confessed to us, in the presence of witnesses, and in detail, the vulgarity of a relation he had with you on the altar of God, and that you had taken the initiative. I took pity on him, but I don't pity you. For all you have done is repeat a general confession and now you shut up, you aren't saying anything. You are hiding the truth from yourself. A dike needs to be broken. You must let your sin enter the light of your mind. Your crime must flood your soul. It is your only salvation.

"It is your only salvation." Geoffroy moved his jaw and wagged his tongue, but could not emit the slightest sound because of the tension of the machine pressing on his chest. Veins in his eyes had been broken. Blood was mixing with his tears. All his body affirmed the sin. But this was not yet sufficient.

Brother William went back up to his chair. Noiret relaxed the wheel a bit.

- I confess everything, Geoffroy breathed, take me to the stake, take me to the stake.

I demanded that the interrogation be suspended. Noiret smiled. Brother William made a sign to continue. The executioner's artistic pride was stimulated. He gave the wheel a push and stuck a red-hot iron into the knight's armpit....

I lost consciousness.

When I awoke, Noiret was holding on the back of my neck a linen cloth soaked in icy water. He looked at me with the gentleness of an angel.

- I would rather not have to look after you, too, he said, as he helped me to get up.

I came back to my senses. But the quick movement I made to get up made me nauseous. I went and vomited in the basin intended to collect the blood.

They had moved Geoffroy into a room in the tower.

Delicately, and with caution and meticulous attention, the executioner was treating the knight, dressing his terrible wounds.

The alternation of torture and medicine, of reality and imagination, of lies and truth lasted for three days and three knights, after which light and darkness ceased being separated.

I fainted two or three times a day. I could not sleep, eat, or drink. I had changed worlds. I was in the world of horror.

From now on, every fellow citizen, every friend, every brother was potentially a monster. Even I could become brother William. To be convinced that "this is good" would be sufficient. As soon as a point of view becomes a religious or scientific certitude, man, thus imprisoned in his chapel, is transformed into a criminal. The "good" had become more terrible than "evil", "truth" more dangerous than the lie. The friend beside me today may save his skin tomorrow

by skinning me alive, and that friend could just as well be me.

Until that day, I had lived in peace because man was hidden from me. Three infernal days and nights have given me man: he is consciousness wanting to put an end to being. I used to live naively among the trees and animals, thinking that the worst in my life lay in the mystery of death. I was way off the mark. We never escape our own eye. Man is that strange animal who is certain to himself execute his own worst nightmares. And this presents itself as a general law: it is for the "good" that we do evil, for beneath the moral frame of consciousness circulates the terror of the night.

Spiritual life consists of crossing the wall of anxiety that separates us from ourselves. As long as we remain on this side of that wall, we are walking between a projected eye and a fate turned toward death.

Geoffroy's delirium was not the rout of his reason, disorganized by pain; on the contrary, his delirium resulted from the only logic that can justify the events that were attacking him. The machine that creates coherent reasoning wove its webs, webs all the stronger for being the necessary results of an unavoidable problem. The worst sins are those we do not commit: they are too horrifying, they appear too ugly, spineless, shameful, dirty, repugnant. No one in the world can do what he firmly believes to be evil. Everyone does "good" according to how he conceives it. If someone does evil according to my lights, it is because it is good according to his! The worst evil, the one we can't bear to see, the one that makes us vomit, we can no more put it into our actions than we can put disgusting food into our mouths. We are preserved from evil by nausea. It is said that the Bedouins eat live grasshoppers with great pleasure; it is because, for them, they are succulent. If they saw grasshoppers like I see them, they would be incapable of swallowing them. Evil horrifies us, and this is a tautology, another of these tautologies that chain man to his logic and to his unhappiness.

An animal, a stake, a rope, this is a rather good definition of civilization.

Let's continue the reasoning, the terrible and necessary reasoning. The sins we cannot commit because they are too unspeakable, we imagine, we don't imagine them completely, but we sketch them out, we jot them down like rough drafts on the parchment of our minds. Our sins, and I am speaking of sins which seem so ugly to us that we cannot commit them, pass like Chinese shadows behind the secret curtain of our desires. So then, if we do imagine them, it is because our mind is producing them. If, for example, once, only once, we happened to glimpse a male organ penetrating a rectum, we may possibly, depending on the nature of our morality, have fainted from disgust. Even so, the act has all the same been executed before the eyes of our consciousness which, for a moment, did not turn away.

In short, we have committed the loathsome act enough to find it loathsome. And the more that we actively scorn it, the more often we perform it (in the crypt of our imagination) so as to better repudiate it. It even happens that we want so much not to do it that it haunts us completely like an obsession... Such

is the basis of Saint Anthony's famous temptations. The unfortunate monk was engulfed in the sins that he busied himself with all his strength not to commit. Buttocks, breasts, and naked bodies surfaced in his mind, the very ones he was caressing with a voluptuous non-touching. Had he lived three days and three nights in the hands of Noiret, under the eye of His very religious Majesty the Inquisitor Guillaume de Paris, he, with great joy, would have, under the iron and fire, tortured himself.

What does man do on earth? With infinite care he weaves his hell with, as pattern, his idea of Heaven.

At the end of three days and three nights of the most horrible tortures, Geoffroy was convinced that he was the worst of men. He had, in his mind, sodomized, raped, blasphemed, denied, betrayed... His memory was saturated with everything he had never done because it was too repugnant. With an abundance of details, he accused himself of actions that could not be more contrary to his order, to his will, to his honor, and to the facts. For him, the facts simply denied the truth. The truth was much deeper, much clearer, much more mathematical. The truth was that he had never even had enough courage to do evil in concrete terms. If he had not been so cowardly, he would have sodomized, raped, blasphemed, denied, betrayed... He was the worst of sinners, and a coward and a hypocrite besides.

I believed that he was broken.

On the other hand, the good brother William and his devoted Noiret were not the worst men on earth, but quite simply they were, like all of us if we leave our mediocrity, consistent men. What made them worse beings than we are came from the fact they are better than we are.

At the end of a week, Geoffroy was a heretic. And this could not be blamed on brother William who wanted him saved and prayed every moment for the healing of his soul.

And as for me, at the end of these everlasting days, I knew that the one thing that keeps a neighbor, a friend, or myself from going that far in so pure a moral logic is mediocrity. In never doing good too much we believe we are not doing evil too much. I, Guion de Cressonaert, was one of those... And yet, in being one of those, I was the indispensable transmission belt by which they horribly tortured a man. They will tell me that if I hadn't done it, another would have. That is precisely the tragedy! We, the majority of men, the changeable, the inconsistent, the common, the servile, it is through us, in us and with us that the world gently descends into hell. We are the hands that activate the wheel.

A week of rest went by. Geoffroy was no longer in danger of death, his wounds were clean, but his soul seemed lost. At night, the wavering of torches distorted the shadows. I was vomiting my liver and spitting out my guts. Each morning, I awoke in the skin of a coward. I couldn't bear it. The Question had run me through and through.

Brother William had seen fit to leave me alone with Geoffroy. Why? I will

never know.

Geoffroy was resting on a pile of straw. He was huddled like a shivering dog. He beckoned me to come near.

- Take a parchment, I am going to confess.

I obeyed.

- Dearest Lady of my heart... the knight began.

He stared at me. I thought he was delirious.

- Pardon, Your Grace, I answered back, but I am Guion, secretary of the Inquisition.

He stifled a laugh. He was not broken. He continued in a confident tone:

- It's a letter for Heilwige, daughter of the deputy burgomaster of Brussels Wilhelmus Bloemart, you will want to take it to her personally.

He smiled. I hesitated, but I didn't have the courage to refuse.

- Lady of my heart, the knight continued, I will never again see you in this world, but only in the other. They thought they had broken me. They did break me, but not love. I have known since my earliest youth as a squire that all human life is only a long suffering that can be shortened only by the sword. Blessed sword! We are born, live and die on a cross. I do good, the Inquisition does good, so the collision was inevitable. War is the crossing of straight roads. War is the normal condition of good. Only evil is muddy, winding, ambivalent, bound to the putrid state of carnal life. I was prepared for the cross. I expected it. I hoped for it. I suffer, but love does not. They will say every kind of slander about me. but you know my heart. I loved you, I love you, and I will love you far from the vulgarity of this body which is already beginning to rot. I am dying, but love is not. I am disappearing in the night, but love is not. You will hear all kinds of rumors. Don't pay any attention to them. I have weakened, I have lapsed, but I have stayed on my mount. I love you. The Inquisition has plunged the sun into my soul. I have seen the filthiness of my body. I have been all over Palestine to cleanse it of infidels. The infidel was lurking in my flesh. But you, the woman I have loved outside my flesh, you have cured me of the woman who was in my flesh. My flesh is crushed, but love is not. I keep guard over love, for it keeps guard over us. The banquet is ready for the wedding. I am coming. When I touch you, I will be perfectly pure.

A great silence enveloped us. In the dungeon's small window, the sky posed no resistance to the stars. Both of us looked at these multiple luminous holes in the celestial sphere. Someone in me envied Geoffroy. Someone was singing the praises of the hero consumed in his ship of flames under the Eye of his god....

I got up again. I was swimming in sweat and was bringing up my guts by vomitings that no longer had any content. Incapable of eating or drinking a

single drop of water, exhausted, crushed by fear and scorn for myself, my heart gave out.

I collapsed in the arms of Noiret, and the valiant executioner, despite his art, could not revive me. For reasons of health, they dismissed me, sending me back to my family in Valenciennes.

I had to be carried in a wagon. The trip was long and dangerous. In my delirium I tried, they told me, to slit my throat with every object I could get hold of. Had it not been for the attentions of a beguine who was returning to Hainaut, I would be dead. She moistened my lips and made me swallow infusions of herbs and roots. I ended up in her beguinage's hospital.

The Rapture

Before the first light of dawn, as darkness vaguely awakened a few meandering forms, a number of women with their children were already slipping out of bed without making the slightest noise. After emptying the chamber pots, they gathered here and there. I don't know how the signal was spread, but it was not by chance. At first, I was surprised to notice a few lanterns. Then I sat down on the window ledge to observe the clandestine movements.

For the first time, my body painlessly obeyed. I took a few deep breaths; the air was good, and my lungs, free. I felt hunger and this brought me an indescribable pleasure. I had lived with nausea for such a long time.

Subdued by the air's humidity, a misshapen half-moon stretched in the night. The pulsation of the stars made it seem as if the heavens' fabric waved. Since childhood, I had scarcely taken time to savor the feelings that the firmament inspires. That night, I was once again under the great Night's dome, free of worry and anxiety. I felt as if I were twelve years old.

I watched the shadows glide on the streets of the town. Small groups of women were forming. Just in front of the gate I overlooked, four women waited with their little ones. What is there more beautiful in this world than a fringe of children around a woman's skirt? I had lost sight of this first world.

A gray, almost black, tunic had been lying for a long time on a chair. Why had they put it there? An invitation to get better, perhaps! I put it on, adjusted the waistband and raised the hood. In such a garment, a man can be anyone. I felt I had the right and perhaps even the duty to begin my new life as anyone.

The Saint Elisabeth hospital was run by the beguines. Thanks to the herbs, the warmth of the hearth, the winter root-vegetables, and above all the gentleness of these women, I had gained strength. Somehow, I had survived among them, half-conscious, like a fetus in its mother's belly. They had pampered me without waking me up too much. Since I didn't wake up, I didn't resist. They watered me with an infusion of motherwort and chamomile. I had wandered in the fragrances of their herbs and their bodies. And the perfume overcame not only my nausea, but that dark moat separating me from my childhood, which now was filled. My freshly reconstituted body longed to explore this new world.

I thought I had enough strength to venture outside. I didn't yet know the destination of these women I saw moving around, nor the purpose of their meeting, but something in me was dead and no hand restrained me from slipping in among these women. They had healed me, they had drawn me out of the well, of a depth and darkness I thought was endless. I was their child, a bit. In any case, I didn't want anything other than a new right to be a child, than a new place in the world of women, under a loving eye.

I looked through the window a little while longer. Valenciennes was familiar to me, but I just couldn't understand the movement of these little jaunts, one of which went toward the waterfront, another in the opposite direction, or to the east or even to the west, always in silence. In the little group waiting in front of the hospital door, I thought I recognized the particularly young beguine who had taken care of me.

The group moved aside to join another one and the girl remained alone. I went down to meet her. She swung around curtly and let me know, without a word, that I should return to my dormitory. I dared to question her:

- But where are you going when you split up like this? I saw groups go off in every direction.

She took my hand to lead me back to my bed.

- Monsieur, don't make things difficult for me.

She climbed the stairs with me, pulling me by the hand as she would have done with a disobedient little brother. I stopped on a step and, without giving it any thought, leveled this at her:

- My life at the hospital is finished. I want to be a servant in the beguinage....

- That doesn't give you the right to follow me....

She pulled me into the narrow stairway again. Then, she stopped abruptly in a doorway, turned, and looked me straight in my eyes as she stuck her nails into my palm. She was a child. No, perhaps not! In any case, the face of a child. Yes! but with an adult's gaze. In fact, I had never seen a face so strange. She was not at all frightened by me, or even intimidated. She was simply reminding me of my duty with those resolute eyes, more gentle than malicious. A little malicious. She held my gaze. And then, she had that pleasing scent, she must have soaked her veil in rosewater; the eligible young women of the region did have that habit, but the perfume blunted the authority she was trying to establish in the tone of her voice. Even so, authority there was.

- You served the Inquisition, Monsieur Secretary... If you don't return to your bed, I will call the guards.

- I know, mademoiselle... I don't have the right to follow you, dogs don't have any rights. Even so, they are taken for a walk sometimes....

- When we are sure of their fidelity!

She continued to stare at me. Her gray eyes seemed to withdraw into a strange reflection. She smiled. Explicitly. Still holding my hand, she pressed it firmly. I had never seen such a behavior, so unheard-of, so impossible to understand, for nothing in that hand invited or rejected, it resembled a reading, somewhat... What was she reading? As for me, I wasn't able to read what was going on beneath the reflection in her eyes.

Suddenly, her delicate hand firmly gripped my index finger and she led me to the floor below by another, even narrower stairway. Her shoulders touched my

chest. We descended in total darkness. I nearly tripped over her. She put my hand on her shoulder to facilitate our progress. The smell of roses bound me to her.

We came to a place lit by torches, not far from a library, in front of a locked door. On hearing us, the guard awoke and came up to us.

- Mademoiselle Beatrice! he exclaimed.

- You were sleeping, Monsieur Pierre! Don't say anything. Open the door for me, please.

Which he did without hesitating.

- Let us have your lamp for a minute, she added.

He handed it to her without the slightest hesitation.

The customs in the beguinage seemed so strange to me that I was never able to predict what would happen. This had, I believe, contributed to my healing. I had found myself in an unexpected country, in the midst of an odd kind of fairies, right in the center of a children's story, without any way to return to the beginning, nor to go and see the end, nor to understand the most everyday actions. From the former world, something had disappeared! I didn't know what. It was too big for me to see it right away.

Beatrice was serious once again. She opened a drawer in what seemed to be archives. I recognized my letters of recommendation, my certificates, my mandates, my family papers, my diplomas, my assignments, everything that made up my social identity, and Geoffroy's letter...

The young beguine turned her eyes toward me, eyes gentle, impassive, and determined at the same time. Her impish smile, her silky cheeks, the smell of roses, the adolescent body she raised on tiptoes and let fall back on her heels, the hand she slipped over my arm, the flickering of the lamp, the silence of the stones, said everything.

I was incapable of thinking, so I nodded yes. I directed the light toward the center of the room. There was an incinerator there for compromising parchments. I removed the papers from the drawer without checking anything, intending to throw them into the incinerator.

-Not this one! she exclaimed, as she took the knight's letter.

I was speechless. She continued:

- This letter, Monsieur Guion, has saved your honor....

The silence lingered in her enigmatic gaze. A long silence. I became aware of the action I was preparing to do. In destroying my identity as a clerk, I was destroying the threads leading to my past, but I was also ruining roads to the future that might possibly lead to responsible positions. I was going to become an undocumented person, without passport, without status, a vagabond, a bum. It was my only way out, however, for my identity could only lead me to the

Inquisition, either to serve it, or submit to it.

-How can this letter get to the person it's addressed to? I asked.

- Our Grand Maiden governor has already taken care of sending a copy, she replied, shrugging her shoulders.

The original had been preserved in order to allow me to introduce myself at the proper time to lady Heilwige Bloemardine so as to explain to her in person the tragic circumstances in which I had written it.

Beatrice looked at me as she swayed from side to side, her eyes like red peppers fixed on me. I took the lamp she handed me and set fire to my papers.

All my old protections went up in flames. In a few seconds, everything I had been was nothing more than ashes. I was no longer anything. I had just made a first conscious step in the direction of the strange country of women. A second childhood was being offered me.

Beatrice was jumping with joy. Standing on tiptoe, she placed her hands on my shoulders. I bent down to listen, for she was petite.

- Now you can follow me, you dog, she whispered in my ear.

Maman had told me this story: "Right in the middle of the day, a good-for-nothing bureaucrat was taken directly up to the seventh heaven, much higher and faster than Saint Paul. A pure grace. This man deserved nothing. But after that, the two angels who had hoisted him up to the top couldn't help laughing and the poor clerk fell back down to earth." I was that man but I didn't yet know it.

We left the hospital walking briskly. My companion took the road leading to the market, then turned off toward the waterfront... A little further on, we followed a winding path that climbed through the woods toward some chalk hills in the north. We were almost running.

We were two sheep going to their fate, but the landscape didn't fold around us. On the contrary, it opened up. The world is great, very great. It was my first day outside for a very long time. I felt as if I were running behind an urchin girl going to steal some eggs. My body had grown too fast; I got caught on branches, I tripped on roots.

Beatrice had lifted her robe in order to run more freely. The forest rose up like an exploded cathedral, the columns smoked, the fragmented vault swirled in the colors of fire. Going somewhere was no longer an issue. I understood why dogs always walk in zigzags, noses in the scents, indifferent to the purpose of their excursions.

Lights ricocheted off the tree trunks. I was convinced, certain, that all the work to be accomplished in this world was the business of the sun and its light, and that Beatrice and I had nothing to do with this world's salvation, or its loss. And it was impossible even to know which would have made us happier, the loss of this world or its salvation. I didn't care. To rejoice in the breaking day,

take it, drink it, run absolutely free, let the sun and the light do what they will....

The Inquisition, the real one, the certainty that the truth will always catch up with us in the end, that the light will inevitably burst the lies in which we so carefully wrap the acts we are ashamed of, that certainty had terrified me; strangely enough, on that day it calmed me. Sooner or later, I was going to be found out, naked and undisguised. I dreamed of that day, and that day was drawing nearer.

That morning, as my mind was awakening, at the moment when the first yellow rays pierced the loosened veil of the girl who was guiding me, this certainty of the truth seemed to me the most beautiful inevitability in the world, the only inevitability in the world. I no longer needed to keep up the lies, I could abandon myself to the one who was leading me through the woods. I no longer even had to search for the truth; it was pursuing me. I was free. I believed I was.

For months, in the fog of my fever and the semi-consciousness of my sickness, the beguinage had made me see that man had not weakened the world of women, in any case, not its freest core. The rules of the Valenciennes beguinage already are a miracle. The beguines themselves elect the lady headmistress of their House. Leadership is the Grand Maiden's responsibility, as much on the material plane as the spiritual. A council of beguines assist the Maiden. The beguinage has its own parish allotted to a priest assisted by two chaplains, all three chosen by the beguines. Postulants enter the beguinage without pronouncing any vows. No dowry is required of them. Each one remains free to dispose of her property. The community accepts all women, married, widows, or single. However noble their condition, they work together. The industrial tasks of spinning and weaving, the agricultural chores, the scholastic and hospital work provide them with economic autonomy. Apart from work, the beguines devote themselves to an intense spiritual and intellectual life. Sisterly love provides for assistance to the poorest among them. Men are admitted into their community to the degree that they respect the way of life of these women. I had observed, in this social miracle, happy girls, smiles, soft hands... I had seen the birth of beguin babies, kisses, and caresses... That joy, that lightness, had healed me.

As long as a girl runs in front of you, you are saved!

Man can do nothing against his desires. And that morning, as on all lucid mornings, man returned to his loves. Too bad for William of Paris! Man is good, but he doesn't know it. This is what makes him mean. Why doesn't he know he is good? Because his idea of the good is not a good idea of life.

I came out of the mire with such a great love of life that a flock of wild geese would not have sufficed to fill my heart. To be born again is good, dear Nicodemus. The Kingdom of God is not the kingdom of men, it is simply the day that is dawning this very morning. To return to your mother's womb is possible, dear Nicodemus; it is easy, it consists of taking a step in the dawn....

I explained this reversal by two things: the death of my civil identity under Beatrice's mischievous gaze, and the unsettling world of the Valenciennes beguines. It was as pure and free a grace as the sun that rises every morning. Apart from my childhood, I had known only the male half of the world, but now I was refreshing myself in the living half once more. I wasn't ashamed to run and feel my heart tremble as I smelled a girl's perfume. I even appreciated the subtle intelligence at work in my new and opened brain.

The Gospel begins where the churches end. Such was my condition. Heretic-- I was one with all my heart, in a sort of childish exaltation. Heretic, today I am a confirmed one with all my heart. However, between the wanton giddiness of my first day of freedom and the confirmation of my happiness, there would certainly be more than one initiation. Many more.

But what did it matter; my day of euphoria had not ended.

We left the woods just as the sun lifted its dome of fire over the horizon. The sky lit up. We were faced with the new ball of flames which was going to shine upon us all that day. A great pink arm crept between two fleeing clouds. The sky threw off its mists. The wet fields transported our gaze on flying carpets of verdure. We couldn't take our eyes off the yellow thread slicing the horizon. The colors of the vegetation shaded off into the blue of the firmament. We were climbing toward the distant tuft of three chestnut trees... The Three-Chestnut-Trees! The place from which Maman had returned....

Small troops were converging. A few noble ladies arrived mounted sidesaddle on a gelding, but nearly all were peasant women, poor women, servants, beguines, nurses. Here and there were men of diverse social classes, but I saw neither knights, nor squires, nor monks. Children were accompanying their mothers. And all these people were advancing toward the spring foliage towering upwards on the three enormous trunks.

We were still a long way from the others. My guide quickened her pace. I was out of breath, it had been such a long time since I had walked in the country, my body was still heavy from a very long sleep....

- Tell me something about this meeting! I asked, catching my breath.

- We are going to meet the woman cleric of Hainaut, lady Marguerite, la Porete (she smiled, for Porete means little onion). She is returning from her retreat and wishes to speak to us.

- I've heard of her story... From malicious gossips....

De Marigny was conducting an investigation. He believed that she was taking over in her own name Guiglelma's Women's Church, a heresy which had begun in the last century. The noble and wealthy Guiglelma of Bohemia, reputed to be the daughter of Constance, the wife of King Ottokar, cured leprous women by applying sulfured clay and rare herbs. She had publicly restored the sight of the doctor Giaccobe da Ferno, blinded by a lacrymal fistula. She was said to be the incarnation of the feminine divinity, the third person of the Trinity, just as Jesus was the incarnation of the masculine divinity, that is to say the second person of

the Trinity. Like Jesus, she was of divine and human nature. But Guiglelma asserted no such thing. However, certain of her disciples related to the powerful Visconti family succeeded in transforming the group into a powerful sect openly competing with the catholic Church.

When the thaumaturgic saint died in August 1281, she left her fortune to the Cistercians of Chiaravalle, supporters of her doctrines. Encouraged by a fanatic named Andrea Saramita, Sister Maifreda, cousin of Matteo Visconti, succeeded the saint, claiming to be directly inspired by her. Sister Maifreda made relics and remedies by washing Guiglelma's perfectly preserved body with wine and oils. Thanks to this wine reputed to cure leprosy and other diseases, and thanks also to the Visconti fortune, the sect spread like wildfire. Several noblewomen, rich merchants' wives and nobles with great fortunes had, with their husbands' consent, added substantial sums to the new Church. The archangel Raphael himself confirmed that the Women's Church must succeed the corrupted Church of men. What had been soiled by the fault of men must be saved and redeemed by women. Guiglelma was alleged to have appeared in a glorified body to many women and men in Italy, Flanders, and the Germanies and even in Palestine. As invisible female pope, the saint named, through the medium of Andrea Saramita, a college of cardinals composed exclusively of women.

The Inquisition took the matter in hand: Guiglelma's remains were exhumed and burned, Andrea and many other women were burnt at the stake, and their property confiscated, and the movement was crushed. The schism that had opposed a matriarchal church to the patriarchal Church was terminated. But as the Inquisition knows very well, fire smolders a long time under the ashes. Certain people let it be known that Marguerite Porete was presenting herself as the new incarnation of the Holy Spirit...

On hearing me tell this story that she obviously already knew, Beatrice burst out in childlike laughter.

- But, Monsieur, your brain is stuffed with mushrooms. Marguerite is the friend of simple souls, not the female version of a pope-emperor good for nothing more than scaring people. It's a question not of copying the mean-minded hierarchy of men, but of regaining the Kingdom, I mean by that the field covered with grass and flowers we are walking on right now, the true Kingdom, green and speckled with beautiful red strawberries....

She stopped short, as if she had become aware of pouring too new a wine in an old wineskin. To prove to her that I was well and truly an old wineskin, I added:

- I confess that I don't know anything about her. But that told me that the bishop of Cambrai, whom I met once, Monsignor Guy II de Colmieu recently had her book burned in front of her on the public square of Valenciennes. You can find the name of Marguerite of Hainaut on the list of heretics that the Inquisition will consider relapsed at the slightest misstep... That said, girl, if you're going to her, I'm going, too...

- Good dog! she replied, laughing. But your puppydog's life ends here. You will have to go through the rest like a man.

And she set off at full speed. Cut to the quick, I called out to her:

- And you, Beatrice, aren't you afraid of the stake?

She stopped and turned back to me:

- Do you want my opinion?

- Tell me..

- The riders of death are running in every country to kill all the life that women can bear. All right! Let them run, let them hasten death if they have nothing better to do... That doesn't concern me. Honeysuckle will grow through their corpses.

- I think you're...

- Very reckless. Say it! Don't you see, they have already convicted us, they have already burned us. They only like captives, serfs, and ashes... But that's not taking women into account....

Eyes sparkling like swords reflected the sun. At that moment and in the pupil of that eye, all was given me. Yes! Obviously, I didn't have the teeth needed to break the shell. But my life was going to begin again. Yes, every day I had the vague feeling that my life was going to begin once again from the start, with a naive girl, with a desire, with an embrace. A thousand times, ten thousand times, one hundred thousand times, a million times, life will have to begin again in a child for man to understand his destiny. The knights of death will mock, will scorn, will reduce to the state of sweepings all the sparks that fly or ever will fly out of Beatrice's eyes. Yet the flash will always be reborn, for they do not have the power to make ugly what is beautiful, make dry what is moist, make sterile what is living.

She stamped her feet, squeezed two fingers of my hand and set my face aglow with her self-confidence. I lowered my eyes:

- Beatrice, I don't have your composure. I know what they are capable of...

- Shush, shush, Monsieur Guion the beghard¹, I have faith in you.

I placed a finger on her lips as if to firmly fix what she just said. I would have so much wanted it to be true. I would have so much wanted it. Yes, at that moment, I would have wished for the most pitiless Inquisition of my conscience, I would have wished to be torn asunder and to know what could remain of me after the passage of truth.

¹ Male equivalent of a beguine.

The Friend

The immense and green crowns of the three chestnut trees shaded a stone well where the livestock of the village of Anzin came to drink. Never had Maman or any other woman ever brought me there. All the common people of the area knew this place of prophecies not to be consulted without good reason. The majesty of the three trees had no equal in all the land. The branches rose knotted and powerful. The chestnuts showered us with vitality, but their great age did not lie. In certain spots, the bark revealed the wood. A very thick branch had been fractured by the thunder and hung down to the ground.

Groups of sheep grazed nearby. The hill was surrounded by two arms of forest which, on the north side, closed in an inextricable thicket. A black dog, a mongrel, it appeared, was lying at the edge of the woods, keeping its ears cocked. The two shepherd dogs guarding the flock watched it with respect.

Beatrice had taken my hand again. I understood that she wanted to show the others that she vouched for me. To my great astonishment, that seemed to reassure everyone.

There must have been three or four hundred women and children around us and probably about fifty men. In spite of their nearly closed hoods, I recognized several rich burghers. All these people observed each other with varying degrees of distrust. The Grand Maiden who, at Valenciennes, directed both the beguinage and the hospital, recognized me and came toward us, smiling at Beatrice so as to reassure her about her decision.

Near the well, a small group of shepherdesses were happily chatting amidst the sounds of birds. Around them, groups of women clustered on the spring grass remained motionless as if paralyzed by the morning's solemnity. Close beside their mothers, the children themselves seemed troubled.

A flock of starlings flew away. The silence became obvious.

The shepherdesses sat down, leaving, standing in their midst, a particularly small woman dressed as they were, save for the shawl of fine red wool she held on her shoulders. Though her height did not exceed that of a child, she stood straight, energetic and cheerful, her silver hair floating in the breeze.

She beckoned us to come nearer. Which we did. Three boys climbed on to the dead branch lying behind the lady. The crowd sat down; Marguerite remained standing.

- My friends! Recent events worry us and worry me. I understand this. They have burned a book which was only a humble reminder of the Gospel. If such a small thing has attracted attention, it is because of a great famine. The small Church has invented laws against nature, and nearly every pleasure has become a sin. A life against nature transforms men into hungry wolves. You all know the Breton lai of Biclavret! Preferring honor to love, fleeing ladies and

pleasures, the knight Biclavret, continent, sullen, and angry, is finally transformed into a werewolf. It is said that at night, he goes out to hunt and he cannot endure the slightest sign of joy in a woman or a child. He is starving. He is tormented, like the small Church whose image he is, and he torments others until the day he finally accepts a young girl's healing kiss. This is not for today. When Jesus visited Jerusalem for the first time, he saw, he too, how the Jewish Church was burdening the little people. And he recalled to us the fundamental equation of life: no love, no joy; no joy, no life. In a starving world, there are no longer any more than two solutions: the knight or the cleric, kill or pass sentence. Jesus found the road of bread and wine: "Happy are those who love." And a young woman washed his feet. Let us find the road of bread. Let us give our nature what our nature needs....

- Lady Porete, interjected the governor and Grand Maiden of the beguinage, we don't understand why the little Church is attacking the Church of simple souls you speak about in your book.

- I told you, it is because of the will to death that inevitably arises in deprived and sullen hearts.

- Lady Porete, another woman insisted, nature is beautiful, but isn't it cruel? There are famines, plagues, the harsh cold of winter, the droughts of summer, wild animals, all kinds of suffering, and death. And they add to it. The Church is dying, the people are dying and cruelty is everywhere. How can we raise children in such a climate? How can we love a man in a world so hostile to life?

- Don't confuse the cruelty of nature with that exercised by unnatural man....

- Lady Porete, a village woman retorted, pardon me, but the one and the other are intertwined like wool and dung in a billygoat's fleece. The Inquisition has banished every free form of life. The Church is no more than a Roman circus: around it, the bishops are applauding, in the center, the wild beasts are set loose against life. You know how the officers of the Inquisition arrive in a village! They assemble the villagers and warn them this way: "If you don't help the Inquisition by identifying the heresy suspects, not only those who don't follow the commandments and the sacraments, but also those who could place in doubt certain points of doctrine, if you don't report their names, you will yourselves be considered suspects." Now, when a suspect is identified by a witness, he will never know what he was accused of or who denounced him. He will have no right to a lawyer or even to a friend for his defense. If, by some misfortune, one person wants to testify in his favor, that man or woman is immediately considered a suspect. Then the poor accused is thrown into a dungeon, he is starved and abandoned to vermin, then tortured until he confesses. And if he doesn't confess, his situation is worse because he is automatically considered rebellious and stubborn. All this is recorded in the rules of the Inquisition. We are caught in a rat trap...

- They are seeking to create panic. But we won't play their game, we are going to live in peace every hour that we can live in peace. The most serious

consequence of their violence is that it creates fear, fear leads to despair and, through despair, we become violent ourselves and everything gets worse. We have a duty to hope, we have a duty to be happy, so let us eat our daily bread out of fear of acting like the starving.

- So, tell us the foundation of this disaster, the Grand Maiden of the hospital asked.

- They are afraid of life. What they love is death, not the real death, but death as they imagine it, I mean the fixedness, the rigidity of stones. If they were here, they would like that big dead branch where those three boys are sitting. A dead branch remains identical to itself. Summer, fall, winter, spring, morning, evening, it stays the same, as if it escaped time. This is what their love of death is: a sullen attachment to unchanging models...

- This is why they establish dogmas, rites, and condemnations, commented the Grand Maiden. They want an unchangeable Church...

- It is a sweet illusion for them, Marguerite continued. Sweet for those who love power and not life. Power only has power over what is no longer living, no longer resists, no longer thinks and no longer changes. For the cleric, it is an idea, for the knight, it is a sword. But that fixedness is only an illusion. We women receive men's seed, we carry and feed the fruit, but who among us knows her child's destiny?

We love life because we have no control of it. Jesus came like a gardener. It is not a question of struggling against nature, but of coming to terms with her... A will to death inhabits a branch of the Church which thinks it is the Church. But it is not the Church; it is only a sick branch that needs to be taken care of.

An elderly woman got up and said her say:

- We must take care of the pope, the king, and the bishops as if they were deadly ill! They are raving lunatics...

- Yes! Marguerite replied, I tell you, we should take care of crazy men....

It was too much, a lot too much for these common people terrified by the Inquisition. Men and women, shepherdesses and burghers looked at Marguerite with reproachful eyes.

- But, lady Marguerite, your philosophy is too difficult.

- Difficult! Perhaps it is difficult to love, but it is impossible to live without love. Listen! If we remain women, guardians of life, they won't recognize us easily. They massacred the Cathars, the Waldensians, the Albigensians and so many others because those groups held to external practices as rigid as those of the Catholics. It was religion against religion. As for us, we don't attach any importance to external practices, but only to the interior life, for we are duty-bound to survive for our children's sake. Let us do everything they ask except denunciation. Here is what I am asking you. A man can always dominate a woman, but he never conquers her heart through violence. The reign of such a Church can only last for a time, for it turns hearts away, while love attracts...

At that moment, the cry of a screech-owl was heard. As we were in broad daylight, everyone understood. In less time than it takes to say "God be with you", the small groups dispersed. Descending the hill, each one followed its own way. A few shepherdesses disappeared with lady Marguerite to where the mongrel dog awaited them, and the others whistled for their dog to return to the flock and lead it further away.

I found myself with Beatrice who seemed undecided, walking ahead, and then back... We heard heavy hoofbeats arriving from the direction of Valenciennes. I understood that the girl wanted neither to leave me nor return me for fear of putting the beguinage in danger. So as not to remain out in the open, she led me toward a well that she knew to be shallow. We descended into it with the aid of a rope used for drawing water.

In the Well.

I was up to my chest in water, but Beatrice was small and had to hold on to my tunic to keep her head out of the water. I read the fear in her eyes. Then, as if by contagion, my body began to shake in spite of myself, and my stomach, to be tied in knots. In a few minutes, I had become a ball of lead throbbing in the icy water.

In the bottom of that well, disgust returned. My sick body took shape again. It had wrapped itself around me like an animal. Once again it was suffocating my mind. I rediscovered my old companion, nausea. It had been a second body. I had carried it for such a long time. When it released me at the beguine, I hadn't yet measured its weight. And now it had caught up with me in the noise of the riders that beat against my two temples like a blacksmith's hammer. .

From where we were, Beatrice and I could neither see anything or hear anything of the horses or the soldiers. But if a rider had had to look into the well, or simply wanted to throw down the pail to quench his thirst, we would have been lost...

The sun was going toward its zenith. The zone of shadow where we were already so poorly hidden was growing thinner. Our two heads were out of the water and in the light. We were growing short of breath. At any moment, a face might appear in the circle up above. Before ducking under the water to hide, we were taking each inhalation as if it were the last...

My whole body shook with cold, dread, and anxiety. Beatrice was looking at me. I think she was searching for a haven, security, reassurance. There was none of that in me. On the contrary, fear must have shown in my eyes, for horrifying images were striking me like lightning. The torture sessions, the wheel, the red-hot iron plunging into the flesh, the knight's terrified gaze...

In the well where we were hiding and yet visible, fear dismantled all my attempts to escape the images exploding in my mind. I tried to keep my respiration at an acceptable rhythm. I searched for peaceful memories. I found fear everywhere...

I had to admit it, aside from my childhood and a few special moments, I had lived in fear all my life. My time under the Eye of the Inquisition had only been an intensification of that fear.

Someone who follows a knife-edge crest between two enormous chasms does not for even a second imagine going to the left or to the right where death's maw opens; he saves his air and advances along the crest without asking himself any questions. He does not ponder, he obeys geography's imperatives, a geography of fear. Such is the citizen in the State, the believer in the Church, the worker in his master's workshop. It is the essence of the social contract which makes us citizens, objects of "justice". This is how I had always walked

before I was taken care of by the beguines of Valenciennes, saving my air and going ahead between the fear of falling to the left and the fear of falling to the right. It was the only logic possible in the social architecture where I had been raised since my childhood at the monastic school. They, the beguines, no longer walked on the crest of the social order, that is why these women are so unpredictable. They occupy the world while men follow each other in single file.

Absorbed in that reflection, I forgot my fear. Then I concentrated on my memories...

I must have been three or four. My father had made me a wooden horse and my mother had asked him to add wheels. Which he had done. I rolled it gleefully all through the house, going from plain to plain, river to river, country to country. And then one day, a beautiful sunny noon, I abruptly stopped to look at my mother. She shone in the light. She smiled at me and I began to cry. -But why are you crying? she asked me, going down on one knee to reassure me. -If you died, Maman... Without her, there wouldn't be any more plains.

In the well I was plunged in, I shook more and more from cold and less and less from fear. I held Beatrice out of the water. My childhood stretched out its hand to reach the beguinage where I had been cured and cover with forgetfulness my life as a cleric.

The sun was now shining on our heads. We were totally visible, ridiculous in the water's mirror. Anyone who cast the slightest glance into the well would have burst out laughing at our hiding place! But I was no longer watching out for the soldiers. A very strong will was taking an ever-larger place in my heart. Women's horizontal world must be kept alive. I wanted to become a beghard. It was no longer a simple impulse...

At the moment, there was a girl who had fallen off her wooden horse and was splashing around me, terrified. Beatrice was hanging on to me, her nails gripped the muscles of my shoulders, her legs were folded around my thighs. I felt her body tremble.

-Don't be afraid, I whispered in her ear.

And I slipped my arm under her hip. She was so small and light. Her nails loosened... She slipped her head in the hollow of my shoulder.

-Monsieur Guion, she whispered in my ear.

-Yes, Beatrice.

-I won't return to the beguinage.

-But everyone there respects you...

-It's because of my mother... Now, everything is different.

Puzzled, I asked her: What is different?

-Monsieur Guion, you can't return to the hospital, because you aren't sick or

indigent any longer.

-Shush! I'm the one who fed you and cared for you during your first months in the beguinaige when you were delirious day and night...

These words made me embarrassed. It was she who had listened to my ravings, she who had fed me and washed all of my body...

-Monsieur Guion, she continued, I will go with you because I love you...

These words plunged me back into fear again, into another kind of fear, a wordless fear, from before the Inquisition, a fear I had kept forgotten with all my strength. My body began to shake again, my stomach tied itself in knots once more, and my heart began to beat as if I were in the thin air of a mountaintop. Who was this girl? What did these words mean? Was it fear that was speaking through her? Was it still this knife-edge road that leaves no liberty? Beatrice was afraid of the Inquisition and this fear was pushing her toward me. Was that it? No, fear was pushing her not toward me, but toward an image of me.

-The soldiers have surely left, I said a little curtly. Let's climb out.

I motioned her to climb. She did this better than a monkey. Her robe opened and hid the sun, already growing red. Arriving at the top, she made a sign to me. I scaled the well in turn. We were alone and the three chestnut trees smiled between the heavens' colored cheeks.

My day of grace wasn't ended yet.

We ran as far as the forest where the mongrel dog had disappeared along with the shepherdesses and lady Marguerite. Beatrice ran in the woods with the agility of a cat. She was so light, so happy that I didn't think any more about her stupid words and her open robe.

But the sun was setting and our soaked clothes froze us. She stopped:

-We are going to camp here. Tomorrow, we will be at Marguerite's camp.

-You know your way around here!

-I carry the provisions to the lepers' secret camp...

-They entrust you with the job of carrying the provisions!

"Who would dare put so young a life in danger?" I thought. She shivered in silence, but her eyes transfixed me:

-You take me for a child. I no longer am one. Let's make a fire.

Which is what we did. I should say that she did it almost alone, for I was no longer used to living in the forest. Her fire was strong and I brought large pieces of wood, but our wet wool clothes didn't give it a chance. She let her tunic fall to her feet and hung it on a stick. I turned my eyes away. Keeping a good distance away, I got undressed myself. But the cold brought us together. In a little while, she was gently trembling, completely naked in my arms.

I had never known a woman. Fate had led me from one necessity to another. And on this road, no one and nothing had appeared but men, goals, business, ideas, and contracts. I had chosen to be a cleric so as not to have to kill, as Marguerite had said: "kill or pass sentence"... And now necessity was inviting me to warm up a girl I knew nothing about, except that her eyes cut through my heart better than those of an Inquisitor. Even so, she did not see me. She was imagining I don't know who... A strong and brave man, the father she didn't have, a brother who left for the war, an idea, an abstraction...

However, I do have to admit that, whatever the lie that held her in my arms, her young girl's body was making an impression on me. I had not known a woman, I had not even known a woman's body. She, for her part, had taken care of numerous men, myself included; she had put them on the chamber pot, she had washed the behinds and the private parts of feverish, dysenteric, plague-infected men... And today, in the cold, I was only a great coat of muscles, for nature, God knows why, had given me a sturdy peasant's body...

Her body produced in my body an unbearable storm. That girl was not a child... Her chest was slender, but her nipples were ripe. Her hips were rounded; downy hair covered her sex. "How old are you?" The question remained stuck in my throat. I was terribly afraid of the answer.

My only escape was to observe how my reason went about extinguishing the fire. First, it wove the child thesis. Beatrice was only a child. A mature and conscious woman would not have thrown herself stark naked into my arms! I was not at all a handsome man. I was big and strong, but I had thick and stubby hands, a bull's flat forehead, an African's broad nose...

"I will go with you, because I love you." Only a little girl could say so stupid a thing...

This argument calmed the storm as long as I shut my eyes and kept my hands very precisely on the same spot on her shoulders. Alas! Every argument generates a counter-argument. The child thesis only held so long as certain clues remained hidden. Yet while my reason was defending its theory, my eyes and my hands were confirming, in spite of me, the opposite hypothesis. I only allowed myself some very small caresses, timid gestures which kept more dangerous company... I did, however, keep watch on the smallest of her reactions. Minimal reactions... Scarcely perceptible spasms... But irrefutable proofs...

I observed my reason's amusing battle against my body. This almost made me burst out laughing: the cleric foregoing his daily bread... Nonetheless, I was increasingly tortured, so paralyzed that I neglected my task of warming the girl. I no longer moved my hands on her icy shoulders. Beatrice shivered more and more. She snuggled up like a little bundle in my arms. But that wasn't enough. So she wrapped herself full length around me and her frozen nipples sunk into my chest.

It was too much. But it wasn't enough.

I was a virgin. I didn't know the movement, the passion, the purpose of desire; my body hadn't learned the way. And fear and self-disdain had everywhere drawn their dark circles around my desires. Despite this, my body had to become a channel, and this channel had to plunge into her, expand in her, find in her otherness a place to explode; what was still solid in me had to become liquid in her; my saliva, my blood, my lymph, my breath, my respiration had to unite with Beatrice's bodily substances; my nose had to lose itself in her perfume, my ears go astray in her voice, my tongue flower in her mouth...

Had to, had to, but maxims stifled me: "Wisdom," it says in Proverbs, "will come into your heart. Prudence will watch over you. Understanding will guard you, to deliver you from the woman with her seductive words"... That saying, repeated a hundred times during my education as a cleric, returned like the dagger of long ago that castrated Abelard. "When you meet a woman, tell yourself that she is not bread, but you are her bread. Like the mantis, the first thing she devours is your brain," my teachers used to repeat. Plato had proved this in his Timaeus: "The brain, the marrow and the sperm are one and the same thing and when they drain away we dissolve into feminine uncertainty"...

A sailor lost at sea, absolutely and radically deprived of every continent, island, ship, or skiff, this sailor grasps in desperation anything solid around him, even the anchor chain. He strives to keep his little being gathered in one moment and one place. The desire for woman went in the opposite direction; it was a kind of storm which goes from the inside to the outside and, because of this, brings with it a reflex of moral and physical perdition. I was called, with a force even greater than that of survival, to plunge without hope of salvation into the feminine void. On this side here of my poor self, the solid side, the side where the self gathers itself to survive, nothing held me back. I wanted, on the contrary, to melt into this girl who was entwining me like an octopus. It is for their own salvation that the knight goes to war to be killed, and the monk cuts himself off from the world.

My pain was so extreme, my hunger so great that it seemed to me a thousand times preferable to lose myself in her than to find myself back on my island alive. To again become what I was, an autonomous body, seemed to me the greatest of calamities. To keep myself in one piece was something I was no longer able even to want. Yes, I was her bread, but if she didn't devour me, I'd go crazy.

In reality, I was already in this girl's hands like Geoffroy in the hands of his executioner. Already this woman held me on the wheel, this little bit of a woman who was perhaps no more than a girl unaware of the arrow she had planted in me. She alone could diminish my suffering. Beatrice had become my hell and my heaven. I was flowing, and I no longer wanted to find myself the same as before...

Beatrice embraced me in so natural and lascivious a way... This was no child, this was a woman, the beginning of a woman no doubt, but a woman. She held me tight, not concealing a light moan; I felt on my thigh a bit of her most

intimate movements. This threw me into terrible tortures.

Beatrice was languishing. She too was tortured, I believe. I couldn't imagine her desire. Nevertheless, I couldn't interpret her movements any other way: I myself was the instrument of her tortures. That reversed the perspective. If Beatrice were in the same stormy state as I was, if even now she herself were pierced by my own arrow...

What! a young woman could suffer from desire? What was it to receive a man, make room for him, open one's lips, take him, let him spurt out? Could a young woman want, she too, to disappear, like a scab or scar that is resorbed... No! this was only another way of killing. Wasn't it Heilwige, Geoffroy de Charnay's mistress, who kept him on the wheel! Wasn't he in fact a martyr of love...

My mind whirled, as I searched for ways to escape. There was none, for she had placed my hand on her breast and tightened her thighs...

I was her torturer, for I remained paralyzed with fear. Through I don't know what property of desire, we were shipwrecked one in the other. If Beatrice was in a state similar to mine, I should have, out of compassion, sprung into action... "Give us our daily bread"...

I could not assume responsibility for the first move. It was too great a move, too great an abandon. Through I don't know what mystery, I felt that the pleasure of the flesh could only be a consecration of desire, not its end. Afterwards, I could no longer say to Beatrice: "My friend, it's surely only your fault if you're unhappy" or else: "My friend, it's you alone who have taken this road, so accept the consequences." "My friend, you are the sole master of your fate"... These statements and all those resembling them would never again be true regarding us. In brief, we could never become islands again. We were each other's torturer as much by inaction as by action. Love had already bound us.

I recognized too well the choice before me. It was not a question of deciding about desire, for it was desire that had decided about us. It was becoming obvious. Either we were going to enjoy each other, or we were going to deprive each other. No in-between! Love had already taken from us all the in-betweens.

The choice wasn't there...

It was at this moment that she said it all too clearly.

-I love you, Guion, I love you like a woman loves a man. Come, I am ready.

These words sliced into Abelard's flesh more effectively than a knife. I was totally put off. I heard my master repeat: "Woman is a stain."

The gulf had opened between my childhood and my awakening at the beguinage. It was the end of my day of grace. A hammer banged out maxims and I fell back into fear.

The First Initiation

Just as in my mother's parable, my twenty-four hour escapade in heaven ended abruptly. Plato and the Church Fathers hurled their words on me like blades of fire.

When Beatrice and I arrived at Marguerite's secret camp, the mongrel dog welcomed us. It rubbed against Beatrice's robe and then began to growl at me, baring his teeth. The huge black dog called Husdent doubtless detected the black hole that fear had dug within me. He discerned the dirty bastard in the man I was trying to appear to be. He had spotted the coward in me, and in the coward the traitor, and in the traitor the servant of death, and in the servant of death the corpse itself. Without Beatrice, he would have performed his duty as carrion-eater.

My heart, at that moment, was lost in the depths of my past. I wanted to confess, cast aside what the dog had detected. Lady Marguerite listened to me for a minute, smiled at me and then arose to lead me back to my hut several leagues from camp, ordering me to remain in the vicinity of my trellis of boughs until someone came for me. This was the first stage of my initiation.

I still hear today the rain chattering its nostalgia on the leaves of my hut. A very weak shield that it penetrated happily with little pulsating melodies. The rain came to warm itself on my skin; I disappeared in its cold.

My first initiation was a great trial. I wasn't prepared for it. They had abandoned me in a dense forest for an indefinite period, without the slightest human presence for leagues around. No surveillance, no harassment, no threats, no requirements, no contract; my sole preoccupation was feeding and calming my little person... A reversal of the Inquisition's procedures... Freedom in every direction of space and time. I could, at any moment, put an end to my retreat; all I had to do was return to my family in Valenciennes. I could also get used to passing the time. But that didn't take Plato into account.

I was lost in an immensity of vegetation. Memories arose-- sparse, broken, half-masticated. They whirled around me like insects, and with them rained the fiery blades, the killing sentences. Plato had said it in his *Timaeus*: "Sex is itself an animal, a serpent that the slightest heat awakens. It devours the entrails and wants to take the "drinking exit", it wants to spurt out like vomit. Only the superior soul can overcome it by abstract ideas"... I was a cleric. Following my father's advice, I had counted on the superior soul, the immortal soul, to escape "the putrefaction that desire transmits"...

After several days the maxims and precepts of Plato and the Fathers crashed into each other in the greatest disorder. From these random collisions other memories emerged, more whole, more clear, more unbreakable.

In all my life as a cleric, I had spent only one day at sea, far from the path of the

knife-edge crest, far from the path of social fears. De Marigny and I had left Bruges and, by the Borde road, had reached the North Sea with England as our destination. In the middle of our crossing, we lost all trace of any coast. The sun shone leaden on the sea, and I became aware of the horizon's circularity. At shoulder height, a line surrounding me formed a perfect circle. That should have made me anxious. The opposite occurred. It was with boundless pleasure that my gaze ran along this circle's edge. I felt at home on my wooden horse.

Alas! I had only to recall the purpose of the voyage for the sea to become a menace again and for the boat to sail along a knife-edge. If I noticed a cliff in the distance, my eyes instantaneously traced a straight line between it and the boat. That line hardened and a road took shape, linking a mortal self to a hazardous goal. As soon as a man goes somewhere, he loses the width, the height and the depth of the landscape. He walks on a path.

Joy is no more, perhaps, than the great volume of freedom one contemplates before launching out toward a goal. Joy resembles a jubilant child in front of a gigantic cake, knife in hand, suspended in his happiness. Joy is the instant of plenitude before we slice the pathetic fragment that will be ours.

On the boat where I was, I was going somewhere, and that was important, so I stared at the horizon, searching for a sign. There in the distance, that point! Was it the port, perhaps! And I asked myself: but who is there on the wharf? Who is waiting for me? Who is capturing all my attention this way? Do I even know him, this person who is stealing my whole universe?

"It is you, you yourself who will be there in a while; you are already there, you are waiting, you are waiting for yourself."

By the spell of intentions, goals, wills and agreements, our "selves" are distributed in different locations in space and time. Life becomes the thread connecting these "selves". And all it takes is an ordinary accident for two of these "selves" to never be able to reunite. This is what is called death.

None of this was possible when I lived in the whole cake. In this cake, I couldn't even be located. I was the sea and all the sky. What, then, could happen to me?

In my little hut of branches in the middle of the forest, necessity forced me to leave the path and pushed me on my wooden horse. If I was thirsty, the sound of the river came to my ears, I was all at once connected to the river, I walked toward it and the water ended up running in my throat and creating a new body. If I was hungry and a doe inopportunely snapped a branch, we were bound one to the other by the fibers of our muscles. These were not arbitrarily projected goals that connect "selves" to ideas, but the manifestation of arteries, veins and nerves that physically connect living beings one to the others in order to form the cake.

In the small clearing where I was submerged, surrounded by a tall stand that minced the sun's rays, I was no longer on the open ocean, the horizon was not as vast; on the contrary, it was huddling around me like a big green animal.

The forest was a depth of little sounds that whispered a strange language. One felt as if one had always known that language. In the depths of his memory, an orphan preserves the mother tongue he has not heard since his weaning, but if he suddenly encounters someone who speaks that language, his heart leaps. I was in that state. The forest was speaking that mother tongue that had become foreign to me.

Fortunately, I had lived my childhood at the edge of the woods. My father had taught me some of the rudiments of woodcraft. Today the forest brought me back to how I was at eight and all the remainder of my life no longer amounted to much: the arrival at the monastic school, the higher studies, the politicking, my nomination to the post of secretary to sire de Marigny, all this was only a bad dream..

And then one day the man is walking the deck of a three-master in order to carry out a mission prepared long in advance. By chance he lowers his eyes to shoulder height and the entire circle of immense reality calls him back. The one who sailed in pursuit of a supposedly important mission sees himself immersed in the pulpy fibers of his first mother. The treaty he is holding rolled up in his hand, this treaty that a short while ago seemed so essential, is nothing any more. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit has man for all his labor? One age goes, another comes, but the world remains"...

The first few days, I hid in the hut and didn't do a thing. Finally, the rain stopped. I was thirsty. Thirst constructs the body. I pity the person who has never been thirsty; he has no body to drink with. Thirst forms the mouth, then the throat, then all the skin and after that it draws us into movement... Suddenly, I thought of Jesus. He had asked a Samaritan woman for water. I had never truly read the Gospel because I didn't yet have the body to read it.

And then, I was hungry. Hunger constructs another kind of body. A body that begins with a nose, ears, and eyes. An odor, a rustling, a color form the belly, which enlarges its cavity. The strawberry's red spot, the green of a fiddlehead, the brown velvet of a rodent make the viscera move. The viscera construct thighs, legs, and feet and all this begins to move... and goes hunting. While my eyes and ears strained to detect the tiniest vibration of a life, my toes read the unevenness of the ground. I silently slipped through the undergrowth, avoiding dead branches and slippery stones. I stepped in fresh droppings. A deer had passed by here. I took hold of my bow, adjusted an arrow... Some time later, with tears in my eyes, I was roasting a fawn on a hazel branch. The world entered my mouth and I entered its mouth.

Perhaps Plato was wrong! Perhaps it is only the peasant and his wife who think, while all the clerics use up and waste their brains in building the world they want on top of the one they don't want!

After several weeks, I was no longer thirsty, I was no longer hungry, and in the vague sadness of the animal I was eating, I seemed to see Beatrice dancing. She couldn't retain her modesty any longer. The heat of the fire removed her clothing. Her body was linked to mine by a lyre's strings. My quivering skin

sang the narwhal's lament...

That girl could skin me alive simply by disappearing into the darkness. Every desire gives us a body, gives birth to us, but this desire aborted in fear..

I huddled in the contempt for the flesh that had been my education. I had brutally encountered both forms of this contempt: brother William and de Marigny. Brother William kept himself hungry and thirsty, tore his back with his discipline, attempted to annihilate a concupiscence that spread in him like fire. De Marigny gave his hunger and thirst just about anything. The one time he was attracted to a woman's beauty, he sent her to the stake and, that very evening, wallowed in his voluptuousness with whores he despised.

The monk and the rake: the two forms of the abortion of human desire. I had been the witness of numerous scenes of ascetic or libidinous perversion. Both fail violently.. The world becomes a place of extreme brutality. I think the rake is the more deprived of the two because he is even deprived of his own deprivation.

Nonetheless, after I don't know how many weeks, I was at the edge of my well ready to humbly ask a Samaritan woman for water. I felt unreservedly the immensity of my solitude. The measure of our solitude is revealed to us on a cloudless night when the stars shiver with cold in the absence of the moon. This cosmic house is quite simply too grand for the child abandoned in it. It is an inordinate volume of air, of earth, of water and of fire where a bit of human dust is moaning. Bread of solitude...

I dove into my memories again. In our memory, there are things so familiar that they form the very substance of our lives... Every evening, at twilight, my father arrived. Maman had already put bread on the table and water in the basin. The soup on the fire spread its moist aroma and Maman came forward, her nose in the cauldron's steam. At that moment, she wiped her hands on her apron, one after the other, just in the hollow of her groin. She slowly repeated this gesture. She was waiting for her man and her gesture grew more languorous... When Father entered, Maman's eyes circled his head and timidly returned to the cauldron. Father washed his hands vigorously in the basin. At the sound of his hands in the water, Maman stopped moving. She began to hum. A warmth reddened her face. And I, a little boy, grew in this desire as if in a womb.

Husdent, the shepherdesses' mongrel, arrived one morning and led me back to their camp. I learned that Beatrice had been sent with two shepherd girls to the Saint Elisabeth hospital to bring back provisions, books, parchments, pens and ink. My head was sunk in a bowl of oats when Marguerite arrived. She couldn't help laughing.

-I imagine you won't be asking me for any more initiations...

She set a bench next to the table and sat down in the sun. Her wavy hair stood out from the verdant bush behind her. Always that incomprehensible joy... Her eyes, however, were not at all naive, and they were seeking me:

-I'm still quite confused...

-So you'll stay?

-With your permission...

She arose and grew somber for a moment:

-Do you know the risk?

-Better than anyone, I answered.

I think she clearly saw that I had burned once and for all the boat that could take me back. She sat down again and resumed her habitual lightheartedness. At that moment, I was the one who wanted to bring her back to earth.

-But you, lady Marguerite, do you accept the risk of taking me under your wing?

A slight breeze crept into the long silence that followed my warning. She was no longer looking at me.

-Who can guarantee his own loyalty? she answered. Here, each one of us carries the lives of the others in the hollow of her tongue. We have only one thing to ask of you: do you accept the rules of our community?

They came down to very few things.

-I do accept them.

She closed her eyes. I understood by her silence that she took me at my word.

-Here then are my instructions: every morning I will dictate to you several pages of the Mirror, which the bishop of Cambrai burnt in my presence a while ago. And you will transcribe them four times. After that, you will teach the shepherdesses and the leper women to read and write. Obviously we all have to participate in the chores. There is always plenty of work in a camp as primitive as ours...

I was no longer listening. Two enormous beeches stood out from the front ranks of the forest. You would have said they were two soldiers. The little bench I was sitting on had trembled, as had the table with the rolled oats, the bowl and the spoon. Drops of milk had spilled out of the pitcher and spotted the table. I had promised to obey...

Dictating her writings made Marguerite a relapsed heretic and indisputably condemned her to the stake. She wanted five manuscripts, five indubitable witnesses to her recidivism and my complicity. It was I then who was going to condemn her and in so doing condemn myself...

I was paralyzed in the face of the terrible fate opening up before me. Having left the macabre road of monks and soldiers, I was now walking on the path leading to the stake! I would have liked to tell her to go into hiding, prepare a grand plan of flight and concealment to save the beguinages... But I remained paralyzed.

She looked at the drops of milk on the table. Her decision was firm and this made her light. In fact, I knew nothing about her decision, I only imagined it. She got up:

-In the meantime, we must bring in something to eat. It's my day to hunt and gather and I would like to spend it with you, Monsieur Beghard.

The Fall

When I took up my bow, my arrows, and my snares again, my clerical education reclaimed its place, closing on me like the two shells of a mollusk over its flesh. I felt ridiculous in my peasant get-up. "The further a man's head is from the earth, the nobler he is. The peasant is the lowest of men, for he bends over the earth. The bird that flies in the sky is nobler than the dog that hides his bone in the earth. In the beginning, the demiurge created only men. Certain men forgot their ideals and, turning toward the soil, died sweating. They were reborn as women. Then, sexual desire arose and the women forgot their ideals. They were reborn as dogs." Thus spoke Plato, and the Church Fathers approved of him despite their rejection of reincarnation. "The more one descends, the more one enters the vagueness of matter, which effaces little by little the precision of the Idea. Woman is matter and fog."

Plato's sentences whirled around my head like a swarm of hornets. I was heavy in all my movements. I had become a cleric again.

Marguerite went to look for a large pouch, a stick, a knife, a hemp rope and many other things... She led me on a path she knew tree by tree, bush by bush. She showed me some flowers with very red and crumpled blossoms and fine and pointed leaves, explained their properties to me, and picked a few. Further on, she pulled some ferns aside to reveal tiny purple buds emerging from a green and spongy moss. She took some of them, because "in clay," she said, "these flowers help to close up wounds." At another spot, she climbed on my back, reached a branch and went right to the top of a tree to look for clusters of a small, almost black fruit. This was for headaches. Later, she pointed out a nest fairly high in a plane tree. This time it was my turn to climb.

-Leave one egg for the maman, she instructed.

I lowered two eggs in a purse equipped with a string. She meticulously laid them across the flowers in the pouch.

I felt grotesque. What had I done? I had traded my status as a cleric for this!

We continued. I shook myself. I tried hard to imagine that I was a child in the woods with an unknown aunt. I shook my head to wake myself up. I pinched myself so I could look around me.

Huge mossy stones stuck out of the bushes like petrified dragons. Small brooks chuckled as they hid beneath the shrubs. Twisted snowball-trees leaned in the shadows. I forced myself to describe the scene.

Marguerite drew me into a heavy, wet and dark undergrowth. On all fours, we slipped beneath the branches. She silently uncovered the burrow of a mother hare hiding her little ones under clumps of sod. The image marked my mind as if it were the greatest tragedy in the world. But I kept on...

We took a trail that was barely perceptible. She lifted some snares that yielded us two male rabbits and one female. I made every effort to play the game.

We climbed a hill and shared the bread. The forest surrounded us like a great plate of leaves. I looked at this strange woman, her face made larger by a kind of happiness. Her childlike eyes slanted, forming tiny crow's-feet on her temples. I thought of the wooden horse on which I rolled with such joy as a child...

-Explain happiness to me, I asked.

A long pause. Silence enveloped us.

-I know a Breton lay that I like a lot. I don't remember the rhymes, but I can tell you the story.

-Go ahead then.

-King Arthur is staying at Carlisle. The Scots and the Picts are ravaging the country and penetrating the land of Logres. At Pentecost, the king decides to reward those of his knights who have fought the best. He distributes women and lands, treasures and booty, but nothing to the most valiant of all, Launfal, the stranger without family or inheritance who arrived from no one knows where. He is, however, the most handsome and courtly of them all. One fair and warm afternoon, Launfal leaps on his charger and gallops for a long time, to the point where he no longer recognizes where he is, to the point where his sadness catches up with him. He goes on through a vast field. He dismounts, folds his coat, and spreads it out on the grass. His destitution seems to him infinite. Toward three o' clock, the sun beats down so strongly that he feels a powerful giddiness. After having drunk a little water, he gets up to try to conquer his feeling of helplessness. Two beautiful girls come toward him. "Sir Launfal," one of them announces, "our mistress has sent us to look for you. Come with us!"

In a humble woodcutter's house in the middle of the forest lived a gorgeous queen. She was the most beautiful girl in the kingdom. Neither rose, nor lily, nor any bird of the fields or the seas could rival her. She says to him: "Sir Launfal, I have been observing you for a long time. I disguised myself as a peasant, as a servant, as an old woman, as a worker, and even as a landscape, I loved you and now, I love you more than all the world and languish in your absence." -"Say no more," Launfal replied, "day and night you live in my dreams, my meditations, my vigils, my battles, my victories, my defeats, since childhood. My heart lives again thanks to you. There you are at last!"

This lay seemed to me just as insipid as others of the same kind. Its pedagogical story annoyed me. It was no doubt intended to teach me that ever-so beautiful nature is always there, the disguise of a God of love...

Marguerite looked at me.

-I failed to make my point, she admitted. I think I don't know anything about your world. Explain it to me.

With both arms, she pressed her knees against her chest and looked out at the horizon. I looked with her. In a certain fashion, nothing was any more beautiful. We were looking down at the forest and the light caressed the sylvan fabric surrounding us. The foliage was spotted with silvery reflections. Crows circled a large pine for the simple pleasure of playing. Curls of white mist rose in the blue sky. Something gave the landscape a carnal texture. You felt as if, in stretching out your hand, you could have caught a rabbit, a wild cat, or a deer. You would have said it was a big cake. Marguerite looked at the world with the wonderstruck eyes of a child. That's what I supposed. I was imagining. But I knew nothing.

She got up:

-You aren't talking. So I may as well be frank and shock you right away. You see this landscape! You see all this immense and magnificent landscape. Well, I deserve all this. This is what I draw my happiness from every day. If I weren't so beautiful, it wouldn't be so beautiful!

I made do with this riposte:

-As for me, I can't even imagine that a dog could love me...

-...And so, life, cow manure, and sex disgust you. You may just as well withdraw from things, climb way up to the top in Phaedrus' chariot. This is how, out of love, we destroy. We think it is love, but it is really hatred for what is there. Resentment eats its prey raw.

She sat down again. Tears ran down my cheeks in spite of me. Silence surrounded us. I was the one who broke it:

-The problem with man is that he sees what he thinks and becomes what he sees. The Church fears the devil, but becomes worse than Satan. As for you, you think you are beautiful, and you are ravishing... But who escapes from the trap? Is your happy madness any better than their unhappy madness?

-Now there's a twist I like. Now, I have a question for you. We see nature as beautiful in spite of everything. Even Plato saw the beauty of the world. And this is natural, because the eye is made by nature. The toad finds its mama very pretty. How could it be otherwise! For the same reason, the lioness sees herself as good and generous, especially when she brings her little ones a gazelle she has torn to pieces. So how is it possible for a man to see nature as cruel? He ought to see that the world is as good as it is beautiful!

-I don't know.

-It's a very lovely question, don't you think!

It was at that moment that she handed me her wooden bowl as a pledge of friendship. I have never lost it.

In the afternoon, we killed a wild pig. She made it run toward me. I caught it in my net and dispatched it with a makeshift club. It took three blows, and all my strength. Blood spurted from his open skull...

And I who had become a cleric so as to never have to kill... I sat down on the ground across my broken illusions, in a solitude without a cure.

I wasn't far from thinking that my new master, who was a woman, had turned out as bad as the "good" brother William. Two complementary insanities, two symmetrical religions. And now I was on her side, the madwomen's side, not just any madwoman, the side of the madwomen they burn alive on the public square. What had I done?

I rubbed my hands in the sandy soil to wash off the blood of the unfortunate wild pig. We were back from the hunt. We celebrated the boar, our prize.. I couldn't eat anything, I couldn't say anything. I was exhausted.

Husdent didn't leave me after this; he had adopted me as one of his own kind. He skipped around me and jostled me with his front paws. If I had had better teeth, I would have bitten him

At the School of the Lepresses

The sun makes its rotation around the earth at a perfectly regular speed except at twilight when it slows its course, to stay a few minutes longer, drowned in its blood. Faced with this precisely measured phenomenon, the scientists of Antiquity developed the hypothesis that the sun, unable to actually slow its course, left its dying image in the heavenly elements. The Egyptians saw in this celestial mirage a proof of the sun's divinity. That evening, I saw in it a proof of its humanity.

The leper women's hut suited me perfectly. Stretched out on a straw mat, a grandmother was dying. She was so disfigured that it was no longer possible to recognize a woman in her bloated flesh. A girl without a nose was singing the Lay of the Nightingale. They called her Flore, and her voice was sad like her gray skin. Three other women, whose age it was impossible to guess, were beating wet wool and horsehair to make felt.

I stayed there for hours on end, immobile, leaning on a beam as I stroked the dog's forehead.

This misery calmed me. I had just found my race, my kind, and my nature. If I had to sink, it was there that I wanted to do it. If Plato had to be contradicted, I might as well do it in the very place of corruption.

I was able to admit to myself that I no longer had anything left to lose; I was in my own eyes a leper, a freak, an oddity, a stranger lost between the catholic city and the heretic city, between crazy cruelty and raving tranquility. I was a reject, the leper of two worlds. A leprosarium was the place for me, I was at home.

I felt as if I were returning home after a long journey. These women had something true about them, as if they were the truth of Man, offered to men. A truth which said: you made me out of ashes and mud and you return me to ashes and mud, so turn your face away from me, Lanval, for your old wives' tales don't cover up anything any more. My body is the mirror of your creation. I am the twilight of man. Look!

If I stayed there long enough, my skin would finally find its truth, its best excuse, its best hiding place to escape both the madness of the Inquisition and the madness of the beguines. The leper offends no one, for he is a human being who, in falling, has landed on his truth.

I had been a submissive man, and I wanted to become a leper. I wanted to disappear in the wretched man, in the true man, he who doesn't have brains enough for a religion, and makes do with displaying his wretchedness to the night stars. Blessed are the poor, for their bodies have stopped lying.

I was going to remain among the leper women, I was going, like them, to softly sink into the matter of the toad, into the oblivion of the marsh, into the narcotic mercy of the leper. It was the best way to suitably honor death. Do we have

any other mission than to honor death?

Time passed through the leper's truth... I let it pass, and held nothing back...It slipped over me like an enormous intestine dissolving compounds... Often, I looked into the bowl Marguerite had left me. Time is naked consciousness in a digestive tract.

When one is lying among leprous women, the lowest of human beings, there where there is no longer the slightest possibility of pulling oneself together again and holding one's head high, there where to give up the struggle is legitimate, a strange serenity sets in. Nobody looks at us any more, nobody envies us, no eye even dares to turn toward us. What a deliverance! Our eyes no longer seek to capture anyone or anything. You don't want to be seen any more and, in reality, no one does see you any more. You no longer turn the smallest fragment of the world in your direction. The landscape regains its primitive form, in consequence. Not to desire calms us, not to be desired any longer frees us. We enter the neutrality of things. We lie down among the things.

When evening came, I lay down with them, my head on the dying grandmother's shoulder. Young Flore had just stretched out beside me and three other women snuggled up against my legs. I heard them sleeping. Their gentle sighs blended with the dying woman's rattle composed a quiet music in the terrible stench that numbed us.

Lying at last on the ground, life above us like a vapor, we could savor the bitterness of the lees, swallow a moment of truth, and vomit up the world in total honesty.

One day, we awoke, and the old leper woman was no longer breathing. The little community of three shepherd girls, Marguerite, and the female lepers gathered around the remains, wrapped in two large shawls of raw wool. Silence recited a prayer. No one wept, no one would have to weep their relief.

Her misfortune epitomized humanity. Beneath it all, the beast remains resigned.

We are precarious aggregates, little piles of alluvium and, as best we can, we hold our elements in the right place in a more or less coherent whole. The wind, the rain, the joys, the sorrows, the tears, the desires, the hopes, the despairs erode this strange castle of dust and one day not very different from the others, we fall in ruins, dust on dust. The imperturbable mind is present at these risings of life and these erosions of death, and within it there is nothing but the incomprehensible serenity of resignation. The mystery is not so much that the world seems cruel to us, but that the human soul is always smiling.

We tenderly buried the old woman. We were a community, we were like a peasant who has just had his arm cut off by a crazy soldier, and who then takes his arm and deposits it lovingly in the earth.

Something in the depths of a human being wants tragedy, the greatest of tragedies. If the worst is there, I will know at last my primordial feeling, my

true and first feeling. We want to know who we are and we can only know who we are when we have lost everything, everything, everything which made us unhappy.

I was at this hour. And my soul was singing. Nothing is more beautiful than a man standing tall in his tragedy.

The Way Out

We were still gathered silently around the old leper woman when we heard laughter and children's voices. Beatrice and two shepherdesses arrived with two girls and a child. The child, almost as large as her mount, was enthroned on the shoulders of Beatrice, whose eyes she covered with both of her hands, and had fun guiding her between the branches, bushes, and stones. A head of blonde hair strewn with conifer needles surrounded a cute little face reddened by the earth. Flore jumped on Beatrice with the result that , in a burst of laughter, horse and rider fell into a thicket of broom.

The three girls were introduced to everyone and, at a little greater length, to the goats. It was easy to talk to children by speaking to animals. The orphan girls understood that they had just found a home and parents who would not easily abandon them, the proof being that the goats were healthy, and especially the smallest and most delicate.

Maiffe, the youngest of the three, the little curlyheaded blonde, had been taken in by an aunt before her mother was imprisoned in a bishop's dungeon. The family was wealthy, so all their property was confiscated by the Inquisition. The child of a heretic! It would be better if she disappeared in the woods for a while.

Gardie and Mitch, the twins, were approaching fourteen or fifteen. They had taken refuge in the beguinage to flee marriages that terrified them. Their fiances were hiding in the Alps around Triverio, for they were both lieutenants in the Dolcinos, mystics of poverty, heretics who needed soldiers to defend themselves against their bishop. Their engagement contract automatically made the twins their future husbands' accomplices. They had already seen men half burned, dying on a gibbet, and they were terrified. Their father sent men looking for them throughout Valenciennes in order to bring them to Triverio. He didn't want them to return to the Catholic bishop, a servant of Satan according to the Dolcinos. Caught between two fires, they needed to disappear in order to reappear in the vicinity of Brussels under other names, as ultraorthodox Catholics if they wanted, or as beguines if that was their wish.

We were all in front of the coals on which we had cooked the meal. The leper women had gathered a little to one side and looked at the new girls with a mixture of regret and admiration. Never had I seen such looks. At times, they saw themselves in these pink young bodies and rejoiced: to be loved, made much of, desired... At other times they retreated into their mean and repellent bodies. It was pitiful to see them. Flore especially seemed torn between desire and disgust. She couldn't remain in the shadows any longer.

She put on a red hood that covered her face almost entirely and stood up to sing and improvise a dance that imitated fire extremely well: The Two Lovers by Marie de France:

In Neustria a mountain rose higher than the clouds

At the foot of the mountain murmured the little town of Pistres.

The king of Pistres had a daughter prettier than a peach and smoother than an apple.

He wanted to give her only to the one who could climb the mountain without a halt

While carrying his daughter in his arms up to the summit.

Many foolhardy climbers had tried their luck and failed

But one day the girl fell in love with a young man

And the young man, in love, requested her hand.

The maiden fasted, the young beau trained.

The day arrived. He was strong, and she, starving.

He carried the bird like a feather,

He found her so pretty he forgot his pain.

At the summit, he died of exhaustion and she, of grief.

Flore's silhouette undulated with such a grace that the other girls had no choice but to admire her. From time to time, her eyes reflected the embers her movements rekindled. The looks she directed at me sparkled in the night. My heart was broken. To be cut off from any form of attraction, buried in a revolting coffin, isolated behind a skin the color of mud, to see a world and yet be refused it...

Why didn't she have the right to create around her that minimum of seduction that from time to time allows us to discover the joy of being desired?

In movement, Flore knew how to conquer what nature had denied her. Never had I seen such grace... And I chose to hold her gaze, not without forming a slight and perhaps ambiguous smile.

The goats chewed their cuds behind us. One of the shepherd girls took up Flore's song and started the young lepress dancing again. Flore was seeking to produce, through her movements, an effect she knew she could not achieve in the light of day. Her dance was losing its innocence. But we all knew that she would never be what she dreamed of being. Her body was already broken...

To pass an entire life, not only without attracting the slightest look, but on the contrary, repelling all who might please us, this cruelty deserved a respite. My eyes gave her this.

Flore became more and more sensual, almost lewd. I shouldn't have kept on looking at her. I was keeping the fire going. But I couldn't do otherwise. I really was seduced by her beauty. That expression, so banal, had here a literally supernatural significance. That girl buried alive in a rotting body perhaps had no more than a few short years to live a woman's whole life. I didn't want to

deprive her of my eyes.

She tore out of her broken body a light which would light up all my life.

Suddenly I understood that we were of the same creed, but that we were, at this time, living it in reverse. Her desire was the most beautiful thing in the world. My sullen inhibition was the ugliest... Nothing was more pure than this leper girl offering her desire for absolutely no purpose, nothing was more impure than my clerical chastity.

Beatrice was captivated by her, as we all were. On that evening, every woman would have loved to dance like Flore, for being beautiful has nothing so beautiful as this; to produce beauty from life's cruelty compels admiration.

The sole and terrible adversity of that memorable night was the presence of time which overtaxed Flore's strength. Flore, exhausted by her dance, collapsed next to me. Her face, dazzling despite its swellings, gradually faded like a moon behind heavy clouds. Glittering tears slid down the fissures of her furrowed flesh.

We were all bathed with similar tears; time had, like a titan, descended with a vengeance on this girl's burgeoning love. Flore burst into tears.

The sky discreetly wrapped itself in a black velvet veil and silence resumed its task as chief gravedigger of every hope.

And then, dawn began to glow behind the trees. We were crowded one against the other, half drunk with sleep. Nevertheless, someone began a story, then another, a confession, a memory... The women confided in each other. On this morning, all reserve seemed superfluous...

Gardie couldn't hold back her question:

-Mother Marguerite, has God abandoned us?

Her question was horrifying. Those who preached God burned women and men, hunted down poor people even in the remotest mountains. Clement V had even declared heretic those who, like the Dolcinos, defended the idea that Jesus had been poor. Even the Franciscan general who had to flee to Bohemia to defend the poverty that the bishops had transferred from the column of virtues to the column of vices. The Church taught from now on that Jesus had possessed a well-lined purse. And now, Gardie and her sister, hunted down by their own parents, found themselves surrounded by leper women who depicted all of humanity's despair. What could become of two girls lost among heretics this way?

For a long time, Marguerite was deep in silence. I think she was measuring the enormous weight that hangs on the person from whom frankness as well as hope is expected. A spark really had to appear, a word, a sentence was sorely needed to put a bit of order, coherence, and hope back into this upside-down world. And yet, any form of false consolation could have no place among these betrayed children. How can lucidity and hope be combined?

She might have given the example of a caravan lost in the desert. The caravan master didn't want to be entrapped by a mirage. He knew perfectly the thermal and optical conditions that create them. He imagined a route through all the possible mirages that, according to the angle of the shadows, went toward an oasis he vaguely knew, but was impossible to see from so far away. He convinced the camel drivers that there would be water after a journey of several days. The troop found the energy needed to continue another three days. They found neither well nor oasis, but a mass of cactus sufficient to grant them another few days of life. Next, they discovered a village and finally, a well. If the chief had revealed to his troop their most probable fate: "We are done for", he would certainly have demonstrated a form of lucidity, but merely a fatal form of it. By giving a direction which circumvented the mirages in order to advance toward a much less likely fate, he demonstrated a superior form of lucidity.

Marguerite couldn't avoid the question, for we were the image of that caravan. She began timidly:

-A long time ago, toward the middle of the winter, on a dismal day, when sleet was lashing the hill and the icy crust made walking painful, I had to return to Valenciennes. I was eight months pregnant and at each step I sank in the snow up to my knees. I had given up hope that a wagon might stop. You don't know what life is until you have carried it in your belly. I was carrying it. A little package that from time to time gave some kicks, a ball folded around the cord that feeds it, a little being formed next to my flesh... My little monkey had already made his final effort; he had positioned his head to push straight toward the exit, but I still had a month ahead of me. It was my first and it was my only one; I had assisted many women, but on the side of the road in the middle of the winter, I would have needed assistance myself... I simply had to get to my beguine sisters. So I walked slowly, taking all the rest I needed. I didn't need to arrive so quickly, what was important was to keep my darling good and warm in my belly.

I believe it was this that attached me to him with a strength I didn't imagine. Without my being aware of it, my body, my thought, my heart, my mind, my soul, my consciousness had curled up around him. I melted like wax on his little body.

It was a beautiful little boy, not the least bit anxious, blond, happy. He liked my songs. He listened to me hum. He purred like a cat as he said to me with his eyes: "Don't worry, Maman, I love you too much to leave you." He was surely more than me, this little one. He was the kernel of another me, a future great thing who could drink pure water, eat boar, and make a child with a woman. By this begetting, he would drill his life across the centuries to a civilization that would know neither stake, nor hate, nor scorn for women. I had named him Godefroid, because he did not have cold feet.

There are temperatures that drive us back into the corners of the imagination. I was with him in a beautiful imaginary cabin with a big fire in a stone hearth.

Godefroid was two meters tall and his large hands on my shoulders reassured me. I forgot the snow and my fatigue. The sleet softened into white silk confetti that fell on my blond hair.

I understood that my little fellow was going to come out. The contractions were making him mad, he couldn't wait any longer, he clenched his fists and defied the weather. He wanted to see me, and I wanted to be seen by him, because his eyes would tell me all the beauty of being a woman. I was his continent, my body would be, for him, the enchanted island. He was going to calm my womb, suck my swollen breasts. He would be my lord, the knight of my heart. He had already conquered all his territory: not a fiber of my being did not belong to him. I wanted only one thing from now on, to be his land and his fields, for outside of his domain it was cold.

I had discovered a spot sheltered from the wind. I tramped down the snow between four or five healthy conifers. In digging our alcove, I uncovered a perfectly dry bird's nest, and placed it in the middle, with twigs, sticks and branches. I lit a fire. I had a big wool tunic in my bundle. The sky grew milder. The wind died down. The air became balmy and my fire provided light and heart. All was going well.

It was not a matter of life and death. My fire was good, the sky had moderated, my clothes were wool, and thick. I knew what had to be done and my Godefroid seemed to know his way around in this matter of being born. He pushed head first with an astonishing expertise. He placed his forehead, his nose, and his chin in such a way as to maximize the effort of the contractions. In a few hours, I welcomed him like a little lamb. I settled him on my bare skin, he found the nipple and drank my body's very sap while I was wrapped in good thick wool. I was the happiest woman in the world. Soon a wagon would pass and the fellow's wife would have pity...

My children, listen carefully to this: if your heart ever longs for a lemon, you will be given a honeydew melon. I had worked for years at the Saint Elisabeth, and yet I didn't see any hint of the permutation that was coming. I had fallen asleep while I was keeping my baby warm under my clothes. The next day, he was dead. The hands of the sky were still spotted with blood and my heart was unable to find the path of tears. I was like a gristmill. Mechanical. I circled my nest of snow like a stone, I crushed whatever heart was left in me and there rose up out of me an emotion impossible to fathom. The mill produced a flour and a bread I did not understand. This bread was my body, and if my heart found nothing to love, I would be blown to pieces as my flesh exploded.

By an extraordinary grace, my suffering did not blind me. One step after the other, I reached Valenciennes, each breath snatched from pain. Someone ought to eat the bread I was.

I arrived at the Valenciennes hospital exhausted. My exhaustion wasn't sufficient. A woman was dying in labor and I had to extract the little girl from her Maman. By what miracle I had the strength to help her, I do not know. But I was given to that woman like a bread. As she died, she entrusted me with her

baby.

If one day, my children, you feel for a single moment the smallest drop of happiness that my dear little daughter has given me, then you are saved. The Source of life has not abandoned women, it has simply given us the honor of arriving at a divine existence. How could it be otherwise? I nourished and loved my little daughter. I taught her all I knew. No, we are not abandoned, our heart contains all that is necessary to confront life, it draws water from the source. But some among us are carrying a weight truly too heavy to be carried alone."

Flore stood up straight again.

-Madame Marguerite, she said, don't worry about me. I have only one question: how did you know that you were loved, so loved that life cannot betray you, but simply produce you, like the sun produces an apple tree, like an author produces a work? You must have known this beforehand, for if you didn't you would have judged your fate wrongly and you would not have survived your misfortune.

We were all thunderstruck by Flore's question. The only one who didn't seem surprised was Marguerite. She knew the girl's intelligence, and she addressed that intelligence.

-It was in the dying mother's eyes, in her hope, when she entrusted me with her little daughter, that I saw that love. Her eyes gave her child. When you see eyes truly give, without reservation, the dearest of beings, then you know that the sun that is rising now is an enormous pupil that looks at us with love. The undulating mountains around us, the rocky ledges tearing the mosses behind you children, the broken tree the shepherd girls are leaning against right now, the ash trees reaching up and tearing space, our goats and even the smallest mosquito, all this is nothing other than an act of passionate love addressed especially to me. The human soul forces the landscape to beauty.

-No, madame Marguerite, Flore interjected, all this is present to all of us, and none of this reacts to our sorrows or our joys.

-Think, Flore, and above all, look, Marguerite answered, the universe is not a big pie that can be divided into pieces, and where each being nibbles what is his. No, on the contrary, there is not one thing in all the universe that does not turn its rays of light toward you. Everything belongs to each one. You do not see one ten thousandth of reality, light does not reveal to you one fragment of reality, no, on the contrary, all the light in the universe is turned toward you. It is not a bread, it is a bread for you.

-I wouldn't want the world to be turned only toward me...

-I truly know your heart, Flore. If the world multiplies its spectators without ever depriving one of them of the totality, it is simply to create one more joy, that we name brotherhood. The sky is transparent, this means that light cannot become a private property. So, the world is turned toward you, the world is turned toward me. But that is still not enough. The little girl that was given to

me is not an ordinary little piece of the cosmos. The dying mother who gave me her daughter had carried her as I had carried Godefroid, with just as much love. I took her child and she took mine away. We were two women and we were capable of a love that surpassed all our conceptions of love. It is this that must be understood. A little while ago, Flore, you danced and you gave us what you could not conceive of by yourself. You became unforgettable in our eyes. You were not just anybody giving herself to everybody, you were giving yourself to the one person you were looking at, you were giving yourself like a bread. Impersonal love does not exist."

-I don't quite understand, Flore interjected.

-For one moment, I saw myself as the dying maman saw me. I tell you: a mother is looking at you and is looking at me because she is captivated by our beauty. Who cares about the rest?

That did it, from now on Plato was nothing more than a corpse at my feet. If Flore exists, if Marguerite exists, Plato's purest Heaven is of no interest to anyone, and the earth, with its sex, its maternity, its love, and its way of dying, is what I want.

Life According to Nature

The dawn was so pure I no longer had any fault to find with the great bowl of life. The sun's rays, still mauve, warmed the children, the women, and the lepers, tenderly shaking them like a mother. Everyone stretched in the warmth. It was a good morning.

I got up before everyone else. I had a plan for the day. For some time, a fox had been prowling a little too close to our seven hens and the rooster was not up to the job. I decided to chase it really far away, while at the same time using it as a tracking dog. It was going to lead me to small game likely to vary our usual diet. I ordered Husdent to stay at the camp and went out in pursuit of the fox. I followed him with my slingshot and a net; I was no good at archery. He wasn't bothered by my presence. He had his nose in a fabric of scent and pulled out threads here and there; some of these threads led too far away or too far back in time; he was looking for an inexpensive prey...

At a certain point, he was really hungry and his stomach took the initiative. He led me behind the hill, on the mountain, another hill, another mountain. He had caught a thread of scent, he was planning something big, I was sure of that, the movement of his tail proved it... No, it was only two or three guinea-fowl eggs which he ate greedily, without leaving anything. He continued.

I didn't know very well where I was any longer. What did it matter, I was on his tail. A fox is definitely always connected. He never goes nowhere. He always goes back up a trail. I was thinking. An animal is the image of true desire. When a desire is well founded, it resembles a more or less elastic thread, a nerve, a fishing line that a fisherman reels in carefully; it draws us toward satisfaction. Something, someone is there at the end of the line. A twist of scent, a string of sound, a thread of light, a source of heat or something even more subtle connect us to the thing we need. There is no real desire without a concrete being at the other end of the line. If not, we are no longer in the world of desire, but in a will tracking an object judged to be desirable...

I had thought too much... I was lost in the forest. I no longer recognized my surroundings. The fox was still preceding me. The forest was becoming dense and oppressive. Why was my heart still quiet? I didn't know. Beatrice had kissed me before I left, so nothing could happen to me.

I decided to climb toward some hilltop or go up a tree; I would certainly catch sight of the stand of pines that borders our camp on the west, or the little lake to the east, or the conifer-covered hill to the north. Goodby, Monsieur Fox! I forgot the animal and found the ideal spot to get my bearings.

It must have taken me an hour to climb, and I left some drops of blood on it because the lower branches were dead and dry. I had to clasp the trunk for a time and hoist myself up on it as if it were the neck of a giraffe. I finally placed my foot on a large knot. High up in the enormous beech, I scanned the full

circle of the horizon for over an hour. I checked a list of the landmarks I knew... I ended up having to face the facts: I didn't know the landscape at all. Little by little, fear seized me by the throat. I had lost all the threads that connected me to the camp.

It seemed to me as if I were suddenly hanging on the edge of an enormous rift, it seemed to me that all of the road behind me, I am speaking of the entirety of my life's road starting from birth up until now, it seemed to me that this road, so long, bordered from the beginning an enormous rift, a cliff, an abyss bottomless and dark as night, an infinite solitude. On one side: the forest, the plants, the animals, the cities, the roles, life and its theater; on the other side: the void, the abyss, nothingness, absence of everything. While the fox advances on a sphere filled with everything he needs, continuously connected with everything, man advances along a great rift that separates being from nothingness. This is the root of anxiety: consciousness does not follow the road of the crests, but wanders between being and nothingness.

By concrete desire, we are connected to concrete beings, we live with the fox on the sphere of responses to our needs; by will, we are connected to nothingness. Obviously, the nothingness I am speaking of here is not nothing. It is Notre Dame de Paris, it is a monument, it is a school, a city, a book, a social work, a work of art, all that we at first imagined, all that we are called to be, all that we have ended up transporting from nothingness to being. But it is also the wars, the instruments of torture, the burnings at the stake, the suicidal ideas, the crazy and dangerous ideas, the devastatingly destructive ideas, all that should have been left in nothingness.

Man the creator is there, along that rift, he looks in the direction of nothingness and sees a painting approach; he imagines it, he invents it, he wants it, and sometimes he succeeds in making it flip over into the sphere of things. In this crossing the best and the worst happen. Monsieur Fox's sphere is now covered with improvements and deteriorations, with gardens and dumps. Watch out for our wills and wishes, they threaten us, us and the fox!

I descended from my tree dismayed. I had wanted to drive the fox away from the hens while catching some small game: an arbitrary wish, badly calculated, which perhaps was going to throw me into the abyss...

I held the panic at bay as best I could. To be certain not to retrace my steps and go in circles, I left markers, broken branches, pieces of my ragged shirt. I had chosen my direction according to a quite precise angle in relation to the sinking sun. I needed to intersect the long path that linked the camp to the village. I walked an hour in that direction. But was it the right direction? The moss on the trees generally indicates the north. I was not going in the right direction. I turned around. I had to climb the tree again and make a better calculation. Evening was coming on.

He was there, at the foot of the beech, my friend the fox. The most beautiful animal in all the forest. He was eating a small rodent. He had smiled at me. By a very special grace, the rift had disappeared. I was in the flat and wide space

again. I followed the fox without ever letting go of the mysterious cord that connected us one to the other. I followed him like shadow follows light. I had understood his game. Obviously, Monsieur Fox had never given up the henhouse. He held on to his very real desire. He wasn't going to compromise his good relations with the camp. He led me back to the henhouse and I entrusted the matter to Husdent who continued to leave him a hen from time to time.

When you are responsible for children, your vigilance increases. Education consists of leading children in the direction of their real desires while preventing them from peering too imprudently toward the rift, and wishes leading to frustrations. It is preferable to come into the world before willing it to be different, a question of learning to know nature and one's own nature before becoming a whole society's Inquisitor.

In those days, education consisted for me of getting up with the chickens. Milk the goats with Maiffe. Explain the work to the twins Gardie and Mitch. Laugh at Maiffe's milk mustache. Carry two pails full of milk with a flexible pole curved at both ends. Curdle the milk on a hot, hollowed-out rock while singing the alphabet. Draw a's, b's, and c's in the curds. Light the stove. Mix the flour with salt, oil, water, and yeast. Knead. Comfort Maiffe when she is frustrated. Tell a story. Bake the bread. Go off in the woods to search for a lost baby goat. Go and get the ram for the servicing. Dig the garden, weed the cabbages, hoe the carrots and parsnips, cover the celery, uncover the onions... Comfort Maiffe when she is frustrated. Repeat the alphabet, write the letters on the bare ground, count the artichokes with the children, trace the numbers between the beet-rows, make sure that the twins don't confuse Latin words with the local vernacular vocabulary... Comfort Maiffe when she is frustrated.

At noon, pray that nothing breaks the rhythm. Keep life going. Keep the children pegged on to things, to the goats, to the dog, to the plants, to the trees, to the vegetables. Keep them on the path that connects the cabins, the construction sites, the clearings, and the pastures. Make sure that reading and writing are learned during the daily work. Sing to keep hearts merry, play the flute and the panpipe, beat out the rhythm. Never lose the thread of time that slowly flows in the space of things, make sure that it slips along in the groove of desire and is diverted as little as possible toward all sorts of arbitrary desires. Avoid the fatal dispersal of the self in the abyss of possibilities.

I said to myself: don't seek the road that goes somewhere else; don't try to construct the world you want as if you were Plato's god, keep yourself connected to the branches of your own existence; life is not about building a world on a stony cape as close as possible to the gaping maws of your own madness; it's about improving this world, the few meters around you is already quite a lot; don't try to build a sterile castle, cultivate the beguinage's garden instead... I talked to myself because my nose was not as sharp as that of the fox.

Marguerite taught us: "There is a way to not roll along needlessly in our hasty judgment about what the world should or should not be, it has to do with

keeping your eye on the children, your ear on the goats' bells, and your nose close to the bread oven. Every moment has its virtues. The other virtues, those that consist of wanting to be like this or like that, brave, strong, prudent, gentle, discreet, do not make us better, but less true. Making human nature bloom is not the same as working desperately hard at some idea of human nature. Learn to live first. The person who does not know how to be a peasant cannot lead a village. We are led by men without roots. Don't be surprised if they lead us to death."

That was the lesson I needed to practice. In this subject, I had everything to learn, or rather to relearn, since I had been a child and so had already lived in a field and a woods.

The eggs, the milk, the bread, the music, the art of drinking the cup that is given us... I had learned all this as a child. In my first months with the beguines, I understood it in a different way, since I was no longer a child, but was in charge of children. As a consequence, I rediscovered my own mother. Maman had loved me with the impetus of a good spinning-wheel, she spun me in the direction of my own fibers. She smoothed out the channels that linked me naturally to the flowers, the animals, the earth, water, air, fire. She cleaned the network of the threads. She made sure that at every moment the light, the sounds, and the odors would reach me. She kept me in a state of relation... What more could she have done for my development!

I now assumed the office of mother. In the beginning, it was a wearisome profession, for I had to wrestle with my own very active will as well as the children's extremely versatile one. I continually wanted to do something more important than to be there for the children, respond to needs, avoid dangers, take care... But finally, the pleasure of following the threads of desire got the better of my will's frustrations. I entered the world. I became a peasant. I was working on the foundations...

Marguerite used to repeat:

-Guion, in each man and each woman there is an untangler of threads. Let it do its work. What we call free will is nothing other than ignorant will that ignores its ignorance. If someone doesn't know anything about growing vegetables, but thinks he knows everything about it, the more he wants vegetables, the more he acts, and the more he acts, the more damage he does. But then there is the weaver who follows the thread of the wool and succeeds in knitting a life that is pointed toward just actions...

I answered:

-I do well enough with the children, but with Beatrice, I am still divided.

-Would you like to see Beatrice like you see Maiffe and the twins?

-That is my dearest wish.

-The woman a man wants doesn't exist. In spite of this she is as heavy to carry

as a marble statue. The woman a man desires, he has already found, and she is as light as a bird. But to know what we desire, we need to rediscover the innocence we had as children. Without innocence, man and woman collide with each other instead of finding each other.

To this I replied:

-Marguerite, I sometimes have the feeling that you are not of this world. Nothing is less innocent than the innocence we want to rediscover.

-You are beginning to understand, my dear Guion. It's not about wanting innocence, it's about desiring a woman. Innocence is never lost because childhood is never forgotten. Love is much more a child's game than you think. On the other hand, child's games are much less child's games than you think.

To ask a man for innocence is to ask a lot, not because of the nature of the male; as a child, the boy can do as well as a girl when it comes to desire, but very soon he is torn away from the kitchen, the garden and the henhouse. He is directed toward arms, the feather, and combat. His will becomes that of his father, his schoolmaster, his confessor, and he is lost. At sixteen he can no longer even baby-sit without feeling that he is wasting his time. You may tell me that girls are forced into an even greater obedience. I will answer yes and no, the difference is not there. The difference is this: while girls know that they are obeying and do so strategically, boys obey with pleasure, believing that they are the ones who are running the show. The reason for this is simple: the girls don't have anyone to command, while the boy always has someone underneath him he can take it out on. The man gets drunk on his obedience as he drinks the power he has over another. It is not easy, then, for a man to rediscover, in the pursuit of natural desires, non-obedience to arbitrary will. Even the word "natural" makes a man smile, just as much

as the word "real"; these are children's words, words that have meaning only when one is taking care of children.

I meditated upon these lessons Marguerite gave. I tried to understand, and life took charge of teaching me.

Despite my difficulties, I learned how to deal with my body again. For years, my body had eaten alone, played alone, wept alone, looked at the girls without me, observed the goats grazing without my being aware of it. How many times had it sat down on the ground without me?

It smelled the smells, it nibbled a head of millet, it gazed at a large meadow, it did everything in an immense solitude while I did the will of others for a salary which, though I boasted about it, was really quite ordinary.

Among the beguines there is a story that is told to every novice: "In a very beautiful kingdom, a princess starved to death under a peach tree covered with fruit. The poor thing wanted strawberries." Obviously, the novice asks for an explanation. Then the teaching begins. The princess was seeking strawberries, she worked all day to cultivate strawberries, but they did not grow in that region. As for the peach tree, she did not see it, nor smell its flowers in the

springtime, nor notice the color of its fruit in summer. In the fall, they dropped on her head and she complained about it. Whatever the explanations, no novice truly understands this story, since it is at the very basis of eighty percent of our frustrations. And without the reassuring pain of our frustrations, we might see the rift, the gulf, the abyss that parallels every moment of our lives...

Marguerite had arranged it so that I would never see Beatrice, except at noon for the Angelus. And it took me two weeks to manage to do this. Why? Because I was thinking of her when she wasn't there, and I was lost in my thoughts when she was there.

Notwithstanding, at the end of two weeks with the children, the goats and the dog, I no longer thought about her except when I saw her, meditating at the time of the Angelus. What caught my eye was her eternal turned-up nose, a child's nose that catches odors with little palpitations of the nostrils. How could a nose be that mobile?

To say that I looked at her is quite an understatement! I devoured her. I felt as if there were coming out of my chest, my hands, my legs, my belly, and all the sensory accessories of my being, a sort of fiber that went toward her like the mist on a lake heads for a mountain's summit... A new body was forming around the organ of my heart. In the patience of desire, the fruit was ripening.

At noon, we all ate together. In a manner of speaking, because eating with children, half-disabled lepresses and Husdent who, extending his muzzle, stuck out his tongue, resembled rather a kind of sport where you manage to nibble something as you struggle to keep the bowls and plates on the table. This turmoil of children and work kept my carnal desires below the level of obsession. I blessed the burden of my life for quieting the ardor of the fire.

The afternoons, however, were much harder for me: one hour of dictation followed by two hours of copying. If Marguerite's presence had an effect on us that was lightening, liberating, and even enchanting, for me her treatise was a stone wall. Reading it, I hit a snag. I didn't understand it at all. At the fifth copy, the mystery was even greater than at the first.

It had to do with an interior dialogue between Reason, Love, Nature, Understanding, Will, Desire and Truth about freedom through the uncluttering of the heart. I wasn't even able to discriminate within myself the characters in this dialogue. It seemed to me that everything revolved around one principal distinction: To will to create starting from nothing kills, to desire to create starting from No Thing gives life. No Thing is a boiling void, a creative relation... Every evening I plunged my eyes in the bottom of the bowl Marguerite had given me. Everything was there, nothing was there. This bowl was considerably clearer than our mistress's treatise.

In fact, I didn't want to write Marguerite's dictation. I refused to bring wood to the Inquisition's stake. She could say what she said, tell it to us, teach it to us, sow it in our hearts, do like Jesus did, rely on saliva and not on ink, for saliva is living and adaptable, while ink is not capable of shutting up even when it needs

to. Moreover, Marguerite was so much better at teaching than dictation; her words and her actions contained nuances that no treatise could express. She spoke to us, while a treatise speaks to everyone. We make use of ink to write laws, draw up sentences, justify the unjustifiable, decree commandments, or fabricate worlds outside of this world. We use it to institute religions. Betrayal of the Word through Scripture - the whole of the Bible's tragedy was this...

I obeyed reluctantly. She noticed this, but persisted. For her, it was a rather short exercise, scarcely one hour of her day. But for me, to prepare the quills, scrape the parchment, maintain the calligraphic quality, revise the text, correct the text, immerse myself in my former profession: writing and rewriting the condemnation of an innocent person, was hard to handle. When I had finished, I resembled a little donkey that had been shut in for hours and then allowed to scamper in a field: I ran to join the children, the lepresses and the shepherd girls: I was coming back to life.

Maiffe worried me. She was not willing to let herself go and cry in any woman's arms. Probably she did not want to betray her mother. For a child, that was a hard and heavy wish. She stuck to me like a monkey to a tree. While on me, she cried for any whim whatever, but never gave in to what was really hurting her. She was almost nine, but acted like she was five. In order not to sink, a man whose boat is broken goes from one bit of wreckage to another; Maiffe went from one whim to another and, in consequence, from one frustration to another.

I didn't know what to do, so I made do with imitating the mama macaque, leading my little monkey just about everywhere. I was deaf to her caprices, but got her interested in the young goats who paid her back her moods with interest. Sometimes, she was able to leave me for a few moments and frolic with a kid that was trying to return to its maman. And then, one day, she wanted to learn how to milk in order to give the milk to a kid abandoned by its mother. Beatrice and I had decided to never abandon the child unless her mother were released. From that moment on, Maiffe remonstrated less and less, but still refused to go into Beatrice's arms as she had, no doubt too spontaneously, in the first few days.

The twins asked a lot of questions about the Dolcinos, their beliefs and their doctrines. I told of how they loved poverty, the simple life of Francis of Assisi, the struggle for the purity of the Church of the earliest days... But I could not hide the fanaticism of some of them, the relentless struggle and the survival in the mountains, the limitless difficulties of the alpine winter, the famines, the raids they made on villages to obtain their food. Progressively, they passed from fear to an increasingly firm decision to remain for several years in a beguinage.

Flore, our young lepress, wavered between revolt and resignation. She worried me even more than Maiffe. I felt particularly responsible. It worsened her pain for me to approach her, and distancing myself from her increased her despondency. She, who had been Beatrice's great friend, now fled from her.

The Nature of the Game

The atmosphere became as oppressive as an Ash Wednesday. It was just as important to keep the children at a distance from sullenness as from overexcitement. Rhubarb, cassia, and senna are reputed to be good at purging the black humor that the Arabs say comes from the kidneys and causes melancholy. That was not sufficient. We needed a mardi gras, a celebration, like the one that peasants organize where everyone imitates the village idiot, put their clothes on backwards, begin the day with cabbage soup, walk backwards and end the evening with a boisterous jig.

Marguerite proposed that we play a set of eight games. She had placed half of our names in a little box from which the other half had to draw. In that way, the pairs were determined by chance. After that, it was all about reversing roles, costumes, and temperaments, doing your partner's tasks, acting like her, walking, moving, and eating in her way, imitating her mannerisms, her grimaces and her reflexes, to surmise her questions, her replies, her ways of thinking... The other would do the same for us.

Every morning, a new character: enter her place, go into her body, into her psychological hive, amidst her bees and bumblebees... Every day, new pairs. After eight days, everyone will have experienced the world of eight different personalities, and at the end, before returning to our good old skins, an evening of mime would put us to the test. In front of everyone, we really would have to imitate someone among us. The laughter and applause would identify the winner... She insisted on the laughter, for it was all only a child's game. Like little girls playing at being grown-up ladies, we were going to play at being our neighbor.

Peasant games were customary in the country, but not at my place, in my childhood home, where to get me out of the peasant class was just what my father aspired to. I opposed this, saying that I was new and hadn't observed, inquired, and discussed enough... This made them all laugh, for everyone seemed to have predicted my objection...

- But my lord His Majesty's cleric, a shepherdess interposed, this is not about winning a post at the university, but having a good time...

All at once, a theory of the game formed in my hyperactive mind. Nothing is stranger than a child's game. The child pretends, he knows that he is pretending, but pretends not to know. Because, if he completely forgot he was pretending or if, on the contrary, he became perfectly aware that it was only pretending, he would in either case lose his lightness, that quality of the child that allows him to learn the world without being destroyed by it.

As adults, we pretend while forgetting completely that we are pretending, we play our character, but in reality we have lost the ability to play. The warrior plays at war with just as much passion as the little boy, except that he has

forgotten that it is pretending. In short, the adult soldier has entered his character and lost the ability to leave it; he is prisoner of a game that is no longer a game. Conversely, the false mystic climbs a mountain, watches time's river pass through the valley of the world, and murmurs: "Oh, the world is vain, all is a game." For the opposite reason, he too no longer knows how to play. The warrior has lost the game by attachment, the mystic by detachment.

I assented to the game and applied all my mind to it.

The first day, I had the great good fortune to draw the lot of our young Maiffe. She taught me what I had to do. She pulled on my big long pointed shoes, attached my gaiters to her legs (they reached as far up as her head), draped herself in a cape she tied on her right shoulder, raised her left arm and, looking all around her with an air of slight disdain, declaimed in a deep voice: "And let us discuss the condition of women". I looked like an orator.

For my part, I went barefoot like any child, wrapped in a tunic I had found that barely reached my knees. With cheeks blackened with dirt, I assumed a rather grumpy air and got it into my head to ask for cherries when there weren't any.

We laughed a lot all day about the foibles that brought us each day's little mishaps, but to tell the truth, I hadn't succeeded in entering their universe. I wasn't playing, I was working. I lacked the magic power of my childhood.

The next day, I was in the skin of a timid, self-effacing shepherdess I barely knew. To help myself, I decided to simply make a mirror of myself, to copy physically, detail upon detail, all that a shepherdess did.

To be a shepherdess is not a simple trade. The art of milking lady goats requires a lot of detail. A delicate touch is needed in order to feel the flow of the milk all along the udder. The synchronization between my hand and the movement of the milk, the sensuality required to persuade the goat to give up its milk, all this was a new pleasure for me...

Next, I became Gardie, the twin perplexed in the face of an uncertain future. A young lady is obliged to be good at guessing men's plans, for her future depends on it. In order to speculate about my fate on the marriage market and get the best deal possible, I had to steer a course inside the wills of men, father, brothers, brothers-in-law, nephews, cousins, in such a way as to avoid the shoals. Predict so as to duck the blows. All retreat being impossible, and any direct hold on one's personal plans ineffectual, the mind has no other reflex than to take advantage of social forces, the will of males, in other words. The world of Gardie's imagination revolved around the futures she hoped for or dreaded.

Something strange was moving in the depths of this feminine body: to let oneself melt in a body stronger than your own, find pleasure in snuggling up against muscles able to crush you, savor the caress of a large, agile, and gentle hand that could break you, perceive your own fragility as a woman in the impetuosity of another... And then, when you are at the right place, the pleasure of feeling a strong and muscular man become as vulnerable as a baby under your charm. To reverse the balance of power by the promise of pleasure.

To know that as long as he is under your charm, you control his power... A terrible knowledge, for if the charm ever weakens, that force turns against you with the fury of a wounded bull...

The day arrived when I had to play with Flore. At the beginning of that day, I was sunk deep into myself, ashamed of myself. Man definitely did not have a very good reputation in my eyes. The whole gang disgusted me... killers, rapists, fanatical monks, cruel soldiers, and lords and bishops as vulgar as they were proud. I was plunged in my dark male heredity, yet the sun had arisen and torn a curtain of clouds. All the forest began to shine. Then, by I don't know what miracle, I tumbled into Flore's eyes, I mean really into her head, and I looked through the two portholes of her skull at someone named Guion. It was a totally different feeling.

The man who was in front of me, that former cleric of I don't know what wretch, didn't look at all like a clown or a bell-tuner, a diplomat or a seducer lost among women. The man who was there in front of Flore's eyes was not a cock crested with feathers, but simply a worried, uprooted man who was searching in the night for a shaft of light in order to leave the world without having to die. And Flore saw very well my confusion and rebellion, but also my decency and good-will.

Flore was not making up stories, as I thought at the beginning. She was not making things up, hoping for a kiss from a Prince Charming who would restore her health. Be in bed, embrace a lover, have fun under the covers, become beautiful again... That belonged to my imagination... Flore saw no such thing. She wanted nothing to do with the eternity that comes in the magic of a moment of orgasm. She had been torn away from this world. She had payed. This is a euphemism. She was eight when her mother had detected the illness. The family had already received a significant promise of marriage, for the little girl was pretty, intelligent, and of noble blood. They had to give up the promise and pay back the loan. The father, nearly ruined, went on a long journey and abandoned his daughter at the door of the St. Elisabeth hospital. All her childhood dreams collapsed and no adolescent dream had taken root. She had experienced childhood; from now on she must experience old age. And yet, as soon as she heard the joyous and sensual music of the shepherd girls in the forest, she started to dance with a consummate art. When the dance took hold of her, she lost all her infirmities.

Flore simply wanted this flame that had cost her so much not to disappear into oblivion. For this, it was absolutely necessary for another consciousness, endowed with a living memory, to be branded with a red-hot iron. And I was branded with a red-hot iron.

And after that, I was Marguerite's partner. We didn't play! There wasn't enough time: make sure that supplies were received and the camp's material organization functioned; answer correspondence, advise the hospital, give medical, administrative, technical and spiritual instruction. There were messages as well, coming from Bruges, Brussels, Cologne, Erfurt, Trier,

Fribourg, Paris, and many other beguinages, all of them threatened either by the Church or the State. I hadn't realized that Marguerite was for the time being the master of the Grand Maidens. They numbered in the thousands, distributed in more than three hundred houses and organizations, some of which were surrounded by walls, while others were openly established on the streets of towns, where they offered various charitable services, still others were hidden in the countryside or the woods, and there were also some very loosely-bonded and elusive fraternities...

At last, chance dictated that I spend the day in my dear Beatrice's company. I had so much hoped for that day! And yet, like St. Paul, I remained blinded by the scales that covered my eyes. I wasn't able to get in to the role of my sweetheart, and still less, her character. I wasn't even able to want to dress like her, nor for an instant imitate her, even superficially. I realized that I had played all the roles rather easily, that I could pretend to be a shepherdess, a lepreux, or even the spiritual mistress of all the beguinages, I could regress and become a child, but it was impossible for me to concentrate my imagination to play my beloved. This plunged me into a bitter doubt.

To look at Beatrice from the exterior, her golden hair in the wind, her soft child's face whose smile retained traces of mischievousness, her eyes which hinted at claws, her fine lips that attracted my mouth, the enveloping movement of her body that called out to me like the water of a brook attracts a tree's withered leaf, the quivering of her chest hidden in the neckline of her garment, every bit of her body became my unique landscape... I wasn't able to enter that skin, I wasn't even able to shrink the proportions of that exterior, to subordinate them to one or the other of the women who had come at times to haunt my dreams. She wasn't woman as I had conceived of her; quite simply, she appeared to be of another species: she alone was a species. Ulysses might have encountered her between the Cyclops and the harpies on some bizarre island. A strange being whose shoulders, though frail, betrayed at the bulge of her shoulder blades a strength of wing that tore her loose from the force of gravity... A hybrid being, half dolphin, half frigate bird. This strange being nailed me alive to the cyclone of my body...I was in a high and raging sea. She made it hard for me even to breathe.

In reality, this attraction I was using up all my strength fighting against was flowing back toward me. Not only was I unable to get sufficiently out of myself to imagine myself thinking and acting like her, but through her I was forced back into my own body. I too became something external, simply a force propelled toward an object. All day long, I had been nothing more than a wandering man with no desire other than to plunge myself into that bird who dared to peck at my heart's blood. And her laugh, above all her laugh, possessed the property of relieving me of all my powers of resistance. A strange anger arose in me. I was ashamed of myself. I had an awful sense of having been returned, returned to that nerve that lays hold on man, making him a monk or a warrior in order to avenge the torments of desire. To tell the truth, I had done nothing but struggle all that day.

The next day, I was very happy to find myself in the character of the pretty Mitch, to wear a beautiful wedding gown, to dream of a valiant knight, to depart with him, madly racing on a powerful palfrey, to leap over hills and mountains with him to a distant and inaccessible land, a land where women can wash their linen in peace, cultivate vegetables as they hold their child on one hip, where it is possible to hear a bell without fearing an army, there where life is not sequestered by the wild beasts that human males have become. Mitch dreamed of love. And love, to the degree that it is a dream, resembles a journey in pastel colors of the kind that do not exist. And, moreover, it is this non-existence that forms the bubbles of life and, like yeast, transforms them into bread.

With Mitch, I had been relieved of the violence of my desire. She radiated such a purity that my heart became a father and this father thought only about protecting her, keeping her sheltered, far from the wretchedness of men. I felt that I could die for this mission, that I would have instinctively thrown myself on any lout who might be rude to her. This calmed my heart.

In spite of my inability to play, to laugh, to slacken the grip of my intellectual worry, to just let time run away in front of me like a sheep, these eight games gave me a rest from myself. I presume that a reader of novels is absorbed in his reading in order to identify with characters and, for a moment, be unburdened of himself.

Marguerite's game had lightened me, but more than that, it had bonded us; we were no longer a formless group, but persons who deeply moved each other. In someone else's presence, no one could remain intact any longer. The illusion of individual controllable trajectories had disappeared. We had penetrated each other. There is no greater pleasure than to gather the entire world within oneself. Have we any other roles than to seek to contain what contains us?

As the evening of role-playing progressed, we moved each other to the point of laughter, a laughter that seized us in our depths, for "us" was what it was always about. For example, I who am so serious, never thought that I was that funny. That evening, nothing seemed any more hilarious than my seriousness. As a character, I was, and by far, the most ridiculous. I doubled up with laughter as I looked at myself through others' eyes, in their imitations. And that released me.

At the end, I was dancing as lightly as a shepherdess. And when everything was finished, the oldest of the shepherdesses said this to me:

-Monsieur Guion, we like you as you are. You put space between us. When we associate only with women, we overheat each other like grains of wheat piled up in a silo. With a little air, we really have a lot of fun. And you have that quality of surprising us with your questions which are a little like answers and your answers are almost always questions. You have taught me to put questions between my thoughts and now my thoughts move around a lot better, freely, almost. I noticed one thing this evening: it is only when we are deep in ourselves, completely unaware and ignorant of other people's point of view, that we are able to talk, act, and move without laughing, like an Inquisitor. That is

when we do a lot of harm. As soon as we get back the ability to see how we see, we get back the ability to laugh. Hell is losing the point of view of others. I am forty, and I have just discovered a man. So don't be so reserved, talk to us man to man...

Realizing the incongruity of her words, her face blushed and her eyes shone. This made her so beautiful that we were all totally charmed. A great silence drew us closer to her.

Night had covered us with a quiet dome. I removed my eyes from the shepherdess and looked around at each one of the women. And suddenly I noticed that all of them were looking at me. The eyes of the shepherdesses, the leper women, the twins, Marguerite, Beatrice and Maiffe were staring at me. I became aware that I was surrounded by women and that these women did not see me as a monster, but as a man and they wanted to hear this man speak, and fall asleep in the sweetness of his voice. They knew very well that I was reasoning, for my nature was to reason just as much as Flore's nature was to dance... They didn't care.

So I took the time to lean against a tree. Maiffe came and drowsed in my arms.

-It is so pleasant to be here with you, I said to them. It's wonderful, this imitation game. It makes me remember a time when I was a child. As usual, my father came into the house at twilight, washed his hands, and kissed Maman... And suddenly I saw it, he moved his head like me; his eyes, his lips, his grimaces imitated me perfectly. He spoke with my expressions and my intonations. A little offended, I exclaimed: - Papa, stop imitating me! He didn't understand right away, but burst out laughing as he answered: - Son, I didn't want to imitate you...But you, you have just now noticed that you are my son. It was a revelation. What I was, my way of standing or sitting, my manner of speaking, of making my eyebrows look like a circonflex accent, my patois, my vocabulary, all that wasn't me, but a character I had constructed by imitation like an actor who is preparing to perform a play.

It is by imitation that I came to assume the role of cleric, and then that of secretary of the Inquisition. If I had continued, I would perhaps have become Notary General of the Inquisition! It is through playing a role that one becomes a character in a tragedy whose meaning everyone has lost. In her book, Marguerite speaks of the land of the lost. This is the land of the child who has lost the art of playing. The adult is prisoner of a character he himself has forged by imitation. He no longer sees his character. If the Pope could ever see himself, he would burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of his vestments heavier than armor, his enormous hat, the parades where he is walked on a palanquin like a sick person or a paralytic, his haughty grimace, the prohibitions he declaims... Such is the land of the lost. All the antics that have a part in power make those who have torn themselves away from the hypnosis of ritual die laughing...

-But, Monsieur Guion, what remains when all this game collapses, when we have had a good laugh at the miserable human comedy? Flore asked. This

evening, what remains?

The young lepress's ravaged face made the answer difficult. Her illness had so to speak thrown her out of the running a long time ago. But that hadn't spared her from unhappiness. There were other kinds of unhappiness. I couldn't escape the question and yet I was incapable of saying anything at all.

The evening of imitation and laughter had just ended. Our human existence had just closed the lid on its characters, and we were screwed back on to ourselves. The night was putting our strength to sleep, little by little. What did remain? Above us, the cupola of the stars, around us, the lap of the forest; in us, the circulation of feelings; in the center, the silent open-mouthed gulf, the eternal rift of nothingness that parallels our conscious lives...

It was Flore who answered:

-When I'm gone, I promise you, you won't be able to forget me.

Beatrice looked at Flore with enigmatic eyes. A thread of gold linked the one who had inherited beauty and the one who had been disinherited of it; one might have said they were two faces of the same moon. Flore got right to the point:

-Guion, would you take me as your daughter as you have with Maiffe?

-Why, certainly, I told her spontaneously, tears in my eyes, it would be a great honor for me to have you as a daughter.

-Then, I want you to marry Beatrice, for I would like her to be my mother and I know that you love her. When it is time, I would like to die between a Papa and a Maman, like a normal girl.

The silence embraced us, crushed us like a grape from which juice is extracted. Husdent, who had been sleeping until then, sat up and stared at me. I expected a miracle to occur and deliver us. I didn't yet know that love was the miracle.

In the secrecy of my heart, I was beginning to grasp that there was something more difficult than to transmute suffering into beauty, and that was to transmute beauty into joy. This was the road that Flore wanted to take with us. This was a mission for which I was absolutely incompetent. Every one of the women and girls, and even the dog, absolved me. I was surrounded by their looks, but more than that I was surrounded by their desire and this transformed me. For one moment, one little too-brief moment, no more than a memory held by a thread, I had seen the Guion who left this gathering of women. Suddenly, I felt handsome, and for one brief second, that beauty burned with joy. At that moment, I believed I understood why the universe is at the same time so beautiful and so cruel...

And then the tiny second closed up again.

The Wedding Night

In the morning, Marguerite was waiting for us. Standing on either side of her, Flore and Maiffe were trying hard to suppress their giggles.

-My dearest daughter, Marguerite said, the time has come for you to take a new direction. You have chosen a man, and he has chosen you. The outer Church has abandoned us. It is I who am uniting you this morning.

She closed her eyes for a silent prayer. Asked us to mutually promise each other support, fidelity, and love. And concluded simply, but without at all averting her gaze:

-You are married. Now go to Silver Lake and bring us some fish.

-I will take care of Maiffe, Flore added. The two of us have put the packsaddle on Becassine, loaded the provisions and what you will need for fishing.

-I agree, but only until the new moon, not one day longer, Maiffe solemnly declared, holding back her tears.

Marguerite took us in her arms. She hesitated a moment before letting Beatrice go. Tears flowed on her cheeks. Beatrice was not yet twenty, seemingly so defenseless, a body that hesitated to become that of a woman. As for me, I was past twenty-five, I had served the Inquisition, and had not finished my initiation to the life of a beghard. Nevertheless, the break with the past took place. Beatrice snuggled up under my shoulder, saying:

-Don't imagine, Guion, that I'm going to blindly obey you.

We were husband and wife. Flore had turned around, as she led Maiffe toward the goats that needed to be milked. Fate had bound us with too strong a desire. Our wills were committed. There was, however, no bridge in front of us, but a vast forest and a big blue sky. Taking hold of the rope that held Becassine, we took our first steps in that immense dwelling place. Husdent brought up the rear, ears alert.

That evening, Silver Lake was like a pewter ladle set down in a hollow in the hill. Perfect calm. Reluctantly, Becassine carried our baggage in front of us. She seemed to know the way. She was thirsty, just as much as we were. The sun displayed the colors of the rainbow on the quiet water. A light mist began to drive the blue light back toward the lake and all the surrounding forest grew reddish. Becassine pierced the water's mirror and, half submerged, sucked up her fill. We too dove into the water. Husdent sat down to keep watch.

The majesty of our solitude enveloped us. No one could do anything more for us.

At the foot of a red dogwood, we saw a log cabin still standing, built by a hunter and free at this time of year. We put our things in it. Leaving the cabin, for a long time we remained perfectly still in front of the dogwood. A

honeysuckle had wrapped itself around it. And we immediately thought of Tristan and Isolde. Would the two of us be famous lovers? When the honeysuckle winds around a trunk and is attached, both it and the tree can endure, but if one dies, so does the other. The drama was already in place. The infinity of our solitude pushed each of us toward the other like survivors of a shipwreck lost at sea. That sea was compressed into this sparkling lake. We were one in front of the other in this enchanted lake, encircled by the forest's reddened fleece. One might have said that the entire cosmos wanted to play in our bodies. Love is a magic that makes light of us.

Becassine, her muzzle in the grass, looked at us from the corner of her eye. She must have been saying to herself: "Ah, what a fuss humans make about sex!" I saw this clearly myself; it was impossible for us to go about it simply. I had often observed the courtship behavior of several kinds of birds and wondered what ours would be. I couldn't guess. But one thing made me smile - I could see that I was already in the middle of the courtship ritual: my body went on its way taking no heed whatever of Husdent's perplexed stare.

The entire landscape entered the game. My body was swept away by unknown powers from the sexual springs of the first days of the world. Everything wanted to savor everything through each one. Into that art, life inserted a good dose of humor.

The evening light was already liquid. Beatrice's soaked shirt clung to her body, taking on the colors of a pomegranate coulis. Her eyes clouded mine, and already my linen tunic no longer concealed my desire. How vulnerable a man is! Always exposed! That made her laugh. And her laughter provoked me.

Hands seemed to emerge from the water to transform my body. The fairies of ardor were making Guion into Tristan. I was not the originator of my amorous display. I was undergoing it. At times, I was overcome by giggles. With a serious air, Husdent was watching the dance of the birds.

I dove into the water as if it were a baptism. I was swept away by a sort of nervous and muscular storm. Captivated by my beloved, I advanced like a serpent charmed by a flute. Love is the art of time. All the past, all the future embraced, crushing us in the same undefinable instant. I was paralyzed, my mouth half-open and my eyes utterly incapable of turning away.

Few things in this world are more beautiful than a woman and a man who discover the strange language that transforms both of them into a new being. Never again would they be indifferent to each other. The language of love has the quality of making pleasure painful and pain delightful. While pleasure and pain used to flee from each other like two enemies, now one can no longer live without the other. Eros unites the ends of the earth.

During this astounding transformation, while the moon's bluish light was gently banishing the sun's purple rays, there was a changeover in the dance. It was she who began. The water covered her up to her knees, a soft sand supported her, and her body was reflected in the undulating mirror of the surface. Her dance

was made up of advances and retreats, of expansions and contractions caused by the movements of her hips. The laces of her shirt were undone and the collar revealed her chest. The movement gave the eye what it took away an instant later and this forced out of my body broken gestures, insect movements.

At the beginning, my hands seemed to cry out to her as if I had become a wound and she, a balm. The following moment, it was her body that was demanding me.

Nothing is worse than aborting an act of love with a gesture of impatience. When such a misfortune occurs, the man and the woman find themselves lying sheepish and embarrassed next to each other, more emptied than satisfied, even more strangers to each other than before the Icarian fall of their desire. I had been surprised to see de Marigny jump on a prostitute like a savage. I didn't want an accident like that. I kept myself in love's rhythm. All the images of the past disappeared in my body like stone in a flaming volcano.

Beatrice had surrendered to her nature. I was a little surprised that she had taken the initiative. With birds, the male dances to prepare the female. For us, it was different. My intellectual nature slowed me down. Beatrice had developed in secret the appropriate skills for desire. With an astonishing ease, and in the total purity of her shamelessness, she showed off all her private parts, unveiling them, then retrieving them, using the water sometimes as a mirror and sometimes as a garment. And she laughed; she found my distress amusing and maybe even sweet. On my side, the moorings were stretched to the limit. I was still resisting. Husdent, on his rock, didn't budge.

Even so, the movement of her body entranced me. I was in the sweet pain of desire. I could see it very well in my jerky movements, often clumsy, close to violence. But I let space take hold of me. Space is love's effective assistant. It is like the body's forerunner, more subtle than the body; space departs as an ambassador and prepares the reception. I used space like a collection of subtle hands for subtle caresses. If I had had the eyes of an angel, I would have surely seen that, inside the landscape, the dance was tying knots in the fibers necessary for the dialogue of bodies which was beginning and would never end, for desire does not move toward assuaging, its end is not consummation, its end consists of making new bodies better equipped to tear themselves out of time.

Beatrice's swaying body was now nothing more than an instrument of suction. The swelling of her nipples called out to my hands, her mouth, to my mouth, her belly, to my male organ. She had become a form carving its form in my body. I had become a form making its form in the palpitations of her flesh. In this touching of the eyes, the bodies joined together, and now all the movements started from the hips.

The honeysuckle undulated, and the dogwood adopted its movement. The pain of waiting chiseled its way into the wood of the tree, and pleasure seeped into the wound. The moorings stretched to the limit were beginning to give way. Husdent curled up on a rock and slept.

I grew supple. I exploded in dancing leaps, I rushed with agility around her, approaching and retreating. It was then that I was surprised to find that I had charmed her. Everything in my body that I thought would have made Beatrice afraid had become an object of attraction. My muscles, my strength, my erect penis... she wanted them. Her final hesitations had changed into thirst. Beatrice abandoned herself to this metamorphosis, she wanted me to make her a woman, able to absorb the entire world and all its solitude. The constantly mobile distance separating us was, by its power of attraction, pulling from our bodies a new fabric.

All the new members taking form between pain and pleasure, the anguish of death and the impulse of life, fear and attraction, appeared to know the same maternal language, so that the hands began to speak, to sing, to wail. In the beginning, the hands, unable to keep a distance any longer, went too quickly, too violently. And then, they understood that they were only at the beginning of the word. Like children who must learn how to talk, our hands began to stammer more slowly, to better articulate their movement, to learn from the response of the other the perfection of the act.

That night, movements as violent as they were tender came, in waves, to softly die on our wet bellies. Becassine was chewing grass as she kept watch on the surroundings. She raised her head and looked at us for quite a long time with all the seriousness of her obscure intelligence. This made us burst out laughing.

The moorings were broken.

Before dawn our hands, our mouths, our arms and our legs recounted all the fierce love of light and darkness. A curious language that creates the very substance we needed to endure this surplus of existence. And then all the pains of desire drained out into the waves of our bodies' sensuality.

Nothing seemed more beautiful than this double body rediscovering its unity in the spasms of pleasure. For me, it is still a jewel that summarizes nature's function rather well: to unite what is separated and separate what is united. The great Baker likes to fold his dough over again, crush it to soften it, open it up to turn it over, force new flavors from it...

We slept for an eternity in Phaedrus's chariot.

And then, we fished on the lake. We had been born in this lake, and we now had a new force, a new instinct at our disposal. We had grown new eyes, new ears, and new noses. On our makeshift raft, slipping across the quiet lake, we were able to sense the fish, we felt it the moment when it bit the hook, we knew the amount of energy required to pull it out of the water without breaking its jaw...

We had come to respect time and space, for in the pain of desire and the pleasure of completion, in love's new language and the truth of our nature, a new reality had taken root: our two daughters had entered our hearts completely, and we felt the need to love them, the desire to see them again, to feed them with our carp and all the fruits of our hands...

We ourselves were the lake, the reservoir and motive force of living things. Life's grand ritual took hold of us each morning.

Today, in my infinite solitude, I barely remember the orgasms and odors, but I know the hour that will place us again in love's grip. It is there before me, inevitable. I will die in Beatrice's arms. It would be impossible for me to die anywhere else, for it is impossible for me to live anywhere else. The wedding of opposites cannot escape its necessity. I know that hour, it is before me. It will engulf me in its time. If not, nothing of what I saw and heard has existed.

On our return to the camp, we were man and woman, mother and father. Becassine was bent beneath his packsaddle loaded with fish, cleaned and prepared for drying. Husdent was jubilant.

Everyone was celebrating. Flore threw herself into my arms; I was her father. Maiffe, after a short hesitation, leaped into Beatrice's bosom; she was her mother. Marguerite's face was covered with tears; her daughter had found the way of conjugal life not in abandoning her own life, but in fulfilling it.

Flight

The Inquisition was infiltrating the Saint Elizabeth Hospital. It was no longer possible for us to obtain supplies without putting the whole community in danger. We had to leave, and the sooner the better, for summer was still radiant, while in one month the first signs of autumn would be jabbing us in the back. Marguerite knew a bit too well what winter means for fugitives.

Moreover, with Beatrice's help, I had completed the five copies of the new version of the Mirror of Simple Souls. These copies contained sixteen supplementary chapters, so many arguments for defending the Mirror against its detractors, Marguerite thought. I was convinced of the opposite. One copy had been sent to the famous theologian Godefroid de Fontaine, one to Domnus Franco, a Cistercian of the abbey of Villiers-la-Ville, another to the Franciscan Jean de Quaregnon and finally one to the bishop Jean of Chalon-sur-Marne. We would take with us the last copy of the Mirror, reserved for the secret library of the Flemish beguinages.

It was agreed that we would proceed with the cart and the donkey, leaving behind us the shepherdesses and the leprosarium, which was unlikely to attract spies. Our family (that is what we really were: Marguerite the grandmother, Beatrice the daughter, our two children Maiffe and Flore and me, the husband) would accompany Gardie and Mitch who had chosen once and for all to try their luck with the beguines of Brussels in the community of Heilwige Bloemardine.

As I have previously said, a copy of Geoffroy de Charnay's letter to Bloemardine had preceded us. Recently, a missive from Marguerite announcing our necessary and urgent exile had been entrusted to a messenger. The beguinage at Brussels had favorably received our request. For my part, I was bringing the original text of Geoffroy's confidences. Lady Bloemardine was expecting us.

Fortunately, the prince of Brussels did not much like the Pope and blocked the way for the Inquisition. The deputy burgomaster Wilhelmus Bloemart, the father of Heilwige Bloemart, called Bloemardine, provided the beguinage with diplomatic protection. We were safe, at least for a while. Once we were in Brussels we could, if necessary, go up to Antwerp, Ghent or Bruges where dozens of communities were openly established and had refuges in the countryside. We were full of hope. Gardie and Mitch had learned to laugh again, played with the children and dreamed of a peaceful future.

We had filled a cart, hitched up Becassine, installed Maiffe on top of the load and after saying goodbye to our friends and to Husdent, we went on the road, two of us pulling in front, the others pushing in the rear. Flore refused to climb on the load and, leaning on a stick that she pushed here and there into the road, she added momentum to her own poor strength in order to make the cargo

advance.

An enormous cargo. It was because we had to do more than flee; Marguerite had imagined a way of camouflaging us that would be educational. We were an itinerant troupe producing a play that was not supposed to be of the ordinary kind, but evangelistic. I objected. It would be running too great a risk.

-I was a theatrical troubadour for years, don't you know, Marguerite retorted a little drily. It's my way of preparing women's hearts. I have also spent a good part of my life in avoiding spies and informers. My disguises have always served me well. They throw prying eyes off course and attract sincere eyes. We have no more time to lose. We must propagate hope and lucidity.

Everyone seemed perfectly in agreement.

The time spent crossing the forest to the first village allowed us to adapt Marguerite's text and rehearse the play. The costumes furnished by the hospital, the props, and the whole heavy what have you had been carted off and, for the time being Becassine was playing the leading role and we, the tiny audience. She put her heart into it.

From village to village, Flore would be an oriental princess veiled from head to toe because... Because she was too beautiful... The rest had to revolve around that necessity.

A little before noon, we were going toward the rain as we climbed a rather steep hill on an interminable track in the forest. The load really was too heavy for the donkey. Becassine put her weight on her back hooves while her front hooves advanced a step and then, with great care, she reversed the process to complete the stride. It was imperative that the cart not go flying backwards, carrying with it the animal and our baggage.

I slid my shoulder under one of the cart's slats, leaned on Flore's stick, and with her assistance I went at it with all my strength. I heard my big daughter's wheezing respiration. At times, I felt her weakening, nearly fainting on my chest. Marguerite and Beatrice were pushing firmly on the other slat. Gardie and Mitch, each on her own side, were working at turning the spokes of the wheels, blocking them with their shepherd's crook to keep them from slipping back.

We were still a machine not yet in tune that labored and overheated. The sun delivered a final slap, and the rain came to refresh us. Alas, it transformed the road into mud. It was then that Maiffe stood up on the load and, following Becassine's rhythm, began to breathe very loudly, letting out a roar at every breath. This got us in step. The machine took on a regular cadence.

The summit of the hill was approaching, but it was impossible for us to raise our heads to notice this. Our strength was wearing down. I felt Becassine's shaking, transmitted by the leather traces to the whole cart. From one moment to the next, the poor beast could collapse. As for Maiffe, she saw the summit very well, only three or four turns of the wheel away. And she cried:

-Mountain, get down! Don't you see that we are passing! Courage, crew, we're getting there.

The rain abruptly stopped, Becassine pressed against her shafts, uttered a resounding braying, and dragged the load right to the summit.

Maiffe burst out laughing as she cried:

-I beat the mountain. I beat it. Look, Flore, at who your sister is! I'm the queen...

Except for Maiffe, who was stamping her feet on top of the load, we all had collapsed as one on the muddy ground. Burning rays massaged our dead muscles. I didn't have the strength to unhitch the poor animal. Becassine was standing up well as she got back to breathing with full victorious lungs. Maiffe, drunk with power, opened her arms and drank the sky. It was our daughter, the arrow of our hope...

The family was spread out pell-mell on the ground. Beatrice's head ended up on my stomach, and Flore's on my chest. Marguerite clutched my forearm, laughing little spasmodic laughs, Mitch and Gardie were weeping tears of victory, wiping their faces on my woollen vest. Maiffe, on the load, was sobbing with joy. And what joy!

A breeze probed through the foliage, scattering the blackbirds. Sparks exploded in all the drops of water sown by the rain. The forest's brown and green arms covered us like a great river's surface. We were lying down in the valley of tears, in the place of water, precisely there where pain gives its value to animals and men. We watched, above the hill, the space of birds. The blue of the sky parted the leaves in order to look at us. A dull humming resonated in our emptied skulls. The air, humid, almost liquid, entered our lungs and made us shiver all the way to our fingertips. We were like a great body regaining its strength directly from the earth.

-But what kind of game have we gotten into? Flore said.

The question throbbed through my mind, exhausted from the effort. That question alone had the power to confront anything whatsoever. I would have accepted death with just as much joy as the life that was hardening its points in all of my blood vessels. In fact, it was not a question, but an exclamation. I think that I was beginning, that day, to understand that the heart exclaims where intelligence questions. There where the head wonders at the tragic fate of man, a serene, given, and burning soul exclaims as it devours the journey...

All the beaming of these women who made a flamboyant sun of me brought blood and fire to my proud heart, made it beat in a more virile way, more satisfied than after the pleasures of love. I was a man, and my exhausted muscles, regaining their strength in more and more widely spaced spasms, savored that man. My eardrums bubbled like wine in the midst of fermentation, and the rivers of my body rushed into the plain.

The feeling of having sown seed, of having discharged sweat and life, of

having, to some small extent, served the femininity of the earth, this feeling filled my veins.

My daughter Maïffe, our future, our continuation, was shouting victory. And my daughter Flore, black hair, skin of earth, was inhaling not air but hope. To belong to the contradictory causes of a groping Creation is the greatest joy of human existence. I was, through my dear daughters, at the center of the world, there where the sap that rises and the sap that descends see that they are indissociable.

I didn't understand why, and I didn't care either, but I had to admit it: the sun is incapable of leaving the trajectory it makes around each Human self. It turns, it turns around the child of Man, fascinated by him. It is a perfect law of physics. The sun quite simply cannot abandon its round of love: a cord as luminous as it is untearable holds it to every human self. I was a component of the eternal wheel in the same way as a woman. At a woman's height, man can finally see the perimeters of life and cease being afraid of its darkness.

I was there, in the bosom of women. The earth could swallow me, digest me, vomit me up or raise me up by and in the sap of trees, no matter, it can do nothing against being; my substances are as eternal as life and as permeable as the substances of a woman. The wheel does more than turn, it vibrates, its movement is impeccable, I mean without fault and without guilt. The question of knowing if happiness exists is a question that does not exist. Conversely, however, what exists vibrates and it is certainly necessary to call that vibration, happiness.

Happiness is the substance of the cosmos when it rests on its profoundest depth, that is to say, in the naked soul of a woman or a man. Whether unhappiness is included in this doesn't change a thing. The fiber that prevents the world from ripping itself into discontinuous pieces is happiness. What can I do? All my sufferings, my tears, my sorrows, my fears are powerless to put off track the jubilation of the cosmos. This relieves me, frees me, that I can do nothing against the cosmos, that it shines forth regardless. I may as well let myself be traversed and pierced by it.

For several delirious eternities, we continued to turn thus in the cosmic plate. Maïffe's laugh made the whole earth resonate. Nothing of this great porcelain disc where the earth's colors travel, where the rainbow's subtleties sizzle, where the leaves and flowers are stirred, where the birds and orang-utans move, can escape anywhere outside of life. There is nothing outside of being, can you go any further in tautology than that!

Maïffe and Flore, Gardie and Mitch, Marguerite and Beatrice turned and turned around me like a top, their arms extended like a cross. Circulating in my veins were those who flee death, women, children, the earth, and passion.

-The world revolves around us, Marguerite hummed, as if she perceived my thoughts.

-What kind of game have we gotten into! Flore repeated.

It was an exclamation.

After a long interval of silence, my breathing brought new air to my mind. I felt myself leaving my lethargy. I knew, I saw that I was going to leave the state I was in. My consciousness was so alert, however, that I could follow, thread by thread, the succession of reasonings that had led me step by step into the world of thought that runs along the great precipice between the sphere of things and the abyss of the possible. I saw my mind invent the fall into nothingness, imagine an absolute death and then extract from it great bucketfuls of anguish. But this process deceived me no longer, for I had taken the initiative; before leaving the immense plate of being, I printed that eternal instant on the bottom of my memory.

I had just comprehended what a simple and emancipated soul is. And I was already losing the thread but not the memory.

-Women that I love, I sighed, go on, get up! We must free Becassine from her harness.

Marguerite had already unhitched the animal, which was drinking in a puddle. Maiffe leaped into my arms from the top of the cart. We were poor people, we were almost entirely women, and we were working very humbly at life. That's enough for a man. It is too much, even.

We had camped beneath the starry dome and I think our play became clearer that night in our dreams, for in the morning, after a solid breakfast, Marguerite's basic structure put on flesh and feathers, and was carried out without any pitfalls. Each posture, each line, each tirade strung themselves together as if by necessity. It was tragic, it was happy, it was human life.

Suddenly I understood why it was necessary to produce this play: to prevent our bones from crying in our place. No one can keep the seed from springing up. It is better then to give it a form that is likely to touch other hearts. The duty of creating collective hope overruled the duty of personal survival. And the heart itself requires it, for it would rather burst from love than always beat at the same rhythm.

It took us a week to cross the forest toward Bergen. The journey was no longer as difficult as it was the first few days. We abandoned a number of props that weren't necessary. We learned to better organize our efforts. It wasn't easy to persuade Flore to climb on the cart now and then. Her respiration was rapidly growing sibilant, and she needed to spit in order to clear her lungs. We had to fear a relapse.

The closer we came to leaving the forest, the more we risked meeting peasants or even a hunting party, so Flore had to keep her hood closed despite the heat of the day. In spite of all the journey's inconveniences, we were as cheerful as Becassine who was afraid of nothing except, from time to time, a river crossing.

At Bergen, we were a professional troupe directed with an iron hand, as it ought to be, by the experienced troubadour I so obviously was, and my mother-in-law had better watch herself, for it was she who publicized the show, started the

applause, and passed the hat. She didn't know how to do anything else...

Bergen's fountain was surrounded by shops supported by full arches sustained by a central column, with square-paned windows whose shutters opened toward the top to form awnings, and small display-stands offering merchandise. The two-story facades, built of good stones, perfectly echoed the sounds. Benches allowed people to sit down to examine the selection of local and imported products. The streets leading into the square did not permit large vehicles to enter, and consequently we were not compelled to shout by the din of iron-tired wheels. An ideal spot.

The sun was still spotting the stone with its morning yellows, the shops were opening, and the square was awakening as the light stretched out and the animals bellowed. A tavern-keeper saw us arrive and pointed out a good seat for drinking and eating in the sun while my family was quenching its thirst at the fountain. He served me a roll, butter, and broth. After a few proprieties, I let him know that I directed a troupe of satirists. In answer, he came out with this:

-If the stranger doesn't mind, I can bring the village provost here, for the permit. You're at his place, right here.

-Your provost has a lovely house, I answered.

I deposited our passport on the table and jingled the coins in my purse. I went on:

-Is the permit for us to perform very expensive?

-That depends...

-And on what, my good man? tell me.

-Judging by that cart there, all those kids, that's quite a few mouths. It won't be cheap.

-Don't tell me that the price depends on the number.

-That's the custom here.

-My family is not the troupe. My mother-in-law, for instance, doesn't go up on stage.

He didn't respond, let me eat, went about his business and a short time later began to hover around me as he looked again at the troupe who were rummaging in the cart to find something to eat.

-You are good Catholics, I imagine...

-What are you thinking, taverner! We people of the road don't dabble in theology, we want to stay alive. We came from Paris. That's a lot of towns and villages. There's not a priest, a provost, an abbot or a monk who hasn't questioned us and picked our brains. We're an orderly troupe, we retell the old lays of Marie de France, we put on a play, as Catholic as can be; you will hear it with pleasure, I assure you. We go to church on Sundays, we often present

liturgical plays there, we don't speak ill of our neighbors, we go to confession, we don't hide. To show ourselves is our profession. So!

-Don't get up on your high horse! I believe you. But you find hornets everywhere.

He returned to his kitchen and came back some time later. I said to him:

-The sun rose very yellow, it won't rain. We thought of giving our performance a little after three. Here, I'm giving you as surety a half sou, pure gold and coin of the realm. Bring us the permit. As sure as I'm looking at you, you will be rewarded. Right now, we're going to the church to pay our respects to the Good Lord.

I tipped my hat to him, returned to my flock and went with them into the little church with the timber-framed roof. One hour later, we had the permit. It had cost us dearly, but since the passport was of my own making and Marguerite wouldn't budge an inch regarding the theater, it was undoubtedly necessary... We still had to work our way up to the permit's standards and prove that we were professionals.

To better show our talents, we rented the public rostrum. Our sets, prepared by the hospital, revealed the room of an oriental princess, with windows ornamented with magnificent birds, a sumptuous vertical bed, glass beads that resembled pearls and diamonds, and earthenware jars that appeared to be of pure china. Our costumes, though simple, were worthy of the finest troupes that trod the stage from Paris to the Holy Land.

Marguerite gaily went out to convince every woman who came to the market to go to the performance. She praised the play with so simple and natural a charm that you would have said that it was a woman inviting her friend to the marriage of her eldest daughter. She began by informing herself about the health of the lady, her children, and her husband. Sometimes she took out a sachet of herbs, a cream, or an oil that could heal an illness. She said to her:

-Good lady, it's a pleasure to know you and I want to remember you. My son-in-law, my daughter, and my granddaughters have something to tell you that will be of great comfort to you. You won't regret it, I assure you. It is not a farce or a melodrama like the others, but something that engraves itself there (she placed her fist on her chest) and that you will remember...

And, almost unfailingly, the woman went down on one knee reflexively as if she were addressing a noblewoman. In the sky, the sun contributed in its way to bring in the public. It made white clouds dance like ballerinas, foaming and floating above the hills. People wanted to do something out of the ordinary and why not! They would quickly make up the lost time, and the autumn's hard work was not around the corner. The tavern-keeper, who was not without some interest in the matter, announced that the men would have their third pot of beer free.

Maiffe was playing with Becassine, making her bray. Laughter and word of mouth did the rest and people came out from everywhere in the vicinity to hear

the troupe.

It wasn't three o' clock and the square was black with people. Flore was still rehearsing underneath the stage with Gardie and Mitch. I heard my poor daughter spit to clear her lungs. I had a tightening in my throat. Fortunately, she didn't have to speak much; for the most part, she conducted a silent monologue on her vertical bed as she mimed and danced her inner drama while Beatrice served as her voice. Her technique depended on the grace she would put into her movements, on the expression of her gestures, close to dance and quite the opposite of a leper's stiff movements.

I confessed my fears to Marguerite, but she persisted, repeating to me that her granddaughter would find her joy in being for one moment the heroine of a tragedy, and that taking this role away from her would amount to giving her a death sentence. It was enough for her to be sick, she must not, in addition, be treated as such. "She who does not express herself, dies!"

How could I answer my mother-in-law!

The Tragedy

Hear, good people, Marguerite began. Stop the course of your lives for one moment. Sit down and make yourselves comfortable. There are bales of hay for everyone. Every peasant and his wife too, every craftsman and his spouse too have the right and perhaps the duty to take a break today to educate themselves. Don't think any more about these persons you are attached to, these men and these women you love. You'll return to them. For one hour, one hour before sunset, full, yellow, and resounding, agree to enter another story even more real and more meaningful. The detour will be worth as much as the coming back, for above each one of our lives, above all the novels we fear or that we hope for, another play, a mythical, biblical tragedy, governs fate. To hear it is the beginning of salvation. We have found this play we have written to be as true as a precious stone.

After this, the presenter left a very long silence, then the sound of a flute provided the atmosphere.

Peasant women approached, and even some husbands. Nursing infants sucked their mothers' breasts. To the east, a group of boys remained standing. To the west, a group of girls had sat down. People didn't talk much in these rural districts since the Inquisition had gone on the prowl. Everyone retreated to his shell. Behind these weathered faces was the habit of filtering sermons without leaving any trace. Nevertheless, something serious seemed to have prepared their minds. A great shaft of light had cleared a path all the way to us.

Covered with a large veil of white silk, wearing a nightgown of fine linen, adorned with wide red ribbons embroidered with gold, a perfect counterfeit, our princess Flore appeared to have a beauty rendered all the more universal by the fact that no one saw it. She was sleeping on the vertical bed. She was dreaming...

Long ago, yes, very long ago, too long ago, she had met a shepherd. Now he haunted all her dreams. She saw him again and again, for her he was all of humanity... All this existed in the flesh of hope, a necessity for life on earth to be possible for all the women lepers suffering from every possible leprosy.

At that moment, that famous shepherd boy came on stage, the one whose duty it is to save abused girls. But he arrived from the side where he was not expected, from the shadow side and, like a blind man, he held out his crook in front of him as he bemoaned his lot:

-They put out my eyes, tomorrow they will tear me into pieces. Let them do with me what they want. They have taken from me my treasure, my beloved. She was not for me. What did I have to do with perfection? She was too beautiful. I'm only good for cleaning the dirt off sheep. She was not a sheep. I got burned... Tomorrow at this hour, I will be dead. For a poor shepherd like me, death is a relief. But I had to fall in love! So death is no longer any

consolation. We live with goats, cows, and sheep, we gather dried cow dung, we are roasted by the sun in summer, we are frozen in winter, in the fall and the spring we dissolve in the rain like salt, but even so there are rainbows that round off their crowns on our heads and we begin to believe that the light sometimes does cross over to the side of the poor... It's true, for a moment, it's true...

I remember my first meeting with her. She was coming downhill at full speed, laughing as if she had just done something mischievous. She was sixteen, covered by a woollen cloak that might have belonged to a shepherdess. Yes, she was wearing a fine wedding veil around her shoulders, but it was no doubt because of the trick she had played... How could I have guessed? Where are you going like that, girl? I asked her. She said nothing, but all at once stopped laughing. I barred her way by holding out my arm. What could I do? I am, like all the shepherds, so accustomed to catching lambs that I grabbed her cloak and turned her face toward me. My prey struggled in her trap. - Stop wriggling, I said to her. I won't eat you. Just tell me why you are running like that and laughing. And I let her go as quickly as I had grabbed her. She didn't run away, but looked daggers at me. Mute, she was. But I felt certain that there was a lot going on in her pretty little head.

Flore, the princess, was sleeping deeply in her bed and a voice was speaking in her place:

-I laughed, but I was scared to death. That day, I was running like a deer, I was running away from a danger a lot bigger than death. And the shepherd, he caught me and let me go so fast. He was missing some teeth, his skin was brown and his hair was tousled. That took away all his pride, I thought. So much so that I loved him at first sight. You must understand: I had come from the Levant. As a little girl, I had been made a slave. They sold me in Jerusalem. It was there, in the Holy City, that a man bought me. He transformed me into a princess, with a name, family, and papers of nobility. It was in order to better sell me, at a hundred times the price, in an offer of marriage to a knight of renown, who was no more than a plunderer of battlefields. But on that morning when I ran laughing, the vulture hadn't yet touched me. I had climbed down from the donjon on a rope that had been left there. I was fleeing. And the one who now haunts my dreams, the shepherd, he didn't seem very smart, he just had good arms on either side of a heart that was disarmed...

The shepherd replied:

-You weren't coming from the castle, were you? You weren't escaping by any chance? Are you mute or what? Speak or show your face. Aren't you, by yourself, all betrayed girls?

-Watch out, shepherd. If I speak of you to my husband, you're dead.

-You're going to tell me that you're the lady of the castle, that your husband is the lord who returned from the Crusade yesterday. That he hid you in a chest

with the booty and that this morning you flew away from the top of the tower like a dove...

At that moment, the princess got out of her bed like a sleepwalker. She took a few stiff steps, then, gradually loosening her limbs, she danced with an increasing grace that demonstrated her nobility better than all the lies of the one who sold her. But it wasn't a nobility of family, of a baron or a count, it was another sort of nobility. The audience detected by instinct or experience that the child had learned to dance not at court, but in the hills. The effect was immediate. Some women approached the stage, others, unable to restrain themselves, unconsciously moved to the princess's rhythm. Girls began to dance, spinning around. Boys took out their flutes and tambourines to add to the music of the troupe.

-I am brown, but beautiful, the voice of the princess spoke more loudly. Tell me, o you whom I know not and who makes my heart tremble, where you lead your flock at noon, so that I may no longer go aimlessly. I tell you: I will arise and go through the city in the streets and squares. I will seek him whom my heart loves.

Flore's dance ended in the shepherd's arms, where she struggled like a frightened little lamb. The public remained silent. The music stopped. In front of the stage, many young women remained standing, leaning on the boards.

-Stop struggling, the shepherd said. I don't have a sword or a halberd to protect you or kill you, but I built a solid stone hut back there on the mountain.

-Do you swear to keep your paws off me?

-But, little one, you don't interest me. I don't need a shepherdess degraded into a delicate princess...

-So much the better, then, lead me to your hut before the baron arrives.

-I hope you at least know how to spin wool, because I won't keep you just because you want me to...

The shepherd disappeared and Flore went back into her bed.

Many approached the stage, boys as much as girls, the former to the right and the latter to the left, not daring to look at each other but knowing quite well that they were listening to the same drama.

-On my couch, at night, I seek you, you who my heart loves, my shepherd, my man, Flore soliloquized in a soft and natural voice. I see him, he leaps from hill to hill. He is like a buffalo, he has soft eyes and a body as knotted as a carob tree. He looks in the window. He peers through the lattice. His eyes tame and inflame me.

Behind the sets, the shepherd answered:

-Arise, my beloved. Come. For behold, the winter is over. The rain has ceased. The flowers pierce the earth and reveal themselves to us. The turtledoves are cooing. The fig tree is forming its first figs, the vine is giving

out its perfume. Arise, come. Show your face, that I may not perish. You are beautiful, you water the gardens of nard, of saffron and of cinnamon, of myrrh, of calamus and aloes.

Marguerite signaled a pause.

Everyone was reviewing in their minds the Song of Songs that Saint Bernard had popularized and the troubadours had so often sung. Each one could grasp the difference, the strangeness of our version. Something lit up the eyes of the older women who had remained seated on the hay bales with their children.

During the intermission, Maiffe addressed the public:

-Me, I'm really lucky because I have the best Maman in the world. We go onstage from village to village and it's a lot of fun. It's true that Father likes the lovey-dovey dramas a little too much and I prefer to do comedy. It doesn't matter. I'm going to tell you something: a lovey-dovey drama is always funny as the devil. Come a little nearer, I'm going to tell you the secret of the devil and of tragedy, too... Listen carefully... The devil performs a very simple operation: he cuts a small nerve in the back of the neck. That way a man doesn't feel what he understands and doesn't understand what he feels, so, what he doesn't understand and what he doesn't feel becomes, with a little pride, a tragedy, always the same. Listen to the rest of the story and you will understand.

The baron came on stage dressed as a knight of the Crusades and spoke his lines in a haughty voice:

-I found my fiancée, my legitimate spouse, in a dirty hut. What shame! When my guards find the wretch who abducted my lady, I will put out his eyes and have him quietly flayed alive on the public square. He touched my wife, my fief, my tenure. She is beautiful and a fine decoration for my castle. Her hair runs in the wind like my herds of horses hurtle down my hills. Her teeth resemble diamonds. Her lips, a purple ribbon. Her two breasts are the twin fawns of a gazelle. My knights would go to war for her dove's eyes and her body's promises... This very day, before the day ends, I will sow my lineage between her haunches. It is my right. No, it is my duty. But first, I must catch the shepherd who has dared to hide her in his garret.

The baron disappeared stage left.

Flore the princess was spinning wool while her little boy rolled around her on a wooden horse.

-Maman, the boy said, look, I'm hunting in the king's fowest.

-Watch out for wolves, my little one.

-But Maman, the wolves ah willy small when yowah way up on a big hoss.

-Be careful all the same, you mustn't fall off the saddle.

The little boy dismounted, stood in front of his mother with his hands on his hips and said to her:

-Yesterday, I got on a will hoss.

-It was a pony.

-A pawfwy, Maman, big as a mountain. I'm gonna be a knight. I'll be champonion of the tounament...

-For now, put away your wooden soldiers, and then we'll go see the sheep...

-I won't go see the sheep...

-Put away your soldiers anyway and learn to pronounce your "r's" better.

With an air of defiance, the boy raised his finger in his mother's direction, then he lowered his eyes and turned his finger toward the soldiers:

-Soljah, to yoh camp...

The princess left her work then, turned her head toward her little one and a voice was heard in an aside:

-We bring a baby into the world. He is like our hand, he is like our arm, more than that, he is like our heart detached from our body. We give him our breast: he takes our blood, our life, our love, our soul. Then, he turns toward his father and escapes us. When we meet him some years later, he is a stranger. We prepared him for life, he only thinks of killing, we directed him toward happiness, he only thinks of dying for honor. Should a mother bear all the crimes of her child? No! Never! Yes perhaps! But if she does bear his crime, she should lead him to repentance afterwards. I will tell him. One day I will tell him: the one you think is your father, the baron, the lord, the strong man who passes for a knight, he who mounts the biggest palfrey in the region with armor, coat of arms, and a dignified air, this is not your father, this is the vulture who pillages battlefields on the plains of Jerusalem. He bought your Maman like you buy a chicken at the market. He married me by force. I ran away. He recaptured me and put out your father's eyes and then, he flayed him alive on the public square. Today, he serves me up to his knights as a reward... I died a long time ago. I gave up the ghost. But I imprisoned my soul in this body by force like a bird in a cage. I draped the cage like a tomb and forced my body to feed you, to serve you, for you are the son of the one I love, the shepherd, the one who fed and clothed the village..."

After a change of scene, the supposed son of the baron appeared dressed as a young prince, boots on his feet, trunk hose over his breeches, a linen surcoat over a quilted corselet. The prince had class, a proud bearing, a haughty air, nose turned up, hand on sword, and youth's disdain on his pouting lips. His mother slept on her vertical bed, covered with a black sheet.

-My mother is ill, the prince began in an aside. It is a sad fate to have a mother who is taciturn, melancholy, drowned in her black bile. And yet she leads the life of the lady of the castle. She possesses servants, a garden, gowns and even lovers. Father is too kind. He makes too many concessions and is too lenient. He lets her languish from boredom rather than making her work for the honor of the family. A few sweeps of a good besom, that's what my mother needs.

Flore stretched out her arms and awoke:

-My child, my boy, there you are, I was waiting for you. Come here. Sit down.

He straddled a bench that was near her.

-I'm listening, Mother.

-There you are, a knight.

-Since yesterday.

-I still see the little boy in your face. Six times three years. That's quite a few times you've been a little child...

-It's fifteen years since I was three years old, Mother.

-So then, yes, be brave. I have something to tell you...

-Is it really necessary, Mother? Not all knowledge is useful. Truth has no value in itself. It is sometimes harmful, sometimes useful. If you're thinking of making me richer and more powerful by revealing a secret, speak. If your truth insults my family, be quiet...

-Possessing property does not free us. The true knight does not want to know where the gold is, but where the dragon is hiding, for a true knight wants to conquer his inner kingdom. And the only dragon worthy of a knight is the truth...

-What is truth?

-A man is happy because he believes in this or in that. The truth is none other than the dragon who dashes our beliefs to the ground...

-The knight kills the dragon, Mother.

-My poor son, the dragon is immortal, that is why the knight frees the dragon so that it can devour everything that envelops, conceals and removes the only reliable support...

-If the truth makes us as bitter as you are, I will do without it...

-All the same, there is in you, my son, something you fear more than anything in the world because it can bring down all at once, in a single moment of lucidity, what you imagine to be your happiness. Perhaps I am bitter, but you, you haven't even put your foot in the stirrup and already you feel your beautiful horse melting like snow in the spring.

-That's ridiculous.

-The truth is hiding in the bottom of your soul, my son. Every happiness based on lies is like a horse of snow. Deep down in ourselves, we know that they are incompatible with the light and warmth of spring. And spring, my son, does arrive sooner or later. Your happiness makes you unhappy, my unhappiness has made me happy...

Flore coughed. She wiped herself with a handkerchief. Colored water imitated

blood flowing from her mouth, and the son averted his eyes without changing his tone in the slightest.

-Mother, the kind of truth you are talking about, that can make the snow melt, is only a construction of your mind. Everything has been done, is done, and eternally will be done by effort, by men's arms like bridges over the abyss. And if a bridge is not maintained, we fall with it into nothingness. This does not depend on truth, but on work. And work depends on weapons. For who will make men and women work, if it isn't the man-at-arms. There is no other truth...

-And if you knew that your bridge was built by unjustly shed blood, by the suffering of poor men and women...

-All bridges, Mother, have been wrested from unhappiness by unhappiness. We walk in adversity, our horses trample the serfs who give us food. That is the truth.

-And if this bridge were only an illusion?

-But Mother, it is an illusion, a universal, necessary, and unavoidable illusion.

The princess showed numerous signs of a consumption that she imitated extremely well. Her respiration was fibrous and painful, and she wiped a dribble of stage blood from one corner of her mouth.

-You're right, I do have bad humors as you say, an excess of black blood. You are well informed about my health. And a woman's illness is always her liquids, her blood, her saliva, her sweat, her phlegm, her chyle, her pus and her tears. My sorrow is real nonetheless and I know the truth about it. But, enough of this chattering, a mother worthy of that name knows that her son will die, he too, one day or the other, and she would never want to abandon him before he is prepared for the truth...

-Don't tire yourself, Mother, Father has already told me everything. What difference do you want it to make to me that you slept with a shepherd before marriage? What can a man thus betrayed do, but save his honor and your honor? In marrying you, Father has made me his son and, from the nothing that you were, he made a noble woman...

-Your father has sowed his venom in your heart.

-On the contrary, he has served me the antidote to the poison that you want to inject into me.

-He has taken everything from me...

-He has given you everything and you hold him in contempt.

The prince disappeared. Flore's veil was visibly wet with tears and spotted with blood. Then a voice was heard:

-He raped me every week of my life, and on the other days, he offered me as a trophy. He stole my life. He tortured and murdered my beloved. He destroyed

the soul of my son..."

After a long silence, the shepherd appeared:

-It is you my love. How handsome you are! Ah! If only you had been my brother, if, as a nursling, you had sucked my mother's nipples! We would have shared the same house, today you would bring me lamb to eat and I would give you good wine to drink. Put your left hand under my head and kiss me. I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and the does of the field, do not awaken, do not arouse my husband, but let me sleep a moment with my lover..."My love, set me like a seal on your heart, for love is as insatiable as death, its ardor as unappeased as Sheol."

The final scene was given to Flore alone:

-I no longer have anything and I feel light. This evening, I am going back home. Dwellers in the Garden, brokenhearted friends, you who are listening to me: my beloved is like a gazelle, he leaps like a doe and no one can catch him. I said to him: Let us go, my love, let us go out into the country, climb to the top of the mountain with our sheep and our lambs. He came and he remained. There is a country, there is a village, there is a sheepfold without name or fame, invisible to barons and knights, too poor for the greed of men and in a shepherd's hut we are living, happy and in love. Our children are running in the hills around us. All the nights are radiant, tranquil and serene; no piercing, beating trumpet comes to stir the quiet depth of men. This garden exists, and there where it doesn't exist, we will create it.

Flore danced until the crowd itself began to dance to the sound of flutes. The youngest danced, the oldest remained seated, deep in their thoughts.

I was trembling. Marguerite's audacity verged on the foolhardy. Nervously, I repacked our things as I prepared in my head an argument to bring Marguerite back down to earth.

The Escape

At Bergen the people were already aroused. At Zinnik, the crowd was so numerous that children and teenagers climbed all the trees. I didn't understand this success and even less why Marguerite persisted in her undertaking in spite of all the additional dangers linked to this success.

It was only at the last village, Tubeque, that I understood the reasons for our popularity. A number of women knew Marguerite if not directly, at least by reputation and they knew that she was the author of our play with multiple meanings, almost a coded message that told them among other things to keep up hope, to strengthen their bond of solidarity, that the time hadn't yet arrived to confront the Little Church, but that for the moment they had to deepen their spiritual originality. She also told them that beguinages were opening a little bit everywhere in spite of the Inquisition's threats. Since Bergen, the news had spread among the beguines and their friends, among the beghards and their friends, who saw in it a way of continuing and even of strengthening the movement under the noses of the authorities, and yet at the same time secretly. Some had already received teachings that opened the doors of Marguerite's astonishing allegory.

But I still didn't accept the impertinence of the undertaking. Our version of the Song of Songs led to an extraordinarily subversive conclusion. Our little play aimed at nothing less than to radically alter the esthetics of the divine. All true spirituality first deposes the gods of power and judgement who are incapable of warming a human heart (the lord of the castle). All emancipation is fatal to the gods. All the gods who are not at the height of the young lepress fall out of heaven like statues of ice. Flore had become a benchmark.

But, then, there was no need for theater; to silently go our way would have sufficed. If truth is sufficient, why lend it words and provoke suspicions?

Nonetheless, I have to admit it. Our audacity was paying off for us. Monks, provosts, lords, and bishops saw nothing more in our presentation than a pathetic Goliard satire. How could they be so blind? I don't know, but we would not, perhaps, have been able to get to Brussels with any more security.

That security I did not share even gave wings to Maiffe and the two twins. Our youngest shone. She liked nothing better than to accompany her grandmother Marguerite who went from conversation to conversation in the market square, inquiring about each person, the poorest first of all, as if they were sisters and brothers. Our little daughter discovered a joyful world, children playing around their mothers, a little cosmos gravitating around a maternal center. And the immensity of the work necessary for encircling and guarding the warmth of this familial nest, each woman knew. Maiffe grew closer to her grandmother and on her return, clutched Beatrice's skirt like any child.

Maiffe's joy had the fortunate consequence of bringing me, in spite of myself,

to admire women. I was able to look at Beatrice with a little boy's eyes. What did she do to preserve the nest, guard it for her child on his wooden horse? She knew better than anyone the danger, she saw the vultures circling, and the birds of prey. She managed nonetheless to keep fear at a distance from the family circle, far from the children's awareness. Beatrice like Marguerite saw further, much further than I, they saw, beyond the danger, life's indestructible hope that must be maintained at any price. After all, for mother and daughter, unhappiness was only the "world's" business, and nothing more.

To be under a woman's skirts is probably the greatest metaphor for life. At the center, the creating power, warm, deep, murky, womblike. Around it, the skirt which, like a nest, preserves childhood. Beyond the skirt, the "world", the place where man endures the test of man. The mother possesses the magic power of keeping the "world" far from the child. The skirt is the monastery of trust. There is where I passed the most beautiful years of my life. I still return to it today, as into a cathedral.

Yes, it is true that truth does not need words or any defense. It is its nature not to need these things. It is what has no need of weapons, nor even of methods of teaching. But the hope present in that truth does need the solidarity of women and of men. If Marguerite had gone into hiding, she would not have participated in that hope and that, in the eyes of consciousness, would have denounced her. She was, every day, before the court of her people. That, I did not understand before Brussels.

Within their grandmother's entirely relative security, Maiffe and Flore had grown close. I surprised them one day in a clearing where Becassine was grazing. Maiffe was imitating her favorite animal: the fox. Flore seemed more like a donkey, determined to get to the end of her road.

-I'm going to protect you from the wolves, Maiffe said to Becassine.

The animal didn't lift its muzzle from the morning grass. It was Flore who answered.

-You still don't know that donkeys are a lot better than dogs at guarding flocks!

-But I'm not a dog, Maiffe retorted.

-A fox is almost the same...

I think that Flore, at that moment, understood the game. She changed her tune:

-Yes, protect me, I really am afraid of wolves, Flore said in place of the donkey.

This time, Becassine raised her nose out of the grass and shook her big ears for a moment.

-So, we'll have to make a fire, answered Maiffe the fox.

They pretended to pile up sticks and set them alight.

-Do you know why wolves are afraid of fire? Maiffe asked.

-Tell me, Flore answered.

-It's because fire runs faster in the grass than they do. Grandmaman told me that. When there is a fire in the forest, if the animals aren't a little ahead of the flames, they risk dying.

Flore, who understood everything, whispered in Becassine's ear.

-Do you think you smell fire, here, right now?

-Why yes, there's lots of smoke everywhere, Maiffe answered.

-So, you're afraid, Flore whispered in the donkey's enormous ears.

Becassine stuck to his tuft of chicory.

-Eh! I'm especially afraid for my babies, they prance around a lot but they don't run very fast yet.

-Then I will tell you a secret:

Flore whispered in the donkey's ear a perfectly inaudible message.

-Repeat, Maiffe answered in Becassine's place.

-N-o f-i-r-e c-a-n b-u-r-n m-e, Flore articulated letter by letter as if it were a spelling exercise.

Maiffe, finding the subject difficult, protested:

-My word and Becassine's hay! No donkey would ask you to repeat.

Flore went over the same sentence more naturally.

This time Maiffe deciphered the message and replied letter by letter:

-B-u-t t-h-a-t d-o-e-s-n'-t e-x-i-s-t.

-Yes, there is something that never burns, Flore insisted.

-I'm going to whisper a clue, Flore proposed. Fire can do nothing against what is like it.

-I've got it, Maiffe very happily exclaimed. You're like the sun. Flore is like the sun.

-Be serious, Maiffe, your sister is not that high in the sky...

-Then you're a fire, fire doesn't burn...

-You burn, Flore retorted, grinning.

And she began to dance, singing:

-I am the wind and no one catches me.

-Yes, I can...

Maiffe began to run after Flore who very soon tripped. Falling on Flore's chest, the little girl dissolved in tears, weeping for her big sister.

-I don't want you to die.

The air seemed to melt around the two girls..

-I don't want to die, I don't want to die, Flore repeated, unable to control herself any longer. I am so happy with a grandmaman, a maman, a papa, a little sister who is so nice...

And she began to sob, too.

-You're not going to die, Maiffe interjected, standing up to defy heaven as she had on top of the cart when we conquered our first mountain.

We arrived at Tubeque rather late, on a short, cold day when the first claws of autumn scrape the sky even before the supper hour. We ate hastily in the red sweat of sunset. It rained all night.

The next day, the sun was unable to battle the lazy clouds wallowing on the soaking hills. The day brought with it a mortal sadness. And yet, that afternoon, all during our final performance, there were great gaps in the clouds. One might have said that the sky wanted to break into a storm, but held back. In place of the sky, it was Flore who was speaking. She spoke with such truth that the sky didn't dare do a thing. On the contrary, at the end a warm dry wind pursued a remnant of cloud that had ventured into the gap. The sun was shining.

Flore the princess was at her final monologue. She was speaking about her terrible husband, she was speaking about her terrible fate...

-He has stolen all of my life... Every day, I have forced my body to swallow its suffering. It was for my child, it was to prepare him for the truth...

As usual, I appeared in her dream in the character of the shepherd. As on the other occasions, Beatrice was to lend Flore her voice, but the latter took the initiative to continue herself:

-It is you, my love. How handsome you are! Put your left hand under my head and kiss me...

I in my turn cheated with the expected script; I drew close to her, taking her tenderly in my arms as a husband might have done. I felt her heart beat next to my chest, strong beats followed by long quiet intervals. She stiffened for a second, then became supple, elastic, and spongy again. In a very weak voice, she continued. The crowd was on tenterhooks; the smallest of Flore's sighs resounded in the crystalline air:

-I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and the does of the field, do not awaken, do not arouse my husband, but let me sleep awhile with my lover... My love, put me on your heart like a seal, "for love is as insatiable as death, its ardor is as unappeased as Sheol..."

While the scene was being changed, I wanted to stop everything, for Flore seemed to me to be exhausted. Maiffe didn't listen to me and there was no intermission:

Flore carried on:

-I have nothing any more and I feel light. This evening I am going back home.

Dwellers in the Garden, brokenhearted friends, listen to me: my husband is like a gazelle, he leaps like a doe and no one can catch him. Let us go, my love, let us go out, let us walk into the country, let us climb to the mountaintop with our sheep and our lambs... There is a country, there is a village, there is a sheepfold with neither name nor fame, invisible to barons and knights, too poor for the greed of men, and in that shepherd's hut a girl will live. You will see her running in the hills and dancing in the blood of evening...

She expired once and for all in my arms. I burst out in tears. The silence sheltered us.

A great saw severed the web of time, the moment plunged into my memory like lead. This recollection is clearer and more palpable than the bars of the convent where I am now imprisoned. Flore is engraved on each of my bones. I still smell a scent of almonds, that final incomprehensible and miraculous odor her body emitted before surrendering itself to the earth.

We arrived in Brussels defeated. Maiffe was inconsolable and no one had a word equal to her pain. We missed Flore infinitely. I say "infinitely", because an infinite hole is possible.

However, we still were on earth, and we had to live. Above all, we had to keep Maiffe in the nest and the twins, too. A parent who loses a child is dutybound to be joyful for the sake of all the others. He distils that joy out of pain itself, or he dies.

Notwithstanding, in the secrecy of night, when everyone was sleeping, Beatrice stifled her tears on my chest as I did mine on her hair. Then flashes of lightning streaked through our minds. Flore filled our memories.

We had to accept it: like a mountain wind descends to the ocean, she had made nearly everything flow out to the open sea. Our parents, our childhoods, our dreams of youth, everything that distinguished Beatrice and me faded into the distance. Our memories from before that adoption resembled tiny stars lost in the night. Flore reigned like the moon, a single moon for both of us. She had compressed our old past, and created a new past which we would forever have in common. She had married our pasts. For all the rest of our existence, we are the parents of Flore.

When suffering has exceeded all measure, we emerge above it. Certainly, heart and body are in shreds, clasping empty space in their arms, but we go swiftly toward the one we miss. We ourselves take on the texture of that lack, and our emptiness seizes death by its bottom, there where it makes its presence felt. Dark presence, dark like all things lost on the horizon.

We watched pain make our family one flesh. Death grinds us into a single material. It is said in the Bible that spouses form one flesh. Flore was that flesh.

We knew, Beatrice and I, that from now on we would be inconsolable, and, more than that, resistant to any consolation, because we were caught in the gears of death's machine and that, in spite of the terrible surges of revolt in our

hearts, our consciousness perceived what was coming to pass. They say that no one knows what there is after death, no one except parents who survive the death of a child.

With Maiffe too, something had changed. Time had slowed down. As for a horse returned to its stable, there was no need to hurry any more. Maiffe walked very slowly. When she slept, she didn't want to wake up; when she was awake, she didn't want to sleep ever again; if she ate, she didn't stop; if she didn't eat, she refused all food; in our arms, she didn't want to leave; away from us, she didn't want to return. In the shadows, her grandmother was knitting a thick wool sweater.

We hadn't yet noticed that we were now safely in Brussels, in Heilwige Bloemardine's beguinage. As for the twins, they couldn't get enough of that security.

One fine morning, I saw them running in the beguinage garden. They were going to laugh in secret at the foot of an enormous oak surrounded by shrubs already stripped for the winter.

And another day, I saw Maiffe, wearing her brand-new sweater, running in the snow to catch Mitch and Gardie. That morning, Becassine had let loose with a braying worthy of the northern seas.

The Pardon

That day, it snowed. As if suspended from the towers, a veil of fog sifted an icy frost. A swarm of little girls were skating on the ice of the beguinage's inner courtyard. Their laughter buzzed in the powder tossed about by the wind. I barely saw through the snowflakes their pale ghostly reflections.

The day before, a blacksmith whose mother had been cared for at the community's hospital had come to thank us, bringing around twenty wooden shoes fitted with double skates for the little girls. And now that we had just completed the morning's chores, the whole school was humming like nightingales on the ice that had formed around the fountain. I couldn't keep my eyes off them, and this detained me for a moment. I was on my way to my own winter pleasure: browsing in the beguinage library. I was determined to understand the beguines' philosophy. This was no small matter. Even as I watched the children gliding in the snowy fog, I was trying to form an idea of what I had read and understood until now: the beguine life is a widening.

Wet snowflakes were sticking to the stone walls. The wind carpeted with a white down the walls of the inner courtyard. Other flakes, with wider sails, rose up again on the horns of the wind and escaped the court. Escapees.

A beguine is an escapee, but from what trap?

A plowman finds a way to pay only half of his rent, tax evasion. He has simply played the game. He remains captive. The lord himself is under the control of a greater lord, obeying the imperatives of his function even more attentively than the plowman. And the emperor, then? He is forced to pass his days protecting himself from his rivals. In climbing the social ladder, one can always gain a feeling of freedom, but it will always be at the price of a greater servitude.

And this collective game which is nothing more than submission to the law of social organisms, is it the fruit of any kind of freedom? Was it thought out by free persons one day in the distant past? Quite the opposite! It results from a pure mirage, it comes from the appearance human selfishness takes on when it sees itself in competition with that of others, a simple hypothesis never questioned. However, this game has nothing to do with any selfishness that is the least bit real. Neither the plowman, nor the sower, nor the lord, nor the emperor seek to meet their needs. Nothing in this game corresponds either to a need of the body, or a need of the heart, or a need of the soul, or even to any of the needs of social life. Everyone obeys the conviction that his own self-interest opposes that of the other. And yet no one even knows what his own self-interest is, or that of others.

The heart of this matter is just that men have lost sight of their own interests. All this is simply motivated by a prejudice about self-interest, a false idea of human needs. And since in the kingdom of men, believing becomes fact, that

belief in the opposition of egos has become the actual fact of social life. Not only is the good of the one not opposed to the good of the other, but it is impossible to create one's own happiness without creating that of others. The "selfishness" of opposition results from a tragic accident of perception.

So, what is the poverty that can make us blessed? This is the beguines' question.

As I observed the little girls skating merrily on the ice, I couldn't help but rediscover that human nature whose essence is finding its happiness in that of others. It really was true that each little girl drew her pleasure from the pleasure of the other. "Look at me", cried one of them as she executed a feat that terminated in an outburst of laughter. And once on the ground, she watched the other do the same. All their pleasure came from the interdependence of the vital need to be seen and heard. Without the laughter of the other, nothing is amusing.

Second by second, the amused eyes of my peers draw me out of nothingness. I draw him or her out of nothingness so that he or she might draw me out of nothingness. So being goes. Incapable of extricating ourselves from nothingness, we find our joy in creating each other. Our awareness of existence results from this poverty, from this interdependence.

Marguerite's Mirror concludes: "...be fertile and increase this creation without fail, for two eyes are constantly watching you with love; and if you consider and look at this as you should, this looking makes the soul simple." We are far from the Eye of the Triangle of a church, far from the Inquisition. In biblical terms, as long as Adam and Eve cultivated their mutual pleasure, their self-interests did not conflict, but mutually broadened each other. Starting from the moment when the good of the one was seen as opposed to that of the other, it was war.

Obviously, everything is not as simple as that. If the little girls are left on the rink for a little too long a time, fatigue will set in, one or another of them will quarrel in order to get a little more ice, or a little more attention, and the sparks that multiplied pleasure will light the fire of anger. But this will be a fall, because fatigue, deterioration, and slackening must be involved, a fall of consciousness.

Desire connects, will divides, that is the motto of a beguinage.

I truly was at the beginning of my understanding. The snow was swirling in every direction. The children were laughing beneath the white lace moving this way and that between the towers.

That day, I had to meet the Grand Maiden of Brussels, Heilwige Bloemardine. I had caught a glimpse of her two or three times and each time her smile had driven me to the brink of a black and clinging sadness.

By what miracle had that woman and her family succeeded in keeping the Inquisition at a safe distance? It was difficult to say, it depended at the same time on the dynamics of the opposition forces, on alliances, on the culture of

independence peculiar to the Flemish, on commercial interests, but also and above all perhaps on the charm, the equilibrium, the wisdom and the natural authority of the grand lady of the premises.

It was a fact, here they knew how to receive an Inquisitor, give him all the anticipated information along with good meals, good company, a grand Mass, approval, and subtleties in the silky net that led him each time to return to Germany, to France, or everywhere else where the threat was greater because the resistance was more acerbic. From Brussels to the Escault, the beguines and beghards under the Bloemardine family's guidance didn't go in for heresy, that was obvious! Everyone maintained this obvious fact, no one doubted it, so the investigators found nothing to object to in these cold and austere lands.

A beautiful lady, tall as a man, but a woman in every detail of body and movement. A ruff of transparent silk clouded her décolletage. A fringe of lace heightened the roundness of forms accentuated by a bodice that uplifted them. A fine gold chain held a pearl that gleamed in the hollow of her chest. A courtly lady in all her finery! Two large brown braids intertwined around a veil of white satin crowned her head, leaving her neck free. She conveyed a nobility and an authority subdued by sensuality. She turned her immense eyes toward me.

-Come here, my friend.

Her words were so warm that they froze my soul. I detected pardon in them. My heart stumbled into the horrible memories of the Inquisition. I collapsed on a chair. The knight's lady. I was white with shame.

-Friend! You call me friend... I helped the Inquisition act against your beloved...

-That was before your eyes were opened...

-There is no excuse. I worked with the Terror.

-Dear friend, resenting yourself will not improve the misfortunes and stupidities of this world...

She opened her arms and made a motion toward me. I wanted to step back, but couldn't. Her look prevented me. Her charm took hold of me. I continued to crouch in my chair. There was such a softness in her eyes, they seemed to lift me up. I found myself standing in front of her, completely stunned and yet unable to turn my eyes away from hers. She came forward and, for quite a while, held me in her arms. And I felt the tears slide down my cheeks...

-Forgive me, she said, moving back toward the window, I too was thinking of Geoffroy...

She remained motionless in the window frame, back to me. Doubtless she was trying to lose herself in the swirling wind. After a very long silence filled with whistlings, portions of Geoffroy's letter came out of her mouth:

-I will never see you again in this world... I have lost everything, but not love...

I am dying, but not love... I am disappearing, but not love... What are a few moments under the biting sun if my heart can appear as pure to you as a nursing child at its maman's breast! I have confessed everything, but not love. I keep love, for it keeps me...

I was paralyzed, transformed into a statue of salt, incapable of the slightest word. The smallest sound polluted the silence... What word could wash the hands of the one who had plotted with the horror? I had no defense.

She turned and looked at me again. I felt myself being swept away as if I were on the North Sea, lost in the fog of a receptiveness that seemed to me without reserve. And that absence of reserve, that acceptance, had the same effect on me as a pitiless mirror.

I understood that man must pass through man. He has no choice; he must survive his inevitable madness, his fall, the cruelty that comes to him out of the fear of cruelty... His tautology as a killer is something he must traverse.

I was Judas after his crime, I was the man shaken and awakened in the face of the traitor and the poltroon, I was the reflective man with second thoughts in front of the turncoat and the coward. It is as if she were saying to me: "Poor friend, poor brother, no flight is possible, we are all submerged in a human heart, a miserable human heart. One day, we will all be lucid Judas confronted with treacherous Judas, we have all had a hand in the affair..."

But that wasn't all. Much more tragically still, we are man outside of time in the face of man the prisoner of time and, after centuries and centuries of war, of hate, of madness and of murder, after millenia of suffering upon suffering, after the extraordinary odyssey of horrors added to horrors, after the culmination of evil up to the religious madness of the Inquisition, after all that and many other crimes as well, we will not any longer know if it might have been necessary to put an end to man. Should he have been eradicated at the beginning? Shouldn't we, even today, work to get rid of this species of pest? Is it moral to live? Is it not a crime to let this animal live?

Heilwige noticed my distraught condition, I believe.

-I am going to tell you something, Monsieur Guion, something that may participate in your initiation or your revolt, may keep you in the beguinaige or make you flee: the human heart is not made for judgement, but for tenderness. We are all submerged in our original contradiction. Our route is strewn with situations, events, meetings, facts, dangers not of our own choosing. From time to time, there are forks in the road and thus choices between different options, and as a result, fragments of open destiny are added to our closed destiny.

And we are moral beings, we all are that, and that means that the good we want to do causes misfortunes we would like to avoid. This will not go as far as horror if we keep in contact with reality and the concrete consequences of our actions. But too often, love of what we perceive to be good prevails over love of real beings. We love the good when what we have to do is love each other. One day, the lucid man is faced with the homicidal man; then he must

remember that he has been absolved of his madness from the very first. That is why I, Heilwige, forgive you...

-Accepting your forgiveness is the price? I asked her.

-Only after forgiveness is it possible to live. That is the Gospel.

-I think I am the most obtuse of your neophytes...

-I don't think so, Beatrice and Marguerite have spoken to me. You are caught in love's trap. And according to what they say, you aren't resisting very much...

I blushed. She smiled. After a long silence, this came out of my mouth:

-You see that I'm confused. For the time being, I only know love's happiness, I know nothing about my ability to sublimate.

-Drink your fill. Without the grace of Eros, who could even want to live?

-I'm frightened.

-We are all frightened. The Inquisition has become our nightmare. But the Inquisition is only the outward expression of an inevitable meeting with the self, and it is the swan song of an horrific form of the Church. Love is at work...

-My case only concerns the love of a woman.

-"Only the love of a woman." You offend me, Monsieur. Love has no diminutives, not even the smallest. There is no small love. You will see that a woman is never "just a woman" and a man is never "just a man". On the other hand, the soul walks beside a great rift between the love of life and the temptation of death. At the start, it trembles with fear, and if it loves, it trembles with fear even more... You love, and what frightens you is not the possibility of being captured by the Inquisition, but your love which will prevent you from betraying your own people and ending the torture. This inability to betray during these times of Inquisition is, I admit it, love's most cruel gift.

It took long weeks, terrible weeks, but a moment arrived when fear let go and Judas the traitor collapsed in tears in Judas the lover's arms.

After this pardon, I was able to see Geoffroy, I could see him as he had presented himself to me and not as a thing horribly mutilated by his executioners. So I returned to Heilwige's apartment and told her all that I hadn't seen when I was assisting brother William and all that I saw now, after I had forgiven myself: the immense love of Geoffroy, his burning love, his soul boiling with love. He was a thousand times more afraid of that love than of Noiret's irons, for love had drawn him to that point and it was this love that kept him alive under torture... Without love, Noiret couldn't have made him suffer any longer than a day.

My whole body was trembling, for the more I spoke about Geoffroy, the more I became aware that love really had got a hold on me, that it had conquered me

like a woman by all sorts of charms and that, little by little, it would take me somewhere else, on an irresistible slope, toward a state of union so different from the cloud of unconsciousness, a state of union where we are one like flesh, vulnerable, breakable and inflammable bones, but one flesh and bones widened and bound to each other by a love that is free...

The moment arrived when my heart at last recited the beguines' prayer:

*It is.. but no one knows what.
It is here, it is there
It is far, it is near
It is deep, it is high;
it is thus.
It is light, it is brightness,
it is darkness,
it is unnamed,
it is unknown
a silent place
that flows out, undefined.
Become like a child,
Become deaf, become blind!
The something that is yours
must become what it is: the no thing.
Leave place, leave time,
Leave image too!
Go without a road
on the narrow path
as far as the desert track.
O my soul!
Enter in to your Source;
drive what is mine
into the divine no thing!
So that I might flee,
you come!
So that I might lose myself,
you find me!
O Source of all life!..*

A Matter of Marriage

In Brussels, the beguinage occupied a block of houses rather close to the docks and rather far from the Grande Place. It in no way resembled a club for extravagant women, but rather a social guild concerned with the public good. At its heart, almost as many men as women are discussing and making decisions. At once discreet and respectable, the beguinage opposes neither State nor Church; it does not fight, but intercedes. It gains sympathy through its ministry of caring for the sick, the dying, the poor and the unfortunate. It develops its credibility thanks to its competency in the fields of law, education, medicine and industrial crafts. It receives its authority from the great responsibilities it assumes in different city services, principally in the supplying of necessities.

It propagates its values without provoking the opposing powers. To maintain such an equilibrium turns out to be a very tricky operation. Heilwige and her family demonstrate here a sense of justice, prudence and dialogue well above average. They succeed in this because they sincerely share a double disinterest: they give no preference either to their own advantage nor even their own ideas; they act with goodwill for justice and the common good. It is difficult to doubt their integrity.

Obviously, that doesn't happen without arousing rivalries. But the beghards and the beguines succeed in staying on the field of justice and not on that of power, so that their enemies quickly appear more interested in themselves than in the prosperity of all.

Alas! Great sectors of public life appear so immersed in unjust habits and mores that it is almost always necessary to grapple with barely acceptable compromises. Intercessions having to do with marriage occupy an especially delicate position where the beguinage can lose all its authority all at once, either by pressing too far against the social norms, or by not going far enough in favor of justice.

On this ground, I was going to play a very risky role.

A go-between had found two brothers from a family of butchers who were interested in marrying the twins Mitch and Gardie. Even if a small group of families knew the underground part of the beguinage which consisted of reconstructing the social identity of certain fugitive girls and women, the majority had no suspicions regarding such a traffic. When it was necessary to marry girls without papers or family, it had always been possible to make arrangements with families intimately affiliated with the beguinage and in every way reliable. However, the persecution of beguines in Philip the Fair's France, in Alsace and in certain kingdoms in Germany brought more and more girls without status to Brussels. From time to time, then, we had to call on respectable families outside the closed circle of the beguinage and its

immediate associates. This was the case for Mitch and Gardie.

Our performances from village to village on the Brussels road had brought us a surplus sufficient to furnish an honorable dowry, capable of demonstrating that the two girls we had found abandoned on a highway were worth, in our eyes, the honor of a reputable family of butchers. In view of the dowry's value, we expected that the family would have no interest in digging any deeper. They insisted however on receiving a dispensation not only from the diocese of Brussels, but also from that of Cambrai. If the first already cost a lot, the second was out of the question.

After studying attentively the canons of the Church, the regulations of Brussels, and several books on former practices, I became aware of the complexity of the civil and ecclesiastical constraints in the matter of conjugal love. Marriage generally consists of an alliance between two filiations which costs the girl's family, in money, the profit the boy's family brings it in matters of honor, prestige, and security. This is the function of the dowry. An honorable family is built over centuries of exchanges and respectable alliances and can slip into disgrace through a single unfavorable and dishonorable union. A bad marriage can destroy centuries of work at rising in status and thus in resources. This accounts for the seriousness of the matter that obviously must not be entrusted to the happenstance of hearts.

A grave dishonor occurs when a marriageable girl is deflowered before marriage by a man other than her fiance. This suspicion did not affect us, for it was easy to obtain a certificate of virginity since the twins had kept their hymens physically intact. Moreover, were it otherwise, the absence of virginity did not entail de facto the annulment of the marriage.

On the other hand, another, more serious censure leads directly to the annulment of the marriage: kinship. The canon requires a separation of at least four degrees of kinship. At the fifth degree, the marriage is legitimate. This precludes, as it were, love marriages, for a mate must be sought far from the family circle, an unknown. Where there is doubt about a possible kinship, a dispensation is necessary. On this point, the bishop of Brussels readily accepted the idea that it was very improbable that the two girls from Valenciennes were related to the boys from Brussels. He didn't feel the need to check the family genealogy in the Cambrai archives, especially since it did not concern a marriage of the nobility, or even of the high bourgeoisie.

In fact, I increasingly understood that the suitors' family, having no social or commercial advantages to gain by marrying their sons to two orphans, wanted a financial compensation equal to what a dispensation from the bishop of Cambrai would cost. For them it was a negotiating "argument" that they wanted to see transformed into a staggering amount of cold hard cash. The problem came from the fact that such a dowry exceeded the norm excessively and that, by consenting to it, we risked feeding suspicions.

What were the suspicions? The facts were the following: the Valenciennes beguinae really had been an actor in the break between the twins and their

family. This was the case every time that a beguinage protected a girl faced with a marriage she resisted with all her strength and that seemed obviously cruel or would be dangerous for the life of the girl. Certainly the Church defended the idea that a marriage was valid only if both husband and wife consented. But every girl owed obedience to her parents! The State's pressure was even greater, for it was essential to the social order that all marriages contribute to the increase in honor, prestige and wealth of the families of a city or county. A lord's treasure depended on the good marriages of his vassals, his subordinates and his burghers. For a kingdom, it was all about ensuring that each familial branch of a country increase in prestige, in strength, and in money so that the entire kingdom would grow stronger. For all these reasons, any person who participated in breaking a girl away from her family with the intent of marrying her to another family without her parents' consent committed a crime against the State comparable to treason.

Legally, the intervention of the Valenciennes beguinage in the case of Mitch and Gardie signified nothing less than an abduction punishable by death. If the affair became public, the dishonor that would ensue for the boys' family would be greater than that of marrying their son to a loose woman or even a prostitute. At this level, the girl's consent was worthless. She is family property. Moreover, and this aggravated the risk for us, if the butcher's family succeeded in proving this abduction, not only would it maintain its honor and annul the marriage, not only would it keep the dowry, but it would in addition receive a large reward and all the ascendancy that would come from defending high society.

It was essential, then, not to nourish the slightest suspicion concerning this.

It was the Sunday of the Fair, and we went down to the cathedral where, after mass, the meeting was supposed to take place. The crowd pressed against us, so I had helped Maiffé climb on my back. I cut through the crowd. Beatrice and the twins followed. My great height gave me an overall view.

I saw the human waves arrive from every direction on the rue Sainte-Catherine and the Marché aux poules. Certain avenues around Sainte Catherine poured out on us the poor people's slum, its day laborers, villeins and churls. The Jewish quarter was emptying itself by two facing avenues. Through these tributaries there arrived from the countryside masses of serfs attached to a plowman, a farmer, or a foreman and subject to forced labor at any time: faces blackened and yet washed, rags resewn for the holiday, a dark mass spotted with guards flanked with spears and clubs. All this poured out from behind us and joined us.

In front of us flowed the petite bourgeoisie of bakers, bonnet-makers, brickmakers, and cartwrights, fragile and poorly protected trades. They paraded, however, proudly surrounded by servingwomen in their Sunday best. Men and women displayed an appropriate smile, but their almost insolent looks betrayed their anxiety. One had the feeling that they were preoccupied with not falling on the other side, in the purgatory of the landless and tradeless or in the

hell of the servile, the infirm, the beggars and the shivering homeless. That fear, suppressed, ruminated, and insidious acted in spasms, and drove them to look upon the common people as vermin. A look they wouldn't dare direct to dogs or pigs, a terrible and separating look, haughty and razor-sharp, flashing with pride and hard with scorn that went from the highest to the lowest and all the more harsh and suspicious as it approached the one who, tomorrow, could be themselves if the slightest accident befell them, the slightest mistake, the smallest error in transactions.

In these diagonal looks, one could see worry becoming hate and descending even lower into derision, haughtiness, and disgust. Everyone threw the one lower than himself into a sort of mire, a hideous cesspool. To me it seemed like a nauseous discharge ending in the mud; a strange runoff if there ever was one, since it consisted of the discharge of what one fears on the back of the one despised. One might have said they were alpinists whose ropes were not meant to safeguard against falls, but to ensure a regular and constant fall of men from the heights to the bottom.

Because we had chanced to arrive at the Marché aux poules, we were in the midst of these looks that consigned to shame the poorest and least free, those one most dreads becoming. One truly felt as if the petite bourgeoisie arriving in front of us were transforming the unfortunate who came behind us into a kind of human excrement without realizing that it was just this look that ruined them, that dug the hole and pushed them into it.

The beguinaige of Valenciennes had so well protected me, rallied round me, initiated, enclosed and loved me that I felt as if I were now returning to inhumanity after a long retreat in Heaven, inhumanity, that attachment of Man to his fears.

Thus, when I saw a common ropemaker plant his stick in the hollow stomach of a poor emaciated boy, I couldn't restrain my hand from grabbing the goodman by the collar and lifting him up to my height in order to show him that some were higher than he. This show of force slipped into my mouth a flavor, the bitterness of which I had forgotten. I had just tasted a black wine that rises from the pettiest foreman to the most powerful of kings, the wine secreted by the act of forcing gall down the gullet of a fellow human being. I repented having taken a swallow of that terrible liqueur...

A wave of light passed through me and I was raised above myself, and I saw in his generality and in his universal habit, Man making hierarchies of men according to a force that was alas! enforceable though symbolic, effective though imaginary, actual though potential, and I saw that this force was only the simple, but astounding ability to despise oneself in the other...

It really was very surprising: the smallest act of logic could only go in the opposite direction, in the direction the little girls looked as they played on the rink in the inner courtyard... For solidarity alone can ensure our salvation, bring us a kind of social security against the inhumanity we fear. We must be crazy to drag one another into an abyss that we ourselves create by reversing solidarity.

Injustice suddenly appeared to me so illogical, irrational, like the madness of travelers who have fallen into quicksand and who sink each other in their panic, when, to stay on top and reach the shore, gently joining hands would be enough.

Through an incomprehensible misinterpretation, this mass insanity, this break in solidarity, is called "morality"; it is instead a terrible tautology: the one looked down on is evil because he is lower than an evil look and because of this, it is everyone's duty to look at him as being lower, in other words, poor, crazy, contagious, dirty, dishonest and dangerous. Thus, the social hierarchy justifies itself by the moral hierarchy that it induces. Next comes the question of building consistent laws, of organizing institutions to apply them, and the whole social architecture imprisons each of its members in a condition such that the human mass descends toward its most lethal fears. The rain falls in the puddle...

Society has but one social contract: that the one who can treat his brother as less than nothing is the one who occupies the highest place, so that the last in humanity are the first in power, and that in the end, the men beneath come to accept being the beasts of burden for the worst of men.

This means that marriage should serve to prevent the fall of one family as much as the rise of another.

A perfect inversion of the Gospel which proposes loving the weakest to ensure that we are never left without dignity, food, or lodging. In all truth, having lost the habit of that sickness, I found myself in the skin of a doctor for whom his client's diagnosis is obvious, yet who is unable to cure him. I saw with my own eyes how misery is manufactured by confusing it with baseness, and I could do nothing about it.

We arrived at a sector of the market where a very common transaction was taking place: a petty lord from the country had come to exchange serfs for palfreys. No doubt he was more afflicted by a rival than by the need to feed himself. Of course, they were not talking about trade, but about duties, services, even friendship, and the agents went from courtesy to courtesy in their hesitations without ever directly comparing the numbers and the equivalences between the animal and the man. Nonetheless, their employees sank lower. One of them pawed with eyes and hands the group of unfortunate men and women who were the object of this transaction. Among them were two seeders, female sowers who were kept virgin and vegetarian in order to increase the fertility of the seeds. They alone were allowed to touch the grain. Every peasant recognized them by their emaciated bodies, their long hands, and their slender fingers, almost without lines, the skin smoothed by the slipping of seeds to winnow, sift, sort out, sell, or sow...

One of them had not, alas, lost all her weight, and the feminine curves that remained were the object of attentive gropings. Impassive, she let them do it without flinching. Vulgar actions no longer affected her, any more than the whip. Nothing affected her. She was somewhere else. She inhabited another

country. She let the men grope the surrendered body, while she lived, so it seemed, in another kingdom. All this was reflected in her motionless eyes, her irises like a border of jellyfish around the fixed pupils. Her lips traced a line that was almost mauve, her smile turned the world's pollution back on us. The gross man lifted her shirt.

Our looking returned toward ourselves, humiliated. Our eyes turned away to preserve the young woman's indestructible gaze.

Tears began to flow from my eyes, moistening Maiffe's hands... I felt her tremble. She had seen the girl and she too was now staring at the muddy ground. Suddenly fidgety, she wanted to get down from my shoulders. I resisted, and took her in my arms. She began to cry hot tears as she planted her nails in my shoulders.

I stayed motionless. Horrible calculations paralyzed me. On one side, the humiliated girl, on the other, Marguerite, Beatrice, Maiffe, the twins and myself in the bishop's dungeon. Jesus made no calculations when, with a whip of rope, he drove the merchants from the Temple...

Can there be a world any worse than the one that has become normal in our eyes?

After his anger, Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Nothing had changed and nothing will change. His Kingdom remains out of reach because we like to despise each other too much.

I was dying to punish the vulgar merchant who was groping the seeder, but I weighed the consequences. I stopped myself, shut myself up in my shame and my impotence. I turned my back on the girl and turned the anger inward.

We left the market square. Maiffe wanted to get into Beatrice's arms. I let her leave.

I went toward the cathedral like a horse walks on the gravel of an arid steppe, indifferent to exterior conditions, insensible to the pain in its feet, guided only by the odor of the stable. I was searching for the other country, the other kingdom, the gathering place of those who have no place here, crushed beneath the social order. I longed for this free domain, this virgin land the seeder knew...

A gust of wind pulled my hood down on my shoulders. In front of me, the two spires of the cathedral rose over the tall houses of the Grande Place, that immense rectangle surrounded by the Hôtel de Ville, the belfry and the houses of the most important guilds. The grandest burghers and the nobles went there, and lords enveloped by their retinue protecting them from the masses. They were like great flowers: around them, like petals, courtiers, soldiers, squires, officers, valets decked out, clad in armor and breastplates, polished, shining; in the center, a man wrapped up in stiff fabrics, a woman crowned with precious stones, and heads of children topped with cloth, covered with cosmetics and rigid in huge collars. A disparate crowd coming from everywhere pressed around them. The guards struggled to keep a little space around the noble

families.

In the dust stirred up by the jostling crowd, I suddenly noticed the strange beaming of a multitude of gazes leading from the poorest men toward those best dressed, a gaze that was disconcerting, because it was full of admiration, envy, and fear. The burghers boasted, puffed out their chests, and stuck out their necks with pride. I had the impression that the populace determined the rich people's worth in this way, just as at auctions the eyes of onlookers establish the price of roosters.

It was the other look, the one that led from the poorest to the prince, the one that reascends toward the social summit, the look that raises, that increases the price that will have to be paid in taxes, in fees, in admiration... A look even more extraordinary, for it decides the debt, the tax, the tithe and the taille that will land on those who are doing the looking. Those who are raising the price through their admiration of the lord are the ones who pay. Bargaining radically contrary to self-interest, pure inversion of the law of the market! I saw the poor create their poverty in their hypnotic and mimetic admiration of the rich and the princes.

Those were the blindest eyes in the world, for they saw the result of their looking without having the least idea of its process and its consequences.

Still further off, the magistrature, the Council, and the burgomaster were strutting. All the crowds that came did not blend like muddy waters in a delta. Not at all! Each look was the occasion for a transfer of mud in the sole direction of the poor and luster in the sole direction of the rich. This caused the shame and the spittle to be concentrated on the former while the honor and the gold piled up on the others.

The closer we advanced toward the cathedral, the human rivers, rather than mixing and thinning, separated, producing the social order like an eruption of the very injustice that allocated the looks. Before the lords, the bailiffs, and the princes the crowd opened, while, in small, increasingly dense pockets, it closed in on the poor and the beggars so that they were trampled like common toads.

At Brussels as everywhere else, on the great feast, fair, or hiring days, humanity forms itself into a hierarchy contrary to its principle of humanity. According to well-regulated strata, this topsy-turvy society sits down in its cathedral. In the front, the great of this world, in the back the great in the other world. The cathedral is a sort of mirror where one finds the teaching of the Gospels entirely reversed. The result is that the true Mass is performed in the narthex, by the sacrifice of the beggars.

I remained motionless in the back of the Church. I didn't wish to participate in this ritual turned upside-down. I dug in my heels and, turning around, looked blissfully at a patch of sky in the embrasure of the door. I clung to the Kingdom of the seeders.

A beggar poked his stick into my stomach and shoved me rudely. He was claiming his place against the back wall, beneath a bronze crucifix dripping

with oil from the lamps. I reared up like a horse. No one could make me come near the bench reserved for us, a bench almost in the middle of the nave, a disgrace. I stayed in the rear, back to the altar, hoping to dissolve in the crowd like a block of salt abandoned in muddy waters.

Beatrice took my hand. I remained cold. She softly slipped her fingers on my hand. After awhile, I leaned toward her.

-Don't forget Mitch and Gardie. If we stay here, we will jeopardize their marriage.

The word marriage resounded repeatedly in my skull.

Salvation by marriage. There was no other rung to climb on this Jacob's ladder fallen backwards in the world. If one hopes for a comfortable position, generations of good marriages are required without the slightest error in judgement. In the face of the vast enterprise of hierarchization that forms this crazy society, every attraction of bodies or hearts constitutes a threat.

In the absence of any solidarity based on a minimal principle of humanity, another solidarity was formed, the family, a distinctive solidarity that has passed through time, a linear and temporal solidarity attaching the generations to each other for a distant salvation: a higher position for the great-grandsons. It is all about contracting marriages that in no way compromise the capital of honor already acquired but, on the contrary, increase it.

In the opposite direction, dishonor, social downfall, lies in wait at all times. For a girl to be reputed to have been seen on a young man's arm, laughing in a way that betrays a suspicious looseness, is enough for her to lose at one fell swoop any value of honor, become impossible to marry, and remain a spot on the family for generations. Each daughter represents a risk according to the peasant adage: "Hold on to your hens, for I've let my roosters loose".

No one thought of forcing on boys the inhuman heroism of restraining their amorous furies. As a child, like all my friends, I played wolf; a willing boy was tied to a tree and blindfolded: he was the first wolf. The girls threw their aprons at him. If he guessed who the garment belonged to, he kissed her. No one would have imagined making a girl a wolf. At thirteen, a girl was forbidden to play wolf; she would risk her reputation. They slipped along toward other games, however...

Because of the dowry, the birth of a girl digs into the family's credit while a boy on the contrary constitutes a potential revenue. As it is said: "Wealth comes with the son and goes with the daughter". The youngest daughter is most often condemned to celibacy, either in a convent, or as a servant in her own family.

Marriage is so much a calculation and a commercial transaction that in many fairs or at the big hiring days for domestics, peasant families bring their fifteen-year-old daughters and line them up on the square, back to the wall, facing the curious crowd. The boys come by in groups of two or three, examine them and discuss their qualities and their defects in the same way that, an hour earlier, they assessed a pair of oxen. They would say about a girl still unmarried at

seventeen that she had already lost at two fairs and was no longer worth any more than a donkey. After five fairs, she doesn't come any more, lest she cover her family with ridicule. Of course, that was only done among the poor. With the middle class, it is rare for girls and boys to meet before the engagement, discussed and planned by the parents.

Fortunately, morality does not overcome common sense.

Among the young people in the countryside, old Gallic customs persist that make the parish priests curse. I took advantage of them myself when I was fifteen. We played the game of the marriageable maiden. It started by choosing a girl by drawing straws and burying her under all kinds of clothes. The boys then employed their dexterity to remove each item of clothing without being touched by one of the group of girls, for once you were touched, you were forbidden to move. At the end, if we were lucky, the marriageable girl was totally naked and the champion had the right to lie down on her. This was never the case for me.

In my region, this game wasn't free. Boys fifteen and older had to pay their dues to the bachelor master. Thanks to my contribution, in addition to the marriageable maiden game, I would have been able to go to an evening party organized around shelling nuts, haying, or some other occasion. People sang there, danced and talked. If, by good fortune, it began to rain or the cold came down from the mountains, a girl would wink in a boy's direction and the latter would approach and ask to be "lodged". The father kept still in his corner. Of course the girl required of the boy a promise of honor with a pact secured by a pledge. Keeping their shirts on, they went into the same bed. None too rarely, a burning kiss popped the buttons off the shirt. The two were then obliged to marry. The father was spared from paying a dowry and took away the pledge. Among those who were too poor to have much honor, the savings were worth the shame. I never went to one of these evenings; my father took it upon himself to keep me occupied every time there was one of them in the district.

We wanted to get the twins on to the first level of the Brussels bourgeoisie; this was a legitimate aspiration. Through the intervention of a beghard who was one of our own, Mitch and Gardie had met their suitors three times. This was highly unusual. Since our arrival, the rumor had reached the beguinage that a mother had decided to marry her twin sons. The family's problem came from the fact that in the whole city there weren't two girls outside the family educated enough to run the business. This was much in demand.

So one of our own went to see the twin boys at their stall in the marketplace. He bought them a bottle or two while pretending to know nothing. Gently, he led the conversation toward the newly married men of the parish as well as those who were currently engaged. The brothers answered: "As for us, we aren't thinking about that." Our guy retorted, "It wouldn't be any too soon, because you can't stay like you are at your parents, working for your older brother. You would earn more on your own account and give your family that much more freedom." The twins replied: "We know that, but we don't know

very well where to get engaged, so we have decided to work together. We would have to look for one of yours. We would be very happy to have one who knows how to write and count, that would be convenient for our business." "Oh well, the go-between said, "say no more, I know not one but two, twins, educated, good workers, obedient and not shy." To our good man's surprise, the brothers came back with this: "You wouldn't be talking about Mitch and Gardie, would you?" "You know them, how did that happen?" They came to buy a big leg of lamb about a week ago. Twins like that, you can't help but notice. We talked to them a little, but they were in the company of a nice little lady from your place..." "Say no more," the go-between replied as he got up. "I will do the errand on your behalf, and I will send you a few words right away if it's possible to do something."

That same evening, the man spoke to the two brothers' mother and father. They had nothing against it. The next day we discussed it, Marguerite, Beatrice and I. It was Beatrice who spoke about it to the twins. "Aren't you talking about the butcher brothers?" both of them asked. And we organized the three meetings, persuading the parents that it would be a good thing for the young people to see each other, for why not reconcile consent as the Church intends it with duty according to the principle of the law?

The bothersome thing was all this silence in regard to their parents. This empty space attracted suspicions...

The beggar who had inflicted on me a blow of his stick took me by the arms, turned me around facing the altar, and pushed me with his foot. I decided to take my place in the cathedral. The parents of the twins emerged from the crowd and slipped into their place three rows behind us. I discreetly smiled at them in a slightly haughty way, as was expected. After the mass, I remained in front of the church with the father while Beatrice, the mother, the twin brothers and the twin sisters headed toward the Great Square.

-Sir, I said to him, I agree that it's not reassuring to take girls from the beguine who can't prove who their family is. I'll be frank, it has to do with a stroke of fate. The parents had promised them to some Dolcinos living in the Alps. Frightened, they left their family at night. Should they denounce their parents to the bishop? Certain bishops require it, but family loyalty forbids it. Should they obey, and marry against the law? Family loyalty requires it, but the bishops forbid it. They did neither one nor the other and took refuge in the Saint Elisabeth hospital in Valenciennes. They swore never to reveal their parents' names so as not to obligate anyone to denounce them. They received all their education with the beguines. They don't bring any family, but they have worked enough to offer a good dowry. Above all, they know how to read, write, and count, are virtuous and very good at every aspect of housekeeping.

I was very surprised, then, by his immediate agreement:

-Sir, I don't know you, but the mother agrees and I take you at your word. Let's engage them this very afternoon. The wedding will take place in three months.

The two girls jumped for joy, and the twin boys, more discreet, tried to hide their feelings. Everyone celebrated, the engagement was great, and the wedding, magnificent. In all of Brussels, not many people were unaware of this strange union that the beguinage would have preferred to be more discreet.

The Unexpected Masters

Marguerite asserts that Man is rationally good. He is not good out of freedom, but out of necessity. Endowed with intelligence and memory, he knows that he depends on everything: air, food, water, the warmth of the sun, protection against wild animals, etc.. He knows that he hasn't gotten through it all alone, and that he won't get through it without plants, animals, women, and other men. He is so vulnerable on his little raft floating in the vastness that without the contribution of all of nature and the solidarity of a group, he is dead. Consequently, he places his bets on a very simple reasoning: give in order to receive, receive in order to live. Said otherwise, the first law of the Kingdom Jesus speaks of is not extraordinary. The Gospel does not invite us to an heroic, supernatural, demanding, religious life... it proposes a simple minimal rule to survive in society: count on others if you want to survive in this world, and in order to do this, get yourself organized so that others can count on you. Cheat on reciprocity and the Kingdom crumbles as well as humanity's future.

So where does this perversion come from? Why deviate from this minimum of social rationality necessary for our own life?

The hypothesis is the following: our birth has left us with a taste of nothingness in our mouths, and we experience a confusion about what is connected to our mother. Is it nothing? Is it no thing? Experience alone will tell us. The problem comes from the fact that experience requires a provisional trust. In short, the minimal and rational law of life in society depends on this necessary leap forward, but it must be made freely: trust.

Badly digested, this paradox perverts, for to create trust, the other must trust us. Now, the other distrusts me because I distrust him. In every tautological system, the problem derives from the fact that the beginning can never be identified. Who committed the first betrayal? That person cannot be discerned, for the first betrayal is, by necessity, that of the other.

From there, by the major highways of collective acceleration, Man ends up in the Vale of Tears. And that is doubtless why, far down in the lowest of low places, we find poor women and their children. Since trust is the pivot of the Kingdom, distrust becomes the driving force of the world.

However his childhood may have been, good or unhappy, poor or rich, with gentle or violent parents, from the moment he leaves childhood and its innocence, the adult transforms himself into an enemy of the human race and of all the earth. Sometimes with the idea of doing evil but almost always with the idea of doing good, he devours his own mother. Religion changes nothing if it doesn't worsen the situation: on a battlefield or in business, in private life or in public life, whether they are Christian, Jewish or Muslim, they aren't any better, they are obedient to their madness and create as much unhappiness around themselves as their devoutness permits. Science and education don't correct

them either, the literate as well as the illiterate, peasants as well as masters of theology, beggars as well as bourgeois tear each other apart. Morality supplies nothing: honest people serve dishonest laws. Canonical sainthood is not a criterion either; how many saints honored by the Church have initiated, preached and encouraged "holy" wars, repressions and executions as atrocious as they were disastrous. Only a few hermits have at least had the courage to protect men from themselves by going to live apart from them.

In fact, all that parents, monks, saints, tutors, masters of trades, instructors, and educators do amounts to conducting the child into society, and, if possible, into the best of society. Once he or she is established in it, the young man or girl follows the collective currents of a flock of lost sheep. Forces like habit, imitation, loyalty, respectability, filiation, obedience, and other virtues push him or her to accomplish, along with others, the greatest possible work of destruction, which he or she will call "civilization".

God grant that the number of our species may never increase, for we on earth are like termites hidden in the central beam of a tall house. We are living like lords on the wood that holds the roof over our heads...

Luckily, there is another side: despite its corruption, humanity sometimes gives birth to an unexpected child.

How can one explain that in China, in the Indies, in Africa, in Palestine, in Europe, everywhere, independently of their families, of their social or psychological condition, of their education, of their character, and even of their personal temperament, in no matter what culture, condition or situation, for no matter what religion, society, or environment, from time to time, always as an exception, women and men escape the shackles of that law and arrive, with clear minds, at a kind of resurrection of their own consciousness and their own existence? They begin to act bizarrely from the point of view of the mores of their time, and their eccentric actions indicate a way of salvation that is elementary as much as it is rational: the love of self, of neighbors near and far, of our own and of others, of cows and of sheep, of tigers and of lions, of ants and of earthworms. Against all expectation, they put their trust in those who do not trust. They break the negative reciprocity of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" and place their bets on the positive reciprocity of "we depend on each other, so we may as well show consideration for each other".

And their monumental failure proves that there is no other way out because, when we see them nailed on a cross, skinned alive on a post or burnt at a stake, we say to ourselves, if we don't follow the way of brotherly love, we will all end up that way, the earth itself will end in that way.

In these masters, I always spot two qualities: the reconciliation of the sexes and resistance to madness. The rest is a matter of culture and circumstances. In the reconciliation of the sexes, they take care of life as if it were a treasure; in resistance to madness, they protect life like the apple of their eyes.

We had to lead our daughter not to marriage, but to this first step of love. Had

we abandoned Mitch and Gardie? Sooner or later, we would have to put Maiffe back in the hands of the "world"...

I was walking on a small promontory from which my gaze could slip away and range over the surrounding countryside. I was completely absorbed in my thoughts. My eyes, however, ran like children in the vast expanse of snow and my ears, especially, danced in the cold wind that played with the snowflakes. I was wandering in the darkness of my mind and at the same time in the whiteness of the landscape.

As the result of so much wandering, my ears heard the braying of an ass, a little girl's laugh and that of two women. Instinctively, my legs went in search of that incongruous joy. Sound traveled marvelously well in this morning as transparent as it was deathly cold. This unexpected gaiety produced in me a power that lifted me off the ground as if I were hoisted by a winch. My heart loosened, lightened, rose up like a great puffy cloud as I recognized the donkey, the child and the two women. I was home as soon as I was near them.

In a wide circle of snow trampled and muddied by Becassine's shoes, Marguerite, Beatrice and Maiffe were playing "loser wins". The one who caught the animal's tail won the right to tell a secret. But it wasn't easy to catch that tail!

I observed them. Except for Becassine, who didn't let on, none of them had seen me or heard me. The snow dazzled and their giggling filled the silence like the twittering of birds. I didn't want to disturb this magic moment in any way.

Becassine was going around in circles, Maiffe was running after her, Beatrice's scarf, too large for her, unrolled, she tripped, and Marguerite, who was following closely behind her, fell on her daughter. Becassine rummaged through their pockets, to see if a piece of apple were hidden there. Then the game began again.

The first one to whom Becassine granted her tail was little Maiffe.

-Here's my secret, she said. Don't repeat it to anyone, and she whispered in Marguerite's ear: I have a real Maman.

-That's not a secret, her grandmother replied, laughing.

-Yes, it is a secret. It's a secret because it's mine and I haven't given it away to anyone...

-Then you'll have to give us the secret, because if you don't, Becassine is going to bite you in the seat of your pants, Marguerite said as she imitated the donkey's mouth with her hand.

-I have a real Maman and I'll get her out of prison, I promise...

-And how about me! Beatrice exclaimed sadly, suddenly aware of the secret.

-You, you're my big sister, I love you a lot, but I have to take care of my Maman...

-I'll go with you this very day, Beatrice insisted, her eyes shining with tears, because I owe your Maman a very great debt.

-On condition that you catch Becassine's tail first, Maiffe shot back.

This wasn't possible. As soon as Beatrice approached the animal, it switched its tail and ran in circles. This was because of Beatrice's hesitation. It was Marguerite who caught Becassine's tail. Maiffe jumped into her grandmother's arms, laughing:

-Tell us your secret.

-Not a secret, but your secret, Beatrice specified. She was recovering a little from her sadness.

Then Marguerite grew serious. She sat down in the snow and waited for everything to be quiet, even the wind.

-One day, I will go to Paris.

-Where is Paris? Maiffe demanded.

Becassine began to run in circles, shaking her neck and thrusting her head forward. From the distance where I was, the picture was amazingly true-to-life: a vast white sea, a circle lightly stained with brown like the broken half of an eggshell and in that shell, the four of them staking their all...

Becassine stopped short, her nose turned toward me. Marguerite caught my eye, Becassine resumed her game, and neither Maiffe nor Beatrice noticed my presence.

-Sit down, I want to talk to you, we heard Marguerite say. All this is written in the snow...

She stamped out a wide circle on a perfectly white border of the great dome Becassine had dug and, at the end, stuck a finger in the middle of the circle.

-Paris is here. At the heart of the world, the navel of the mother country.

-Do you think that Maiffe's maman has gone to Paris? Beatrice asked, puzzled.

-It may well be. It's absolutely certain that it's in Paris that all this is being decided. Maiffe, my dear little Maiffe, you're right about your maman, she needs you, Beatrice, Guion, me, all of us. But don't look for her where you lost her. She's not in the spot where you saw her for the last time. She has lived since that time. She has lived a lot. Where you're mistaken, my dear little one, is when you think you would please her by leaving Beatrice to try to join her again. You're dangerously mistaken because, think of me, my little boy is no longer in this world and I received a little girl in her place and oh well! I'm her maman and no one can take her away from me. That is why I'm your true grandmother and Beatrice really is your second Maman. There, that's a secret worthy of Becassine's ears, because it's true.

-I love you with my heart and your true Maman's, too, Beatrice whispered in Maiffe's ear.

Maiffe cuddled up in her grandmother's arms. Beatrice came closer to Marguerite. Maiffe seized her adopted mother's sleeve and pinched her arm. Beatrice then slipped behind Marguerite's shoulder in such a way as to envelop the grandmother and the little girl in her two extended arms. For a long time the picture stood still in silence.

Beatrice whispered this in Marguerite's ear:

-And you! You aren't any better than Maiffe, you want to go to Paris! It's suicide.

-Can I abandon women, I who have received so much from a woman? I don't want to go to Paris, but I will go to Paris. Isn't it said: "Faith leads to the thing that is hoped for". Two meanings can be given to that sentence: one leads to unhappiness, the other to happiness. The danger for Maiffe is to run after her mother's image and to try find it in Valenciennes. Then she would fall into the Inquisition's paws and, by trickery, the Inquisition would find proof of her mother's supposed heresy in her testimony... A deadly danger for Maiffe and for her mother. The good she wants to do would end in the disaster she wants to avoid. All human beings act in this way, more or less; they run after what they hope for as if it were an image. Human madness follows. Reality is not an image, but a living being. Human beings have lost the true meaning of hope, which consists of love of neighbor and not of attachment to images.

-No, grandmaman, Maiffe reacted, I just want to find my Maman. She had followed perfectly the conversation's meaning.

-Yes, I know that very well! But the beguines at the hospital haven't abandoned her. Everything it is possible to do has been done. The best thing for now is to try to understand the world you are living in. Then you can help the beguines as they work to save your mother. A lot, a whole lot of wisdom and common sense is necessary if you want to extract a prisoner from the Inquisition's claws. But what wisdom can't do, love can do. It can do it, but in its own way, not in our way.

-Tell us, then, what is the second meaning of hope? Beatrice asked.

-The only hope for hope is to give it eyes, ears and a nose capable of passing through images. It is about having faith in the meeting itself. It is about making the world ripen in concrete meetings...

-But what about Paris in all that? Beatrice questioned.

-Paris is France's blind spot. Paris attracts to itself all those who are rejected because they don't conform to the image of France. All those who have no place in the countryside find themselves in Paris. Paris is the Jerusalem of our culture, the temple of the "image of the good" and at the same time the place of those who are excluded from this temple... It is there that I can bring hope because it is there that distrust is at its height. It is the most beautiful thing and perhaps the only thing I can bring into the prisons, into all the prisons all the way to the dungeon where Maiffe's mother is living.

-But they'll kill you, Maman.

-I'm not easy to catch.

-You're dreaming, Maman. Paris won't see anything at all. You said it, it's the blind spot.

-The blind spot is also the source point.

-So, I'll go to Paris, me too, Maiffe exclaimed as if she were perched on the top of a cartload.

At that point, Becassine let loose with a braying that gave me away.

The scene froze in a strange perplexity. This lasted quite a while. I would have so much liked to put this moment in my sights and kill the name of Paris.

To Make a Child

Every morning is lethal for our dreams. This one more than the others. April is a month of blue light and when a sunbeam perforates a pane of glass, it can be cruel. The fairies who had flown above my bed, the nymph who had danced on the silver river, the shadowy landscapes of my dreams, the uncertain beauties of my nocturnal imagination had flown away. And yet the day had still not made a single form appear...

Coming out of a dream isn't easy for someone who is beginning to be surprised at being here. A little more than twenty-five years ago, I was not, today, I am; this flickering of being is really the strangest thing that is.

I had doubtless had a premonition of the day's beginnings. This had awakened me. I was expecting the first sunbeam. The silence scintillated beneath the cries of birds calling for the dawn. The dawn will come. I found it miraculous that my consciousness could be so assured of this.

I occupied a perilous position, for my nocturnal imagination had ceased to exercise its art, and my diurnal imagination had not yet awakened. I was thus at the mercy of the being who was there, naked, silent, opaque in the darkness.

In opening our eyes, we ought to expect nothing, literally nothing. If something does appear, we should be astonished. We will need to explain where that thing that is there comes from, what it is, its destiny, its endurance...

There is a place in us that knows that this is not natural; that nature, the trees, the things, the animals, all of life, all this is not natural, habitual, yes, but not natural. There is a depth in thought that logically expects to find nothing. If there were nothing, there would be nothing to explain. Thought would simply say: "I knew it, there is nothing."

But there is something, and not just anything, an immense thing, a thing so great that it doesn't appear to be made for our eyes, so complex that it doesn't appear to be made for our intelligence, so beautiful that it doesn't appear made for our esthetics, so cruel that it doesn't appear made for our ethics. We are plunged into it. We are flickering inside it.

Who can endure it?

So, at night, the nocturnal imagination and, by day, the diurnal imagination keep us in another world, a world that fits us, neither the nothingness that we ought to expect, nor the being which exceeds us, but a little world, an adult equivalent of the imaginary world of children, the little kingdom inside of which the little Church quarrels with the petty State.

But on this morning, as my two imaginations fell silent, Beatrice's bare and smooth back appeared. And my heart melted in tears, moved by the fact that she did exist, she, my lovely one, she, hidden away in the darkness.

I say it simply. The essence of a couple's life takes place where we don't imagine it. Truly and exactly where we don't imagine it. Bodies left to themselves exchange odors, flavors, textures, warmth, softnesses and all kinds of fluids, known and unknown. In the morning, two bodies are found embracing. Scarcely could the soul, returning from its imaginary voyage and sniffing the sheets, recognize its own flesh through the loved one's members. A hand stretches out, touches a buttock or a breast, feels here and there in order to discover who the other is and take back what is his. This soul rediscovers its body, but it is blurred, eroded by strange, smooth, mysterious sediments from his partner of the night.

Love is two bodies that don't give a damn about the little kingdoms, two bodies weaving existence in the vast expanse of being. We say to ourselves: Who goes there? And we don't know. But this attracts us.

It has already been almost a year since I devoted myself to this desire and this work. For anyone who is not attentive, the change remains imperceptible. At any rate, this absentminded man has not yet recognized that being is not among his thoughts, but in the very act of seeing and of being seen. Even so, the one who transits in the morning from the nocturnal to the diurnal imagination, taking all his time, recovering himself gradually, detaching gently, delicately, and one by one his body's limbs from those of his beloved, that man perceives the patient work of existence.

That man realizes that, until then, his soul was wandering and moaning in the void.

The husband's first nights are stunning. He feels he is returning to himself. He realizes that, between his mother's breasts and his beloved's, he has wandered in isolation and frustration. This makes him irritable and aggressive. Incapable of inhabiting the vast reality of things.

In that isolation, he has become a wanderer in the little kingdom. He has developed a sham individuality in a sham world. Like a snow crystal, he is detached from the clouds and, in the distance, is individualized by cold. Like a snow crystal, he has begun to wander in the icy court of social life, carried along by currents, fashions and mores. There, his actions were dictated by a lack he was incapable of naming. He was a kind of wound; he went, irritated and combative, competitive and quarrelsome, in flight from himself. In the cursed isolation of the sexes, he formed an idea of sex.

A few rare individuals leave this little world, discover their lack and open up to love.

The wound of their solitude is assuaged and sometimes they are cured. Little by little, a new layer is added to their bodies, a tender skin, a heart of flesh. These men leave their women in the morning, they stretch out their arms in the warmth of the day, they get up in peace, they have a taste for work, for children, for the earth and for plowing, for oxen and for poultry, they have rediscovered life's flavor. They have left the little kingdom. They will never be spoken of,

for they are happy husbands and affectionate fathers, creators of life.

This second birth is impossible if one remains in the imagined world. The little kingdom is little precisely because it cannot tolerate being. How, then, can it tolerate existence, life, desire and love?

But let us imagine that a man happens to go out and have an affair, that he abandons himself to love, that he sleeps with his beloved in a real sense, is this truly the metamorphosis necessary for peace with oneself and with others? Is it truly the coming of the Kingdom the Gospel speaks of? In any case, it is the entrance to the beguine life.

The man who has left his mother, but has never found the way to a new body-to-body is the man to save, the man outside the Kingdom, the man who is prisoner of the Churches, of the State or of business, the dangerous man.

Nicodemus is not truly able to enter a marriage bed, so he goes to the Temple to sacrifice himself, he races to his duty to sacrifice his life, to war to sacrifice his enemies, to business to beat out his competitors... How can he be born of the spirit when he is not yet born of the flesh?

The night had been particularly impregnated with femininity. In the morning I recovered from it very slowly. I inspected the calm new man who got along quite well with his wife. My eyes awaited the first light of day quite simply, while my skin absorbed the cool and humid air that gradually separated me from Beatrice.

A very pale sunbeam began to turn in the thick glass of the window. I saw it playing, undecided. Another beam arrived and danced next to it. Another and still another came, and then they joined together to venture into the room. They crawled on the table, slid along the flagstones of the floor, passed over Maiffe's blonde curls and leaped upon Beatrice's exposed breast.

I was surprised, for this was not the breast I knew. It appeared swollen, the nipple had turned brown, the areola had enlarged and risen, and the end of the nipple had formed a kind of happy turret.

I whispered in her ear:

-Little sneak!

She turned over and, with her soft snoring, continued to maintain her mystery. I uncovered her a little so as to see if other changes had taken place. The curve of her hips seemed to have become rounder. I tickled one buttock. She turned over on her back, snoring a little louder. Beneath her navel, her belly was more defined.

-Little sneak, I breathed in her ear, a little louder.

She smiled without awakening. I leaned back against my pillow in order to better look at her. She hugged my thigh. For no reason, tears began to flow on my cheeks. I gently took her right arm and folded it over her breast. She sank more deeply into her dreams. I quietly arose.

Maiffe looked at me. She had been observing us. Her face was as smooth as the moon. I tucked her in. She looked at me for a long time, neither smiling nor sad, as if she were contemplating a distant landscape whose beauty and mystery intrigued her.

-I love you more than anything in the world, I said in her ear.

She buried her face in the straw mattress again. Marguerite was curled up against a window, reading a page of the Bible she had found the night before. When she heard me coming, she whispered a passage:

-..."it happened that Sara, daughter of Raguel, at Ecbatana in the country of the Medes, heard the insulting words of one of her father's maidservants, because of how she had been given to seven husbands who had all died one after the other before consummating their marriage. And the maidservant said to her: "It is you who have smothered them." On that day, Sara was afflicted and began to weep because she was accused of the successive murders of her seven husbands. She wanted to do away with herself. But she did not do it so as not to cast her father, in his old age, into the pains of Sheol."

-We will have to leave, I believe that Beatrice is pregnant, I told her.

To avoid giving fodder to the vicious gossips, when a beguine was pregnant in Brussels, she left for the countryside and went to serve on a farm associated with the beguine movement.

-I just read you the fundamental fear of patriarchal society, Marguerite commented as if she hadn't heard me. Sara didn't smother any of her husbands. But man is afraid of being engulfed by her. This was Augustine's fear in regard to his mistress. In reality, in the marriage bed the imagination's illusions die and concrete life arrives, and this is disconcerting...

She had just now explained my tears. I was going to lose an additional illusion. The girl I had loved was disappearing. I was going to find a mother in her place. Sleeping with a mother was not exactly to my taste...

-I'm selfish, I want to keep my beautiful Beatrice, I admitted.

-We women experience many metamorphoses, and without a doubt the most important is the one that transforms us into mothers. We are so much immersed in the process, fascinated by our new creativity, that we don't always perceive the importance of the change. If we asked a butterfly what happened in the cocoon, it would say that all the elements of its body were reconstructed in a different way in total darkness, that's all it would be able to say. It knows nothing of what did happen, it felt the disruption, but it neither saw nor heard anything. Beatrice will not accompany you in your mourning, for hers is very different. She is already captivated by the living being that is gradually making its home in her. She is not, for the time being, mourning the young woman who is dying, for she is witnessing the birth of the mother, that incredible bond with a part of oneself that is becoming an other... Come, let's go outside, I want to tell you a secret.

A fog was bathed in a brown light, the stone walls of the alleys dripped, we were following the arched openings without worrying too much about getting lost in the labyrinth. The city was sleeping. Goat droppings on a street's paving stones guided us toward a hill. On the hill, an elm extended two big branches. Marguerite climbed on to a bend in the trunk that could easily bear both of us, and I sat down beside her.

In front of us, the house of a poor man barely stood out from the night. Its stone roof streamed with purple shadows, its roughcast walls paled under the creeping light that seemed to rise out of the earth, its tiny windows glowed, its frame was rounded beneath the fog's weight. The night opened its wings to display the sprawling lips of the horizon in a pink veil. The farmhouse rounded its back and hid its head between its paws in order to sleep a little longer. Our eyes dove into it, captivated by that mansard sleeping in the fog.

A goat settled down at the foot of our tree. Lying down, he began to chew his cud. Patches of snow sketched the beginning of a landscape. Then colored lines and trees appeared, other houses, stables, henhouses, plowed and muddy fields, pastures still vaguely beige...

-This landscape, Marguerite began, reminds me of another morning, south of Paris, south of the University, in a countryside as poor and as beautiful as this one. I had just finished writing my first Mirror. I had entrusted it to a German Dominican with a great reputation who was going to teach at the University of Paris and who with great respect was named: Master Eckhart. I awaited his reaction without the slightest hope.

-I imagine he denounced you.

-Not at all. By I don't know what stroke of luck, he met me before daybreak. I had fallen asleep on a large branch like this one here; that was my custom when I was in the forest. I had awoken and was awaiting the sun's arrival. He sat down by my side like you are now, without saying anything, for the world, as it gently clothed itself in light, shrouded us in its beauty...

-Did he finally speak? I asked.

-Yes, when the light had wrapped everything in its first colors, he did speak. I remember every word. "I passed the night in your book," he said to me, smiling (he had placed a strong emphasis on the preposition 'in'). You made me enter the creche of Bethlehem and even, I believe, the body of the mother of the Word. You have shown me a little of her maternity... I was going my way, going from one monastery to another, preaching in one church and another, I saw lots of women, they had entrusted them to me, but they should have entrusted me to their keeping." He burst out laughing like a child and continued: "I was going from beguinage to beguinage in Alsace, all along the Moselle and on all the roads that go from Trier to Cologne, from Strasbourg to Erfurt. I preached to hundreds of beguines, I confessed many of them, but I have not been preached to by them. I met a few beguines of the Free Spirit, mainly those who reject the body completely. A young beguine by the name of

Katrei, wandering like you, came to me recently with a profound hatred of the body... I would know now how to talk to her. Your philosophy, Madame, is new to me. I didn't know that anyone had developed this wisdom." I did, however, have some precursors, I answered: Bentivenga da Gubbio of Parma, Hadewijch of Antwerp... "They didn't speak as clearly as you...". Could they speak without losing their lives? I shot back. The master remained silent. Return to what you were saying, I asked him. It was then that he told me this: "It is possible for the human soul to melt in the Depth out of which creation gives birth to the Word and in this way the Word gives birth to the New Man. From there, life grows green and flowers because the Depth grows hot and burns. It is all about touching the eternal instant of creation. What you are saying, Madame, is not different, except that you add that this comes from Love, from a Love above God himself. For if God were not subject to this Love, he would no longer be a creator, but a jurist..."

Marguerite stopped as if choked by emotion; tears ran down her cheeks. It was her consolation, the only consolation that had come to her from the exterior. She had never had any others nor, to my knowledge, any after that.

She turned toward me, and I read the fright in her flooded pupils. I didn't understand. She should have been happy; she had been confirmed by one of the greatest theological masters of the time. No doubt my look appeared to be a questioning one. So she responded by telling me what the Master had said to her in conclusion:

- "You are risking Jesus, Madame Porete, you risk sharing his fate."

It was her terrible secret, and now it was my terrible secret.

Marguerite could escape her destiny only by escaping her identity. She could escape the Inquisition only by betraying herself. This was how she saw things, but I, for my part, did not understand. It would have been so easy to escape this fate, to go further north, to the city of Bruges, for example, or to simply remain in the surrounding countryside. But what worried her was to live less than Love.

- All that we do out of love is radiant with joy; all that we do out of self-interest, out of running away to save ourselves, darkens us, she concluded.

The fog dissipated over our heads and the light illuminated all the new verdure of spring. Children had come out of the house and were running barefoot in a circle of grass. A bell rang in the distance. This house, these children, this garden, this goat who got up to go scamper around the little bit of awakening humanity, this was all that I wanted, this was all the teaching I had received, one more drop and I would be back in the cave of the carrion-eaters, back in the world turned toward death. It was imperative that we not leave Brussels and its region.

Marguerite had calmed down and regained her usual good humor. Yet I remained suspended between my marital happiness and Marguerite's secret. I asked her for a proof, one solitary proof that the Master's terrible prophecy was

not a trap:

She responded with this paragraph from the Mirror:

-I prefer, a hundred thousand times to one, the abundance of goods He keeps within Himself than the gifts that He gives me. I prefer what is in Him and beyond my understanding to what is in Him and within my understanding. What He knows and I do not know is better for me than than what I know about Him. There where what exceeds me is, there my treasure is. And because I prefer what exceeds me, what exceeds me is mine. Such is Love's fulfillment. It drives us there where we are not. Don't you see that this is what leads us to the heart of life itself, there where it takes root, sprouts and grows green...

I had gotten up again. Space had become transparent and separating. I didn't understand anything and didn't want to understand anything. I just wanted to keep my happiness.

We had left Brussels for the country. One day's walk to the north, there was a small house, a little hut and three fields to cultivate. A plot of land rented by the beguinage..

We had been there for a few months... And the whole earth was swelling at the same time as Beatrice.

In the country district where we were, on the big-bellied hill on top of which our little house took the navel's position, the summer consumed its light, and the earth, all swollen, unceasingly gave birth to grass, flowers, grain, vegetables, and fruit in great abundance. The spring had been rainy and the heat, generous. We had hoed, sown, and weeded and now all was given back to us a hundredfold. Our cow, our sheep, our cat, and Becassine herself swelled up like balloons, heavy with promises. Our young Maiffe's body lengthened, her cheeks grew softer and her chest began to bud.

Only Husdent, who came back to us with a messenger from Valenciennes, and I maintained our weight, or rather we lost it, for it was not easy to protect all these female people, to keep up the house and outbuildings, to make the cribs and the cradle, to harvest for the needs of the present and for those of the winter.

Sometimes, in the afternoon, a rainbow formed its arc, separated the sky, then melted on our wheat field like the sweat of creation.

Every day, light plunges its hands into the dough in order to extract life. The earth works relentlessly, producing the mixture of elements that rises toward the sky in the form of vegetables. The animals work, too; they take the grass and reconstruct it, transforming it into movements, into games, into courage and into pleasure.

In the evening, the sun's last fires filtered across the horizon and came to tuck in the plants, the animals and our solitude. Even the night watched over us.

Caring for life is the world's only business.

We ourselves had plenty of work. And yet no activity, however feverish, prevented me from observing what was taking place around me: this genesis, this rising of life.

Wasn't I myself simply an extension of the solar effort! Wasn't I light become sight and sight endowed with hands and the word! So I let the light enter my eye, be overcome with the beauty of the world, and depart again through my mouth, singing like the nightingale. I didn't stop humming pastoral ritournelles at the top of my lungs, though my voice was like a crow's.

Beatrice was carrying our child.

We were all beneficiaries of a profusion of vital breath. It traveled through the plants, hid in the life-giving breezes, was heard singing in the grass. It filtered into the inhalations of all things living. It mixed the seeds of vegetables, broke them apart into fertile dust, plunged this dust into the digestive earth, and brought it up again in a profusion of species. From there, it took on strength, verdure, and fruity colors and then went into the mouth of a herbivore, gave it life, and ended up in a carnivore's belly. We could almost see it passing from one sheep to the other; we could smell it on the breath of our ruminants, giving off their grassy fermentations.

The inhalation of the one corresponds to the exhalation of the other, it is breath that passes, but there is always a surplus that remains and swells the animal with an excess of vitality. Then, this excess breath mixes with the seeds, the male pursues the female, the seeds accumulate in the female, the breath organizes and vitalizes the minute particles of earth, water, air, and fire; new beings are composed for other cycles and other springtimes.

The dead are resurrected in the plants and the plants, in the animals. I was observing the exuberant work of life.

In the preceding months, when we were in Brussels at the beguillage, on a feast-night in the beginning of January, we had eaten a lot of lamb and drunk a very effervescent wine. Unable to contain the breath, we had been swept away by a frenzy of irrepressible love. I still recall the pungency of our breaths, the whirlwinds that whistled in our veins, the cutaneous storm of our orgasms, the arterial thunder of spasms, the immortality that swept us into the necessity of merging our bodies in order to cross through time. Love against time, we are greatly mistaken to call this reproduction; it is a breakthrough, a real creation.

Happy slaves disappearing in the duty of nature, dying in the delight of the senses for the birth of another kind of entity, a multiple entity, a family, time become a rosary of ancestors and progeny. Always and forever throwing life a step further into the gaping abyss of a future that widens by reduction. Life pierces time through the passionate bodies of lovers.

And now, now that the breath was rising back from the plants to the animals in the turbulence and luxuriance of summer, Beatrice was transformed into a kind of chalice for the metamorphosis of blood and the transubstantiation of the flesh.

Beatrice was tasting the work of this same breath hurled out since Genesis to separate the celestial waters from the terrestrial waters, and reunite them in its egg, to slip through the pipes of hope. It is its way, the eternal and unique way of transferring eternity into the monumental space of the cosmic womb. And during this time, chaos sweeps off into Sheol the residual dead, the dead necessary for the renewing of life, the dead who will roll along in life some other way, we don't know how!

We never tire of looking at the cyclical and mysterious life that unrolls its inventions before us. We become ridiculous from reinventing words to express and attempt to preserve the amazement. If there is a miracle that is incomprehensible everywhere on earth, it is that life ends up by seeming natural to us.

Blessed is the consciousness that knows, like Beatrice, how to put work aside, to savor the undulation of the blood in the shivering of the veins, to let nature do its work in silence, to free itself of every worry, to lend itself to the inner caress of the universal spirit, to abandon itself to the alchemical work...

Blessed women creators!

Maiffe and I were not in this same state of grace. Something united all three of us even so. There was a name too sacred to be pronounced. We were thinking of her, though we never talked about it. She had given up her body to the earth. And now that summer was bringing all its plants up from the soil, our hearts overflowed for her. She was at our love's foundation. There was a way of roaming around her absence without falling into the abyss of pain. And so the leper girl set down a perfume at the edge of our wound that restored some zest to our most ordinary activities.

A loved one who dies confident is an invaluable treasure. It is impossible to pass on a greater inheritance. In her way, our older daughter participated in Beatrice's maternity.

Leaning on Becassine who lay down for hours in the tall grass, Maiffe and my beloved were cleaning a large basket of onions, and I was threshing the wheat. We were chatting.

-Tell me, my beautiful ball, what a husband ought to know.

-Pardi! my man, if I am a ball, it's not a crystal one! So don't rely on my answers. But what do you want to know?

-Uh! I don't know! Tell me again, tell me one more time who's coming?

-A boy, Maiffe cried.

Becassine snorted her approval.

-Not so fast everyone! was Beatrice's reaction. I'm going to tell you something. Listen carefully...

I was threshing the sheaves. The grain was shooting out of the ears.

-I feel my little lamb moving and all my body turned toward him. But I don't know who is coming! It's important what I'm saying here. I don't know him. I've been transformed into a nest and into food, but for whose benefit I do not know. I have a strange body that is taking possession of me. He's not an angel. He often hurts me. What I find strange is that love comes to me even though I don't even know him. I am discovering a love that doesn't come with knowledge; it's a love that, on the contrary, goes out toward the unknown, a love that seems to produce the person to be loved.

-But me, you love me because I'm lovable and you know me, Maiffe reacted. And if I wasn't lovable...

-I would love you anyway, because I would know that you made yourself hateful in order to be loved...

-Oh well, I said, we're getting away from the subject. Who is coming? I don't want to know his sex, his character, the color of his eyes, I just want you to talk about him. You owe it to us a little, we too are getting ready, but blindly, without ever feeling him. Maybe you don't know him, but you feel him, you have a relationship with him. And as for me, it's through the woman that I am becoming a father, and not any other way.

-Whoa you two! A relationship... What are you saying? What relationship? I have a watermelon in my belly that's growing and growing, crushing my bladder, my intestines, my stomach, my lungs. He weighs a ton, and is taking my bread and my air. There's the reality. I should hate him like a hunchback hates his hump, but I love him like a treasure. He's not the only stranger in me: the love he arouses is even more of a stranger to me. That love has taken hold of my heart like a tiger. Woe to the one who comes near. That love takes up all the space. I could jump on a wolf for a baby who's kicking me! To make a long story short, he's making me lose my head.

-So, I gleefully exclaimed, it's the breath that's the guilty one! That's what's taking you away from us and damn the details! We won't know what's carrying you away.

-It's the breath, Maiffe repeated, shrugging her shoulders.

-Go ahead and laugh! But don't laugh too hard, for you mustn't disturb it, that dear breath. Letting things go, my friends, is no easy task...

-How does it knit its stitches, plain or purl? It jumps some, it passes some, does it make any knots? Maiffe sung to herself to a humorous tune.

-I am going to tell you. Before, I was like you two. Sometimes I felt like I was leading things. I was living in my imagination. I dreamed a lot. I thought a lot. A thousand times, I made little men and little women in my mind. If I had known how to knit babies according to my images, I would have a thousand children. All sorts of children: some pink, some brown, some chubby-cheeked, some big-bellied, some gigglers, some whiners. I imagined futures, too, lots of futures, sometimes in the country, sometimes in the city, sometimes with you, my Guion, sometimes alone, sometimes with another, yes, with another, a lord

or a real peasant... In the pure and blessed sterility of a mockingbird, I imagined. But here, it's different. I am transformed into a mother, I am quietly awakening into the true life, the one that leads everything with a confident knowledge that doesn't often do what we would want.

-The true life, the true life doesn't get headaches, I think! I exclaimed.

-Watch out, Guion, Beatrice continued. I'm going to tell you that it is right, necessarily right. It is the tautology you are seeking. Even when we are right and it is wrong, life is still right because, good grief, life carries the world and we, we don't carry it, we imagine it. And me, I'm only carrying one little baby and it takes all my energy to simply let life do its work. That's it! Since he is really there, the mother is not really me. I'm the big baby who is carrying the little baby. Yes, I've never felt as much as now, at this very moment when I'm talking to both of you, that the heaven that holds its great waters beyond the firmament, this great blue sky, is not the vault of a cathedral, it's a big maternal belly that supports all this jumble of mountains, of forests, of animals and of clowns like you two, and you as well, Becassine. So why would it always be good-natured, this big belly?

-And I imagine that, from reknitting us so much, it misses some stitches, I said, joking...

-That's it exactly, you are imagining. I imagine, too, but my body doesn't imagine, it does and it depends. It does and it depends. When you understand the union of these two verbs, you lose the ability to speak. And if the breath that knows all and does all misses too many stitches, my baby would look like Becassine or even a toad and too bad for all the babies we might have imagined.

Beatrice began to weep. I stopped threshing the grain, sat down beside her and took her in my arms:

-But this big beautiful belly full of stars has an occupation. Life is its occupation. Luckily, we aren't the ones who have the knowledge at our disposal.

-Parbleu! who does know then? Maiffe asked.

-Beatrice is right, I answered Maiffe. Our bodies make, create, produce, and engender life, but they aren't conscious of the knowledge that is acting in them. Look at the little stone there, it already knows a lot of things, it knows how to organize its elements in order to be what it is, it knows how to react to the sun, and it keeps its heat for a time; it knows its proper place, and, if someone throws it, it falls back to earth; it is informed, perfectly informed, of all the laws that Aristotle attempted to discover. It knows how to behave according to all the details that make nature coherent. The onion you have in your hand contains an incredible quantity of knowledge about its internal organization, the relation it maintains with the earth, the water, the solar fire, the air... Everything we see seems to know everything. All this cosmos functions following rules that are at the same time simple and complicated. Our consciousness alone knows nothing as it looks at all this nature, that is why we must learn

everything through science, by tiny little steps, with the feeling that centuries and centuries will not suffice just to understand the mysterious behavior of an insignificant stone. Our consciousness is born of that immense knowledge and yet it is born infinitely ignorant of everything. Adam and Eve knew nothing. The apple, like everything, by the way, knew perfectly well how to behave in the cosmos, but neither Adam nor even Eve knew how to behave. They asked themselves what they should do. If they had known perfectly how to behave, they would not have been conscious. Submerged in pure knowledge, they would have felt nothing of this knowledge, they would have been so obedient that they wouldn't have known the knowledge that is at work in the world.

-Then, they didn't eat the apple of knowledge? Maiffe asked, surprised.

-They imagined that they ate the apple, I continued. They imagined that they captured knowledge, and right there is where the drama is. With their false knowledge, they began to act any which way, without the slightest caution. In the human being, consciousness is possible only in the distance between it and the knowledge that orders reality. Our ignorance is the very condition for our lucidity, to the degree that we recall Socrates' principle: preserve the knowledge of our ignorance and so advance by little steps of science and act with the prudence of the blind man who barely makes out a light.

-The world is always and always will be greater than what we imagine about it, Beatrice added. Love comes from the attraction to what surpasses us and yet intimately inhabits us.

-Grand-maman is always talking about the Far-Near, Maiffe recalled. Knowledge is infinitely near in our bodies and in our hearts, and infinitely far to our consciousness which goes out in search of it with all the arsenal of reason. I understand this well, grand-maman has explained it to me. But if nature knows without understanding and we, we think we understand without knowing, is there someone, then, who knows and understands? If there isn't, I'm afraid.

Beatrice was astonished by the clarity of Maiffe's question, such an old question, nearly always badly formulated and that now came into the mind of a child:

-You are asking if this knowledge is simply a blind force organizing everything without ever becoming aware of what it is doing, Beatrice repeated so as to be sure of having correctly understood the question.

-That would explain the icy cold of the mountains and the insanity of men! Maiffe added.

-You are, my dear daughter, faced with a great question. Either it is a conscious knowledge that permeates the cosmos and we are not alone, or it is a blind force and we are left to ourselves!

Beatrice and I had, each in our own way, experienced and tested the height, the width, and the depth of that question. And we knew that no one can attain a true peace without confronting that question.

It was Beatrice who spoke:

-I won't answer your question, Maiffe. I won't fill your question with any kind of knowledge whatsoever that doesn't come directly out of your consciousness. You have understood it: our ignorance is necessary for distance, for lucidity, and for freedom. Were consciousness to truly grasp the immensity of its ignorance, the heart would begin to tremble. Anxiety sketches the walls of our consciousness. Then consciousness can become conscious of its nature. Something in it wants the truth and wants it more than anything, even more than any lovable and consoling god. The divine will have no reality for you so long as it does not emerge from there, from that No Thing of consciousness that you touch upon in your question.

I am at a stage different from you. A belly that carries a baby and puts it together piece by piece doesn't have that much choice; in faith it lets the knowledge work inside it. And it is conscious of what it is doing. It's a reflex of life, of survival. All I can say for now is that I'm not able to imagine that a blind force can make something like you, capable of such a question, a question that isn't useful, a question that serves no one's interest. You are searching for the truth even if it turns out to destroy all your illusions. This mystery of all mysteries shows us a way.

However it may be, I am carrying a child and I ought to let knowledge and consciousness act in me in their unity. If I get involved, I could bring chaos, confusion and even death... What I fear above all is not the knowledge that is working in me, it is me the ignorant one, working so maladroitly in this knowledge. Soon I will have my little one in my arms and I will have to watch over him. In my womb, he doesn't need my knowledge, he just needs my body to know what has to be done. But when he'll be in my arms, I will have to do what is necessary. Now, he is in the knowledge and unconsciousness of my body, soon he will be in the ignorance and consciousness of my arms. This frightens me. So for now, I keep quiet and learn. Maiffe, your consciousness is pregnant with a question of life, let it work; but above all, watch it work, for if it works by knowledge and at the same time by consciousness, you will surely have to admit that somewhere, at least in the depths of your being, knowledge and consciousness are united, they are lovers one of the other, and they are Love.

-Do you trust? I asked Beatrice.

-Good grief! Guion, I have a little one in my womb, he's moving. Tomorrow, he'll be crying in my arms. I know nothing about the alchemy of milk, I just feel that my breasts have changed, they're hot, swollen, someone's working there, harder than a blacksmith, at a transformation more complicated than the making of the philosopher's stone. I should let Mother Nature do what she wills with all the attention necessary for knowing-and-letting-go. And besides, I who am so ignorant of the things of life, when the time is come, I ought to know how to lead his little mouth to the nipple, how to hold him, how to pacify him... I must learn my little bit of knowledge very quickly. I don't have the time not

to trust life...

-Do you really feel him moving? I asked.

Beatrice nodded "yes". I put my hand on her belly. Maiffe did the same. She guided us and I felt a blow, then another blow.

-It's a boy, he's hitting hard, I exclaimed.

-You're not in charge, Guion. And that suits me fine. Open your ears a little.

Maiffe and I, each on our own side, put our ears to Beatrice's big belly. It was impossible to distinguish the rumbling of her stomach from the baby's heartbeat and movements. Yet we felt that he was there. The magic was in the process of coming true. After a long while, Becassine wanted to get up. We allowed her gently and painfully to get back on her feet. She went off to eat. Beatrice got up also and took a few steps toward the house, holding on to her sides. She sat down on a stump and confided:

-At every moment, life can make an error, put an eye in the middle of the forehead, install a hand in place of a foot, a navel in the middle of a cheek... It's complicated, making a baby, you have no idea! The three of us together couldn't even draw him the way he needs to be, and she, the womb, does it down to the smallest details. A little blurring, a little error, poof! it's a monstrosity. And as for me, I don't want my baby to be all wrong, I don't want him to die... As for the rest, I could care less!

That point I believe I had understood a little. As a child, I went with my father once to a blacksmith to repair a cart wheel. We had been forced to leave the cart and its contents on the side of the road. We were quiet, my father and I, our eyes on the forge, suspended in attention and silence so that the blacksmith could successfully accomplish his work. And it was a wheel! The simplest and most ordinary thing in the world. A baby, then! That's no easy piece of embroidery. We had to let the great blacksmith do his work.

I took up my flail and struck the wheat again. Maiffe helped Beatrice return to the house with the onions. I heard them murmuring. You would have said they were cats purring. And he, the baby, no doubt liked that, being made inside a woman.

In the evening, Beatrice often made her belly vibrate with a singing that she held in her chest like a buzzing. She was somewhere else. No! It was I who was somewhere else. She was standing in the true life, prepared for labor, heart suspended, contained, driven back to trusting, pierced nonetheless by a constellation of dull anxieties. At times, she might well have gone knocking on the great blacksmith's door to demand an accounting: "Are you certain that this ear here ought to go on that side there? Are you certain that the heart is in the middle? That there is enough blood, not too much, enough earth, water, air and fire and that everything is properly placed in the right order? And if a bit of earth wasn't in its place! And if a bit of water wasn't in its spot! By what illness would he be carried off! I am afraid, but I'll leave you alone. Only, do it the right way. Don't make any mistakes, don't make any mistakes, I'm keeping

an eye on you."

She did not say this prayer; it seeped out of her trembling heart. She contented herself with keeping this heart purring so that it would numb the worry and keep the baby calm.

I, for my part, endured another fear that never seemed to cross Beatrice's mind: and if death carried off, not the child, but the mother. I had to thread my way across my worries. A very big task! .

On the Roof of the World

Nearly every day, Marguerite took Maiffe out to gather berries, hazelnuts and acorns. Beatrice cooked the jams, braided the onions and garlic, prepared the sauerkraut, and cleaned the Jerusalem artichokes. The wheat, barley, and oats had had a good yield. The old masonry silo had been sealed and filled. New thatch had been attached to the lathing of the roof.

I was perched on top of the roof like a raven with softened wings and a pensive beak. I had just adjusted the final clay tile on the ridge of the roof. I had cemented it to the thatch with a daubing of clay. Our roof would not leak again. I was seated straddling the ridgepole...

Autumn had been prosperous and thus particularly demanding in terms of work. Until then, all our fatigue had been absorbed by necessity, for we had to eat this winter. Beatrice had become so heavy that it was hard for her to drag herself outside. I had had to take on a good part of her responsibilities. I didn't complain, but my body seemed all at once to remember it. When the final effort was terminated, it didn't want to do any more. Like Marathon, I had arrived, and couldn't take one step more, nor even get down from the roof. I was incapable of it, any more than I could raise an arm or wiggle a toe.

I resembled a gargoyle attached above empty space and indifferent to any possible fall. My eyes took advantage of this to float as they pleased, as if my momentary inertia had given them wings. I was enthroned on the crest of the brand new roof. We were all ready for the winter and rest was coming, well deserved.

The sun slowly subdued its heat in the rising dampness. My muscles were asleep. An inexpressible peace rose from my feet up to my head with the increasing heat of my body. And a shiver sizzled on my skin.

A fever made me reel a little from dizziness. The landscape rocked. I was growing numb in a soft torpor and a deep satisfaction. My eyes swept like drunken ships over the surrounding country.

On the waves of the hills there here and there appeared big pot-bellied cottages bordered with dark hedges. Fields yellowed the backs of the ridges and the cambered dales. That green and corpulent sea undulated to the rhythm of my fever's spasms.

I was seasick, my head was buzzing, but a kind of drunkenness anesthetized all my pains.

On the swaying of the swell, the steeple of a distant church resembled the mast of a ship. The sea of hills fled toward the reddening horizon. On the final line of waves, a gristmill waved its arms between sky and earth. Touching the horizon, my gaze was frozen in the gelatinous red of the sky.

I was in the middle of this productive sea. It had yielded, it had given. Its belly, crumpled by the effort, breathed now in chaotic waves. Curious sea in which we inter our dead, in which the trees go off to rot, to which all the living return as to their homeland. It returns them in the springtime, leads them back to the greening surface for their sunning, takes them back and lifts them to the light again to give their seeds in rushes of sensual delight, and faint once more on its earthy skin and vanish in its entrails.

A great rolling of rollers returning the ingredients in the darkness in order to offer them once again to the light in unceasingly different recompositions. Mobile painting of eternity.

My heart felt infinitely happy.

To belong to that swell of intrepid bakers intoxicated me. I was happy to get up to work at the rising, happy to go down again in a temporary rest. Happy at the flickering of my consciousness across life's ascents. From time to time, I float on the terrestrial womb, from time to time I drown in the unconsciousness of its shadows, but something like the horizon remains, something happy and cheerful, a sort of connecting thread that joins all the metamorphoses.

On the roof of my cottage, I was hooked to this thread. I could lose it, but I clearly perceived that my consciousness had always been attached to it like a beam of light between a sun and its planets. Consciousness and time are the two axes of the eternity that my body is testing in my heart...

My breathing had given me air again, the dizziness stopped, the landscape stabilized.

Small groups of women came down from the hills. Large baskets on their heads, they were no doubt going to the mill. Sparrows were gorging themselves on grain straight from the baskets. They were like second heads. The women were far away, but I heard them singing. Following them, an old woman led a horse that was slowly pulling a cart of vegetables.

Soon, this winter perhaps, one of them would fall, worn out or victim of an accident, by eating bad meat or in giving birth, and her body would go to meet the sea, our mother, to return transformed. This rolling of life advanced by round waves toward a distant horizon where it was fed by celestial fire, the most subtle elements of creation, so it was said. The flame, moreover, could be seen going out through the holes of the stars, that flame that boiled the waters of the firmament to keep them on top of the cosmic cauldron. That flame heated the sea in the setting sun...

If I weren't so accustomed to these hills, to these trees, to these fields, to these animals and to these men, I would find this truly very strange and completely magical. Nothing is more astounding than this rolling that seems to be eternal, that reveals, in its substance, no indication of beginning, end, or fatigue. One might say it was a kind of self-sufficient respiration that desires no rest, nor any explanation. This moves in a complete knowledge, enjoying its own undulation, its own rolling of clay across the knots of night and the untieings of

the light. Languorous movement where exuberance always wins, defeating the inevitable nostalgia of relapses into unconsciousness.

My body recognized that it was perfectly at home in this cosmos, it was so habituated that it saw nothing, it never did more than repeat its seeing. And when, all at once, I forgot, when all my recitative knowledge left me, I saw, I recognized myself and tears of joy flowed from my eyes. Gregory of Nyssa said it: "To never find satiety in desire, this is to really see." Plotinus said it differently: "So long as a being does not have the Good, he wants something else; as soon as he has it, he wants himself."

I wanted myself so much that I never wanted to come down from the roof. I wanted to eternally remain in my occupation as lookout for life's thousand metamorphoses. I didn't want to leave this navel where I was perched. I wanted to contemplate without interruption that beauty that was darkening now but would shine again the following morning. I wanted to be able to relate all I had seen in ten thousand years, simply relate this rolling of terrestrial waves that successively go, in a beautiful slowness, to renew themselves between the fiery lips of the setting sun.

I wanted to be that eye, I wanted to be that memory, I wanted to be the parchment on which this is written from moment to moment. I was a soul in full commemoration.

I did feel my tired body. It was not very interested in my seeing. Evening was coming and it wanted to sleep. It was not won over to the eye's eternal work. I, on the contrary, wanted to stay awake on my thatched roof. I had the impression that if no one stayed awake, the world would disappear.

I imagined my existence, season after season, occupied with only two things: taking care of life and keeping alert.

The summer had been so beautiful, so magnificent, a succession of three or four days of burning sun followed by one brief day of melancholy rain. Not a single moment to ask oneself what needed to be done. Every morning get up and serve the goats, the fields and the garden. Participate. Insert the seeds between the earth's tepid lips. Close them with your palm. For a moment, feel the earth's lips enjoy the planting. Weed the edges of the furrow. Lay down straw to protect the earth from the sun and preserve its moist intimacy. Enrich the soil with the chickens' manure and Becassine's.. In the afternoon, stretch after sleeping for an hour on a plot of grass. Return to the house, body worn out by work. Swallow a thick soup. Dip the bread in it. Snuggle up against a round, warm woman, hear a child purr while a baby is forming in the cosmic belly of the loved one. Sometimes, push the penis into the feminine creaminess, to appease an excess of ardor and simulate the immense orgasm of life desperate to live. Pleasure struggling against death.

My body seemed to know everything and my ignorance knew it.

It is all the same extraordinary that the consciousness of the eye and the knowledge of things are separated in this way, one in the subject, the other in

the object. At times, reason knits a link between the two, finds solutions to problems that emerge precisely from their separation. Yet a man who is exhausted and perched on his thatched roof sees very well their intimate and secret alliance.

My eye was free. I was like the rooster on top of his henhouse. My heart was leaping in my chest. I had returned. Talk about changing the subject, everything is there!

Yes! We had returned, Beatrice and I, to the earthly paradise that had always been waiting for us. Now, every year was going to be alike, every year would be a great respiration. Spring, summer and fall, all three united to keep life going one more winter.

To look after life.

To keep it happy on the earth's surface, and when, exhausted, it wants to return to the maternal womb, open the lips of the earth, bury the body in the soil and await the springtime's resurrection.

Serve the great wheel of life, do not lose the thread again, never lose the thread again.

I sincerely thought that I had finished my initiation. I was infinitely happy. I no longer needed anything other than to participate in the movement of life.

To take care of the earth, to take care of Maiffe, to take care of Beatrice and of the baby that was coming. That also meant taking care of death when it would come. I didn't fear it, I didn't fear it any longer, it was simply a moment of dark sleep in a dark earth, a moment of renewal in the night, a moment, simply a moment of rest in the maternal womb and in the unrendable continuity of time.

I had come home, into the bosom of life. Always and interminably, I will be a gardener, a simple gardener, a worker working at the mixing of seeds, the crossing of sexes, the perpetuation of life, the esthetic of transmutations. I was going to stand on the eternal thread of consciousness.

The stars shone on my head like a garland. The silence of the evening had swept the birds and all the animals off into a profound silence. A small breeze whispered in the bushes: The day is done.

The Fruit

A veil of snow had covered all the fields. A milky sky blurred the twigs on the trees. The moist air kept us on its foggy bosom. The chimney smoked. A fire wavered in puffy clouds of smoke. In the country we were in, a cloud could sit over a house. I felt its quiet presence, I heard it breathing; it smoked the morning's cold air.

Marguerite's silhouette stood out against the moonlight that came through the open door. She had thrown on Beatrice a mountain of raw wool to be carded. Maiffe slept with her in that wool.

I had just arrived and was warming my hands in the fire's mane. I had traveled by night, and was bringing some news from the beguinage. It had had to do with leaving us on the small property loaned to us for Beatrice's pregnancy, in return for the usual farm rent. In exchange, they would send us girls who had been abandoned for supposedly dishonoring their families. It was somewhat risky, but reasonable. I had hoped to buy two good cows and produce milk, butter, and cheese.

I was going to discuss it with Marguerite, but she gestured to me to be silent. Beatrice needed to sleep as long as possible. I understood that it would be today.

A tree knows perfectly well how to assemble and reassemble its elements, hold its branches, take a pose, offer its form to the sky that silhouettes it. It is a genius in science and an artist of great talent, an ecstatic dancer. The Greeks had understood that each atom knew of necessity the laws of the associations and composition of the materials of nature. Everywhere we place our eyes, we encounter a dense knowledge that makes the cosmos. We men alone do not know how to behave, and do not deign to learn it.

Some days, however, the body we despise in so haughty a manner calls us back to order. As we are loitering in the vast solitudes of our ignorance, laughing and changing the subject, our bodies suddenly summon us. Whether it is afflicted with an illness, or whether it is on the contrary abundantly healthy, it demands our silence for the urgent work of the sexes. If we have one ounce of humility, we refrain from harming.

Can a husband not harm?

Beatrice's body had known what to do to blend our seeds, transform a womb into a nourishing nest, combine the useful liquids, by some miracle bring air to the baby, prepare the breasts for lactation, and now that it was entering the violence of delivery, I doubted it! I wanted to flee with my fingers in my ears...

Marguerite ordered me to assist her.

Maiffe and the cat, both seated on a flagstone, kept still, their backs next to the

fire. Why does a cat's eye know every time that the human eye has lost the thread of knowledge?

I had to put up with it, though. I must not disturb Beatrice's labor. I kept myself from acting out my fear, blindly obeying Marguerite who, for her part, did no more than follow the knowledgeable process unfolding in spite of us.

From the first contractions, Beatrice and Marguerite knew that all would go well. The Bible is no doubt right, wisdom is in the breath and giving birth appeared to me like an art of respiration. As for me, I held my breath. I was responsible for the fire, the hot water, the soup and the security of the premises. I heard Husdent quietly turn around the house. I believe he was walking my anxiety in order to relieve me.

Honesty compels me here to make a painful confession. The brutal immodesty in which Beatrice's private parts were exhibited offended me. You understand! She was a bit of me, a bit of my body, even the most private part of my body. It was my place of letting go, the place where ignorant reason had to be lost in order to enjoy the knowing body, the place of the odors that knew so well how to intoxicate my thought and close my eyelids. Isn't the essence of sensual enjoyment bathing ourselves in corporal knowledge, while reason, tipsy with pleasure, takes its leave! In these moments of abdication, when I saw Beatrice's sex, my respiration increased, my blood simmered, my body shivered from the marrow of my bones to the surface of my skin: a source of sensual delight that came from the kept secret, from the secret that must not be told either to the ear or to the eye so as not to awaken reason.

And now my mother-in-law saw this secret and Maiffe too, and the cat, and the cloud that was sitting over the house.

But there was more. What was unveiled was no longer a sex, but an inversion of sex. The young bride attracts a hand, an eye, a kiss into her skirts. She spreads her legs in a receptive posture. Her vulval lips moisten and tremble, injecting into the husband's veins the liqueurs of an irrepressible desire. He is attracted to that cleft like a drunkard to a tavern. Now, it is the opposite; it is all about pushing out, expelling, displacing a little animal who wants to be delivered. The brown breasts, the distended belly, the upraised legs, the outsized lips that open and stretch like bows, all this puts desire in reverse, it is no longer a matter of attraction, but of revulsion.

I was offended by it.

Between the contractions, when everything calmed down, when the breathing regained its rhythm, I started to shed tears. I would never have admitted the reason for this weakness. I had lost what I thought I possessed.

While Beatrice was completely engaged on the sea of sufferings and with the risk of a new life, I wept for the girl who had given me so much sweetness and pleasure! My butterfly had become a big fat caterpillar. Reversed metamorphosis. From now on, I would be sleeping with a mother.

I was ashamed. Had I been a noble or a burgher, this would have been the

chosen moment for me to find a mistress. That thought disgusted me.

Time began to slow down, to slide like a slug in the moisture that didn't give up, in the sun that didn't emerge from the fog. My heart was torn in its will to live; I thought it had lost the unconscious knowledge of carnal love.

Beatrice was so calm between the contractions, so strong in the moments of pushing; she seemed harnessed to time like a knight on the saddle of his palfrey. Each moment arrived with its knowledge, nothing more, nothing less. Beatrice experienced this knowledge and went on to the next. She allowed the knowledge to operate. She did not grasp anything. She went from knowledge to knowledge. She kept perfectly contemporaneous with each grain of time that slipped through the waist of the hourglass.

Her red and swollen face showed a courage that had no time to become aware of itself. There, I am saying it, my amorous desire was transformed into admiration. And I was afraid.

A couple is more fragile than a candle stuck on a piece of bark and abandoned to the currents of a river. Desire thumbs its nose at will.

In her presence I was like a great stiff tunic that had dried too long in front of the fire. Arms twitching in their powerlessness, jaw sagging, calf's eyes fixed on the gray head emerging amid the blood, I was a participant in emptiness and strangeness. I was a miscellaneous object left by accident on the set of a play whose language and gestures I did not understand.

A man lost in the feminine mystery.

And suddenly my heart woke up. I left this nightmare of doubts. What's this, was I crying! Beatrice was going to give me the fruit of our greatest pleasures, and I was crying! He was there, he was almost there, a third of his head outside the vulva. Marguerite grabbed my sleeve and brought me out of my torpor. She placed me in front of the great bloody opening. Beatrice smiled at me, kept going and gave me the son of her flesh and of our seeds.

When I saw him in my arms, I broke down in other tears, hot and waxy tears that enveloped the baby. He entered my heart as if it were a new womb.

He is still there today, he is there and my heart is nothing other than a uterus pressing itself around him to keep him alive. I carry him now and I will carry him off as I die...

I resolved to put him on Beatrice's breast. Beatrice's eyes clung to him and only partly returned to me. I was the father, I was no longer the king. I had to do my job: bring all that was necessary to the nest even as I softly stepped aside before the baby's perfection.

It took me several months to become that father. One man died, another arrived. Women are synchronic with time, men are diachronic; they run behind, closing time and closing history. That man was approaching. To my surprise, the man who was arriving was attracted by the new woman and the so-vulnerable baby; the other man was going off into the nostalgia of his

memories, sealing the breaches of nothingness. The lover who was coming into my new body liked the odor of the woman who slept with him. And she, particularly, had a renewed thirst for an ever stronger communion with the man I was.

Maternity had simply made her more of a woman, more desiring and more desirable. Our bodies had become squirrels knotted together on the stem of the tree of knowledge, of consciousness holding tight to knowledge.

It All Depends

Winter enveloped us. It was there all around us in its coat of snow. It turned, its skirt rippling in the wind. A cold being who every year came to encircle us. It kept itself on purpose below the temperature of the living. Millions of flies, grasshoppers, wasps and ants are transformed into frost and dispersed in the wind. The mice are hidden away in holes, the squirrels in tree-trunks, the foxes in lairs, the bears in caves, the peasants in thatched houses. Winter awards them an hour, a day, a week, yes, sometimes it spares.

It all depends.

The day broke pale and sickly. Winter permitted me to go outside. I entered the woods. I lit a fire to make the cold go away. Winter smiled, it wasn't offended. But it whistled through its icy fingers, it covered the walls with hoarfrost and the roof with icicles, it shook its skirts and scattered its snow. It gave us permission to have a quiet breakfast.

It all depends on it.

I led Maiffe to the traps and snares, to the holes in the ice on the lake. It was granting us a reprieve.

At noon, it let us take the grain in the silo, the vegetables in the root cellar, the dried meats in the attic. But it nibbled our fingers, toes, ears and noses. We slapped our hands one against the other; this made it laugh. It had all of its immensity on its side, it was holding it in reserve in the breezes and the powder, between the trees and on the mountain, very far to the north in the Baltic or the Norwegian Sea.

Often, winter calls us to order, it sweeps its broom wide, shakes the roof, makes the beeches tremble, freezes the provisions and takes some lives. "If I really get mad, I cut you down. I'm the one who awards the tenures to Madame Life. I think there are a few too many dirty little animals crawling around."

Winter coughs and the earth is full of chilblains.

But on that morning, it was simply blue with cold, transparent as crystal, it resisted nothing and allowed the eyes to run after the light, dive into the distance, lose themselves, play in the infinite, get out of breath and never want to return. It had even erased the horizon, it was the sky in its entirety, a sky translucent to all the matters and to all the forms. Whiteness and cold waltzed everywhere in the absolute immobility of its humor.

Anyone at all who responded to its invitation, would have let himself be enchanted by it, would have walked in its skirts, slid on its lakes, stepped aboard one of its great sailing ships in the sky and disappeared in its cold. We in our houses were like fishermen clinging to the masts of their boat, all was immense around us, without limit, and we were confined on the surface of a

few warm ells surrounding the hearth. A hearth is a ship lost at sea.

But no one escapes winter. It passes through stone walls. As long as it restrains itself, we live.

I watched it. I knew very well that it was making fun of us. It was everything, we were nothing, a puny little invention of life. Bareskinned animals, what an idea!

I lit the fire, it didn't sputter in the chimney; I went to look for what was needed, it let me do it; it hadn't spoiled the vegetables in the root cellar, it had preserved our meats. Thank you, good giant!

I sensed that it was indifferent to all my attempts at manipulation. It had its law and, according to its law, it didn't have to concern itself with us, we weren't its business. It simply had to call us to order from time to time, keep us awake and respectful, it simply had to press death against us a little so that death would keep us alive.

"It all depends," it mockingly repeated. "It all depends on me."

It was, then, a cold morning. Beatrice was wrapping Benoit in his swaddling clothes, she was looking at him, and he was looking at her. She caressed his lips and slipped a finger into his mouth. He sucked and squirmed. His belly became like a knot. She opened her bodice, he seized the nipple and the knot loosened as he siphoned the precious liquid.

Why is the substance our lives require always outside of our body?

When Benoit was on his maman's chest, he wasn't able to sleep. He only thought of breasts and milk, he only thought of his maman's seductive eyes, of her mocking smile, of the games of coming near and going away. I took him, I rolled him up in a woolen shawl, I held him on my chest and he went to sleep.

She was his place for waking, I was his place for sleeping.

This was how the maternal clock had won me over. Five times a day, two times a night, he shook the screaming bell of his throat and got us moving. Beatrice had a little fun at his expense in order to wake him up, stimulate him, and light sparks in his eyes, and then she filled him like a gourd. She patted him to make him burp. He regurgitated like a drunkard.

She gave him to me. I swaddled him and he fell asleep. He let us live a little, sometimes sleep, and then resumed his tyranny.

Since he depended on Beatrice absolutely, he made her totally depend on him. He drew his vital substance from Beatrice's breast; she drew her maternal substance from Benoit's eyes. I was the distancer: without me, I think they would have melted into each other like the sky and the sea in a storm.

What a clock!

Passage from sleep to waking, from knowledge to ignorance, from abandon to consciousness. We were sailors, sometimes on the sea and sometimes in it.

Since our clock was beyond any control, it led us into the intemporality of life's secret rhythm. By what miracle does repetition make consciousness giddy? By what miracle does abandon dissolve consciousness into another kind of consciousness, a consciousness stuffed with knowledge? I don't know.

But, swept away in my clock, what I did was appropriate. I felt as if I were spinning life like a wheel spins wool. Benoit grew bigger and was getting stronger. The screaming clock did not let time escape. At a certain point, we were drunk from lack of sleep, or rather sleep and waking were mixed together and we acted mechanically like windmills, moved by the breath, without the slightest capacity to resist it.

Depending constitutes the simple and prime reality of each one of us. We draw our substance from outside ourselves, that's all there is to say.

Maternity is nothing but existence itself, the transfusion characteristic of life, the clock that is needed to engulf us in life once again.

We are fragile! Terribly fragile.

Unbearable fragility of breath. We have taken on life on an earth we depend on forever.

The screaming bell rang, Benoit sucked, the candle swayed, the cold retreated, and life continued.

On that day, the maternal clock was neither one brief second fast nor one brief second slow, for we no longer had any other clock. The day was totally ritualized. The family monastery cooed like a psalm, so that the mind escaped like a peasant escapes in the furrow of his field, called by the evening's dying sun.

The blind man sees for the first time that he has inhabited from the beginning the Kingdom of magic. The baby who leads Nicodemus back to the maternal womb.

The womb resembles a half-sphere, a full moon in a constellation it eclipses, a dome and perhaps the Dome. The baby approaches it and then goes away from it, sucks his life directly from his mother's life, and then it is the battle of digestion. The belly hardens, tenses, stretches, and acids inflame the milk. Horrendous battle. Everything occurs between the mouth and the anus and when the suckling child has conquered, he falls asleep like a knight after a joust.

The mother, exhausted, with rings under her eyes, her stomach hollow, is dying of thirst. The cow's milk is resting on the table; she strains it and drinks it. She gulps down a soup and devours some porridge. She falls, exhausted.

The screaming bell rings and everything begins all over again.

Depend. Verb to which it is so difficult to consent.

Having a baby is sufficient to make us understand our childlike state of permanent dependence. All our needs have answers outside of us. Is it possible

to say more?

Our existence is summed up in the act of drinking light either directly or indirectly. We don't have the slightest autonomy, except in the mental world in which we reverse everything, to the point where if this mental world were to find powerful instruments of action, it would destroy all life for the sole end of proving its independence!

Everything comes to us from outside. We have been drawn out of nothingness by a cause that was not us. Is it possible to say more?

For a long time I did not want to be dependent. We enter the Kingdom the day when we lose all illusion of sovereignty. I didn't want to be Benoit on Beatrice's breast. I didn't want to be a little one on his mother. I believe I had invested all my civilization, my culture, my reason, my struggle in this.

Like a knight, I had wanted to test my spiritual independence, prove to myself that my soul was capable of floating over my body and that it could face God as one faces a father. I was quite willing to beg for a father's pity but not for a mother's very substance. My religion had been constructed as a weaning. The weaning was only symbolic, the child deprived of his dependence believes that he is god, and, believing that he is god over all, he, dying with anxiety, goes to serve an Emperor, a Pope, or an Inquisitor. He starts to hunt down femininity in every nook and cranny of the world and destroys the earth that feeds him.

I was this way less and less, but still a little until this ordinary day in Benoit's first months.

That morning, the sky was blue. The icy winter had crystallized all its humidity and the air was more transparent than a diamond. The view embraced infinity and all the circle of reality was not and could not be anything but a maternal breast feeding me in every way.

And I liked that. For the first time, I wanted to be that child lost in that giant mother.

I admit it, I still am trembling: do we have any conception of having a mother like that, so big, so immense that, without light and transparency, it would not be possible to have the slightest idea of its starry dimensions! It made itself transparent so that we could suffocate in its immensity.

I went outdoors to cut wood. The snow absorbed my steps in a rustling repetitive as breathing. I didn't want to stop walking, for I wanted so much to hear and hear again the snow reverberate the sound of my steps on the soft skin of its drum.

I felt as if I were taking my first steps outside, in a world that I finally accepted, that I wanted to explore, to which I wanted to give myself.

-Maman, I cried, weeping.

I tripped on a stump and fell in the snow.

By I don't know what instinct, I cleared the snow from a circle of soil. There

were small stones, dead leaves, and a little mole hole. I heard a deep exhaling behind me. It was Becassine. Husdent was standing a little further off, dazed.

Ignorant me, I belonged to knowledge in spite of myself.

I had lived for four seasons in the land of Becassine, my dog and our two cows, twelve months on the maternal earth to the rhythm of the maternal sundial. I didn't want anything else. I knew that I had entered eternity.

I was on the roof. And I watched the world unroll its eternity in the multiplicity of forms. I stayed on the roof. I see this clearly today as I reassemble my life before my eyes. The one who struggles in his destiny has never been able to leave my smile. The eye hung on the vault is mine, and it enjoys all of the earth's children.

It is no use saying that the starry sky is an extremely vast sphere with a thousand houses, that up there beings lighter than ourselves dance more lightly than we on a snow less cold than ours, it is no use saying it, but while we speak, everywhere where there are living beings, these living beings awaken one day or another in Becassine's cosmos. They open their eyes, look all around the firmament, and they depend.

No matter the revolt of their souls, their beliefs, their thoughts, their religion, their distractions, they will perceive in the end that they drink and eat little pieces of the world that envelops them. They will perceive in the end that they are simply puddles of time since their eyes are immense drinkers of space.

When a man sees the eyes of his wife disappear in the eyes of his child, he knows that he will forever remain outside, on the roof of his house. It is a great opportunity to look.

Woman is almost entirely submerged in knowledge; man stands outside and looks, with all the worry of his ignorance. And then, he supposes he is there, beside that woman. He shivers with happiness. He can at last savor his fate as eternal voyeur.

I will be the nest. I will be the worker. I will go to light the fire early in the morning and bring you the milk from my cow, I will make the porridge, I will be the breast that feeds your breast.

I will take you in my arms when you cry, I will caress your worn-out body, I will give you the vigor that you inspire in me, and when we are tired, we will sleep together in peace.

I had arrived.

It would have been the normal thing to stop my story here, to stop it in the perpetual re-beginning of this chapter of my life.

It would have been right to leave it at that.

In the inner courtyard of the Saint Jacques convent, in the pulsing light of my pains, I hesitate to continue my account. I would like to stop there, around this bell-shaped landscape, I would like to never leave the roof where I was perched

since the beginning of the world. The future of this story no longer interests me. It is, however, on this impossibility of closing my story here that the greatest mystery of beguine life rests, the quintessence of love: it is not eternity that transcends time, it is time that transcends eternity, and time sweeps us away..

The Accusation

Three weeks after Easter a document arrived. Marguerite was summoned to the Brussels beguinage. The paragraph was so short, the paper so large that our minds began to wander, worried, frantic and nearly terrified by the words "summons to come before the beguinage assembly". Something serious had happened, something that couldn't be written, but that we were supposed to guess.

For my part, I was persuaded that it had to do with a letter intended for several people, copied at least four or five times and mandating irreproachable and competent persons to come before the assembly, for an important consultation, no doubt. A decision had to be made, and it probably called into question both the spirit and the future of the beguinages. It very likely had to do with a kind of special chapter or, at the very least, with a consultation on a crucial article of the regulations. This plenary meeting was supposed to take place on the seventh of April, in the great common room, before the hour of Vespers. There, those invited would be informed of the subject of the discussion, which must not be divulged because it touched upon a more or less secret part of the beguinage's work... I speculated out loud in front of Beatrice and Marguerite.

Beatrice was gripped by a kind of stupor, and couldn't manage to get out of it. Marguerite remained speechless, her eyes fixed on the clearly inappropriate word: "summons". Perhaps, deep down, I too had taken notice of the abyss in that word! I decided, against her advice and in spite of Beatrice's tears, to accompany her to Brussels. A cleric familiar with civil and canon laws and precise formulations could be useful, if only to ensure the correctness of the vocabulary. And then, there were the dangers of the road... Finally, we had to think about transporting our alimentary contribution of several cheeses that it would doubtless be advisable to bring along on the same trip...

In the wee hours of the morning, I kissed Beatrice, Maiffe and Benoit. A distracted goodbye. I was absorbed by worry about this affair. A painful leave-taking: Beatrice looked at us as if the world was going to fall on her head. Marguerite, for her part, had gotten up in a good mood, lighthearted, determined. If, by some chance, the beguinage was indeed preparing to criticize one point or another of her numerous counsels, she was completely open to discussion...

She hugged Beatrice for a long interval, manifesting a gaiety that was a little nervous, but sincere. She reassured her, quieted Benoit, and ran around the table to catch Maiffe who refused to bid adieu. In the stable, while I was checking Becassine's load, she even kissed the shiny noses of our two cows, laughing all the while. She didn't want to leave until Beatrice began to smile again and she had Maiffe's consent.

An interminable departure that I barely remember, for I didn't get out of my

worries. Marguerite was taking everyone's happy face with her.

I was mistaken from start to finish, and Marguerite, too. She alone had been summoned, and that word was not strong enough. The common room sparkled with a spring light dancing on the waxed wooden floor. The Bloemardine family, their advisers, the representatives of the beguinage, the officers, the highly reputed associates, thirty to forty people in all, remained seated, stiff, silent, austere beneath the windows, in a shade that excluded the April sun. Ghosts behind a bridal veil, one might have said.

The looks slid along the floor, ran away and rippled in the blond wood. I recognized the twins' father-in-law among those assembled. He emerged from the shadows for a moment, threw me a defiant look, turned his severe eyes on Marguerite and retreated into the darkness. He wanted to make us understand, proudly, that he was not disinterested in this convocation...

I understood that the decision had been taken. What decision? We didn't know it, but it was palpable in the piercing light that streamed on the accusers.

When we took our first steps to approach the great capitular table, Heilwige stood up, came toward us and kissed us warmly, trying to lighten the moment, but her voice betrayed her emotion and her hands around our hands left us with a feeling of dampness and cold.

A knight dressed in the French manner remained standing behind the table. Heilwige resumed her place at his side and invited Marguerite to sit on the armchair that faced the table. A single chair. I went forward to stay by her side. Straight as a die before the knight who faced me, I scrutinized my counterpart's face as much from defiance as from intrigue... They left me at Marguerite's side.

It wasn't difficult to make the connection between the look the twins' father-in-law had cast at me and the presence of the knight.

Heilwige solemnly sat down facing Marguerite on a small throne of scarlet leather. No sooner had she touched the chair, than her face became impassive.

Marguerite couldn't contain herself:

-What a reception for a little peasant woman! she said, laughing.

-Woman cleric, Heilwige slowly and calmly replied. You are a woman cleric and much more educated than any of us. But above all, you are considered by many women and men to be the spiritual master of the beguines. Aren't you that?

A witness remaining in the shadows, whose voice I didn't recognize, read a certain number of extracts from letters coming from many Grand Maidens that testified to their gratitude for counsels received from the "holy" lady Porete. I didn't understand this act at all. Why this reading full of compliments? Why this manner of publicly confirming a fact known in all the beguine world?

The raw woollens that clothed Marguerite reflected the increasingly sharp

sunbeams entering the room. The spiritual leader did not arise and answered simply:

-You are crowning me Mistress, but to what end? If I understand correctly, we are here in special chapter, my friend and dear sister, and you want my advice on a decision that displeases you...

-That displeases me more than anything in the world, Heilwige insisted.

-Tell me the gravity of the charges, Marguerite requested.

-Lady Odile... Heilwige began, hesitantly.

-The mother of our adopted daughter Maiffe! Marguerite exclaimed.

-Yes, Maiffe's mother, Heilwige specified, has finally been burnt alive in front of the Valenciennes City Hall, accused by the beguinage and holding your Mirror on her heart.

Marguerite all at once became mute, stunned. I myself was torn by a thousand horrific and contradictory emotions. Our child's mother's horrible, terrible fate. Relief for a woman who had so long rotted in a ghastly dungeon.

Crossing of the ways or a horrible omen, I did not know. But there was so much more, so much worse: "accused by the beguinage". The outrageousness of these four words brought me out of my astonishment.

An amazing silence and calm took hold in my mind as if my heart had petrified itself in order to free up my thinking. I took over for Marguerite who was still dumbstruck.

-Accused by the beguinage, you say, is that a crime?

The knight took one step toward her. Lady Bloemardine motioned for him to speak and he complied:

-I have just now arrived from Avignon, dear friends, His Holiness Clement V, our revered Pope, has finally decided to grant Philip the Fair the condemnation for infamy of the whole of the order of Templars in all lands of the West and of the East, and in the same breath, he decided the fate of the beguines. The case is closed: they will be formally accused of heresy. All beguinages, beguines and beguards of every allegiance will be anathematized. An ecumenical council will soon be convoked to produce the two decrees of condemnation and draft the bulls necessary for their execution. The king and the pope agreed. The punishment, at Valenciennes, of Odile de Charon has served, in this matter, as an example and as a warning...

-But we are not an order, I protested spontaneously, not even an organization living under the same statutes, the same vocation, with common regulations. "Beguine" is only a vague word used by the people who don't know us, a word that covers all sorts of ways of life going from the Third Order to pious women...

-That is just what they criticize you for, the knight replied. Christianity does

not allow for "all sorts of ways of life". There are only two possible statuses for women, the religious orders with their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience which, of course, must remain under the protection and governance of a male order, and marriage, which subjects the woman to her husband...

As I heard the knight's voice, I had a vague feeling of *deja vu*. Then, suddenly, I recognized him. He was a former member of the Inquisition, a spy who couldn't be equaled. Here he was now selling information in the camp of the alleged "heretics"! I had better be careful.

I continued to plead the legal impossibility of combining the *beguinages* and even more so the *beguines* and *beghards* outside the walls into one entity liable to be condemned as a whole. Women had even so the right to not marry or not enclose themselves in a cloister since no law obligated them to dedicate themselves to a religious order or to a husband. It was quite simply a legislative outrage. Obviously, all unmarried women remained under the governance of their families represented, as it should be, by a male head. All the *beguinages* respected law and order, at least officially...

I pleaded, but I didn't grasp the importance accorded Marguerite's case in this affair, nor the reasons for her strange coronation which seemed to incriminate all the *beguine* movement.

The knight let me beat around the bush for a few minutes, then raised his finger and said:

-I have evidence to the contrary. On the one hand, Odile de Charon demonstrated all during her confession, naively and spontaneously, that Marguerite was considered to be the spiritual master of the *beguines* and *beghards*, and on the other hand, evidence, in the form of letters and testimonies, has been brought to the bishop of Brussels, to the effect that your protegee, Marguerite Porete, has participated in the abduction of two twin girls married fraudulently...

-You are omitting two things that are capital here, I shot back, first, that my protegee, as you call her, attests in Chapter 122 of her *Mirror*, I am quoting from memory: "The *beguines* declare that I am lost"... This is compatible neither with the idea that she is spiritual master of the *beguines*, nor with the idea that the *beguines* are a coherent entity. Secondly, you avoid saying that the twins you are speaking of were daughters of a family declared to be heretic. Should they obey their parents and become heretics themselves? I believe that you have been badly informed.

-Don't talk foolishness, Monsieur de Cressonaert. For one thing, the walled *beguinages* are practically federated. Almost all of them form a legal, economic and vocational entity, and they are for the most part placed under the protection of Dominicans, Franciscans, Norbertans or Cistercians. Protection which they don't respect, because they receive their counsel from elsewhere, from their spiritual mistress. Nonetheless, this protection is part of their statutes, and their statutes make them an order which is defined, and as discernable as that of the

Templars. Moreover, any child of heretics should leave it in the hands of his bishop, in this case, the bishop of Cambrai, for an official dispensation. Which has not been done.

-Your first point, I answered a little nervously, concerns a few beguinages in Alsace that are put in the same category as a third order. They are a minority. As for the rest, all the women, even those they call Free Spirit, are subject to their families, as is demonstrated by the presence here of the most honorable Bloemardine family. As to the second point which concerns the diocese of Cambrai's dispensation, it was not necessary since the bishop of Brussels did not judge it necessary! Monsieur, you have come here to inform us. So then, just tell us how the holy Inquisition can lump into a single movement persons of different nationalities, different customs, different thinking, who are as Christian as you and I, and respect the Catholic and civil laws in all their practices? This is only a subterfuge to spare the expense of individual trials...

-You ought to know it better than anyone, Monsieur, you yourself have copied the Mirror of Simple Souls five times rather than just once...

-Four times, I replied. Four. But what does that have to do with it?

-The Mirror, dear friend, has been recognized by the pope as presenting the doctrine of the beguinage. And several people here can confirm its influence; numerous letters tell a great deal about the authority that is given to the woman and to her book. Odile related in great detail how this book had influenced her, how it had changed her life, how she acknowledged that she was "more Christian" after she had read and studied The Mirror; it was her "manual of salvation"! The Inquisition disposes of several other testimonies just as eloquent. But, you are right, I am not here to condemn anyone at all, on the contrary, I am sharing with you precise information that can save the life and the work of the great beguinage of Brussels. Whether it pleases you or not, The Mirror, which has made its author a relapsed heretic, has been seized by Philippe de Marigny, the new bishop of Cambrai, who has referred the matter to the Inquisition of Haute-Lorraine sitting in Paris, which submitted it to a committee of twenty-one theologians of the University of Paris. The pope has already determined that The Mirror represented the basis of the beguinage so perfectly well that its condemnation will be, in the same breath, the condemnation of all the beguines...

Philippe de Marigny... The name resonated in my head. I was seized by the same nausea that had overcome me in the past. Instinctively, I turned toward Marguerite.

The little woman appeared crushed, aged, trembling; her hands remained clenched on the sculpted armrests of her chair; her legs, too short, swung like pendulums; her respiration was panting...

I thought she was going to faint. The silence stunned everyone. The light restrained its movement. Not the smallest grain of dust dared to move, the fibers of Marguerite's woollens remained frozen...

For a moment, nothing stirred. Locked in their bout of arm-wrestling, heaven and hell stayed fixed. The cogs of time were stuck.

Finally Marguerite swallowed and inhaled. I heard her feet slide a moment on the hem of her robe, she firmly pressed her hands on both arms of her chair and stood up straight and firm, her face returned to its eternal childhood:

-I have delivered, Monsieur, only my best counsels in the simple light of my experience, and I have done it for all those, men and women, married, monks or non-monks who want to fully live the Gospel...

-That's just it...

-Be quiet. You misrepresent the meaning of my text if you make out that it advises insubordination. The Prologue of the Mirror begins with these words: "The soul, touched by God..." the soul, as the Gospel so well says it, is neither married nor single, it is quite simply not subject to the social mores of this passing world that already are outmoded. The Mirror is addressed to souls...

-Madame, the knight repeated, I have not come to condemn you, I have come to inform the most influential beguine in the land of the danger that threatens it.

Marguerite then turned toward those in attendance and began to recite the explanation she had had me add to the last copies of the Mirror as a measure of precaution:

-"You who will read this book, you must take it in the humility in which it has been written. You theologians and other learned men will not understand it if you do not place Love above Reason. Reason has no reasons other than Love. Put all your trust in your intelligence in exactly the measure that it is given to Love. And thus, you will understand this book which, by Love, makes the Soul live..."

-There, alas, Madame, is what condemns your book and in the same breath condemns the beguines' doctrine, the knight riposted. You let it be understood that there is something that surpasses the canons of the Church...

-That is necessary, Marguerite replied, if not, faith would only be submission.

-It is only submission, Madame, do you doubt that?

-It doesn't have to be...

Marguerite stopped short. She looked at each one present one by one, even to the point of staring at Heilwige... Then, all became clear in her mind:

-Now, I have understood. Forgive me... My words are not for you, I see it clearly, who can understand them? I am placing you in danger, I have written to souls, and souls are, even here, buried in fear... Now all that I have written can only be poured out drop by drop in the intimacy of those who will escape that fear...

Heilwige's eyelids quavered. The Grand Maiden of the place arose:

-As for Brussels, we met officially in extraordinary chapter this very day, and

reaffirmed, unanimously, that it is not possible to uphold the existence of a great evangelical Church wider and more inclusive than the official Church of the assembly of bishops, that which pardons all confessed sins and opens its arms to repentant heretics. We have then reiterated our complete submission to our pastor and bishop of Brussels, and we consider your book, Madame, as a sincere, but erroneous deviation and we ask you to surrender yourself to the holy Inquisition to recognize your faults and advise all the beguinages to dissociate themselves from your counsels. As for the marriage of the twins you have entrusted to us, it remains valid in return for a financial compensation...

Despite my terror, and perhaps because of my terror, I noted that Heilwige had not spoken directly of a submission to the pope, but only to the bishop... The Bloemardine family had kept, then, the confidence of its pastor who was skilfully maneuvering to safeguard his fragile independence. The play-acting of this special chapter was intended to convince the French knight that Brussels didn't need the Inquisition to get rid of heretics. Over and above the "financial compensation", the price to pay was Marguerite, the stranger from Valenciennes, who didn't stay very long behind the walls of the beguinage and who was living without place, or permission, or passport, or status, in the anonymity of the peasantry.

Marguerite grew bold:

-I accept the verdict of the authorities of the beguinage of Brussels. In this world I have been no more than a poor woman who has never stayed under the same roof longer than a sparrow in its nest. That is surely what I am: a sparrow and not a spiritual leader. I am leaving Brussels this very day to surrender myself to the justice of the Church.

She turned and dashed out of the room, so hastily that she did not see the look of the twins' father-in-law, a look that grimaced with satisfaction.

The Dark Night

Marguerite ran through the streets of Brussels, the evening wind swirling around her. Her skirt stirred up the straw that had just been spread on the streets. The setting sun cast its scarlet light on her as she went to the right, to the left, to the north, to the south, then took a westerly direction, the opposite way from the farm, the road to Valenciennes. Crazy with pain, ready to surrender to the authorities...

I followed her, trying to regain my spirits. She must not give in to that fate the French knight had sketched out for her as a kind of trap. There were other paths, there must be other paths...

-Marguerite, I cried as the sky already darkened the forest, let's return to the farm and flee together to Bruges. The Inquisition doesn't need you. Let's disappear in Bruges.

She turned around. Her childlike face, her smile, always so discreet, so gentle, so tender, all this erupted in a terrible anger.

-You don't understand, Guion. It's all over for me. I won't put other beguinages in danger. I order you to return to Beatrice. Take my daughter and the children to Bruges. I order you to leave immediately, to let all Brussels know that you have renounced and abandoned me. I beg of you, Guion, save my daughter, save my grandchildren...

Breaking down in tears, she transformed me into marble... And this marble fell on its knees and cried. I was lost. My heart wanted to run to the east, arrive at the farm in the morning, throw myself weeping into Beatrice's arms, inform her that Marguerite had been attacked by wolves, that she had died on the road, had been buried, that all was finished, that life could resume as before, sad, but blessed.

Devoured by wolves... That would have been such a beautiful ending! I myself would have had to have been the fangs of a wolf, my knife would have had to serve mercy and pierce the heart of the saint. But my conscience prevented me from acting. I would have had to abandon her, save my skin, run to a mountaintop, leave this cursed earth on a beam of moonlight...

I was unable to take my eyes off Marguerite's blazing look. I couldn't abandon the mother to save the daughter. Moreover, I knew deep down that Beatrice was not in danger. Heilwige herself would guarantee that she could flee in safety. This was very evident to me. Alas! It was also very evident to me that I should stay close to Marguerite. I didn't have the smallest excuse. Faced with my conscience, my reason couldn't do a thing...

Alone in the night, betrayed and denied, become for all the worst kind of leper, the leper of the spirit, Marguerite was more than destroyed, she had been transformed into a scapegoat. The beguines were obligated to sacrifice her in

order to continue their work. Every refuge was closed to her. It was right that one woman die in order to save the others!

It wasn't possible for the spiritual master of the beguines to ask for even the slightest aid, thus putting in danger the work that had been begun with such difficulty more than a century before her, that had required the sacrifice of so many women, some drowned, the others thrown into the dungeon or burned alive on a public square!

Sometimes one person must be delivered up in order to deliver the others. Heilwige cut out her heart to execute the order that Marguerite would have certainly given her if she had been informed. The spiritual head of the beguines took upon herself the inevitability of the sacrifice so that others might escape.

I had to find a path to safety. There had to be a road, a passage, a way out...

Can you imagine the fate of that woman, condemned now, transformed now into a genuine calamity for all around her by the simple fact of being made anathema before any trial? To have no place to go, no possible friend, no conceivable refuge, to know that your very presence endangers anyone who would dare look at you. To go along the roads, to fall over from exhaustion from bush to bush, to go to pieces bit by bit on every thorn of calumny, hatred, and scorn elevated to a religious duty... To know that you are more contagious than a victim of the plague, more dangerous than a forest fire, more harmful than a gang of hooligans. To be, by your very existence, a sentence to the dungeon for anyone who approaches... Could there be any fate more tragic? To have been designated a servant of the devil and to deserve as a matter of course all the resentment of the fearing man... Now, she will go along the roads like the Grim Reaper herself, sentencing to imprisonment or torture all souls inclined to pity.

For her, from now on every road would lead to Paris, even flight would lead to the Place de Greve; all was a time of suffering preparing the final suffering: The one who denounced her would be rewarded on earth as in Heaven! The one who led her to the executioner would wipe his own sins clean! The one who hesitated to denounce her would be punishable by death! The one who, in an act of natural compassion, gave her a little food or water would be accused of conspiring with the devil! At the end of the road: the implacable Philippe de Marigny, the monstrous brother William...

What was one woman in the face of so much power, so much canonical certainty and the complete submission of all consciences to fear! Evil, absolute evil, is a conception of good that has lost contact with the concrete suffering it produces...

-Go away, she repeated, no one can do anything more for me, now my road is as straight and sharp as the blade of a sword. My freedom doesn't have the slightest bit of deviation anymore. Can you understand that!

It was impossible for me to obey without being transformed into a traitor, a traitor who would never be able to approach his wife, his children, and even

less, himself. I no longer had access to my life: if I returned, it would no longer be I who kissed Beatrice, but Judas. I too had been freed from any possible deviation.

The stroke of an axe had broken the vital cord that connected me to my life, to my happiness and even to my duties. I could do no more than merrily slide along the thread of my freedom. Yes, sometimes two people are totally entwined in the same freedom following a law above all the laws of physics and psychology: when God is rejected, it is up to man to replace Him. Man is God's subsidiary. To the question of Jesus on the cross: "Father, why have you forsaken me?" Mary Magdalene responded: present. There is no other answer. Only a stative verb can reverse the thousand evasions that impede our implacable freedom.

In the rivalry for mercy between God and man, it is always man who should carry the day. Such is love's vocation: to reveal to God His hidden part in man. Such is the meaning of Marguerite's words: "I love more what in Him is beyond my understanding than what in Him is within my understanding, for there where what surpasses me in my love is, there is what surpasses me in my treasure. The god of the little churches fades away in the Love of which I am made capable, such is the deity in its deepest human depths."

My own presence, wandering around me, condensed in the terror of the moment. The presence within me that was beyond my understanding perfectly understood its freedom, the road to its realization. Nothing can hold unhappiness back, but something should contain it, collect it, so as to testify, against the god men have invented, of the Love that emerges from a human heart. Jesus the Son of Man testifies every day against Yahweh. Love was going to prove itself more divine than the gods of power, and I was going to be its action.

For that moment, my presence did condense around me. I saw in it sacred being, I saw Guion the unknowable stand up before the holy woman, I saw that his act of presence became his only reason for being. The good, the sincere good, consists of recognizing oneself in the concrete suffering of those near us. All that I had been dissolved in that presence. It thrust itself upon me, I could not be other than this presence. And my presence thus condensed could no longer distance itself from the little woman who had just been cursed. It was my freedom.

This was my first spiritual vision. When I opened my eyes, the night's foggy garment had been torn, and a few stars penetrated the darkness... Marguerite was no longer there.

I walked, I ran. By I don't know what miracle, my steps found their way through the tatters of the blackness. The bushes tore my clothing, but the road sucked me forward in its macabre shroud. By an inexorable spell, I was chained to Marguerite.

I soon caught up with her. She was sobbing at the foot of a gigantic tree with

low and knotted branches. She was curled up, immobile, shivering. In the darkness, the wool of her garment resembled a fur. For a moment, I mistook her for a dying little animal. From where I stood, she looked like a squirrel fallen from its nest...

The image forced a sign out of my memory.

I put my hand on her shoulder.

-Let me be, she said.

The blackness stifled the final remains of a star. The foggy night confined us in its coal mine. Only the sound of our breathing connected us.

The necessity of the divine in the face of absolute evil, that necessity that surely must be named "deity", was writing our lives in impenetrability: Marguerite would go to Valenciennes, she would demand that the Grand Maiden call an extraordinary chapter so that the beguines' hospital could distance itself from the Mirror, which from then on could only address hearts in private. And then she would go to Paris, not to defend herself, but to direct the demons' hatred toward her and so avoid a general slaughter. The spiritual vision of my freedom had faded. I didn't want to hear anything anymore...

-Let's let the world take care of itself, I told her.

The silence had no need for my words. Marguerite remained crouched like a little squirrel run over by a wagon, but I knew, alas! three times alas! that she was going to arise again and go her way right to the furthest reaches of her earthly existence, right to the horizon with no horizon, and I had embarked with her on this leaky rowboat that would never be able to return to port. My "goodbye" to Beatrice had been an adieu...

-You can't do that, you can't, I repeated to her.

She burst out in sobs.

Had it been possible to weep blood, she would have wept blood; had it been possible to sweat blood, she would have sweated blood. Anguish strangled her suffering. Her suffering touched the absolute, and I, I was on the other side; I saw it clearly, I was appalled, but I was on the other side that could not attain, nor even think or imagine, the weight she was bearing.

This silence lasted forever.

The night should have extended forever. The night should have once and for all devoured every form of light and of time. We were under the swinging sword of Damocles. All things would have had to stop, and the lethal pendulum would no longer have let its saber slide over us. The pendulum's cable would have had to let its sword fall all at once... But what would eternity be if time did not produce its act...

A pale light lifted the horizon. A morning dared, once more, to enter the vanity of the world.

-Guion, she said at last, you haven't slept, you have stayed awake with me. I carry you with me in my heart. Now, go away. I don't need you any more. You have done what you should have.

I got up, turned around, walked toward the rising sun, ran even, but I hadn't reached the top of a little hill before I abruptly turned around and cried:

-No one can deliver me, no one, not even you.

-You don't understand, she repeated. All is finished. I no longer live under the law of the world, I no longer live under the law of the will to live, nor even under that of the power to live, I do not live under the mode of the will to die either, nor of the power to die. I am moved by something that I do not know, and that surpasses me. My life, my thoughts, my imagination are strangers to me. Something I do not know has taken hold of me. My way is not your way. No one can follow me where I am going, not even me; no one should follow me where I am going, not even me. I died here tonight, in your presence, and another is arising and going away to accomplish a work beyond her understanding. Don't get involved in this. I am not getting involved in this myself. Go away, I don't want my grandchildren to lose their father and their grandmother at the same time.

Her childlike face was looking at me. Her eyes had darkened, a glint of light gave her flesh a rosy cast, a thread of silk shone upon her cheek, and I clearly saw the woman emerging from the child and the child emerging from the woman, but I could no longer distinguish the end from the beginning; time had stood up straight, infinitely thin, perpendicular to the destiny of the world, pointing toward I know not what alarming thing that the sky did not yet show.

And then, suddenly, my fate, which had always inhabited the top of this dark point, of this timeless verticality, fell in on me: I was not a man destined to live and die, I was not a saint destined to achieve what is and forever will be above our gods, I was a witness, a simple witness, a memory, a time around time, another kind of time, of pure duration becoming filled with time, of potter's clay around a form which must be forever fixed in the collective memory. I had been created to witness just as the clay witnesses to the living beings that it covers.

-Your grandchildren's father will tell their grandmother's story, I answered her. I cannot avoid this fate without denying myself. I am your witness.

The skin of her face became like a peach powdered by the morning light. The corners of her mouth pointed upward. An inexpressible happiness had just passed through the anguish. We were tied one to the other like flesh and bone.

It is possible to be resurrected before dying; this is all of the mystery that had to be decided starting from that day.

The journey that was supposed to lead us to Valenciennes never seemed to end. Marguerite found paths that went up to the north, went down to the south and from meander to meander led us to the west; paths of herbivores that avoided man and wolf, drew close to watering places, connected clearings, wandered off

to the ends of territories, were lost, began again a little further on for another herd that likewise grazed and advanced in a westerly direction. A way of traveling she had always known. She had given up her nose to the sense of smell, her ears to hearing, her eyes to tracking, her legs to necessity, her head to the fog. We were roaming animals and, like all life, we were lengthening our journey toward death.

Wander here and wander there, gain time, kill time, conquer time, finally sit in the saddle of time and race into the abyss; we had returned to the customary itinerary of all life. We had forgotten for a moment that the world belongs to death. In a single day, that illusion had crumbled.

The Inquisition, death's eternal Inquisition, interrogates life like a sorcerer interrogates the entrails of an ox. Death was questioning us: "Where are you going? What are you doing? Why are you moving about so restlessly? Why are you running away from me? Don't you know you are living between my paws!"

To zigzag like a deer in the forest, sink into suffocating quicksand, get lost in limestone caverns, vanish a few brief moments in a perfume aspired toward the heights, and then fall down again into the torment of a flight in the threat's direction: we shared again the fate of mortals strolling and staggering in the tightening of death's paws.

In the hollows of the valleys, the deepest reaches of the forest, always as low as possible, universal destiny's inexorable hand was closing. It was impossible for us to distract that hand. The convulsion of a woman falling on her knees, the trance of horror, the outburst of laughter from a heart grown cynical, the gnashing of teeth of frightened flesh, nothing disturbed its task.

Silence worked in a state of absolute concentration.

From our birth on, time spins its linen fabric. At the moment when we become of age to see it, it has already meticulously moved its cloth forward in the loom. It has woven it out of hope, love, beauty, goodness and trials. It has worked gently.

I unrolled its silent work in my memory: a long, warm and sensual veil, the skin of Beatrice and the children, the fields of wheat and Becassine's fur, the river and the hot soup from our vegetables... And the fatal day of the condemnation at Brussels. The cloth had received its final touches in the long flight in the forest. It was finished. I had finished my life. It was in front of me like a sheet, perfectly monotonous...

And now, silence enveloped us with this past, strip by strip, like an embalmer, adding creams and ointments. We were no longer living a life, we were in death's first moments, which consist of being embalmed in our memory. Shroud or cocoon, who can say? Strip of a linen shroud, or fine cotton-silk of a cocoon, who can perceive the difference?

Can we guess the function of the texture of the past?

What had been our world unrolled on us, adhered to us. Soon we would no longer be able to see it; it was no longer anything more than a pressure and a blinding, a nostalgia and a pain, a yoke that hinders the lungs and paralyzes the heart.

This killed so many things, this sacrificed so many things, this cut so many vital relations. The heart was no more, from now on, than an altar.

One night, I awakened in a cold sweat. I was completely shut up in a box. The darkness and silence were absolute. It seemed to me that all the infinity, all, absolutely all the interminable infinity of space and time, below, above, behind, in front, on all sides and in every radius, was nothing other than mineral soil and rock... Nothing any longer existed in all the limitless cosmos than this incommensurable mass of earth in whose center a wooden box enclosed the mummy that I was, half conscious and gradually sensing the horror of his condition. My mouth opened, my lungs captured the last gasps of air that remained, the body brought its final forces home to cry out its anguish, but nothing came out of my mouth. Infinite solitude of the last witness of being! Solitude of the last witness of what had been the passage of a narrow shaft of consciousness in the darkness of the Earth. My task was to swallow the final emotion of horrified consciousness imprisoned in the plenitude of death.

I woke up under a starry sky, without the slightest hope of escaping my nightmare alive.

The Inquisition was already doing its work on us. It was setting up death as the only possible object of desire. In the morning, our heads resonated like a bell struck by the hammer. We emerged from our torpor with the daylight. In front of us, a veil of clouds never tired of ending up by drowning in the darkness. Life was dragging its ball and chain in the cracks of matter. After a few days, we were maggots crawling in the center of an earth infinitely enclosed in its own opacity...

Strange, terrible drama of precarious and ephemeral existences...

The Temptation

In the region of Nivelles, as our thoughts were totally lost in the thickness of a silence that pulverized us, having heard nothing, not even the rustling of a branch, we were startled when an old woman seated on a stump called out to us:

-Hey there! Madame Porete, are you going very far like that?

-As far from Brussels as possible, she shot back.

-In that case, you must not know the lady of Brussels yet. Come with me then, there's room for everyone beneath the sky of the grand beguinage of Bloemardine, especially for the most noble among us. The Church of women is as wide and welcoming as the Church of men is small and crushing.

She stifled her laugh, stood up straight on her stick, crossed a thicket and took a footpath that no doubt led to Nivelles. We hesitated to follow her.

-Mordieu! Lady Porete, do you know all the effort we have spent to find you before you leave our bishop's domains? Well, you sure know how to disappear. Never fear, we haven't done this work to leave you with the cursed Inquisition! We'll keep you with us.

She led us into a large stable where women who appeared to be peasants had gathered: their low-cut blouses and coarse wool skirts testified to this, but not their hands. Evening had come. Candles set around a beam lit up their smiling faces. We were taken aback.

-This is not our first resurrection, one of them asserted.

Our faces must have resembled big question marks. They burst out laughing.

-The thing is a little complicated, but the result is certain, another said.

-You are hoping to hide us, I replied, more than skeptical, but that is impossible. No unknown person can suddenly appear in a village without anyone noticing it, not at Nivelles anymore than somewhere else. It is even harder to disappear in the country than in the city. They will look for Marguerite relentlessly, they will pursue her to her death, they will exhume her corpse and burn it at the stake. You know all that. What good would it do to gain a few more months? We must flee to Bruges instead and even farther north.

-There are circumstances that force a miracle, the old woman cheerfully said.

-You're imagining things! I added.

-Don't you know that Madame Porete is our saint! She opened up the Gospel, that had been a closed book for us.

Like Mary Magdalene, she led us to Jesus. The Little Church preserves him like a tombstone, a tombstone we now need to roll aside. For us, Marguerite is

not the Gospel, but the mirror of the Gospel. (Turning toward Marguerite.) We care more for you than for any other woman. How many women and girls have found the way of hope, freedom, and love thanks to your counsels, your letters, your book and your presence! Do you think we are going to abandon you? Heilwige had no choice but to put on that whole production. She needs to find you a place that is sheltered from the Inquisition just as much as she needs to remove you from the surface of the beguinages for the time being.

-Good intentions, but by what means? I asked.

-There! I'll explain it to you, the old woman continued. A combination of surprising circumstances has arisen. Providence has done the work more than we. Upon one of us there fell a fate that seemed cruel, but proved good in the end: one of our women died in childbirth along with her little one. She showed an exemplary courage. Before dying, she volunteered to save you. Her husband accepted her proposition...

It was useless to say any more about it. The rest of it could be guessed. The woman's body would be dressed in Marguerite's clothing, and girded with her purse in which they would find her silver cross. It would be brought along the trail we had followed, to the very spot where the old woman had found us. The wolves would take care of making the body unrecognizable. The Inquisition would be informed of the gruesome discovery. The husband would hide the one called "the saint" in his home. For family reasons, the woman would stay in the house most of the time, taking care of the brood of children and all a humble woman's customary tasks...

I pinched my cheeks. Yes, it was possible. In a village like Nivelles, for isolated peasants in a territory that didn't care much for the papacy, it was possible. For a woman like Marguerite, who knew so well how to disappear, it was possible.

And as for me, I would be useless, in the way, even. I was free, and I could leave. I was going to resume my life, my ever-so-dear life close to Beatrice, my little children, my donkey, my cows, my freedom, my happiness.

The beguinages, the secret networks, the social swamp of the peasantry, the organization, all this was now at the state of maturity. The movement had worked so hard, for so long to open such rifts in the social architecture...

It was now possible for a woman to be resurrected, to take on a new life. We could take advantage of this route. It had been possible for others, and it was possible for us. And I was the only witness, I could leave, I could leave spreading the rumor that wolves had attacked us...

-Don't count on me. Marguerite, after a long silence, came out with this sentence.

Her face grew even softer than usual, but all her fine childlike features began to tremble around her eyes of crystal, only to stiffen progressively. She had made up her mind; this could be seen from the softness of her face from which the last signs of struggle were disappearing.

We were appalled.

-The resurrection that you are proposing for me, she retorted, is quite simply the opposite of a resurrection. You are proposing a life that would kill me. What a person has wrested from despair is not nothing. It is not a pile of garbage that you can throw in a ditch, it is a seed you must take the time to sow in the right place and in the best conditions. I have lived my life, I will live my death. I will not deprive myself of my own death in order to take another one that has no connection with my life.

We were incapable of reacting, or even of uttering the slightest word. Our eyes alone revealed our complete incomprehension. So she continued:

-Don't you understand anything! The Roman Empire crashed down on a little people, the Jews, and the Jewish tradition made the victims bear the guilt of the conquest. Rome's domination was due to their own sins, the sins of the unfaithful Jews! Such was the political function of their religion. The conquerors came out of this transfer of guilt not only blameless, but covered with glory, while those who had submitted bore the shame which made them subject. Sin descended to the bottom of the social scale, and the lowest were the women. Women's sin justified the Roman oppression. There had to be, then, a dramatic act to declare the oppressed innocent. Don't you see that the Gospel consists first of declaring the poor innocent in order to release the world from the madness of submission and power...

We remained as mute as the candles that reddened our faces, for if that had been Christianity's intention, Christianity had failed completely. Nothing had changed save for the fact that the Christian hierarchy had lent a hand to Caesar, Philip the Fair in other words. The High Priest and the emperor had merged, such was the result.

Aware that we hadn't understood, Marguerite went on:

-This Gospel deserves to be upheld. Don't you hear the groaning of the wretched of the earth, of those considered criminal as soon as they are unfaithful to injustice? The adulterous woman was there in front of him, they had sentenced her to stoning... And Jesus was supposed to have left, just like that, he was supposed to have disappeared from the middle of the crowd without saying a word! Oh well! She is still there, that woman, continually stoned for her love's sake and if I, Marguerite, disappeared without lending her assistance, of what use would my life have been? My life would have been no more than a pile of hollow words.

A kind of anger took hold of me.

-But nothing has changed, Marguerite. We are in Caesar's kingdom and the crucified Jesus has himself been transformed into a sign of guilt. Do you want to add to that guilt by your own martyrdom, Marguerite? Every woman will say to herself: "She suffered and died for me. I am a wretched woman. I too ought to suffer." And since each woman crushed by guilt engenders a dominating son, the world will eternally be the prey of tyrants.

-That's surely it, Guion my son-in-law. You're right, as always, in your critical judgement and wrong about the action to be taken. Guion, if the corpse of Christ elevated to a symbol serves the cause of the oppressors, his resurrected and living person feeds the hope that the Kingdom of justice needs. The Kingdom of the resurrected is advancing: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and the women arise...

-So, show us the Son, the old beguine said in an accent half sincere and half sarcastic.

-One morning, when he wasn't yet twelve, he climbed a mountain and saw the weight of the world on all those men and women who took care of life. He saw through my eyes. He saw Caesar the Fair and Clement the High Priest profit from the submission that has become, through religion, the culture of man. And he wept through my eyes. All his teaching has been reversed. And he wept. We were alone on the mountainside. Yes, Madame, I will show you Jesus...

I thought I understood, and made this objection:

-But Marguerite, you can't do anything about it. You know very well that they won't listen to you, that on the contrary they will quite simply push you into the fire...

-What they will do with me is not my business, Guion. My business is to cry: "Women, break your chains."

-Then your death will add to the guilt. Women will have as their model a female sacrifice. On their reredos: on the right the crucified, on the left the woman burned alive...

-You don't understand anything about hope, my son-in-law, my friend. Imagine that these women were not vengeful, but sovereign, happy and aware that life deserves to be carried, nursed, cared for, cultivated... All of this society founded on death would be overthrown and rebuilt on the principles of life.

This time it was the old woman who took over:

-But that's just it, there won't be any two hundred thousand who will follow you to Paris. You will be alone, completely alone and so totally powerless.

-That's precisely why I should go to Paris, because no one else will go. For two hundred thousand women to end up marching on Paris, there must be one, then two, then three, then four marching on Paris one century after the other, without any hope of changing things except in a few people's hearts... Women need a forerunner... Do I have to explain everything? All who are not resurrected in this life cannot march alone on Jerusalem or on Paris...

It was then that I dared to ask this terrible question:

-How do you know that Love has resurrected you? When, faggot by faggot, the stake is set up around you, how will you know that your heart won't falter?

-I don't know, Guion, I don't know. I am not a fanatic who has become certain of immortality. They don't liberate, they kill. It is not a matter of believing in

resurrection instead of death, it is about going to the end of the experience of love. The one who always remains where he is can never know that he will be in a place where he isn't now. The diving bird thinks it is a fish when it is submerged in the water. Sometimes it remains there a long time. Absorbed in pursuing a fish, it forgets its need for air. And then the pain from the lack of it calls it back to the open air. It rises back up. Having regained a foothold on a rock, it allows itself to dry. The air burns its lungs and yet it feels free. Such is the law of love. Love is our need for air. Someone is calling me out of the water.

-Then it is necessary to pass through fear.

-Yes, Guion, you must take the bridge of love if you want to pass through fear. We are all going to die. Each one of us, without exception, will find himself on a rock in the open air. Each one of us will lose his link with the fish and with the water, will feel his feathers dry, his lungs burn... Don't you see, Guion, it is no use for us to talk, to argue endlessly, to discuss, to laugh, to cry, there is no possible mediocre world: either we live in cosmic horror, and consciousness will not survive, or we live in cosmic beauty, and consciousness is before us. At each step of my emancipation I, like you, my son-in-law, have had to risk the ascent. At present, I have come out of it more alive each time. That is why, amid the great anguish my decision causes me, I am leaving for Paris.

-I won't follow you to Paris, I answered with determination.

-I forbid you to follow me to Paris. Return to Brussels as I have ordered. Leave, my son, and testify to my children about my mad hope...

-... And drive them to imitate their grandmother's madness!

-Guion, my dear Guion, do you think that you can escape death? You think that I am going to burn on a stake, but perhaps I am going to die, tipsy with fever, in the arms of a big good-looking Parisian! You dream of gently dying in Beatrice's arms, but perhaps you will be incinerated in a burning house. It was not I who invented death and it is not I who will decide my death. I don't decide my death, I decide my life. That's all. Those who get stuck in the trap of domination and submission never go that far, their consciousness never gets to the edge of the abyss, and if they do get there, they don't dive in. They retreated at the first signs of fear. They speak of the glory of the cosmos, but they have never confronted the blackness of the cosmos. The person who is resurrected alive is not the one who passed through death, but the one who dove into the abyss. I can say nothing more...

Entering the Labyrinth

Because he hadn't been given a name, he named himself Audret. He had welcomed us a short distance in front of the Porte Saint Martin. For greater discretion, Marguerite and I had decided to speak to each other in Dutch. They had taken us for Flemish yokels discussing the best ways to plunge into Paris without losing all their savings in the first hour.

-What in the world are you going to do there? he said. It's suicide! Without a guide, you're risking your purse and even your life. I know all of Paris: the Town, the City, and the University. With me, Providence won't pop your bread out of the oven at any moment.

A line that he tossed at us politely, even gaily, but firmly, his hand in his surcoat so that we would know that he had he possessed a good knife capable of defending us or of running us through. He was the third to offer us his protection and we hadn't even passed through a gate!

You would have said he was a child in a man's clothes! A round face, a smooth and satiny skin, dreamy eyes, a worried smile, chubby shoulders, the ingenuousness of a lamb inside a crook's exterior. He appeared to have some education. No doubt he hardened himself more from necessity than from inclination. A little further on, three other men, much more threatening, waited their turn. So we decided to make the best of it.

He threw us into action immediately, reminding us of the birdnester's proverb: "He who knows where the nest is, knows it. He who takes it, eats." He wasn't really a criminal to be afraid of, but a gifted young boy who was seeking to extricate himself from his poverty. He had suppressed his timidity in order to follow a demanding, but possible, road. He knew all the foremen. He dealt with hiring strangers by the day in exchange for a decent percentage. His business was based on judgement. And until now, his intuition had served him pretty well. He selected his people. His robust troop satisfied his bosses.

Had he guessed that we were fugitives? The first month, we were never hired out two days in a row at the same place. The harvests were not yet completed. We worked at the farm of Saint Gervais, in the fields of Sainte Catherine, at the cemetery of Saint Jean, sometimes for a foreman, sometimes for a market gardener, one day for a plowman, one day for a gravedigger, always on the Right Bank, in the Town, in sight of the Temple's sinister cluster of high towers, a gloomy vertical ghost from now on...

My heart was no more than a puddle of pain.

I watered my work with tears. The shock had been too violent. I was nothing more than an automaton, a body emptied of its guts and walking by dictation. The exile, torn from his loves, holds his roots in his arms like a sabre-slashed soldier holds his intestines; he keeps them warm, but little by little the warmth

goes away. He dies from a slow loss of temperature. And this makes him indifferent.

The exile that I was could walk, move objects around, dig a grave to bury a dead man, but he is an empty shell, impervious to the earth on which he is gradually falling to pieces. He no longer makes any distinction between the vegetable placed in the basket, the stone thrown in the cart, the carcass of a lamb buried under the apple tree; the unclaimed corpse tossed in the common grave, he likes burying a dead man as much as transplanting a leek.

I was like this, the insensitive slave of Monsieur Audret (we had to call him: Monsieur), a movable worker in the autumn fields...

We arrived at the break of dawn. The sun caressed the spire of the Celestine abbey. It was mirrored in its broad stone-ribbed windows, it illuminated the porticoes inhabited by pinkish statues, it plunged into the immense enclosure of the hôtel Saint-Pol that I used to visit. The hotel could accommodate two dozen princes with their retinues and their domestic servants. A single apartment for a prince was composed of several rooms, the parade room, the prie-Dieu, a bath and a steam-room. From there, the prince had access to private gardens, kitchens, wine-cellars, a chapel, stables, a library...Right next to this immense hotel complex, the roof of the hôtel du Petit-Muce, beside it, the hôtel de l'Abbé de Saint-Maur, a veritable fortress... Ramparts in a fortification.

They were all islands isolated by strong walls, each one protecting a lord. A city: an archipelago of islands, a population of islanders. And yet we were within the monstrous walls of Paris that Philippe-August had had constructed. It was no use for the lords of Paris to mock at grandeur, they must have felt very fragile to surround themselves with defenses like these inside such a bastion. However, what so many walls, so many stones, so much iron too flagrantly proclaimed was fear. The cold walls must be covered, at least in the interior, with tapestries, colored woodwork, paintings, wrought iron, escutcheons, huge shelves that must be filled with gleaming dishes, white statues, and in addition the candelabras, candlesticks, and torches that attempt to furnish a little light where the sun has in fact been prevented from entering. Next, you must bring in the jugglers, the courtesans, the flatterers, and the lie so as to introduce a little of the life that has been left outside...

Poor exile! My fellow creature. And I gradually realized that this was the fate of nearly every person shut up inside Philippe-August's old walls. A man of the city, I mean a man without a landscape, is an expatriate.

There is a price to pay for this luxury of walls, this famine of hearts. To the right of Tournelles, there is this crowded mass of enormous, black, and circular towers, this donjon pierced by arrow-slits, the drawbridge raised, the portcullis closed. This is the Bastille. It recalls the morality of Paris.

What sort of morality is it?

To find out, all that is required is to wander among the hotels and the mansions. That is what we were doing, Marguerite and I, once evening had come, in order

to escape from the cold. I had forgotten the inner streets, the houses of the people, the ordinary houses with half-timbered walls filled in with cob, and corbelled stories that prevented the moon from lighting up the mud. I had forgotten the gutter in the center of the street into which were thrown the contents of chamber pots, rubbish, the offal from butcher shops, the dye from the dyers, the tallow from the candlemakers... It was an open-air morality, the morality of the separation of miseries, each one for itself..

We didn't have to walk for very long. Marguerite crouched down beside a particularly hideous sick man . I went to look for water, and, with her finger, she dripped it between the dying man's lips. She spoke to him of the end as if it were a beginning, she spoke to him of the loss of the world as if it were the discovery of a treasure, she spoke to him of the kiss of death as if it were that of a girl. She sang a canticle of love. She set the dying man's head on her thigh, caressed his hair, and if he were slow in dying, she would fall asleep there, leaning against a wall. She was retieing the connections that morality had undone.

As for me, I was searching for a little more comfortable spot not too far from her and growing numb from exhaustion. I no longer knew how to sleep.

Often, in the middle of the night, we borrowed a wheelbarrow to go and bury a body in a border of the cemetery reserved for those without families. We had no place to stay and prudence required us to be constantly on the move. When it rained, we went under the arch of the houses on the pont Notre-Dame where Audret and most of his laborers took cover.

As soon as the hens left their hole we went back up to the fields, avoiding the main streets by following the labyrinth of merchant alleys... On some nights, we ventured as far as the square steeple of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, to the des Innocents cemetery, and quietly approached the pillory at les Halles in order to bring water to those exposed to public view there.

We had slept all through the circular shacks of the wheat market, we had cared for the beggars who fed at the skinning shops on the quai. We had roamed as far as the port au Foin. If we had a day off, we went beyond the Louvre and crossed the faubourgs of Saint Honoré and Petite-Bretagne to get to the Marché aux pourceaux, in whose center gleamed the horrible furnace used to boil counterfeiters.

On the squares where sentences were pronounced, a gallows and an iron wheel recalled morality: We mitigated that morality as much as we could. We couldn't do anything else to escape that autumn's cold! Yet we always avoided the Place de Grève. We had no need to go there, for anyone could tell us the names of the killers, the assassins, the brigands and the heretics inscribed on the wanted list. Everyone knew the name of Marguerite Porete, the notorious woman cleric of the Free Spirit who was called , in spite of this, the beguine saint. Everyone knew the crime of feeding her and the reward for handing her over. Luckily most people had other things to do!

Surviving in Paris is no sinecure. Those who worked beside us or died on our knees weren't very interested in the authenticity of our names. It was enough for them to know that we were too poor to do any harm and strong enough to help.

Before Christmas, Audret found us a place to sleep in the enclos de la Trinité between Saint-Denis and Montorgueil streets, with the filles-Dieu. Nearly a century ago, the bishop of Paris had taken pity on the prostitutes in the red-light district and founded a hospital to enable them to change their lives. It was a plot of land of eight square arpents where the filles-Dieu could receive their tithe, but above all where they had jurisdiction and even a minor lordship over the property. It was rather risky to live there with other day-laborers, in a shed built against the main building in order to benefit a little from the heat of the kitchens. But winter was coming and we had to survive.

Audret hired out our services nearby. He had realized that we knew how to read and write, that we could diagnose several illnesses and cure them with the aid of common herbs. Marguerite had not been able to keep herself from assisting several women in childbirth. She had even saved one of them in extremis thanks to her skill as a midwife. More and more, she directed the nursing staff, and I took care of different tasks related to the establishment's secretarial work.

We were beginning to attract a certain amount of attention, and we sometimes overheard conversations praising us. Also, on some evenings, I took a chance and went to the other side of the bridge, beyond the City, in the neighborhood around the University that I used to frequent, in order to collect a little precise information about the verdict that would be or had been pronounced concerning the Mirror and the status of the search for Marguerite's person.

The final decision had not come down and for the time being no one was looking for the beguine in Paris, so close to the Inquisition.

Our medical reputation was growing. Our diagnoses were considered to be reliable. But I saw nothing of the drama that was building, of the melancholy about to break on one of us, of the thunderbolt about to fall.

The Festival of Fools

One fille-Dieu, in spite of being two times twenty, stood out because of her almost virile beauty. Her fine, brown, and silky hair, which she parted in the middle and let fall naturally behind her shoulders, formed a kind of dark curtain that framed an unusual face, pale and hot at the same time. Her shadowy eyes with their narrow irises left a vast expanse of white in the eye; a mystery reigned there that was at once sad and radiant, and this mystery's name was Agnes.

She had dedicated herself to the care of the incurable, and what she lavished upon them was mainly reading and counsel. Given that she was a penitent who had arrived at the filles-Dieu long ago, no one knew where she had come from. It was customary to forget all the shameful past of a girl who had been absolved in general confession. Agnes' strong intellectual abilities had been noticed from the beginning. She even gave private Latin lessons to the chaplain. I regularly requested her services for my own secretarial work. I associated with her on a daily basis.

Audret was becoming increasingly interested in my work as a secretary for the filles-Dieu. He came to the library nearly every day, sometimes several times in the same day. He lingered, he rifled through papers of no interest, he asked questions. I assigned him various errands. He quickly returned. We were now more bound by friendship than by business. Agnes did not leave him indifferent.

The time arrived to prepare for the Festival of Fools, which was also the festival of freedoms. As soon as it drew near, this festivity emitted a rank smell of ancient orgiastic rituals. The pretext given for it was to honor the donkey that carried Jesus during the entry to Jerusalem, but in reality it was about making the clergy look ridiculous once a year.

That year, the filles-Dieu firmly intended to take advantage of the general permission in order to get back a little, or maybe a lot, at their young, very handsome, but very haughty chaplain who continually reproached women for a frivolity that he knew very well how to work to his advantage. However, so as not to go too far, the ladies' council entrusted me with the task of organizing the day. I immediately enlisted Audret to assist me, since he knew Paris better than anyone.

Obviously, the chaplain must not know that he had been chosen by the community to play the King of Fools. We had to bargain for permission from the pastor without offering him more than ten percent of the estimated receipts from the festival, and persuade him that the participation of the people would be up to the level of his monetary expectations.

In retrospect, I must admit that, without my knowing it, unavowed feelings were at work within me. Could we give the Inquisition a glimpse of the fact

that "morality" could turn against it? We had to be bold.

This led us to venture into the markets of the University, far from the spies that the pastor must have hired. We discreetly passed over the Petit-Pont, went alongside the big low towers of the Petit-Châtelet and plunged into the din of laundresses beating, rubbing and twisting their linen as they passed on rumors. It was necessary to find out what was going on in the major institutions, at the Grève, at the chapelle de Braque, at the Palais de Justice, at the Sorbonne, at the provost of Paris...

The worst irregularities were predicted. The trial of the Templars, the censure in the schools and at the Sorbonne, the attacks against the Averroist masters at the University, the Inquisitor's zeal, the King's abuses, the Pope's excesses, the recent witch-hunt against the unmarried women who maintained the hospital, cared for and buried the poorest of the poor, all this had exacerbated consciences... The common people wanted to take full advantage of that one day's permission in order to scare the authorities.

If we wanted the festival at the filles-Dieu to throw a few sparks in the brush that was already well overheated, we had to dare to do something big. For his part, Audret wanted to attract Agnes' attention. We decided to present a mystery play truly worthy of the festival. It would make it possible to see the world's insanity, and to show it is surely the function of the madman.

I said nothing about my preparations to Marguerite; I wanted to surprise her.

Audret yielded to my propositions. But I noticed that he blushed about everything. He was young, a virgin, and knew nothing about love. He was not only prudish, but paralyzed with fright in the face of the possibility of seeing sexual organs exposed, though this was the unavoidable custom. Despite this faintheartedness or perhaps because of it, he let himself be overcome by the ambiguous spirit of the festival.

We needed the most exotic costumes, props, colors and make-up. They weren't easy to find. We waited for the sun to set and from one tip to another, we went in search of the underground world of black marketeers. Despite the almost miraculous deployment of Audret's bargaining abilities, most of the objects that interested us were over our budget. Nevertheless, we did purchase a very large two-sided oriental mirror which would separate Adam the madman from Eve the madwoman all during the parade. For my part, I knew quite well the Sorbonne's thousand roofs. Through the lodging-houses, the hôtel de Cluny, around the Julian baths, and walking beside the abbeys, I entered the most extraordinary worlds and was able to buy several unusual props.

Throughout the three Parises (Town, City, University) we let the craziest rumor circulate concerning the mystery that would unfold at the filles-Dieu.

As the decor took shape, we defined the scenario. The traditional outline would show the election of the Pope of Fools and the Empress of the Insane, the Adam of the Church and the Eve of the State, the monumental farce of their accord, the corrupt marriage out of which storms always fall upon the people... We

would show only the pure truth.

When one has been raised in the shadow of the forests, fascinated by squirrels, among goats, hens, and garden plants, one cannot imagine a thing like this: little children barefoot in winter, toddlers staggering in stinking muck, a baby's corpse abandoned in the rubbish of an alley, urchins warming themselves at night around a fire of rotten wood, young mothers overwhelmed by a nursing infant's tears, the cries of women giving birth in despair, in brief, infinite solitude back to back against the walls of the most luxurious hotels. Not just any solitude, but that of pregnant women, mothers and children,

life's border abandoned without protection to the bite of cold, hunger, and a poverty that is absolute, while men do battle, whether it is in a monastery, in a war against the flesh, or in a war for wealth in a business, or in a war against a rival in a castle courtyard.

Certainly it was understandable that artisans would gather on the shores of a lazy river, that they would form an association and construct tall houses, secure shops, and opulent display-stands so as to better sell their products and live more comfortably. One could accept the fact that certain businesses allow one a better level of comfort. The idea that the most competent merchant sells more than a mediocre competitor doesn't necessarily destroy the concept of justice or of humanity. One can respect the appeal to individual happiness. But these streets that are sewers, these slums that are hells, these rubbish-heaps where women made pregnant are abandoned, driven to the brink of lupus, consumption and cholera, these dried-up mothers condemned to watch their children wobble in the mud, these starving mothers who no longer have the strength to wrap a dying baby in their arms... This dawn dropped into death... That is a disgrace!

I can't understand by what miracle of Satan this so generally occurs in all the big cities I've visited, as if it were fate. I am not speaking of injustice, but of the crime of allowing to die, beside your house, in the most complete oblivion, the beginnings of human life. I saw this every day, not in the distance in a desert, not in a dense forest far from people, but in the shadow of an abbey, within earshot of the morning prayer of a fraternity of men, a few yards from monks who inflicted the discipline upon themselves to expiate their sins, within earshot of a cushy villa where at this very moment a bourgeois is making a servant woman pregnant. I saw it in the makeshift huts leaning against the wall of a royal or ecclesiastical fortress.

This contrast of the abject with the religious and with lucre can only be accomplished after an operation on the eye. Once the scalpel has passed over it, the eye sees without perceiving, looks without becoming aware, and the hearer listens without understanding. The eye has learned to look at the unfortunate from every angle without noticing them, without even supposing that they exist. If society were just, the poor would not exist, consequently they do not exist because society is just, for if not, the King and the Pope would be no more than scoundrels. Tautology. Lush and fertile tautology that cuts the optic nerve.

In order to live carefree in Paris, one needs to have virtually annihilated the poor, have rendered them so unimaginable that they can no longer be perceived, for how can something that can't even be imagined exist? In short, poverty cannot have an existence that concerns us. It is impossible for the destitute to exist in the same world as our own. Looking produces a perceptual Swiss cheese; it reports to us only what does not risk exposing our inhumanity. It allows us to see the inequality that stimulates, but not the breaking of solidarity, not the absolute exile of those who represent too well man's dependence on all things. We learn to look with holes in our vision, leaving in nothingness those who insult the image we make of humanity. To preserve our feeling of humanity, we do not see them, we see nothing more than their supposed vices, sins, stains, and laziness. And this infirmity of looking, this transfer of guilt, this transposition of our vices on their vices, this blinding denounced by the Gospel in the strongest terms kills a thousand children a day, and women, parts of ourselves, the beginnings of human beings.

When the blind see, the Kingdom of justice will be.

This world cloven by this aberration of the human gaze, this torn world can only exist through and in madness. It is madness itself, that is to say the juxtaposition of two incompatible realities in one and the same person: the citizen. The metaphysical, psychological and social struggle between being (the rich man) and nothingness (the poor man), the war of what can be looked at and what is unbearable that culminates in delirium and ends in the frantic search for death, this madness is "the world", and the role of the madman is to denounce it.

Soon it would be the festival of everything out of bounds. Already eyes are becoming lustful. Men are casting glances at girls, plans are imagined, common folk are saying among themselves: "We'll put flowers in our soup, we'll hide a piece of lace under our pillow. Where did the little brat go?"

Festival of no importance, festival whose consequences did not concern good Catholic society.

The people of the street pooled their contributions. Enormous ox-drawn tipcarts came, and the gutter was emptied. Sand was brought to dry the mud, colored sheets spread out on the dark walls, torches made ready, horses caparisoned. Where did the poverty go?

The girls mended their dresses, adorned their skirts with garlands and their blouses with ribbons. The men smoothed the leather of their hose, took the best-looking leather codpiece out of the family chest, burnished their dagger, dusted off their dress hat. This will be a night without consequences, an aside, a foray into the wrong side of the world, a moment of compulsion that would leave no trace...

The gutter is for the devil.

The poorest of the girls came out of the rubble of the gutter. She was no longer ashamed of her rags; shamelessly, she washed herself at the fountain, she

laughed and wiggled like a bourgeois girl.

The gutter is for the devil.

A spark pierced the night. Madness, intoxication, the ecstasy of an instant outside the Catholic clock. Devil take the little brat. Let's sing! Let's dance! Let's forget unhappiness for a moment.

And what if this moment outside the world were to discredit the world for good and there would never be gutters again!

What I hoped, I did not admit.

Somewhere a warm place had to open, thronged with people, dried by bonfires, lit by a thousand torches, and all this space be used for dancing, eating, drinking, laughing, kissing... We had to make the gutter disappear. We had to take in our arms all the brats of our nights of love and anguish. And what if bringing down the social order were all it took to get there! Since the beginning of time, ever so many women and men have believed that to find peace, breaking the rules was enough. That could be. Outside of morality, salvation.

Troops of women and men arrived from everywhere, inflamed by alcohol. The streets were thronged. They had forgotten the little brats. They sang, they kissed each other, touched each other, embraced each other, fornicated...

I woke up. The night enveloped me, thick and black. Sweat chilled my skin.

What adventure had I gotten into? Everything could turn upside down.

Where was Marguerite? I waited for my eyes to sort out the blackness. I left my hut to light my candle at the night torch. I went to the chapel. She wasn't there. I asked a night nurse to go and see if she weren't in the girls' dormitory. She wasn't.

I realized that I hadn't seen her for several days. I went by the south gate and followed a sort of corridor that seemed to form in the silence as I advanced. I heard in the silence something like a clamor, a strange emptiness of sound that seemed to call for help.

I found her. She was crying. On her chest, the body of a little boy. As I lifted my eyes to the horizon, I saw the inconceivable circle of absolute poverty: children, young women lying on the muddy ground, the cold hardening the mud around them... Dogs were gorging themselves in this mass grave.

-This is too much for me! Marguerite finally moaned.

She was totally overwhelmed by this death, premeditated and organized on a citywide scale. Winter in Paris is not winter, it is the occasion for the whole city to get rid of the very poor. It was a matter of forcing poverty back into the same alleys, of cramming it into the same holes and waiting for the cold to do its good job of cleaning. This was surely what was taking place. They had filled dozens of tipcarts with rubbish, they had cleaned, and now the disabled, the emaciated women, the sickly children found themselves deprived of all food. Then they chased them out with sticks. They crowded into the alleys of

the slums that didn't have the means to rent a tipcart. And people let their dogs out, of course.

Before the festival, the big cleanup!

In the morning, they sent the municipal undertakers' wagon out to do its good work. The day of the cuckolds could be celebrated in peace, for only healthy girls will be dancing around the fire. But where did the little brat go?

-You can't do anything about it, I said to Marguerite, hoping to bring her back to the filles-Dieu.

-You said it, Guion, I can't do anything, not even leave this place.

So I stayed there, keeping the dogs at a distance while Marguerite prayed with the dying.

The day of the famous festival finally arrived. We were ready. Everything, well, almost everything, had been anticipated, organized, and planned: the fires, the food, the sets, the production, the musicians, the actors, the bellringers, the announcers, the watchmen, the guards, and those who passed the hat. I hadn't had a wink of sleep the night before, and neither had Audret. A day was coming that we wanted to be glorious, a day of jubilation, of joy, of pleasures, of madness, in the hope of lifting up a new look at the world, of opening the eyes of the blind.

Audret had given himself the best part and I was his accomplice. Today his beloved couldn't help but notice him: during the day, it was he who would lead the procession, in the evening it was he who would preside over the mystery play, who would introduce the characters, who would declaim the poems of transition. His text was a real literary play, pure courtly poetry. He didn't want to disappoint. He was perfectly prepared. He had passed the night adorning himself. At three o' clock in the morning he was dressed like a page and handsome as a prince.

Discreetly, we went to look for our two escorts. We slipped through the night as far as the presbytery. As expected, the guard let us enter. In the greatest silence we went up to the chaplain's room. His door was ajar. Audret entered in the dark. We followed him.

And slam! the door closed behind us.

-He who will take will be taken, cried all at once four men-at-arms whose swords, already raised over our heads, gleamed in the darkness.

The chaplain lit a torch, started to laugh and commanded:

-Undress that one (he pointed at Audret). And you, the filles-Dieu's courtier (he turned toward me), you are going to come with me. I am the new master of the game. We won't change the production at all. Tonight we have chosen a new King of Fools. Isn't he ravishing in his Adam suit?

He burst out in a nervous, almost sardonic laugh. The two guards we had brought with us began to laugh too. The pastor had betrayed us.

Brutally, Audret had been relieved of all his clothing. They grabbed his satchel in order to take his poems, and tied his hands so that he wouldn't be able to hide his penis. A guard collected his clothes and his bag. With great care, they dressed the chaplain.

I decided to go along with the game. It was the best way of avoiding the worst. Our scenario was in fact intended to escape the worst vulgarities, the slide toward debauchery that Audret's sensibility could not tolerate, above all in front of his queen Agnes. The chaplain had not planned to depart from our scenario which he seemed to know perfectly; he was satisfied with changing the role. Nothing that serious could happen.

So it was that at dawn, the King of Fools was placed backwards on the back of a female donkey and led to a dressing-room at the filles-Dieu. Luckily, the streets were still deserted. There were only a few women who were going out to look for water. They gossiped among themselves and paid no attention to our fool, who was, moreover, perfectly mute.

Once he was in the dressing-room, our two make-up artists, surprised at first, set to work. Audret remained totally paralyzed; one might have said he was a wooden statue. As much as I could guess his feelings, he was forcing himself not to break down in tears and to act in a stoic manner. It was, for him, the best way to play the card that had been dealt him. Any panic would have pushed him even further into dishonor and the ridiculous. The women did good work. Our king was so thoroughly covered with colored ointment, wax, feathers, and peacock's eye-plumes that he resembled a macaw with its wings cut off. He was one. He climbed on to the wagon. We gazed at him, silent and open-mouthed.

To tell the truth, Audret was a very handsome man and nothing could have made that beauty disappear. Whoever borrowed a painter's eye would be delighted in the model. Crowned with flowers, with a sad face, broad shoulders, a powerful torso, and muscular thighs, his posture had something emotionally moving about it.

A few minutes later, there emerged from another door the Eve who had offered to accompany our handsome king. She advanced a little timidly at first, somewhat stiff in the wax that held her feathers. When she noticed that her Adam was not the chaplain, but Audret, she couldn't help saying:

-I didn't think that I would be parading today with so handsome a king.

Audret didn't flinch. She was smiling in her colors, more beautiful and natural than all the Eves of the red-light district. She climbed aboard the wagon with such nobility that the chaplain couldn't do anything more than yell in Audret's ears:

-You will be damned in Hell.

Audret remained stony-faced.

All Paris rang its bells. It was as if the bronze resounded directly on the bones

of the populace. Brains vibrated in skulls, and the pulsation gave a sacred character to the mad images that suddenly appeared in minds... I all of a sudden understood that no one would be the master of this festival. It had its own propulsion.

A mild breeze lifted the draperies hung on the walls. The cob of the houses seemed to be stirred. Some hats blew off in the wind. Every window opened, and thousands of heads went out of the window-frames. Thousands of eyes plunged like arrows on the naked couple we were parading. It seemed as if our Eve understood our Adam and his childlike timidity. She began to dance in order to capture the looks and in this way soothe her one-day lover's modesty. Audret had definitively sought refuge in immobility.

Our two oxen started off. The wagon, covered with little bells, sent out the first signal. The sun's yellow light lit up the flowers, and in the flowers, the bird man and woman that a mirror bombarded with sparkles. Instead of a great laugh, there was a great restraint.

We had won our bet. Our float was so beautiful, recalled so well the moment before the Fall, the innocence of primordial desire, that a joy, mystical as it were, made tears flow down our cheeks.

Audret remained stiff as a statue. Notwithstanding, there issued from him the beauty of a big adolescent, an ephebe without guile. Eve, on the other side of the mirror, danced, plucked dried flowers from her ointment-covered skin, undulated like a sunbeam on a stained-glass window. The musicians accompanying the wagon made the rote, the hand-organ, and the tambourine hum. The flutes excited the percussion. Jugglers danced around our lovers. People began to dance in the streets like waves stirred up by a great tide.

Poor women emerged from the alleys with their children. With a courteous gesture, men invited them to dance, taking the little ones on their shoulders. The sun now streamed down on the festival. We had succeeded. The children had embarked on the voyage...

Toward the hour of noon, the air was almost hot. We had crossed the wooden bridge at Meuniers. The City was ours. They let us pass. The men-at-arms watched motionless on the terraces of the walls. We passed by the palace, we turned in circles on the public square. Everywhere people left their groups to come and join us.

The chaplain followed. He tried to make himself noticed by leveling his usual satires against the King of Fools. But no one laughed at his facetiousness while everyone laughed heartily at the incredible gesticulations of our Queen of Fools.

We had crossed the University, the Petit-Pont, we had gone back up the rue de la Juiverie and from there we took the Notre-Dame bridge to return by the rue Saint-Martin as far as a crossing of streets that led us to the rue Saint-Denis, then to the Town's red-light district. From there, we reversed course. Our procession, swelled by a whole mass of people who had preferred to follow us,

entered the filles-Dieu, a crowd so enormous that it wasn't possible to contain it without it climbing the walls, the scaffolds, the turrets, and into the apartments where it looked out the windows.

It was at that moment, without warning, that the chaplain's bodyguards took hold of me, bound me and gagged me. The chaplain mounted the high podium that had been installed next to the fountain. Knowing the habits of the populace, he didn't harangue them very long before they remembered their manners. The guards made Audret, his hands still bound, climb up on the podium. The poor boy had no place to sit down. The sun and the heat had melted the wax that held his plumes. He stood up like a child who was being punished. The chaplain insulted him, laughed, and accused him of wallowing in the solitary vice...

He went too far. The situation grew dangerous. Then a woman took advantage of a very brief moment of relative silence to rail against the chaplain:

-Who is that guy who is telling us what to do?

And all that was anticlerical in the crowd pounced on the chaplain. They seized him. They hurled him into the audience. The people held him on their outspread arms. He floated on the crowd like a tree-trunk on a windswept lake. They began to sing the song of the fools in a furious rhythm. They made him circulate around like a sacrificial animal. He undulated in wide circles above the crowd. He followed hieratic currents to the liturgical tempo of burlesque psalms. In this sham of a sacrament, he was stripped of all his clothes. At the same time, they had liberated the unfortunate Audret, whom I barely saw, huddled up in a coat, under the podium. The chaplain was transported on to the stage, naked, alone, and scared.

Terror could be seen in his eyes. At that moment, he alone symbolized all the oppression of the State and of the Church. Shivering with fear, humiliated and nearly terrorized, he crystallized upon himself all the resentment in the world.

They cried:

-Devil take the priest, devil take the Inquisition.

A wave of fury passed through the crowd. It was like an earthquake crossing the walls of the enclosure. Out of stones and out of men there arose the trembling of the infernal regions. Out of chaos, an enormous energy emerged. Each one seemed to become a component of a single beast, of a single titanic maw ready to close on the man. A cry, a whistle or a signal and the man would have been crushed to death in the crowd.

I should have been glad. But the monstrosity of this new collective Inquisition made me shudder.

So, what we had agreed upon in case of a major risk took place. Enormous quantities of juniper incense were thrown on the fires. Heavy black smoke came out of one window. The doors were opened and almost all the crowd left, fleeing the smoke.

A man who was perched on a turret yelled:

-Let's go celebrate on rue Saint-Denis and leave the chaplain to the filles-Dieu.

Agnes and two other women left through a door. They ran to cover the chaplain with a white sheet. I was released from my bonds. I rushed under the stage. Audret had disappeared.

The Plunge

-Wake up, Marguerite shouted in my ear, shaking me. Come with me.

Torch in hand, she went ahead of me, piercing the shadows. We descended into the courtyard and ran along rue Saint-Martin as far as the pont Notre-Dame. An arm of fog rose up from the river and hid the view at horizon level. Higher up, the roofs overlooking the Seine were barely visible.

Marguerite hesitated for a moment about the direction to take, closed her eyes and inhaled a breath of fresh air, then started off again at full speed.

We crossed the City as far as the Petit-Pont. There she showed me a human form that stood out of the fog on top of a corniche that extended out over the water.

-Watch him from here. If he jumps, dive in and look for him.

A few moments later, she was on top of the roof. She slowly approached the man. The air was humid, so I heard the tiles crunch under her feet. As she drew near, the man retreated a step toward emptiness. She stopped:

-You loved her and you still love her. I see the nobility of your heart in that.

The man said nothing. He was frozen on the edge of the roof.

-Don't despair, Marguerite continued, nothing is lost...

-I am annihilated.

Despite its trembling, I recognized Audret's voice.

-No, Marguerite cried...

And the wounded lover let himself fall into the river. I hesitated a moment. Had I the right to prevent a man from saving himself from such suffering? Had I the right to refuse him an abridgement that was forbidden to me?

Marguerite threw herself into the void. Her body spun around for a moment like a warbler struck by a slingshot and disappeared in the water.

There was an eclipse in my consciousness.

I found myself in my turn in the river's waters. I had to remove my clothing, for I was being dragged toward the bottom. Finally getting my head out of water, I instinctively headed toward the splashing noises I was hearing. A woman's cry. Then nothing. A mournful silence. I swam to the left, to the right. Not knowing where to go, I peered at the fog. I saw a light slowly appear, coming from the shore. I swam toward the water's edge.

My two friends were stretched out on the beach a few ells from a beggars' fire. Audret was naked and held Marguerite in his arms. She was coughing and spitting water. She vomited, then lost consciousness. He kept her warm as best

he could, but he himself was shivering from cold.

We carried Marguerite up to the fire. An old woman handed us a coarse woolen garment. We undressed Marguerite's frozen little body, wrapped it in the wool and brought it closer to the fire. Two poor people there handed us the blankets they had slept on. I wrapped them around Audret who was hugging Marguerite and crying.

Was she going to die in the arms of a big handsome Parisian, as she had said? I ought to have hoped for that. My heart should have wanted her to leave us then, gently, at the proper time.

She slowly regained consciousness.

-How I would like to die like this! she said.

She fell back into an interminable silence.

At last, she twitched again in Audret's arms. One might have said that she was a child getting ready to wake up. She pressed against him, warming herself. He caressed her cheeks. In the firelight, her white hair looked red, and her wrinkles had disappeared in the blue swelling of her skin... More than ever, she resembled a little girl.

-I have seen death, she whispered in a hoarse voice. It is not as small as people think it is. It is not a period at the end of a poem, nor a bridge between two worlds. It is an old friend, a kindly companion. She packs on to us this taste for life that we certainly do need. You're right, Audret, she does free us, but the only thing she frees us from is indifference. Audret, my friend, the four of us are now already dead, freed from indifference, unprotected in the face of immensity...

-Four? he repeated, astonished.

-The one you love came to speak with me... I don't know how long ago. Her dream was broken. Death works, you know, it never stops working, killing our dreams if they are too small. The festival of fools revealed in broad daylight the character of the chaplain she thought she loved. Her lover had been an image. That image is dead like a dream pierced by the arrow of morning. This very evening, there is nothing left of it. Worse, she can no longer trust her heart which was so completely mistaken. Do you love Agnes?

The silence said it better than anything.

-She is much more beautiful than you think, young man. You see, we don't know how to dream at the level of reality. Our dreams are small, dull, and lifeless. We think we are protecting ourselves against our own lives by imagining another life. But we are very poor inventors. We have to first enter into creation before we feel the call. Do you want the people here that you have never seen?

There were a dozen poor people around us. Old men, women, urchins. They were scorched faces dancing in the light of a fire that the dawn was turning

yellow.

-So, now that all four of us have lost our dreams, what can we do for those who are here?

Everyone was taken aback. She continued:

-Listen to me, you two, all of you, every night, every day, women and children are dying in infinite solitude. I need you, I can't do it by myself. To die alone, without the presence of a person full of hope, without having truly lived, this is the worst of misfortunes. Agnes has decided to help me...

That was how every night, after our day, we met, all four of us and an old woman who was there, in the filthiest alleys of the Town, to console those whom death was taking in its arms.

The Gospel of Love

Not very far from Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie there was a pile of planks, tiles, canvas and straw in which thieves lived. They made soup from bones and inferior meat for greasy little feasts. It gave off a stinking warmth. Urchins came with their mothers, former prostitutes who no longer had any charm to rent, and revellers bursting with rotgut. They pilfered the leftovers in order to survive, they sang so they would not cry, they danced so they wouldn't freeze to death.

Three cooks fought to control the soup, sold for the highest possible price. For those who had nothing, there was still a little warmth and aroma. They came there to forget, to hope, to put a stop to a wretched life.

In this reservoir of calamities, there were still different levels, and one could go lower. Those who occupied the top position kept dry, but next to the central gutter, they died in the rubbish. In this hellish crucible, there was no worse misfortune than to die without having known a single moment of love. The one who hasn't received the least reflection of the beauty of the world or the goodness of a person, the one who has never seen a mother rabbit tear out her fur to keep her little ones warm, nor a squirrel carry a mouthful of nuts to her babies, nor the stars dance around a big moon, nor a face lean tenderly toward him, it is impossible for such a one to bear a life any heavier than that. That poor wretch sinks into death without bringing with him the smallest memory of life.

This was the case for many street children in Paris. Some came to die in the squalid gutter of the rue aux Soupes without ever seeing either a mother's happy face, or the smallest part of Mother Nature's generous bosom. Their look was so empty, their faces so starved, their clothes so soiled, their bodies so battered, that it was difficult to make them out in the piles of garbage.

Nothing was more important than to take them in our arms, rid them of their dirt, delicately warm them, allow their eyes to plunge into a human heart, to draw from it a candle they would afterwards bring with them into death. And then we went and deposited the little corpse in the common grave that the pastor in his mercy had allowed us to dig in a quiet corner of the cemetery.

The child who dies with a little love takes with him enough existence to venture into death in peace. We owe them that moment of life, that drop of hope.

In February, all five of us were needed to make the rounds between the alleys of the rue aux Soupes and the cemetery of Saint-Nicolas.

It sometimes happened that a too-white snow displayed too well the horror of these abandoned children's deaths. The scandal appeared too blatant to the eyes of a small group of mothers dying of hunger with emaciated infants on their breasts. The soup was there in arm's reach, but the three cooks' sticks as well as

their knives prevented the poor wretches from approaching. One woman, more determined than the others, gathered up her last strength, threw herself on the ladle to get a little soup, and was felled by the blow of a club. That was too much.

A group of ex-prostitutes armed themselves with planks in order to liberate the precious cauldron. In front of them, a mass of discontented drunkards arose, armed with daggers. The place was going to explode.

Marguerite got up, leaving me with a baby in my arms. By I don't know what phenomenon, everyone fell silent.

-Those people there, she said to the women, speaking of the thieves, don't have just the cauldron, they have the weapons and a whole network of pilferers; without them, there is no soup at all. They are needed. But their soup is slop and doesn't nourish; it lacks cabbage, onions and Jerusalem artichokes. My idea is that if we brought in vegetables, those who pretend to be bad guys would gladly serve us a little of their sustenance, for they're pretty well disgusted with downing piss from the butcher shop day after day.

-And where are you going to get these miracles? the head thief asked.

-Out of her skirt! his confederate answered, grinning.

-I'm too old for that, Marguerite replied. It was while looking at you that an inspiration crossed my mind. The Templars' farm has been abandoned...

-And very well guarded, the chief concluded.

At that moment Agnes, who was sitting right beside Marguerite, got up:

-It's a wonderful idea, she declared.

Despite her common clothing, she shone with an uncommon beauty.

-Under the snow and the mulch, Marguerite continued, we will find some cabbage, some roots, and some herbs, all you need to transform your soup into real food.

-I am sending three good men with you, the chief retorted. If you're lying, you all will serve as vegetables...

-Keep your doughty warriors with you, Marguerite shot back. Only women can get past the Temple guards, who aren't concerned with vegetables. If we return with food, we will share it. If we don't return, you are rid of these beggar women here that I am taking with me.

She pointed at the women armed with planks.

The three cooks remained silent. Marguerite went off, preceded by Agnes and followed by the former denizens of the Saint-Denis red-light district. It was not without an ulterior motive that the chief cook let the women go. Agnes alone could rob a regiment of guards just by looking them in the eyes, I hoped.

Audret was just as silent as I was. We had to trust our two friends' wisdom. The risk was great, the wait was long.

The sun wasn't quite up when we heard women singing. They were joyfully returning from an expedition worthy of the best thieves in the neighborhood. Their hitched-up skirts contained treasures that were washed, cut, and poured into the soup. A smell came out of the cauldron that made the dozens of people huddled there get up. Agnes and Marguerite asked everyone to form a line. And when everything was ready to be served, she was silent for a moment and then asked:

-Ladies, let's bless this meal! (A short silence served as a prayer.) Let's be polite and serve the three good men here first.

She pointed to the three cooks who had drawn their knives and were making threats. By a strange reflex, one after the other they put their weapons back in their sheaths. Agnes served them with her loveliest smile and everybody celebrated.

For over a month, the same stratagem allowed many men, women and children to eat. Audret used all his bargaining abilities to open the wine cellars, the food pantries and the silos to the woman who came to ask for something to eat. He succeeded in renting three goats in exchange for work. Agnes took charge of counseling the famine victims. Several women, advised by some of the filles-Dieu, took part in saving the children. They took the sickest, cleaned them, wrapped them in warm wool; if they were able to eat, they fed them, if they were breathing their last, they prayed.

At the end of winter, Saint Jacques de la Boucherie was the pastor's pride. He was proud of having set his house in order. The Franciscans had complained of the competition from women in the sphere of activity they had received from the Bishop himself, which overshadowed their authority (and their purse too a little, because of the offering for the funeral services). But the pastor refused to intervene.

More than that, on Sunday he let the former prostitutes go up the steps of the church, and the doors stayed open so that a little of the mystery of the Mass would touch their hearts. Since the sermon was scarcely audible outside, the little group asked Marguerite to say a few words.

I recall this sermon:

-There is no place for us in the church, but only in the balcony. Thanks to the pastor, The Church of God has neither roof nor wall. It embraces the entire universe.

I tell you: Happy are those who have left the war of blame, I mean the Old Covenant. All those who want to do good and practice virtue according to a fixed model have to blame and listen to being blamed. No one can measure up to a model. And the more a person holds it against herself for not measuring up to it, the more she lives in guilt and resentment. In order to avoid such harmful emotions, she blindfolds herself. She sees only the part of misery that she is able to relieve, so she takes it on only for her power's sake. Such a person goes through the slum praying for the poor without seeing those who are dying of

hunger out on the street. She has done her part. She is satisfied. She lives to relieve her guilt. She lives without love in the prison of indifference.

These people are not the Good Samaritans Jesus speaks of. Do not practice the war of blame, because it blinds.

Happy are those who no longer live for a fixed ideal of virtue, for they are blameless. They do not see a good to be done, but children, women, and men to love. Their hearts burn with love. Happy are those who remain in this state, for they hear a distress that is far beyond their ability to relieve, they hear distress as a call to a new life. Their heart takes misery in its arms as a mother takes an infant and puts it on her breast, to be born at last to an engaged and incarnated life. Do you know a happiness any greater than to put an infant on your bosom? That is why I say: Happy are the pure hearts.

The heart will always be greater than misery, because it is not impassioned by goals to achieve, but by human beings who above all need love. He who sees according to the measure of bread he has doesn't see very much. He who sees according to love's measure sees all. For if he does not have love, he takes it, if he has it, he gives it. Nothing can stand in the way of love.

Happy are the poor! For they see all living beings. You who are here, on this balcony, you lift up your eyes and the landscape fills you to the brim. To see is already a relation that suffices. Isn't that extraordinary!

Those who lead us are, alas!, imprisoned in their delight in the good and their hatred of evil. We all suffer from their blindness. The blind lead the blind. Let us open eyes.

In the war of blame, the heart wears out and grows empty without ever being able to renew itself. We must understand the heart, it resembles a spider: if it doesn't create a connection, it falls into the bottomless darkness of its own abyss. However, if you place a heart in any spot whatever and leave it naked, it naturally weaves relations with everything that moves. And thus it finds its happiness in the abyss. It vibrates within the threads of its relations, it lives in love. It finds in each thing, plant, animal or person, a source of nourishment and expression. From that nourishment and that expression it draws its existence and its joy. For it is out of the inner abyss that love springs. The spider's silk gland is in its belly, our silk gland is in our heart, it is our desire. Desire casts its net over the world and each thing is a treasure. Why are there so many plants, so many trees, so many birds, so many horses, so many fish, so many people, so many stars, so many variations, colors and forms in this world? It is because we need them all. Everything in us should be joined together. We are the binder of being as light is the binder of the cosmos. For every being in this great universe, we have a potential desire. And, when we have one desire too many, we make babies, and a new being is born. Love saves us, and it saves all things. It is creation in movement.

What is a soul? It is a sensitivity that draws its existence from what it is not. It is a sensitivity that draws from existence what it does not have. And that

perfect act devoid of any why is joy's very essence.

Today, this evening, tomorrow, I need you, for Paris is broken like a vase shattered on a paving stone. We must restore the connections. If a child, a woman, an old man, or a brigand dies in solitude, I am deprived by it as much as you are deprived by it. If one of you catches him and ties him to her heart, we all profit from it. In brotherhood, death does not exist since love has bound all things together.

This last paragraph ended each of Marguerite's sermons. And when the church poured out its human contents on the square, the crowd of the faithful made wide detours. A circle of scorn prevented them from approaching the poor people assembled around Marguerite. For them, the Mass was finished; for Marguerite, it was beginning.

As for me, I was appalled, for the "saint" was publicly betraying herself.

The Descent into Hell

At last! The sun shredded the icy fogs of winter, took a few more days, and plunged its creating rays into Paris. The first vegetables shot up. Death entrenched itself a little further off, in its winter quarters. Rest.

At the filles-Dieu, the joints were done; we could eat new shoots and free the root-cellar of its remaining vegetables. It was possible for us to halt the famine. It was time; we were exhausted. We only had sufficient strength to weep in each other's arms. Audret had been running short of money. Nothing remained of Agnes' savings. The old woman who had helped us during the winter had given up the ghost before the first buds.

The ordeal had matured us. Audret was no longer the young boy who made Agnes smile. Agnes was no longer the idealized image of a madonna for Audret. She had shown herself to be a woman of commitment and fidelity. Between them bonds had been woven stronger than adversity.

In the shadow of such a couple, I missed Beatrice cruelly. My life dragged.

Around me, springtime was at work. It had arrived abruptly, intoxicated spirits so violently, pushed so strongly on the sails of hope, that one would have said it was a resurrection. After such a winter, it was a strange thing to return to normal life. For one who has been tested, to find again is not the same as finding. Simple ordinary life, drinking and eating, wanting and desiring, bearing children and giving birth in the dry straw, appeared miraculous. The return of light is a celebration.

Everything took on the appearance of a miracle; an old man who raised himself up on his cane to go and get his serving of the meal, a blind man who went straight to the cauldron guided by smell alone, a deaf man who heard the bell for the supper served at the filles-Dieu, a young bride who was at last bearing the fruit of her love, a father who found a child he thought was dead. The mundane return of clear days produced such a joy in the blue sky's clarity that people's hearts imagined the supernatural everywhere.

Miracle of return.

In retrospect, the winter that had been so rude was transformed in the memory of the survivors into the first-fruits of the Kingdom. Something was going to happen because something had happened. Like the prodigal child, Paris had returned to the fold.

It was said that a little woman had saved a suicide, that she had opened Heaven to unbaptised children, that she had expanded the soup kitchen, that she had pacified the vultures of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie, that she had transformed former prostitutes into holy women. What next! It was spring fever.

Some even went so far as to give an eschatological interpretation to the Festival of Fools of this terrible winter that was finally finished: prophetic trial! The "world" was coming to its end, Christ was going to drive the rich out of the Church and the State, entrust the power to Mary Magdalene and the holy women so as to establish the reign of justice, conjugal love and respect for children that men had betrayed.

In short, a rumor as uncontrollable as a brush fire began to circulate in the most destitute alleys and the poorest streets: the holy beguine was in Paris, the Kingdom was at hand. As Joachim of Flora had intimated: Christ would return in the form of a woman and restore his wayward Church.

Marguerite was targeted. The author of the Mirror was none other than the little woman who had, all winter, taken care of abandoned children. The Inquisition could not ignore her.

Alerted, Audret, Agnes and I had gone out to look for more precise information. The copies of the Mirror that had been sent to Godefroid de Fontaine, Domnus Franco, Jean de Quaregnon and the bishop Jean of Chalon-sur-Marne had not produced anything good. On the contrary, some of these manuscripts were submitted as proofs that the woman was relapsed, obstinate and impenitent. In a letter addressed to the bishop of Cremona, the Pope Clement V had risen up against "those who want to introduce into the Church an abominable style of life that they call freedom of spirit, that is to say, the freedom to do everything that pleases them."

The theologians of the Sorbonne, whose chief occupation consisted of arguing among themselves for scholastic reasons, were preparing to form a united front against the beguine, the ignoramus, the erring woman who pushed the ridiculous to the point of confusing human eroticism with union with God. They had great fun reading passages while giving them an obscene interpretation. They fabricated in their depraved imaginations what they then blamed the beguine for living out in her daily life. They didn't read, they leered between the lines.

They will no doubt draw up their condemnation around the following thesis: Marguerite pretends that the soul absorbed in divine love can, without sin and without remorse, give way to all the demands of the flesh. And, since they confuse these demands with their frustrated male appetites, they will make the one they would secretly like to sleep with out to be a woman of loose morals. And since they hate that lecher within themselves intensely, they will want to burn her, her, rather than him.

For his part, the Inquisitor, the good brother William, didn't intend to lose much time or money in a trial against a woman. He had other fish to fry in regard to the Templars, whose case was not yet closed. Godefroi moreover was still in prison. Regularly tortured, he no longer said a word. It was said that he no longer inhabited his body, that he smiled at his executioners.

Brother William wanted to innovate by employing a new form of trial:

condemnation by auto de fe. The sentences rendered would be kept secret until the day of a solemn ceremony associated with some public festival. At the beginning of that ceremony, all present, from the King to the least of men, would swear an oath of allegiance to the civil and religious authorities. Those who didn't swear would necessarily be guilty. The condemned who were impenitent and those who had relapsed would be handed over to the secular arm which would see that they were executed by fire in a public place of punishment ; those who abjured their errors would be reconciled and condemned to lesser punishments such as life imprisonment.

This trap would be flawless, since the condemned person would first be excommunicated, imprisoned in the complete isolation of a dungeon for over a year without the possibility of saying anything whatsoever publicly. Now, the simple fact of being excommunicated for over a year without having publicly abjured her heresy condemns her. As a result, the day of the auto de fe, her renunciation of the heresy, were it ever pronounced, would arrive too late. For this reason, the Inquisitor could arbitrarily have the condemned person burned or give his mercy free rein by imprisoning her for life. This trap had been constructed because it was now known that the beguards, beguines, and disciples of the Free Spirit were advised to do everything the Inquisitor demanded, as the words forced out by threat or torture were worthless in God's sight. Marguerite would be the first in France to undergo this type of trial.

They were also searching for "the women's dog". They knew neither his name nor his status, but a description had been given. Audret himself had read it on the justice post at the Place de Grève. They promised lots of money to those who possessed information, so we had to disappear. It was no longer possible to work at the filles-Dieu and Marguerite didn't want to put anyone in danger, especially the women in such an indispensable institution.

Audret and Agnes took charge of finding us hiding places. For greater security, we seldom passed two nights in the same spot. During the day, however, Marguerite went out unexpectedly, either to help care for the sick or the dying, or to teach women, or to preach publicly at places that were indicated scarcely a few minutes in advance thanks to a network of reliable informers who communicated in code by means of flutes.

I saw too well where this was leading us. I accepted dying, but to find myself between "good" Brother William's paws, this idea I could not endure, though, in my imagination, I was already on the wheel, and red-hot irons were sinking into my flesh.

The Inquisition was encircling us. It was only a matter of time. The winter had worn me out. I no longer had any resistance. Anxiety and solitude had taken hold of my heart. Rodents.

Death's two sisters held me firmly, and I could no longer arise. I was too far from Beatrice. I wasn't drinking anything other than a little cold water which diluted, for a brief moment, my body's acidity. My weakened muscles summoned their last strength and contracted in spasms on my chest and

stomach. I was a fruit being crushed to extract the kernel.

I had lost all contact with hope. I was growing insane. I was sinking. I was transporting my love, my Beatrice, like a heavy statue and I was sinking into a horrible marsh. But as for my real beloved, she was continuing her life in the river of time.

I saw her dashing through the streets of Bruges, Maiffe on one side, Benoit on the other. She was more beautiful than ever, for little wrinkles accentuated the beauty of her face. Her skin was like peaches. It was warm and her dress of fine but worn wool hugged her figure. Time, however, was slipping in the opposite direction from that in which she was running, wearing away the body like sandy water strips the hull of a ship. She was growing old. The skin over her bones was becoming thinner. The ribs were coming to the surface. In her face, the eyes were growing deeper. The cheekbones were emerging. Her lips were chapping in little flakes like bark that flew off in the wind... Maiffe had disappeared... No one knew where she was. Benoit, frightened by the beguines' marginality, had entered a monastery...

In the shadow of the cathedral, an old woman held a wooden bowl. Bent like a broken stump, she was standing up on the steps of the church and no one saw her. Her eyes, sanded by the salt of tears, dull, empty, retained a remnant of color. Her eyelids struggled to hold above water a last sad look. Her indestructible nose alone had resisted time, a child's nose that seizes odors by little palpitations of the nostrils...

My eyes really were dry. I had a reflection of beauty in my belly, a reflection of marble no doubt, but a reflection all the same, the one and only hope that has ever been accorded mortals, and she had been taken from me not by one of life's accidents as I believed, but by time itself. Time that swallows all.

I was crushed by anguish, but I did not die.

I awoke. The sun had penetrated the gaps in the boat canvas that served as a shelter for us in those days. The bare poles of our makeshift tent showed their purplish veins.

Marguerite was sitting next to me. She was reading a worn parchment. A very slender edging of morning light encircled her face, that of an eternal child. By I don't know what sympathy, Beatrice resembled her adoptive mother: the same eye color, the same fine nose provided with vibrating nostrils, lips sharpened by silence.

-I loved too much and now I'm dying.

That sentence seemed to sum up everything. I fell asleep in the dizziness of falling once again...

I woke up again. I heard a babbling. Marguerite took a baby out of a coarse wool cover that had been set down in front of her. She slipped it into her clothes and pressed it against her chest. Agnes pulled back the canvas of our makeshift tent and handed Marguerite a bowl filled with a soup of the spring's

first lettuce.

Woman seems to travel in the opposite direction from death. And perhaps that is why men resent women so much. But nothing is more false. Woman does not travel in the opposite direction from death. No one goes in the opposite direction from death, all of us are with it, we are all going in the same direction. Marguerite accompanied death in simply reducing the pain and softening its harshness.

The baby wasn't one year old, and already Marguerite was escorting the future dying person who was there, in perfect health, on her chest. All our loves accompany dying persons, for in this world the only persons who exist are dying, some soon, the others later. And when death is short of flesh, we make children for it...

But why then are we death's companions, for each other and from the beginning? Why is this the very essence of our nature? We have no greater task than to make flesh for death and then accompany this flesh right into the mouth of darkness. If we had a little mercy, we would all be Cathars: chaste, sterile, happy to prevent life and to shorten our days by a final fast. Or else we would be Knights-Templars, killers out of love.

What is the beguine doing at death's side, assistant to the terrible surgeon who is already leaning down to peel the flesh right down to the bones... Dust in the wind, we were dust before our birth. Dust in the wind, we will be that soon after death. Why this sympathy between different heaps of dust already half lost in the wind?

Agnes had entered, sat down, and was helping Marguerite. The sun was warming the tent. The two women looked happier than little girls playing with a doll.

I would have liked to tell them to let us die in peace, as swiftly as possible.

Marguerite stuck her finger in the lettuce soup and placed a drop on my lips, which smiled in spite of myself.

-You won't die so easily, Guion, she said, I still need you.

She took my head in her arms.

Marguerite watched over me day and night even as she busied herself with feeding and caring for the babies Agnes brought her. She fed me at the same time as she did them. I was her baby. Nicodemus had finally arrived in his mother's womb: the Night...

One night, a dream drew me out of my madness...

The sky was as blue as crystal. High white mountains formed the serrated line of the horizon's circle. I felt as if nothing existed beyond this vast hoop enclosing a majesty of mountains and valleys. A small spot was moving inside this vase. From the elevation where I was, it resembled a grain of dust at the mercy of the wind. I came closer. It was a wolf hunting in the valley.

Its muzzle was short, its nostrils were palpitating. It wasn't going just anywhere, it was following the scent of a prey. That's what I thought. Looking more attentively, I saw that he was running alongside the urine markers he had left on the edge of his territory. At a certain point, he shook his muzzle and sniffed the smell of a female, which made him leave his borders. He was going away from his hunting grounds. He was following currents of scent he did not understand. He approached a small flock of sheep. He crouched in the tall grass, behind a bush. He had snapped a branch. The sheep fled as one and in their panic, spread out pretty much everywhere on the mountain. Further off, a shepherd girl whistled and shook a large whip that she snapped against a rock.

The wolf got up on his hind legs, raised his nose, and his muzzle grew longer. He looked at the clouds in the sky. Very slowly, he looked all around. And then he rushed toward the sheep, gathered the flock and drove them toward the sheepfold. He had chosen to become partners with the shepherd girl. He accepted the occupation of shepherd dog. Now he followed other scents, listened for other sounds. He was going according to another logic.

The shepherd girl loved him. She fed him; he served her. He felt as if he had enlarged his territory. In the village, he followed new instincts. He learned to tolerate men, to value their good qualities, to be wary of their faults. He avoided kicks and received strokes. He never went far from the shepherd girl. They called him the women's dog. He had found a more agreeable way to live. He didn't understand his mistress very well, but he perceived that he was the winner in this new arrangement with life. He gazed at his mistress for hours. He seemed to profit from her intelligence as a bird profits from the sea air.

And then one day he climbed on top of the shepherd girl's hut. On the highest stone on the roof, he got up on his hind legs once more, his muzzle lengthened once again, and with his palpitating nostrils he sniffed the air at a height he did not know. Standing on the rooftop, he seemed to capture new scents, sounds he had never before distinguished, colors he differentiated for the first time. He set out once more, leaving his life as a shepherd dog as he had left his life as a wolf.

He descended to the village of his own accord. There he followed the horse road to go I don't know where, but very far. Always, he followed the signs and the currents. Nevertheless, it was another world and another logic, another river and other currents. He felt as if his nose had gotten longer, that his ears had enlarged, that his eyes had deepened.

He approached a large city. He waited a long time on top of a stone. Once again, he looked all around. And then he slipped into the shadows of that city, avoiding the wheels of wagons, following the strange scents that attracted him. He was surprised to find himself in the most notorious slum, crossing the poorest street, next to the filthiest gutter... Nothing of this repelled him. On the contrary, he felt as if he had come back to his own...

We had come to Paris, not to die, but to respond to the smell of happiness. Marguerite had told the truth, she was not surrendering to the Inquisition, but

following her life in the direction of happiness. It wasn't her fault if this happiness came out of an understanding impossible to grasp for one whose muzzle was too short.

I opened my eyes. My head was resting on Marguerite's thigh and her gaze was plunging into mine. A strange sensation of freedom filled my lungs. Tears ran on my cheeks. I no longer had hope, for I was in hope.

Springtime in Paris

It sometimes happens that out of pure pleasure the month of April hurls high one of its days in such a light that Paris is no longer Paris, but Jerusalem on the day of Resurrection. The whole world has lost its bearings, the Last Judgement has been forgotten, and Heaven gives itself unconditionally.

It was that day.

The crowd, rich as well as poor, objected to the shade and refused to enter under any kind of roof, whether of copper or loose planks. They strolled without any reason, the north no longer existed, the south was right over their heads. Paris was walking in its streets. They weren't going anywhere, they were moving out of love for their bodies. If one is a man, one's steps naturally cross those of women, and the reverse. The light touching of bodies ends by spoiling brains. The head is no more than a dome growing drunk from light. Moment of intoxication.

Since morning all of Paris was on the move in the streets, the squares, and the flowery lanes. They had froliced without any aim but the need, vegetable as it were, to let the pores of their skin gulp down pots of light. So, then, the lengthening of shadows a little before the third hour produced a sort of unconscious and almost supernatural nostalgia. They were afraid that the eternity they were in would fall back into time once more. They wanted to prolong this day, render it as interminable as it was impetuous.

So when the flutes began to inform all those in on the secret that the holy beguine would be on the public square a little after four o' clock, it wasn't a hundred people who rushed toward Notre-Dame de l'Étoile, but nearly all the city.

Some men had set a sturdy square platform on their shoulders. Two gentlemen helped Marguerite mount this mobile platform. Next we saw the platform raised; it was placed on the overhang of a balcony. Marguerite was wearing a simple dress of unbleached linen, open at the collar and fringed with a wide blue ribbon. She had put her hair up. At that elevation, she looked even more petite.

Her reputation was established; the crowd became silent all at once. The saint was going to speak...

-People of Paris, rejoice.

The stone facades surrounding the square echoed her voice. The silence deepened even more. She continued:

-One day of light is enough to erase a winter of unhappiness. Only yesterday, the world was upside down. Only yesterday, enormous surpluses had to be produced with enormous effort in order to counter terrible suffering just

because an excess of wealth imprisons our good lords in their strongholds.

The nightmare is finished; today we are all profiting from the same sun. Our lords are here with us, like us. What have they got to do in their cold castles when it's such fine weather outside?

I see and I am not dreaming. I tell you: our suffering is over. Look. There is great country around us, the soil is good and productive, the wheat is coming out of the ground, the green grass is thick already, the gardens are overflowing with life, the cows are lowing to give their milk. All this is given us here in our home, in the warmth of this day, at this very moment. Nothing can be any greater, more beautiful, more generous.

From now on we are going to work as brothers. United in work and without the necessity of giving everything to our miserable masters on high, the effort will be light. A little work at a good rhythm will be enough to satisfy everyone. So, at this very hour we are at now, we are delivered from excessive tasks and, by this very fact, free to produce additional food.

Listen carefully to me. I see and I am not dreaming, even if I am enjoying the weather because it is too beautiful today. This will be, therefore it is. Never forget that what is necessary is what will be in the future, but is already working in your minds today.

In this very place, our hearts are in the light. At this hour, at this moment, we are satisfied. Such a superabundance is given us that all our wishes look ridiculous before our satisfaction. The globe of existence is immeasurable. We live in an apple made for us, and in this fullest of all fruits, we are satisfied to the fullest. Yes! Look at this vast sky, the sun that shines, the river that washes Paris, the fountains that quench our thirst... Look a little further off: green hills surround us. And further still, other mountains, and still further, the seas, and beyond, the vast unknown, the living and vibrant reality of a great cosmos... The universe contains us like a fruit contains the seeds.

An earth so great has been given us, a sky so vast, riches so immense that it is impossible for us to measure them. Our eyes are too nearsighted, our hands, too small, our mouths too tiny for the world that is there. But it is there. The one small problem is that we are not yet able to want this world, it is too beautiful and too great, we didn't expect such a gift, so we don't yet manage to want it. Nevertheless, we do desire it. I think that our will shrinks everything, and we only have what we want. A peculiar habit that suits us. A peculiar habit that's not affecting us today. Today is a beautiful day and we want all that is there, we want it with all our heart.

Listen for a moment to the silence... Don't you feel in your soul this saturated heart, these inflated lungs, this full stomach, this skin sated with sunlight... Today the women are beautiful because the men are satisfied, and the men are handsome because the women are satisfied. Not only do we have everything, but we have even been given the power to add to this the little ones and our own creation. Our children are running around us.

That is what it means to be annihilated in our will as in a wineskin that is filled too full. We don't want anything, for we desire all that we have, and we have everything. We have finally arrived in the Kingdom.

A child lived in a great castle, and was unhappy. So he shut himself up in a narrow dungeon. For a while he felt safe in his cold dungeon. Alas! he had lost the key. Then he remembered having lost it. So he began to search everywhere, and he found it. Now, this very day, this child is going out in the sun, happy as a king. It is we who are the prodigal child, the child who receives the earth's and the sun's extravagance. You see Paris, these churches, these cathedrals, these palaces, these buildings for the king, these apartments for the bishop... This is the dungeon and it is ours, for it is we who have made it. But we don't want it. Why would one who possesses the whole earth, and even the sun, be satisfied with Paris in its walls? We are going to devour all of the fruit.

The women and men we are will not forever be able to escape life, the sun, desire, the happiness of taking in both hands the substance that has been given us. We will not rot forever in the dungeon of injustice. We will leave our dungeon, therefore we have already left.

I say this in all extravagance, out of happiness and in all truth. I say it because I know that the sun will not yield, that the earth will not give way before Philip the Fair or Clement V, that all the chaos caused by the lie of their wills and the blinding fear brings will never overcome so great a firmament. Why would the immensity that is there bow to beings as small as the king or the pope?

Since all this majestic reality is created in front of me at every moment, destroy it, and it will be recreated before day's end. The world passes, but the Source remains. What She has willed, She wills. It was Her desire, so it is Her desire. She desired me, so She desires me. So then, he who is born does not die; he is transformed by the strength of love.

If the universe is exactly the fruit that matches our hearts, we are, each one of us, the fruit that matches its heart. If not, what is would have no mirror and therefore would not be reflected to its own consciousness. We are conscious, therefore we are its mirror and it is our mirror.

All this cup of beauty can be dirtied here and there, but since it comes from a creative act, it always comes back through the same act and continually cleanses itself as it continually differentiates itself. No man can vanquish the great creative nature that is passing through us at this moment, and if he does fight against it, the world is unhappy for a time, but time passes; time is memory that washes itself in intelligence and consciousness.

As for me, I will not go where the crazy men who lead us are going. I am leaving the dungeon. May I! I am leaving this dungeon...

Women, you who bear children, feed them, teach them, do not despair. The madness of men! They'll grow out of it. Madness is not what man is. Take care of life, heaven is with you. Practice the resistance of the heart, I mean the art of joy, the ability to feed on truth, even in the empire of the lie in which our

lords have plunged us. Humble men, noble men, caring for life is an honor. No longer serve the death that frightens you, lend your hand to women to take care of life.

Obviously, if winter hadn't happened, we wouldn't be under the sun today. However, don't you think we have suffered enough! Isn't that enough for us? Must we still add more and for how long? We do not have to submit, on the contrary, the necessity already sweeping our consciences is driving us to submit no longer. We cannot abolish what we are, so we may as well fulfill it...

In the crowd, clamors were heard. Doves left the fountain and went to nest high on the towers of Notre-Dame. Soldiers came out of the bishop's palace, but could not clear a way in the density of the multitude. Marguerite was no longer on her cornice.

That night, we slept in a workers' hut in back of the Temple field, between the wall of the castle and the wall of the Town. In the middle of the night, Marguerite came and snuggled up in my arms. She was trembling like a little girl after a cold bath. I searched her eyes for a moment. She sank her face in my chest to hide. The trap was closing on us. Only a few days were left us, only a few hours...

My hands interrogated her shoulders; she was unable to speak. Her cold body exuded a fine oily sweat. I wrapped her in the wool that covered me and enclosed her in my arms.

The moon cast a blue veil through a window pane. Dust danced in this veil for a moment. Marguerite slipped her hand on my chest, seized a fold of flesh, and dug her nails in my skin. The pain relieved me for a short time.

She was so small. I would have liked her to disappear in my body.

There must surely be a way of getting out of here. There must surely be a method of escaping, not our natural destiny, but the insane hands of frightened men, the horrors that a man who is afraid imposes, the radical evil of those who live in the certainty of good, and therefore in the certainty that Marguerite and I were evil. I resented our bodies for being so incapable of disappearing.

Must we be handed over to our peers? Must the happy part of our being end by being torn up by the unhappy part? Must the enlightened side of man be thrown into the dark continent? Must we die between the teeth of the monster that we might have been? Is it acceptable that someone who has succeeded in escaping society's madness finally succumb in its hands?

-And what if we were to go and die a little further away, I whispered in Marguerite's ear, on the other side of Philippe-Auguste's wall, in a quiet little woods. To no longer eat would be sufficient. Moreover, we are no longer able to swallow anything whatsoever. It would be enough to let nature do its work, to listen to the trees moan, to stretch our necks out to the night. She will slide her fingers along the back of our necks, she will find the jugular... Is that too much to ask? Do we have to endure Brother William's scorn, submit to his hate, enter his sick Church?

Marguerite stiffened for a moment, then relaxed in silence. The moon was shining in the center of the window pane. No flight was possible. We were born of a woman, we would, therefore, go and die in the violence of men. Perfect logic. The cure has no utility if it is not deposited in the heart of the sickness. This is what we have come to do in Paris, deposit the cure in the sickness's vortex. This is why Marguerite didn't want to die anywhere else than in the inferno of the Inquisition. From there she could spread everywhere, by the sickness's own channels.

I felt ready to die, but unable to endure the presence of a man driven mad by his fears and his beliefs. I did not want to smell the breath of Brother William. Too strong a reminder of myself. I prayed that a tree would fall on our heads. I didn't want to die hating a man that I might have been.

My tenseness had an immediate effect on Marguerite. You would have thought she was a squirrel stiffening with fear. She too gave a start.

The moon put on its blue robe once again. I believe its smile reassured the stars, for they stopped quivering. Time had stopped. My heart stood still.

-Help us, I whispered to the moon. Help us. Take us away. At least, put out our eyes so that William's slimy gaze may never touch our bodies.

The moon remained immobile. I threw my final argument at it:

-Don't you see that I am carrying a child, a pure girl, in my arms! Do you know what happens to imprisoned women when the family doesn't have the money needed to pay for the guards, the rent for the dungeon and the room and board? Do I have to poison her myself? Oh! Moon who smiles in the cold of space, take us away this very moment.

My tears clouded the peace of the moon as it enveloped us. My acid tears fell on Marguerite's cheeks.

-So, I'll watch over my maman-in-law alone, I said to the moon. I'll watch over her until my last breath.

The moon had returned to the window. Its cheeks were pink like a child's. It threw me a sideways glance toward a visitor .

Yes, a presence had entered the hut.

It was as if something had given way in the shadows. There was an opaqueness, a compression of black matter suspended like a celestial sphere about one meter above the ground. A materialized tranquillity, an intensified matter, a being a thousand times more incarnate than ourselves, a being necessary on this night.

This presence did not speak. It simply reflected back to me my truth: You will be delivered to the hate you are capable of in order to arrive at the love you are not yet capable of. You will be the Father's subsidiary. You will not escape your destiny. The miracle you are waiting for, you will accomplish. Your good fortune compels me to obey only at the bottom of your soul. But I am the

consoler, I have always been there, I am there and I will always be there, right beside you, closer to you than you are to yourself, and none of the horrors you are thinking of will be done to you. Fear nothing.

By what miracle had this terrible truth, this unfathomable duty thrust me into peace? I will never know. I simply felt at the bottom of my being, and I could not reasonably dispute it, that such an end from the Inquisition would be for me the only joy consistent enough to assure me beyond all doubt that radical evil is a bad dream, an inopportune passage, an aside incompatible with the moon, not even compatible with a blade of grass. I was here to liquidate the greatest possible fear, that of radical evil. The cure must be deposited in my, the witness's entrails, in my, the consoled one's, peace.

The Confession

Before Christmas, Marguerite had disappeared. The Inquisitor had been, to say the least, discreet; he doubtless didn't want to upset the poor of Paris, already worried about the coming winter. A few days later, a decree constraining the filles-Dieu to complete imprisonment. No miraculous soup at Saint-Jacques de la Boucherie.

One moment was sufficient. I had left her at her prayer in order to go and look for food. On my return, she was no longer there. No witness. A perfect abduction. Spies must have infiltrated the charitable circles, a piece of information had been bought, they had gagged the relapsed one, they had shut her up in a sack and transported her with the bags of grain. No one had noticed anything.

Audret, Agnes and I took an oath not to abandon her. We decided to do everything possible to prevent her being tortured and diminish the cruelty of her end. The best thing was to collaborate, to work in the same direction as the Inquisition, for its purposes: give (harmless) information so as to make any excess of violence unnecessary.

We improvised a plan around this goal, the only realistic one: an infiltration. Some time after his resignation because of illness, the former notary of the Inquisition, Guion de Cressonaert, had regained his health at the hospital in Valenciennes. (It was easy enough to disguise myself, for the description of the "women's dog" was approximate, to say the least, and I had grown terribly thin over the winter). This former cleric quickly left the city. After several years of wandering, he reached a Franciscan convent at Bruges (we had the support of the prior there). Following a severe novitiate of repentance and penitence, the ex-secretary had pronounced his vows and donned the cassock of the Order of Mendicants. With the permission of his superior, he had led an eremitic life somewhere in the countryside around Brussels, shielded from sight. (We had fabricated a directive from the prior to that effect.) Recently, the monk has been seen in Paris, devoting himself to the poor, leading an ascetic and unobtrusive life. Like so many others, he had listened to a few sermons by the one who was called the holy beguine. No one at that time suspected that she was Marguerite Porete, the notorious heretic. The Franciscan had, nevertheless, become concerned about her orthodoxy and had noted down her sayings in order to inform the Church. As a former notary in some case with the Inquisition, he quite naturally wanted to provide his cooperation in order to facilitate the poor wretch's condemnation...

It was a rather teetering construction, but it was unlikely that the Inquisition would suspect that a person would take such great risks in order, in the end, to really help them in their investigation. For that was surely what we did have in mind; any other choice could only worsen the fate reserved for Marguerite.

While I was preparing myself, while, from contact to contact, I was approaching the circles of the Inquisition, whose ramifications I knew something about, Agnes had succeeded in getting herself employed at the Saint-Jacques convent where Marguerite was imprisoned. She was a servant and a nurse in the cells reserved for women, a task that everyone avoided. Marguerite was chained to a column there.

With the greatest discretion, Agnes saw to it that the treatment the woman received was not excessively rough, made sure of bringing her clean water and a little food when this was possible. Above all, by her alert presence, she spared her the usual insults reserved for women without protection.

Fortunately, Brother William was completely occupied by the trial of the Paris Templars and had no other plan than to lead the renegade woman to the stake by the new procedure of the auto de fe. Marguerite had lent herself to this from the beginning by refusing to utter the customary oath that opens a trial. This had the consequence of rendering all interrogations officially invalid. Marguerite could, then, hope for a relative peace during her detention. Obviously, this justified her immediate excommunication. To keep the woman from the public eye for at least a year was sufficient, then, for her to be condemned. Marguerite had no illusions about her fate.

The Inquisition's net was tightening on the unmarried women who did not enter communities. Some time ago, Etienne Tempier, the bishop of Paris, had condemned the heresy of certain students attracted by the Amaurician thesis of a certain dissident Franciscan of Spoleto, Bentivenga da Gubbio. The Amauricians, disciples of Amaury de Bene, condemned in Paris in the last century, preached the idea that Christians were Christ's members, had suffered with him on the cross and so had been rendered innocent once and for all, did not need to undergo any other penitences, but simply keep themselves poor and simple in spirit so as not to have any evil intention. So long as a Christian remained in that disposition, he was without sin. This simple and rapidly popular idea had been likened to the Free Spirit.

Brother Bentivenga da Gubbio was arrested in the past year. Now his confessions were creating alarm as high up as pontifical circles. They were convinced that the Amaurician ideas had spread to the milieu of the beguards and beguines and several charitable associations. This justified the intervention of the Pope himself.

At the same time, the means of recognizing this heresy had to be articulated and formalized. The label of Free Spirit was attached to beguardism as a matter of course, and it was useless to struggle against the errors of this entirely fabricated story. The Inquisition didn't make any nice distinctions; on the contrary it grouped and regrouped the heresies into families in order to be more certain of reaching all of them, in conformity with the medical idea that it is better to quarantine a hundred healthy persons rather than let a single plague-infected person freely move about.

It was now hoped that the heresy expounded by Marguerite Porete would allow

the Amaurician error, that of the Free Spirit, and that of beghardism to be placed in the same category so as to bring together all the girls and women wishing to escape marriage or the convent. It was a quite a gross generalization! But in one go, the multiple problems relating to widows or unmarried women active in poverty circles were resolved.

I had to make my contribution in that direction. The more the Inquisition managed to destroy what moral authority it still had, the more quickly the oppressive Church would collapse. For the State as for the Church, it has always been necessary to "take care of" social justice so as to retain the minimum of authority necessary for the exercise of power. Already, the Roman emperor Augustus, in his *Resgestae*, asserted that he had won through *autoritas* what he could not win through *potestas*. Since Rome, it was known that power can be imposed (*potestas*) by violence, threat, money, and manipulation, which end by ruining the *autoritas* that comes from the concern for justice. To purchase the lost *autoritas*, nothing is better than to "make good use of the poor". However, all charitable works must be meticulously and closely watched, for groups of women unceasingly infiltrate them in order to sabotage that cornerstone of the political paradox and the social order. It is there that the future of tyranny is decided. If we were to help the Inquisition achieve its political suicide, we would be helping the cause of women.

Furthermore, Marguerite's formal silence did not prevent the Inquisition from questioning her informally with a view to documenting the dossier and better supporting the thesis probably already very well drafted by Brother William's secretaries. The best way to avoid torture for Marguerite was to become a party to a private and secret confession that would advance the thesis toward its predefined conclusion. So long as we brought the Inquisitor what he wanted, he wouldn't have to use up the precious time of Noiret and his confederates.

Audret had his network of informers. He would advise us, Agnes and me, of the Inquisitor's intentions, shifts in direction, theologians' debates, obstacles...

In the beginning of spring, I presented myself to the Saint-Jacques convent as an experienced notary able to document the Amaurician heresies of the beguines and the Free Spirit. I had a preliminary proof of this: the complete notes of two of Marguerite's sermons in Paris. As for the *Mirror*, it was still being studied as evidence by a committee of theologians at the University. I succeeded in persuading the Inquisition's representative at the convent that it would be worthwhile to compile in greater detail the heretic's justifications, the Satanic subtleties in her thought, the meandering lies that had led to such a dangerous heresy, to, in brief, uncover the trap itself. It was a fine advance in the struggle against heresy in general. And this couldn't be any better achieved than through an interrogation that was free and without violence.

After consultation with the Inquisitor, the representative gave us permission to proceed. By order of the prior, the dean of the convent, Father Dominique, an old man who was very alert, though physically very frail, was assigned to the task. There was obviously no question of a formal confession, since the woman

did not want to take an oath and was, on this account, excommunicated. Instead, it was a matter of a simple hearing of what the sinner would agree to say freely.

The old father was in no danger of falling into Satan's snares and vouched for my spiritual security, which was a little uncertain from the prior's point of view. For my part, I was going to compile the interrogations according to the proper forms. We were in no hurry. With a little patience, we might be able to obtain from the woman a very rich testimony capable of supporting the evidence. Given that the Pope wanted to make this an exemplary case, the effort was worth the trouble.

Three times a month, Father Dominique and I went into a low room. On those three days, Marguerite was freed from her chains, fed, and taken into a room illuminated by a small window. Father Dominique's frail health did not permit him to go any further down in the cells, and this was more convenient for taking notes.

Marguerite understood the game immediately and played along with it. I think she hoped that her confession would pass through time in the archives of the Inquisition. The vehicle made little difference, really; plants rise vigorous out of manure, so why couldn't her testimony emerge from the dossiers of the Inquisition?

If one sticks to the essential contents, the whole of the hearings can be summarized in the following dialogues.

Father Dominique - In your Mirror, you speak of seven states of grace. Tell me where such an ascension begins.

Marguerite - Father Dominique, you have lived in silence and solitude, you can understand. Alas! you have also lived according to a traditional model recognized by a rich and imposing institution. There you have great fortune like that of the rich man in the Gospel.

Father Dominique - Perhaps you are right. My community shows me a great respect. The novices admire me. But when I look at my life, I see nothing more than a miserable chain of indecisiveness and abdications. I surely am the rich man the Gospel speaks of, but my gold is no longer worth anything. Every time I look out a window and see a village, families, a beautiful hill, my life as a monk makes me smile and cry...

Marguerite, surprised, remained silent for a long time. Had she been given a sincere heart to confide in? She could hardly believe it. Even so, she dared to speak frankly.

Marguerite - Our first birth and our first education took us out of the carefree life of early childhood in order to throw us into the world organized by men.

Father Dominique - Where gold, weapons, honors, and even recognized sainthood make the rich young man dream.

Marguerite - Well said. The rich young man must now free himself from this

world. As long as we are somewhere, in a church, in a country, in a profession, in a status, in a city, in a village, on a road with its markers and stopping-places, as long as we inhabit an easily located social position, people will say about us: he was this, he was that, he lived here, he lived there, he passed through here, he passed through there...

Father Dominique - The little tracks of our little lives...

Marguerite - Exactly. As long as we are the hero of a story people like to tell, we are rich. But in fact, we are alone, poor, ageless, and storyless beneath the dome of a limitless firmament. Such is the point of departure.

Father Dominique - Solitude in the desert.

Marguerite - If that's what you want! But it is a desert filled with everything: trees, mountains, fields, cows, calves, pigs and sand, too, and women and men and children. And the slender necklace of our lives is barely visible in the grandeur of concrete things. We know therefore that we are at home. We know it because we want more than anything in the world to live in truth...

Father Dominique - What you call the Little Church is the rich young man today. Let us go straight to the point. I am that rich man. I feel them beside me, behind that wall, these poor people who are treated like dogs and I, I stay here praying, accomplice of a Church that justifies the worst injustices. A rift, a ravine, blocks, for me, access to the Kingdom. If I were sincere, I would pay the price...

Marguerite - You will pay the price, Father Dominique. But until then, it is better to taste life. The first fault of the rich young man is not to have tasted life. If he had tasted life, he would have spent all his gold like the prodigal child, and he would already be on the road of return...

Father Dominique - But Jesus didn't give in to the desires of the flesh!

Marguerite - What do you know about it! Father Dominique, it's your turn to speak, tell me why the Church has become a business for frustrated and misogynistic celibates who have no other concerns, it seems, than to be suspicious of young people's sex lives.

Father Dominique remained mute, as if drowned in sadness.

The convent bell marked the end of the question period. Father Dominique and I had decided to intersperse the interrogation with moments of silent prayer. While the old monk meditated, leaning on his cane, Marguerite turned her face to the cold winter light entering through the small window.

In spite of all these rest breaks, it was more and more difficult for the old Dominican to return from these meetings. I had to support him. He stopped on the stairs, knelt at times on a step, and resumed his effort until he reached the chapel. There, he sank into I know not what interior sea.

Toward the beginning of March, there were a few warm days. The father brought with him a copy of the Gospel of Mark which he patted from time to

time as his head swung from side to side. Marguerite was getting a little of her strength back. Her heart was lighter, she laughed often. She really liked Father Dominique, and he felt exactly the same way about her.

Father Dominique - We have spoken at length about entering the Kingdom, but what is the second state of grace?

Marguerite - In the first state, we answer the call of truth...

Father Dominique - But if truth were nothing more than sand in the wind and we had to conclude that the world was absurd!

Marguerite - Advancing in truth surprises us as well, because truth of necessity is not what we, or anyone else, wants. It might well be that the conclusion will terrify us. So here is my question: is there something in the human being that drives him to desire the truth more than anything, even to the detriment of the answers he may want?

Father Dominique - Do you mean to say that the fact of wanting truth more than God himself demonstrates that we are more divine than we think, I mean capable of truth well beyond our self-interest!

Marguerite - It is our first meeting with our own nature: we love truth more than ourselves. It is a danger for religions built on falsehood, but the hope of lovers of truth. However, the thirst for truth leads to another thirst, the thirst for justice, for truth wants to act on the world and the first social truth is that we are all equal before the grandeur of the Cosmos.

Father Dominique - Your way is terrible, Madame Porete!

Marguerite - The heart can find its joy only in responding to its desires for truth and justice...

Father Dominique - Doesn't the call of the flesh mix up desires...

Marguerite - Don't trust your distrust of the body since it is our mind that constructs our idea of the body and its desires. Father Dominique, people who respond to their bodies' desires don't wallow in lust all day long!

Father Dominique - Your words make me angry because you have come here to pay a price I tremble at, I who have struggled all my life against the temptations of the flesh.

When the father was tired, we let him sleep a little. To absorb a little warmth, Marguerite huddled in a ring of light. I used this time to weep in silence. It was my consolation. I couldn't approach her, take her hand, caress her hair. A guard might arrive at any moment. So, I wept.

When the father awoke, Marguerite once again assumed her sitting position, perpendicular to the confessor, and continued as if the links of time had been welded back together again without the smallest fissure, and I held back my tears.

Father Dominique - I have thought carefully about all your words and I can't

quite put my finger on the secret of your serenity.

Marguerite - A mother understands her child. In a way, her heart and her intelligence envelop her child's heart and intelligence. A child of seven or eight can already understand a horse, at least sufficiently to make it respect him. The gardener understands his plants, the cowherd his cows, the hunter, his game, the artisan, his art...

Father Dominique - And me! Do I understand you? I ask myself that!

Marguerite - There is a place where we understand each other just because we envelop each other. Two mathematicians understand each other because there is a common basis of mathematical logic in thought, a mathematical intelligibility of the world. Music is intelligible, the cosmos is at least in part intelligible, an intelligence can wrap itself around it. If there didn't exist in some way such an intelligence, the cosmos would be absolutely inaccessible.

Father Dominique - And where is serenity in all that?

Marguerite - It is the state of that enveloping when we feel that it is reciprocal. The child is serene in its mother's arms.

Father Dominique - All that seems so abstract!

Marguerite - Like a baby...

Father Dominique - A baby!

Marguerite - If you have never taken care of a baby, the baby is an abstraction. An abstraction is a thing whose existence you have neglected. For a mother, a baby is not abstract. Our friendship, Father Dominique, is it abstract? We feel as if we understand each other, at least a little. If not, why talk? The concrete forces thought to consider its existence. If that bench there were abstract, I could pass through it without colliding with it. But it does bar my way. If I didn't think about its solidity, I would strike against it. Suffering is almost always colliding with something we didn't know how to think about.

Father Dominique - And you, Marguerite, aren't you colliding with the Church?

Marguerite - Don't you know very well that it is the Church that is colliding with me?

Father Dominique - An elephant doesn't collide with a speck of dust!

Marguerite - I am not a speck of dust. I am a mountain, an enormous mountain, I am woman and I am here to end the time of submission and open a new era.

The sun had set. I had seen it disappear. It had seemed to me that the bleeding horizon had risen behind the hills and that it had ended up swallowing the solar orb. There was something crystalline and sparkling about the darkness...

The next day, the monk arrived tired and let slip this one question.

Father Dominique - And love?

Marguerite - Love goes beyond knowledge. To mutually envelop each other is

not sufficient; it is a preamble. Love goes further. In love, we know that being always escapes every enveloping. The embrace finishes nothing. If the wind tries to envelop the fire, it arouses it. If the musician seeks to envelop the music, it arouses him. Such is the essence of love. If the philosopher seeks the truth, the truth arouses him...

Father Dominique - So love finishes nothing.

Marguerite - Life always stands in the beginning, never in the end, that is why death is no more than the renewing of the peripheries. Lovers want to be set one in the other forever, and yet their game consists of escaping that fusion. In love, we go where we are not so as to be what we are.

After several months of this confession which truly was one, Father Dominique seemed lost. He sat in the garden. He remained motionless for hours watching the spring battle the frozen ground, soften its dough, and prepare its verdure. He himself, with the dizzying speed of the season, went in the opposite direction from springtime, was transformed into a sickly old man: his skin stretched, the wrinkles lengthened, his weight overcame his drive, his memory dispersed like autumn leaves. He held on to things less and less: at supper he dropped his bowl and his spoon; in the evening his prayer fell from his mouth in imperceptible whisperings. His eyelids filled with a water that ran down the furrows of his cheeks.

Nonetheless, he summoned up his strength for the questions. The life remaining in him was exercised there.

Father Dominique - Lady Porete, don't leave me here in this monastery.

Marguerite - Let us give ourselves to love, Father Dominique. Love is everything, it takes everything, it tears everything away from us, but above all, it leads us to everything. Listen to me, Father Dominique. I tell you this, because I feel it, and that is what love is, to respond to your desires is part of my existence.

Father Dominique - And what do I desire?

Marguerite - Me.

Father Dominique - You!

Marguerite - Yes, me, the old woman. (She laughed a little.) Every being in this world desires me. In the beginning, we realize that we desire the flowers, the trees, and the mountains. Next, we realize that each flower, each tree, and each mountain desires us. To know that we are desired in this way by everything changes everything. Not only do we have to produce ourselves and give ourselves, but produce ourselves and give ourselves without shame and without reserve. For if I am capable of a greater art and I do not give it to you, I am depriving you of myself, I am depriving myself of myself, and we are deprived of love.

Father Dominique - A great enthusiasm, it seems to me! What is the difference between you and the Inquisitor?

Marguerite - William of Paris acts against concrete women and men in the name of an abstract good. I come to the rescue of women and children. I love them, it is stronger than me, much stronger than me...

Father Dominique - You're taking a big risk...

Marguerite - We will not die just any death; our soul is prepared for one precise death, as a key is forged for one precise lock. The pain is not so great because the key fits perfectly in the keyhole...

The silence that followed these words was too heavy. Father Dominique entered a state of fixedness from which he could not extricate himself.

Marguerite moved her hand nearer. He brought his closer. On the stone window ledge, the two hands remained side by side, motionless. Hands so different. One had caressed the heads of so many children, cared for so many women, touched so many wounds, so many vegetables, so much grain and so much life that it might have been said to be a hand full of things. The other had skimmed so many pages, pursued so many lines, that one might have said it was the worn leather casing of an old breviary, a hand deprived of things. These two hands almost touched each other. I told myself: one day, one of these hands will touch the other...

The next day, he wasn't short of courage and took up where he had left off.

Father Dominique - You have spoken with me about the first three states of grace. The fourth state, isn't it the peace, silence and solitude of which the mystics speak?

Marguerite - No one speaks about the fourth state, it would be shocking. The lover doesn't speak of it, out of modesty. The lovers touch and embrace each other, but their fondling remains secret. The lady's maid who dresses the lady in the morning recognizes the signs of them in the reflections of the light on the satin of the skin. The squire does the same for the knight. There comes a moment when love is no longer a surpassing of the self, but a surrendering to pleasure. Joy, Father Dominique, is the blood of the soul.

Father Dominique froze once again in silence.

The following day, he inquired about the fifth state.

Father Dominique - I am so small and you are talking to me about something so great...

Marguerite - Yes! It is true that from the point of view of our ability to produce our being and our meaning, we are nothing and we depend on everything. But it is a very curious nothing since everything, absolutely everything is necessary for the life of this nothing.

Father Dominique - ... Terrible paradox.

Marguerite - Paradox the source at the same time of the worst and the best in man. From this feeling comes the inclination toward nothingness found in all human souls. Before being, I was not. I know that I am a part of this

nothingness out of which I have been drawn. At every moment, I take air, warmth, light, food, water out of all that I am not. Terrible feeling. If I sink into this feeling, my relationship with nothingness, my guilt about belonging to nothingness, my anxiety that comes from nothingness will kill me.

Father Dominique - You're losing me!

Marguerite - When, suddenly, a baby ends up attached to your nipples, a little one who has just been drawn out of nothingness by a stupendous desire to live, we are touched by his extreme fragility and dependence. We say to ourselves: "If I remain superior, if I hold on to the role of nurse, he may never be able to develop, he will be stupefied by my status as all-powerful creator, he will remain inhibited, submissive, obedient and will never be able to find himself. His guilt from belonging to nothingness will kill him. He will only be able to get out of it by hating himself. That hate will distort his being; he will become master or slave and he will destroy the world surrounding him. An all-powerful God can produce only three things: dominating men, dominated men and a world in ruins.

Father Dominique - What are you saying there?

Marguerite - The fifth state is that I am the mother of men, so I must learn how to love them appropriately...

Father Dominique - It is surely that love that terrifies men. I am an old man, and that sort of love frightens me...

Father Dominique no longer wanted to stop the sessions of this confession, but he had no more questions, or rather he was submerged by questions. We went down to the low room and, in silence, we let the light warm us.

Springtime had completed its arrival. The light took on substance. It fell in oblique rays through the clouds, diluted our memories, inundated worry and lifted the soul like a river overflowing its banks lifts houses.

In spite of the springtime, Agnes' attentions, and the quietness of the confession, Marguerite looked more and more like a little old woman, bent over and out of breath. One might have said she was one of the starving children at the Place aux soupes: the bones stuck out of her flesh, her skin loosened her veins, and her eyes peered into emptiness. She was so light: a butterfly still entangled in the shreds of its cocoon.

I no longer prayed, I looked at her, I collected the last sparks.

How much time can a spark live? This is a very big question.

Father Dominique had returned to his childhood. He had returned to his mother's place. This could be seen in his hands which had grown supple and moved by fits and starts, opening and closing like those of a suckling infant. He clung to imaginary hair, held a maternal breast, renewed his strength in the lost tenderness. Nicodemus. Starting from this new beginning, he was remaking his life, he was reconstructing it branch by branch, he was taking other roads, roads he had rejected.

He whispered that new life to us in fragments. From the age of five, rather than go with his father, he stayed with his mother. He did the cooking. He ate straight from the cauldron. At ten, he ran with his girl cousin in a wheat field. At eighteen, he married her.

Tears ran down his cheeks. The life he had not lived entered his veins and left through his eyes, bitter waters.

He regretted nothing; he was living other things. He added up the lives to make a bouquet of them. Why not a thousand lives! This purged him of bitterness.

Children ran around him. He taught them how to approach animals, he showed them how to pat them, he took them with the sheep up to the mountains, he never stopped chatting with the young shepherd girls who ran in the grass. I saw all this through his smile.

His hands were inlaid with the lives he had not wanted.

Father Dominique was galloping on his horse, and his eldest daughter was following him. He let her catch up with him. He let her run in front of him. Her golden hair rippled in the light. And behold! a future was opening up in front of him. When he was certain that his daughter was pregnant, when he saw her suckle her firstborn, Father Dominique stopped breathing.

His head was resting on Marguerite's thighs. He was still looking at her. Sparks appeared in the woman's eyes as they disappeared from the eyes of the old man.

Nothing was sweeter than this internalization of a man in a woman.

I had to bring him back up from the cellars. He was dead. I cried "help" so that someone would bring the Prior.

The Prior arrived nearly terror-stricken. I shouldn't have held his gaze. He noticed the sparks in my eyes. A spark lasts too long, and his gaze lasted too long. He recognized "the woman's dog" on my face.

He went into an incomprehensible rage. He understood the plot immediately, had me arrested on the spot and imprisoned as a heretic sympathizer. Fortunately, he did not connect Agnes to my crime

The Entombment

To be entombed before death plunges us into the strange necessity of putting an end to the remnants of our own will, or, if you like, of fabricated hopes. The slightest will, whether directed toward escape, vengeance, or revolt, becomes the torturer's acolyte. It must be killed before its birth, for after that, it has already taken control; an hour later, it possesses us.

I was a prisoner of the Inquisition, so I had to rid myself of my inner enemies.

Bound in irons at the wrists and ankles, attached to a short granite column by four chains six ells long, I had to restrain my heart, nail it down once and for all: I will never get out of here. This cell is my tomb.

They had left me nothing but my homespun cassock, no undergarments, no cross, no cord, no socks, no sandals, nothing. The darkness was such that when I closed my eyes I could see no difference between my inner gloom and the outer blackness. A slight difference in the cold separated night from day.

In the beginning, smell alone structured the circle of my space. A hole had undoubtedly been prepared for my bodily needs; it had been emptied, but it still stank. On the other side of the column, the straw was fresh and if I buried my nose in it, I managed to lessen my nausea. The hole and the straw were my only landmarks, my sole geography. I decided to keep a small pile of straw away from me, at the end of my chains, accessible to my nose alone. I preferred the cold, it kills much better than the stench.

Such a long time ago already, I had said adieu to Beatrice and the children... Little by little, I was regaining the awareness of time. I was no longer on the roof of my house, but in the lower basement of the society of men.

In the ferrous darkness, I was alert for the smallest sounds. I heard moaning from different spots, but I was alone in a vaulted cell, as large as a crypt. This was my perception, after having scrutinized the echoes at length.

From the beginning, I had erased any hope of leaving the cell. I knew perfectly the usual procedure and the end reserved for a sympathizer like me, without family or protector. Systematically, I liquidated one by one all the illusions that my positive imagination could produce. But more dangerous than the mirage of salvation, Noiret slipped into my imagination. He lit his fires, meticulously checked his wheel, examined his instruments. Rationally I knew that they would not do me that honor. Torture required a procedure. They already had all the information useful for the condemnation of the beguines. The prior was certainly not going to formalize his negligence through an official investigation. I was socially and administratively non-existent, so they weren't going to make me exist through a notarized torture. They were reserving for me the usual fate accorded heretics without documents

It had been explicitly agreed upon that if one of the three of us were captured,

the others should abandon her or him. It was the only thing to do. I had been thrown alive into what was customarily called the "dog cage". No one escaped from that passive torture. They simply forgot the poor wretch in his chains, and after a few months, he became as mad as a dog abandoned at the end of a rope. He ate his own limbs in an attempt to free himself, wriggled for a moment in his blood, and they threw his still-warm body out with the garbage.

I could hear the convent bell and when I was able to regain my self-control a little, I learned to follow the Hours. Once a day, after vespers, they left a small bowl of barley broth and a goblet of water at the end of my chains, so as to lengthen my suffering. The person who entered left his torch outside. I saw only a shadow. I drank the water, took the bowl and emptied it directly in the hole. Despite my repulsion, I interred the broth in a little earth mixed with excrements. I didn't want to be stuffed with a funnel like a gander. I had mercy on myself. I worked instinctively to shorten my torture.

So as not to yield to either will or fear, I had to devote all the energy of my imagination to the creation of some kind of work. The darkness left me very few possibilities. I forced my imagination to relieve me. I decided to use the better part of my periods of wakefulness to paint a series of pictures to decorate an imaginary great hall where I could invite Marguerite, Beatrice and the children. I would produce one painting representing my childhood, another painting would be devoted to my fall into the world of men, seven paintings would represent my slow initiation, from the hospital at Valenciennes to Paris via a life of marriage, family, and service, and two paintings would recapitulate the Festival of Fools and saving the poor. It was one way of bringing my baggage home before the departure. Without the peace of the comforting angel, I would never have managed to do it.

Each painting demanded that I pay attention to every moment. The imagination is easily destabilized by irregularity in breathing and emotional instability, which influence the beating of the heart. Nonetheless, for a period going from the Angelus until the arrival of the barley broth, I was able to keep in place the great hall, the easel, the wooden panel covered with its base coat, the brushes and the palette of colors.

I proceeded carefully. I began with sketches, worked at the composition, refined the drawing down to the smallest details. Next, I colored it with great care. If fatigue got the better of me, I took a break on the gallery of the great hall and looked at the landscape. The garden was immense, the vegetables were growing well... And I had to endlessly scold Becassine, whose only thought was to take advantage of the garden. As soon as I could, I resumed my work. I was increasingly certain that Flore, Maiffe, Marguerite and Beatrice would come to visit my hall. That would be the end. I wanted to die happy.

Hearing is a very unusual sense; it builds its own space. A good way of helping it consists of making it advance through concentric circles. At first one pays attention to a distance of several ells around oneself. One can discern very fine sounds: insects living in the straw, the scurrying of a rat as he goes to feed in

the hole, the light touch of a lizard's tail. When one goes further, it is possible to discriminate the sighs that slide along the stone walls and outline the architecture. Through these sighs rose a hum coming from the vaults, holes of silence revealing openings and doors, soft hisses unveiling alcoves, echoes that revealed obstacles. All this occurs with a texture borrowed from sandstone, granite, wood, and earth. Against this background, one can manage to locate the sound of living beings.

The moans, the cries, the snoring, the clinking noises of the guards, the rustling of chains, the sighs, the creaks, the groans...I succeeded sometimes in outlining a tiny island of silence, a rather distant niche from which no moans came, but sometimes a very light women's whispering. Once, I managed to definitely discern Agnes' voice, then, very weak, that of Marguerite. Starting from that moment, I managed to perceive snatches of their conversation. I certainly knew that the content of the dialogue was largely the result of my imagination, but the sound materials really did come from my hearing. In the night, the ears naturally go to the limits of love and gather the living around the heart. My house was not so empty.

In times of too great fatigue, my imagination fell back into my body in chains. I was burned at the wrists and ankles by the irons, and my skin was raw down to the bone. The remainder of my body was ice-cold. The pain spread, and all of my skeleton moved restlessly about. Like frayed hemp cords barely holding together a bundle of faggots, only with difficulty did my muscles keep my body unified. My body went into terrible convulsions, fell into the fire, was thrown on the ice. I sweated, shivered, my teeth chattered, and I vomited what remained of my gastric acid.

Exhausted, my imagination could no longer do anything against the torture; it participated in it with a ferocity worthy of Noiret. The torturer is in us. The inquisitor is us. The torment lasted until my heart wrapped itself around the knots of my pain like a bitch around its pups. It called for a general numbing. The healer is in us. The doctor is us. Night brings the universe back to itself. I was contemplative in the night.

There is a point between the thumb and the index that the undertaker pinches violently before certifying a death. I noticed that if I prolonged this pinching, if I bit long enough, the entire body would end up becoming numb, and sometimes sleep came with its mercy. A point of contemplation. The other point is located at the base of the nose, in the fold of the upper lip. By strongly pressing the iron band around my wrist on this point, I succeeded in freezing my body even more rapidly. Next I pressed the back of my neck against two small stones, and I sank into a feverish sleep. The night returned me home.

I avoided disorganization thanks to my three exercises: decorating the great hall of my imagination with paintings recapitulating my life, encircling space with all of my hearing until I got to Agnes and Marguerite, cradling my pain and relieving the dying according to what I had learned from the beguines.

Alas! more and more often sleep swept me off into uncontrolled dreams.

Sometimes I left my cell to meet Beatrice, and the shock of awakening was unendurable. Sometimes I was in a dungeon, spread out on the wheel, and Noiret was roasting me with red-hot irons. Then awakening saved me for a brief time.

At the end of I don't know how long a time, I could no longer distinguish sleep from waking. The paintings painted themselves, hearing probed impenetrable spaces, my body's pain was all-consuming, and everything was mixed up.

To die suffering is one thing, to croak as one's tormented mind dissolves in the cold is another. I had understood it: Egyptian religion, Greek culture, Roman mythology bring the city out of chaos by the intervention of a demiurge, an arranger, an organizer, an emperor. They suppose a dark and mysterious foundation, a primordial madness, a chaos of blind forces. If no logos, noûs, reason or intellect builds order through knowledge or law, then the world and all men flow into the primordial madness of this chaos. In short, madness was for them the primitive foundation into which we fall as soon as the empire of reason gives way. It suffices, then, to place man in an environment where he can no longer think and, according to this theory, he will of necessity fall into madness, into the primal chaos. The "dog cage" torture rests on that law. A stake, a rope, an animal. Any empire, whether Catholic, Islamic, Chinese or barbarian, rests on that law. A stake, a rope, a sheep. The "good", guilt, instinct. Psychology of master and slave: without submission to rules, the madness of instincts.

This is totally the contrary of the cosmology of the Free Spirit beguines. If man returns to his most primitive source, he becomes a saint and not a madman. Madness, on the contrary, is the state of the city when order comes from force, and force comes from an arbitrary will, that is to say from an act independent of the understanding of the totality of the earth's inhabitants. In short, for the beguines, the primitive state is not chaos, but the creator uterus. Chaos is, on the contrary, the will against life, the empire, in other words.

Fatigue and suffering were destroying my reason. The threads of time were tightening, space was twisting. The abyss was opening its maw. The night demolished me. For me it was the moment of truth, the moment of verifying if woman is the primordial creator in the cosmos or if she is madness threatening the cosmos.

Was I going to sink into chaos or into the breast of a benevolent mother? Deathly anguish.

I stretched out my nose to reach the little pile of straw I had set aside. The smell soothed me. The cold chilled me with sleep.

It was my only hope: dive into the river, let the eddies sweep me away. I repeated: "Into your hands I commit my spirit". I was utterly incapable of any other prayer.

The slightest twitch created imaginary tumults that tortured me. I became a rat desperately going up the sewer, I passed through wars, rapes, violence, the

cities and the miseries of the world.

At other times, the despair became so absolute, so impeccable, so perfect, so pure, so beautiful, that a confidence without reserve arose in me. To despair of oneself, of the world, of everything, purges the soul and renders it perfectly receptive to the deep currents that circulate in the entrails of the cosmos. This despairing ends by attacking despair itself, and peace comes like a state of corporeal music. It is a primitive knowledge of the coincidence of truth, consciousness and being.

How many times did I find myself lying, my head on Marguerite's stomach, feeling so small that she seemed to envelop me like a nursing infant. I felt her respiration, the beating of her heart, the quiet of her arms. She was having me swallow a warm oat broth in which she had placed a spoonful of honey. We were carried off by an ascending wind, transported over Paris.

And then I fell back into my cell with, as my only prayer: "Oh Night! Cast me back no longer into the confusion of men."

Once, I heard a little bit of Chapter 117 of the Mirror: "I cannot lose my beauty since I cannot lose my ugliness; I cannot erase my goodness since I cannot erase my malice, I cannot eliminate my hope, for I cannot eliminate my despair. It is because my sail resists that the wind bears me away, it is because my sail tears that I fall into the sea. I clearly see that I am a part of the salvation of the world since I am participating in its unhappiness. You can all understand how my shadows have forced the stars to spurt out light."

I added: Now, kiss me, for I have drunk the cup to the bottom.

Someone was shoving me. The torch's light violently slashed the darkness.

- Is he already dead? a guard was saying.

The other was feeling me.

- He let himself starve to death. The son-of-a-bitch! He will be punished.

He jabbed a stick between my ribs. I stiffened with pain.

- He's alive. Let's take him to the infirmary. The witch will pull him through.

I was under an intense light that passed through my eyelids. Tears flowed. A shining blade cut through the fog, replacing things beside their meanings. The world was taking me back. I could do nothing about it. I was returning to life, to suffering...

So the torture wasn't finished.

Men were holding me solidly by the wrists and ankles. My body was materializing in a renewed pain. I was ending up like meat in a meat-grinder. Tragic resurrection of Lazarus, horrible exit from the quiet of the tomb! Once more I was open to the violence of men. I had a body with a potential to suffer again.

- Let him be.

It was Agnes' voice. They let me go. There was a long silence, there was a soft sound.

Agnes' hands plunged into the water, washing my body which was no more than bones. A shiver awakened my skin which tightened, then submitted to the warmth of the water.

She poured a lukewarm infusion into my lips. A burning revived my guts. A cramp, a spasm, and a softness... There was a silence, there was a moment of exquisite delight.

I went to sleep in the smell of straw.

The night had turned the light brown, subdued the sounds, dampened the odors. The world had fallen asleep.

I woke up. The smell of a woman dilated my nostrils. I opened my eyes.

I was stretched out on a bed. I turned my head. There was Marguerite's face. She was looking at me. It was truly her. She too was stretched out on a large sheet that covered the straw of her bed. Her face was emaciated; one might have said they were the eyes of autumn in a skull of wax. She was smiling at me.

- It was magnificent! she said to me.

I saw again each one of the paintings in my imaginary great hall. I entered it as if they were scenes from life.

In all my existence, love, then, was all that there had been. The rest had only existed to set the stage for it. Love was enough.

- Are we in the resurrection room, I asked Marguerite.

- No, not yet, she answered. We will be soon. But already the world has lost its ability to do us harm.

Agnes was seated between our two beds. Her face remained impassive. She was staring at the ground. I followed her line of sight, which rebounded off the floor. A guard was standing at the head of our beds, straight as a statue, proudly holding his lance, scornful of the dying people that we were.

This was the infirmary of the Saint Jacques convent. I fell asleep like a bird vaguely anxious about gravity.

Agnes cared for us with all the arts of the filles-Dieu. She had us swallow very thin broths, watered us with herbal juices, rubbed us with oil, and brought us back to life. But her face remained impassive, forced into indifference by the soldier who watched over us with zeal and scorn.

It was useless to question her. There could be no other reason for this salvation than our loss.

At the end of a long sequence of wakefulness, of dawns, of twilights, of broths, of herbal teas, of rubdowns, of dreams and nightmares, our bodies had regained new capacities for suffering. Just as a broken arm, as it is restored, adds density

to the bone, the life of the resuscitated adds sensitivity to the heart as it is restored. Which is not an advantage.

All was pleasure, all was pain. We were no longer capable of the world; with the same breath, it swept us away into ecstasy or pain.

They made us get up. They forced us to walk. Brutally, the guards put our joints to work. Granules of calcium scraped the cartilage in every one of them.

To live again was an ordeal, illumined by Agnes' caresses. But strangely, pains and pleasures produced the same effect: they proved that life had once and for all integrated us and that nothing seemed able to extract us from our metamorphizing bodies. Perhaps the soul is nothing other than the body once it is really incarnated in things.

When we were able to stand up and walk a few steps by ourselves, they led us to the hall of questions. Before us, eyes closed, kneeling on a prie-Dieu, was Brother William.

He remained in prayer another moment, opened his eyes, slowly got up, and came forward. He didn't see me, but addressed Marguerite:

-Your life and your doctrines are an abomination to the Church of God.

The two guards accompanying us placed their iron hands on Marguerite's shoulders. She fell to her knees. William took another step in her direction. The monk's face grimaced from the sulfurous stink he imagined. He drew back slightly. He continued his sentence with a voice that seemed to be restraining itself from vomiting. High theater.

- The plague that you have introduced and that has spread to women whose simplicity, ignorance, and sensuality you have taken advantage of is imputed to you by the power of the Church to seal in Heaven what it seals on earth.

I couldn't keep from protesting:

-You don't know what you're saying.

A guard's steel cuff broke my teeth. I too fell on my knees beside my lady. Brother William remained fixed on Marguerite:

- The verdict of the Sorbonne confirms the verdict of Cambrai, fifteen extracts are affirmed heretical, the remainder is a woman's poor ravings. You are condemned, and the totality of beguines, beghards and madmen of the Free Spirit along with you.

He turned toward me:

- And you, dog of the beguines, you are well-named, the divine fire will not spare you either.

He took a step backward, and stared at Marguerite once again:

- Unbeliever, tomorrow you will be brought before the Hôtel de Ville for the oath of allegiance which will separate every year, from now on, the vermin from the lambs. If you publicly abjure, you may be spared Hell. Are you going

to confess your heresy? At the same time, you would save your dog.

Marguerite attempted to get up, but didn't have the physical strength.

Silence suddenly filled all the room, a silence so long, so compact, so inviolable that the Inquisitor hastily left the room with his guards. We remained alone in front of the prie-Dieu.

In this silence, I finally conceded that we were the beauty of the world.

For the first time, I felt that all of creation had been made for us, yes, truly for us who were there like corollas absorbing the daylight. All the cosmos was coming to us through this entering light. Nothing could hide our house any longer. We were home, in the day and in the night.

William's words will pass, but we, we were assigned permanent residence in this vast universe where we had as our duty, brotherhood. Our souls absorbed the unavoidable happiness of living in so vast a house. It is said: Drawn up by the sun, thrown to earth by condensation, all the water on earth ends by passing through the same fountain. We were that fountain.

Ecce Femina

On May 13, 1310, Philippe de Marigny, arbitrarily appointed by the king archbishop of Sens, had 54 Templars executed on a common stake in the marsh near the Temple. The fate of the grand master, Jacques de Molay and that of the commander, Geoffroy de Charnay, lover of the grande Dame of Brussels, was not yet sealed. Were the two men still alive? It was said that they were.

Marguerite had survived eighteen months of imprisonment thanks to Agnes' care and the rest provided her by her dialogues with Father Dominique. Despite a renewal of vigor that probably came from hoping for the end, her body was no longer able to recover. She was dying, but concealed it very well.

On the 31st of May, the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville was inundated with people and symbols. On the rostrums: the king, his family, his retinue, the bishop and his courtiers, William of Paris and the clerics of the Inquisition, the theologians of the University, colors, flags, standards. At their feet: the high bourgeoisie. On horses: the nobility, the knights, the army's cavalry, coats of arms, blazons, escutcheons. On the roofs and balconies: archers and crossbowmen in breastplates of royal blue. In the crowd: swordsmen in the same colors. Further off, encircling the square: scarlet pikemen. And the crowd, gray, submissive, insulting.

All these fine people had joyfully spat out the oath like a firecracker, sparks in their eyes, proud to belong to this multitude huddled against all the menaces of hell. Then, this mass fell silent, to better feel its power. Power of slaves. Against who?

Yes, there surely were dangers somewhere, enemies, German, Flemish or Scottish scoundrels... Still barbarians... It was impossible for there not to be enemies of the king, of France, of the pope, of Catholic order. Above all, internal enemies, Templars for example, or rival families, opposing clans, secret organizations perhaps, and, far away, Saracens, Allah's horrible fanatics, bloodthirsty Orientals... And many other enemies: sects, overzealous monks, monks who weren't zealous enough, witches, enchantresses, sibylls, werewolves, sea monsters, underground kingdoms, incubus and succubus devils... All of this together is evil, Satan, and it infiltrates through medical theories, exotic doctrines, whisperings too, and through reason, through order and through disorder, through abuse of the senses or through abuse of ideas... Nearly always invisible enemies that one must beware of in order to save the pope, to save the king, to save the Almighty, the ever-so fragile Almighty!

Solidarity against the enemy. Salvation of the people.

Hail, slaves! I saw you that day. You were looking at us. You had spat out the oath: "We are one against you, enemies of civilization, enemies of the Church, enemies of the king, enemies of Christ." We were before you, the perfect symbol, target of your hate.

They must exist, these enemies. They cannot be lacking.

Yes! What would you be without us? What would you do without your enemies?

We were six outside that solidarity, standing straight, unable to say a word, incapable of that allegiance: a priest from Beauvais, an unfortunate peasant woman alleged to have uttered a spell against her parish priest, two who had informed against the Temple and then repented having spoken, Marguerite and I, beguards opposed to marriage and abstinence: messengers of the Enemy.

What a strange silence ours was. The Temple informers no longer had tongues or strength; they were so broken by torture that they could not stand had they not been attached to a post hidden in their robes. The priest from Beauvais, lying on a stretcher, stared at the sky with the dazed look of a dying man. The witch stood up straight on her own power; they had not cut her hair. No doubt they were saving her for the display of mercy. Marguerite and I set apart, special enemies. A particular admonition awaited us, with drama and objurgations, for it was a matter of condemning an entire movement, with amputating all of a nascent organ of society, a loathsome branch that smelled of sex and the country.

We had no desire to speak.

The silence spoke in our place. Before the Inquisition, our raw presence buried all the words. Never would I have wanted to be anywhere else, someplace in the crowd, amid that solidarity of fear.

The small halo of silence we had formed in their creed, as they recited the oath, this little hole that didn't say a word, I had savored it. It asserted that we were not one of them, that we did not belong to their mass, that we had nothing to oppose, that we had no enemy, that this idea of enemy did not concern us. We were on the side of the reconciled, of those who no longer have antagonists, above all not that mass aroused against its own imagination. They were excommunicating us. That relieved them. We enveloped them in our commiseration. That irritated them.

I experienced the happiness of Jonah thrown up by the whale. I was on the shore. The sky was blue that day; at most a few white clouds tickled each other above our heads. In the countryside I did not see, peasants were walking on an already productive earth. Far away, Beatrice was weeding the garden with the children... Happiness was there, in arm's reach.

The beast was spewing me up. I was no longer in the beast. My view was unobstructed. The light pierced me with all its arrows.

I saw before me these souls crushed by fear, glued together in the same sweat of fear. In the crowd, a terrible anxiety suppressed a muted resentment... Tears longed to flow from my eyes. Could there be in all of interstellar space a people so poor, helpless, suffering, and beside themselves? My eyes remained dry, however.

Children in their mothers' arms seemed frozen in a fright close to panic, as if they felt the horror approach them. No one was going to protect them. So I held my head high in dignity, veiling as best I could the fears that wanted to strangle me.

After having slowly disrobed the witch to ensure that she had no talisman, they released her. This was the first spectacle. The two informers were sentenced to remain there on their stake, so that they might use the final moments of their lives to repent. They were not going to survive very long. The priest of Beauvais and Marguerite were condemned to be burnt at the stake the next day. The plague is purified by fire. I, for my part, was going to end my days in a monastic prison.

The next day, a little before dawn, they loaded us on a large tipcart: the body of the priest from Beauvais, dead in his cell, Marguerite the master beguine, and me, "the women's dog", forced to be the witness of his mistress's suffering. The crowd covered the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, also called the Place de Grève because it adjoined the shore of the merchants' guild. The distance from the Hôtel de Ville to the shore was not long, nor was it far from the Saint Gervais church to the stake of the condemned. One only had to cut through the crowd, which need only change the direction of its gaze in order to pass from the glory of the powers to the fall of the heresiarchs.

This change of direction was going to be a metamorphosis, however.

In the beginning, the soldiers struggled with the crowd to clear a way for the cart. Of course, the king, the bishop, the Inquisitor, the nobility, the high bourgeoisie, so proud of their justice yesterday, were not there. We had been given over to the secular arm. The municipal executioner on his plastroned palfry, his armed guard, and his breastplated officers followed us. The tumult of the day before had given way to the immobility of morning.

These were not the same spectators. There began to well up from the ground, through the mouths of children and their mothers perhaps, a vague memory of winter. Mothers and children from the soup kitchen had come. While the soldiers encouraged the usual mockery, the crowd sought refuge in an assertive muteness. The poor priest's corpse lay at our feet; one might have said it was an old peasant lying on the ground. Marguerite stood up straight, free in her gestures and manner as if this delivered priest had given her his energy.

She looked at these poor and humiliated people. Tears ran down her cheeks. One by one, hearts were led back into their soul. The air's transparency crystallized in the morning silence.

- Don't be afraid of anything, Marguerite told them. The gardens and fields will give a good yield. Rejoice! Every one of you is desired, every one is loved, none of you will be abandoned.

A little further on she added:

- You, my little children, this afternoon you will hide your faces in your maman's coat. Don't forget to hide your face. Your maman will protect you.

For the time being, look up high, the sky is blue, the clouds are playing leapfrog. The weather is very good today, don't be afraid of anything...

Her voice was clear, scarcely troubled by a slight trembling. The silence carried her words as the wind carries off the dandelions' tiny umbrellas. Her look, even more than her voice, was reassuring. She gazed at a mother, a father, a child as if she wanted to know the story of each one, and bring her or him with her. A question of broadening herself before the final hour, of making room for an unbearable emotion... She went on, ever so softly.

- This poor priest from Beauvais here at my feet, I knew him. He loved his wife and his children and sympathized with us. Where is he now?

She smiled. Her eyes were filled with visions. She took a deep breath and continued:

- The sky is beautiful. The trees are singing and the tulips are shining.

Tears flowed from her eyes. She kept on singing for a moment. Then she called out very loudly:

- Listen. Every one of you will leave this square alive, even more alive than you came. No one will die here today... In my home, where I came from and where I am going, there is no king, there is no pope, there are no laws, there are only fields and wheat.

Why hadn't the executioner ordered her teeth to be broken and her tongue burned? That was the custom on such an occasion! Visibly, he feared for his life. He had too few soldiers at his disposal and the crowd was closely surrounding him. Marguerite's words were calming them. He let her go on.

And Marguerite continued. She spoke slowly, allowing long silences to enter her sentences so as to cover all of the Place, from the Hôtel de Ville to the stake driven into the shore. She spoke loudly so that all would hear. She covered that space with words that sang. She spoke slowly, but she didn't give silence the time to imagine the fire...

A man near the cart cast a doubtful look at her. She smiled at him.

- You think, Monsieur, that I am dreaming, that there is no land of bread, that there is no kingdom where the girls have braided their hair for dancing, where the boys are gallant, where the children are happy, where the priests are good husbands... I tell you, this country is right here..."

A small group, completely absorbed by Marguerite's words that, obviously, they didn't understand had, without being aware of it, advanced in front of the tipcart. The old horse stopped for a moment, happy to take a rest.

Marguerite was speaking. She was struggling with the silence that contradicted her. For the stake was there, mute in front of her. No, she was speaking for something else...She wasn't speaking just to divert her imagination from the fire. She was speaking in order to die, to exhaust a final remnant of energy. She was not speaking, she was giving her life so that it couldn't be taken from

her.

- Because you are afraid, you see a corpse lying in a cart, a standing man who is silent, and an agitated woman who speaks, a madwoman being led to her punishment. You think that the Inquisitor has the power to condemn, that the executioner has the power to light the fire. But the king and the pope, the Inquisitor and the executioner are men. Every moment, the peasant's food sustains them, the serving-woman's water quenches their thirst, the sun warms them. And you would have it that they can do something against me, against you, against life?"

She gestured toward the shore to clear the way. I felt her nearly give way, but she continued in an even stronger voice:

- You see the stake there, the one they want to tie me to, and me, I am here, still fifty metres from there. From here to there, the air will have filled my lungs a hundred times, the sun will have kept me from dying a hundred times, all kinds of energies, forces I don't know will have sustained me second after second... Without these life forces, I would die a hundred times from here to this post. So why do these forces that sustain me, that rebuild me at each step of the horse, cease their actions simply because the executioner is afraid of the king? Will he want only to obey?

The soldiers looked at her. One of them brought his horse close to the tipcart.

- How many blades of grass do you think there are over all the earth's surface? How many drops swirl in the great ocean? How many mosquitoes are there in a forest? How many stars in the sky? What is there has no measure. And you want me to be that little thing you plan to burn in a little while! Listen to me. Life brought me out of my mother's organs and has kept me alive until now. I am from the beginning dust assembled by a creative hand. Do you think it will let itself be impressed by your pyre... It makes me out of ashes moment after moment. If it is tired of making me out of its breath and its dust, it will make me out of its caresses and its light...

She looked at each one. I think she had calmed down. She continued unhurriedly, but with strength:

- I was born from Love, I have lived from Love, I am going to die of Love, my country is Love. At every moment, Love recovers everything from death. My friends, God does not come to save us like a conqueror come from the Orient to keep us worshipping and depending on him. He is not a knight. He comes in our freedom so that we can save ourselves, be proud of ourselves, responsible for our kingdom and therefore happy. He is our brotherhood. Let us love one another.

The horse stopped again. This time on its own initiative. The soldiers and the executioner didn't budge. Fear was now beside them. Marguerite didn't seem to weaken. On the contrary, she appeared more vigorous than ever, full of enthusiasm and vitality. In reality, she was utterly exhausted, ready to render up her soul at any moment.

- I truly loved living among you. Starting with the spring, when the girls put up their hair to better receive the sun's caresses and the boys, their hands on the plow, turn their gaze toward them, from the moment when they kiss until their little ones gather around the houses, until the autumn of rumpled dresses, wrinkles, and fatigue, from one end to the other of the rainbow, from passion red to crystal blue, I have loved looking at you. The tenderness of married love, its fire too, its secrets, the scent of the embrace, the woman who breastfeeds; a father who swaddles his little one... I have loved living among you. I came to Paris because you were here."

Some men raised the rails of the tipcart, and one man extended a hand to Marguerite. The cart was high, and the man, strong. With all the strength of her last breath, Marguerite cried out:

- It is my end, it is my beginning...

And she collapsed in the man's arms. The man looked at me; it was Audret. He carried her briskly toward the pyre. Another man carried the body of the Beauvais priest. Marguerite seemed so small, so light, that she might have been a clean wool rag. Audret deposited her on a pile of faggots, beside the priest. She had given up the last of her strength. He let me know, by gestures, that she was no longer of this world.

There was a very long silence. The men-at-arms, astounded, didn't budge. To put an end to it, some men lit the fire. All the air rose up in the flame.

The executioner was still on his horse, and the chaplain hadn't yet got free of the crowd when the fire rose furiously in the crystal sky. Neither Marguerite nor the priest could any longer be seen; a veil of flames hid them.

The crowd was stunned. There had not been any reading of the sentence, any sermon, any ceremony, any humiliation. The fire had taken the saint with the speed of thunder. I was dumbfounded. The prophet Elijah's chariot of fire had come to seek the mother of a new humanity. What she had said was true: she had died in the arms of a big handsome Parisian...

Sparks crackled, firebrands exploded like stars. There was no longer any body, almost no wood, and no stake. Already the fire had dropped its yellow coat and had lain down greenish in the embers. Marguerite had vanished into thin air, without odor, without smoke, without resistance. Audret had arranged for everything. A large amount of powdered saltpeter had been added to the very dry faggots. Nothing remained. A few embers sparkled in the brown water of the Seine, spitting a little smoke.

And yet, there was nothing any longer but her and us, nothing else in all the space suddenly emptied of its props.

Before our eyes, all had disappeared save for the translucent air that had served as vector for the saint's enlargement, her incredible enlargement. Marguerite now covered all the square. She enveloped us. We were in her robe. We were in her garment. Torn away from fear.

For a moment, we were unburdened of ourselves, light, happy...

We looked at each other like escapees from a shipwreck. We had survived.

A long time ago already, yes, we remembered it, the boat had cracked open, the water of madness had mounted on the deck, we were harassed by waves, spindrift, spittle. Then, all at once, it went away.

We were there now, shaken, lost, or rather suddenly awakened on our island, in a great sea of peace, under a blue sky. An odor of lavender made us giddy. Further off, on a hill, squirrels were looking at us. There were girls, boys, mature women, strong men, tranquil old men and every promise of a new life...

The Place de Greve surely was the place to arrive on earth, under a blue sky, among blooming hills that shook themselves in the clouds. We were overjoyed, fully resurrected in our hearts, a little sheepish, but so happy to be together...

The new continent had, however, nothing ethereal about it. It surely was an arc of sand, a slow river turning brown after the dispersion of the final embers, a stunned populace in front of an impassive Hotel de Ville. The people looked at each other as if an enormous gust of wind had swept everything away: the guards, the army, the king, the Inquisitor, the tall houses... Paris was no longer anything more than a market town forgotten in a serene countryside. Nothing was truer, fuller, more complete than the person there beside us. We looked at him, he looked at us; we were friends forever, brothers.

Moreover, it seemed impossible for us to imagine a force capable of returning us to the nightmare of the death camp where we were a little while ago, before the fire, under the guard of I don't know what imperative, now so totally insignificant...

Who could undo a single one of the bonds that united us?

In obedience to some survivors' reflex, we kissed each other and tears of joy slid along our cheeks.

The soldiers themselves smiled, the executioner smiled, they would not be reprimanded: the saint really was dead; she had not escaped their vigilance. There had not been any miracle or abduction. Put simply, the pyre had swept away, besides the saint, one knew not what; something that had previously grabbed us by the throat, a useless fear, a panic that no longer had an object. And we were defenseless in a world without danger. This laid each man, each woman bare; suddenly they appeared in their purest simplicity. All the child-faces became attached to each other, like little girls on a skating rink.

The Kingdom, then, was there where it had always been, inevitable, screwed in the ankles of time, the inalienable conclusion of human destiny, every traveler's oasis. We no longer had any desire to undertake another course of action, to lodge an appeal, to leave for other detours, to satisfy other imperatives before coming to an understanding with each other about this brotherhood, which, in any case, we could escape no longer. And besides, was this brotherhood that unpleasant!

I looked around me: the women were beautiful, the men were handsome, the children weren't crying any longer; surprised eyes intertwined their astounded looks. This brotherhood was not difficult. The heart was already taking care of it; it slipped into it as if it were its natural place. After all, it was in sleep that the disaster had happened. Our nightmares are the only places where such an offense is possible. If it was not in a bad dream, then it was in a game, to see what that leads to. Never could such madness and such sufferings have been thought and willed in full awareness. Once awakened, once the mean and stupid game was finished, brotherhood was woven in proportion to the fright we had had.

When the fabric is finished, and it was being woven at lightning speed, who could threaten us? Brotherhood made impossible the collusion of madmen that had so much persecuted us.

In front of me, I recognized the continuator of the Chronicle of Paris, Guillaume de Nangis. He was looking around. He was blinking his eyes in order to verify the facts that were obvious to us. His mouth, skeptical at first, ended by accepting, by accentuating, by confirming: he well and truly saw the truth about kings and popes, lies and weapons. One saw them floating, scattered; useless wrecks on the sea of our memories. Paris could become frank and free at any moment, without even worrying about the machinery of fear. That possibility was so inevitable that, for a moment, it had pierced through history's belated weft. A necessity.

A portion of the conclusion was imposing itself starting now.

The chronicler of Paris was going to write of this event: "Here, in Paris, we have run ahead of the facts." This Guillaume de Nangis could not escape the imperative of time which had just marked a short historic moment on the slate: "Yes, the Forerunner has spoken to us, has lived among us and she has done her deed." The fraternal Kingdom will be and today, at this hour, it is. The chronicler is going to transcribe what he has seen. There will be a trace of Brotherhood in the archives of the little-kingdom; not a trace, a seed, a seed that will grow, that will cover all humanity, because, for a moment, it has shown us its flower and its possibilities.

An attentive reader, any reader, with no other means of knowing his history than the narrow chronicle of official reporters of the world, will fall, despite all the epic length of human misery, on these enigmatic words: "the nobility of her attitude and her devotion moved to tears the crowd who attended the spectacle..." The chronicle of human history will show in that small sentence the transverse fissure of time. A look will be able to infiltrate that crack and seize the seed. The natural humidity of the heart will do the rest. One day, a reader of that chronicle will encounter this sentence, raise his eyes for a moment on the world surrounding him, and will say to himself: Could it have been different? Can it be different?

And he will see that the woman there beside him is well and truly a source of life. The earth is awaiting her act of freedom. Yes! The child is worth the

trouble.

Eternal Solitude

The ecstasy only lasted for an hour.

Arms yanked me up from the ground, and I was thrown on my stomach over a saddle. We galloped across the City and went back up to the University. They threw me to the ground in front of the Saint Jacques convent. Two lay servants pushed me into a labyrinth of corridors. A cell door was opened and then closed. An earsplitting squeak, a thunderous slamming. Night.

This was not the "dog cage". After a groping inspection, I understood that it was probably a former monk's cell whose window had been bricked up. Perfect night.

They fed me through a trap door. They set down a jug of water. There was a clean straw mattress, a linen sheet and a wool scarf. On the wall, I had touched a crucifix. There was a recess for a window, but not the smallest shaft of light penetrated the joints of the brickwork.

I slid my hands over this rough and uneven hollow. I hoped that a drop of light would finally take shape. Nothing. Eternal night.

Once a week they hobbled my ankles with chains and led me to Mass and to the Hours. And then they threw me back into the black silence. They wanted me to disappear in it.

I heard rumors from time to time nonetheless. Two of Clement V's decrees had reached the convent: *Ad nostrum* and *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*. They talked about it. For them it was a summary of the charges against Marguerite and the beguines. From Marguerite's book, the Inquisitor general had finally retained fifteen articles summarizing, according to him, the doctrine of the beguine associated with that of the Free Spirit. His Holiness the pope expresses his "extreme concern in view of a thought and an action that puts in danger the very foundations of the Church". The following propositions could be read there: "Man can acquire in this present life the plenitude of celestial felicity, such as he will obtain after death"; "The man who has reached the final degree of perfection need not fast or pray any longer, for his senses are then so well subjected to his understanding that he can in all freedom allow his body everything that pleases it"; "The perfect soul takes leave of all the virtues."

Despite the serious distortions that this text introduced into Marguerite's thought in order to discredit it, I confirm that it truly is like this: each time that consciousness touches its own substance, it is blessed.

The two decrees served as a guide to the Inquisitors in the interrogation of those suspected of beghardism. One finds them in the proceedings of the Council of Vienne, but they were not published immediately. After Marguerite's execution, riots took place in Paris, in the region of Langres, in Flanders and in Germany, making the pope hesitate. Nonetheless, hundreds of beguines were drowned in

the Rhine, others were burned alive or imprisoned for life in solitary confinement.

In regard to the Templars, the situation was no less dramatic. Submissive to Philip the Fair's pressure, the pope Clement V issued his bull to dissolve the entire order. The 19th of March, 1314, the Grand master of the Templars, Jacques de Molay and the commander, Geoffroy de Charnay were burned alive on the Ile aux Juifs. The cardinals had given them the night to think it over, but they were burned that very evening. A relief for them, for torture let go of them only to better take hold of them again.

On the pyre, when Geoffroy had already rendered up his soul, the Grand Master pronounced this curse: "Pope Clement! King Philip! Before a year has passed, I summon you to appear at God's judgement-seat to receive your just chastisement! Damned! Damned, all of you, until the thirteenth generation of your race."

Clement V died of suffocation the following month; Philip the Fair died of a stroke in November without leaving male descendents. This was the end of the Capetian lineage.

And I survived.

When, after the intoxication of the ending, the fire went out, as I found myself in the darkness of my dungeon, it seemed to me that God had forsaken me. Like a deluge, my solitude flooded all my inner abysses. The blackness was total; my soul, liquid. How many times must I climb out of the darkness? I do not know. Perhaps as many times as needed to take root there.

I think that it is now that the most vivid part of my initiation begins. For it is now that I am without wife, nor master, nor consoler, left to myself, ready to become a man.

Marguerite was no more. I still was. These two bits of sentences could not live side by side. It was unbearable.

Death is nothing. By definition, we can never encounter it ourselves. What we collide with is the separation of the dead from the living. The dead are us, of course; the living are them. This is surely the worst; we are left in our tomb, and in our tomb we are never again able to meet any living being. Our solitude is infinite. Mine suffocated me.

For one who is plunged into night, this makes it impossible to breathe. You don't tear out a man's lungs without his losing his breath. Even before, I couldn't live without Beatrice, so living without Marguerite, without breathing the air she just exhaled, without penetrating the space she just vacated, without listening to the song she was humming a moment ago, without feeling the light that shone out from her face... Without her, the cosmos was no more than a gray clock.

The beating of time deafened me.

Yes! It's true, somewhere life was turning in its light like dough in its flour,

beauty that wounds, its well-greased cogs were sickening. Love is the explosion of greens, of blues, of yellows and reds that color the great panorama of time; without that explosion, the perfection of movement shatters the heart more effectively than torture and the wheel. The explosion keeps time in a state of space; were it to disappear, the cosmos would collapse on us. This is the black hole.

The explosion of your beauty

Oh earth!

Is a necessity.

Don't refuse yourself.

Without you, who could survive?

What consciousness?

By what mystery did the canteen cook slip into my trap door one day, along with my meager sustenance, a wooden bowl perfectly smooth and perfectly clean, the worn bowl of a mendicant, a treasure? I felt it in every way. No face could have seemed more beautiful to me. It was going to finish off, and put away, the last of my resistance. The bowl is the night coiled around us, the form of the void.

I suffocated in the opaque night. I suffocated, but I did not die. There was a peace in the depth of my being that refused to let death have me. So, since I was not dying, I thought...

Imagine the most beautiful cosmos: the bluest sky, the greenest earth, animals running, flowers casting their color everywhere, peace, harmony, justice... All you desire, right here in a bowl. Everything turns without a hitch. You are there, seated on a cushion, nothing goes against you...One detail is missing! In that coil of time, nowhere are there two great eyes to contemplate, with love, a story.

So there is no more explosion; the bowl rolls up its useless poetry, and the perfection of things weighs on you like lead. What good is living if there is not a single witness! The bowl of the memory of the spheres is there, but without a drinker. Nothing wants to happen there, I didn't want to happen there any more.

The eyes that looked at me with love are no longer. Therefore, I am no longer.

In consequence: all is there, magnificent cosmos, lackluster wooden bowl. The brown clock of a perfect thing. The times are accomplished. Eternity tints the immaculate second of existence. All is in accord. And suddenly someone comes and whispers in your ear: "Always live, never die."

That is what the Inquisitor had thought for me. Make me live beyond love. Make me live with my little handful of love disappearing little by little in the palm of my hand like sand in the wind. It was out of mercy that good Brother William had added total darkness to my solitary confinement: a wave of suffering allowing me to survive. Without that wave, I would have died at once

and I wouldn't have taken root in my solitude, I wouldn't have been born.

Why the suffering? It protects us from perfection.

In conclusion to my dog's life in the beauty of this great cosmos, I say this to whoever can hear it: no matter if the cosmos is beautiful or ugly, great or small, dominated by a god or by nothing at all, no matter if its flow is harmonious or tumultuous, pleasant or unpleasant, no matter if it is good or malicious; discover and learn all its perfect laws if you like, understand all its mechanisms if this pleases you, no matter if it is perfect or imperfect, the question is not to know if some gods exist to explain the thing: without love, everything is no longer worth a thing. If love is not, what is cannot be.

That was the lesson of the dungeon. That is the lesson of the dungeon. If not, why would all of us be living in the dungeon of the night? We miss love, we miss it so much that it forms of its own accord in the depths of our lost hearts.

I was, then, in a dungeon once again, buried somewhere among the Dominicans, in the darkness, like a dead man in his tomb. This was not the "dog cage", but I was deprived of even the distant presence of the one who kept me hoping. I would so much have preferred the "dog cage", for then I was able to hear Marguerite's whispering, which proved that Agnes existed and that Beatrice was caring for my children.

For the moment, time was slowly dissolving me in its acids.

Why did Marguerite's death make everything suddenly disappear? What good is love, even if it is the very necessity of our lives, what good is love if it leaves us?

They had eradicated the Templars, they had burned many women and eliminated almost all the beguinages. For all practical purposes, the filles-Dieu had been cloistered. They had quashed the riots; calm and peace have returned to the Church. The monks were singing thanksgivings; I heard them in my cell and once a week I went to sing with them. I didn't sing, I wept. These men of prayer grated on my ears. Their prayer insulted all the truth that could remain in a conscious mind.

A stake, a rope, an animal, if that is the whole psychology of the social animal, strangle me or burn me, but don't leave me for one second in this dump of rituals!

Absolute evil had taken all away. The Inquisition. After such acts of barbarism, not savage and impulsive, but pondered, theologically justified and above all, perfectly well-intentioned, there was no longer a Church, no longer prayer, no longer even any humanity. A monk from now on is a sullen stump on ground that has been burned. Their whispering entered my night like fingernails sliding along a slate.

How could the idea of an original goodness, of a benevolent gaze survive after the Inquisition, after the organic barbarism of a civilization that claims to follow God? The Inquisition had killed the love we hoped for long ago. That

hope no longer existed.

I vomited from terror.

In my dark dungeon, this logical problem was so clear that it appeared increasingly obvious to me that the existence of Philip the Fair and Clement V, conscious, systematic and institutionalized cruelty, was totally incompatible with Marguerite's existence.

If man is power, if power is what threw me into this dungeon, then Marguerite never existed... It's a novel. And in this case woman can only submit, marry man, imitate him, lower herself perhaps, disappear in his pants, in his functions and in his violence. And too bad for the children...

If I were in the Inquisitor's dungeon at present, then all my life of love could not help but disappear as soon as I regained my full clarity of mind. The terrible thing about absolute evil, torture, and the silence of a dungeon is that they annihilate all previous life as soon as it shows a little love.

In my dungeon, in the rhythm of six days of absolute darkness and a few hours of canonical light, in the repetition of the eternal week, in perpetual silence, in the ritualized bosom of the convent, in the austerity of the Church, in the sterility of continence, in the religious darkness, I was erasing myself. Everything was fading. I would have exchanged an hour on the wheel for one particle of light.

I was becoming a stump; my memories no longer existed. They weren't memories any more, but scraps of dreams emptied of all reality. I had dreamed Marguerite, and Beatrice in consequence had never existed. A novel!

Since the "dog cage", my condition had worsened. Rather than me dying, everything was dying. I was not dying, but everything around me was dying, worse, everything was losing its existence, everything never had existed, every love was becoming a novel. Love never had existed, for had it existed, I would not be in a dungeon.

My memories retreated, faded, darkened, but above all their nature changed; they weren't memories any more, but the crazy ideas of a dreamy child, tales one repeats to oneself in order to hold out one more day in the sidereal dungeon of our desperate existence. All that my life had been was only a mental construction necessary for survival in a dungeon. I had invented everything. Love had been my invention; my life, an invention.

The Black stage had to be completed. Much more effectively than torture, ritualizing salvation within the certainty that one knows the "good" ensures the death of everything. The Church's function now is this: repeat "Blessed are the poor" while producing their poverty. The Church's function: prove that the Gospel is only a dream necessary for slavery.

And the years passed, wore down and bored to tears the man in his dungeon. The prayer of the monks passed over him like a carpenter's plane. I had become a naked heart in an empty cosmos. And, miracle of peace and of

foundations, I survived.

I still kept my memories alive like old vegetables one turns over in a root cellar. I recited them, but they no longer had life; they had dried up. They were objects I had invented and collected when I was young and unaware. They still shone a little in the dark, but never again would they awaken on their own, never again would they take the initiative of waking me up. They no longer had any sparkle.

Time had gone its way, and I had stayed behind among the dry and deserted things. Everything disappeared in the wearing away of solitude.

The true initiation had begun the day that Marguerite died.

Having nothing to see, nothing to hear, and nothing to feel, I couldn't live; I only thought. I was in very great danger of thinking without living. Listen carefully to the ultimate questioning of this condemned man: if death is the end, what then is the beginning? If love does not exist, inevitably the end is death. Everyone is in agreement about that. But what, then, is the beginning? The beginning cannot be death.

In a dungeon, because of the long and icy duration of time, the silent breadth of solitude and the dark depth of emptiness, such questions take on enormous proportions. One is forced to think the world because the world is no longer there. One finds oneself, before Creation, in the position of an isolated and painfully imaginative god who is dying of solitude and asking himself how he can make a world capable of lasting.

One hypothesis seemed agonizing: after death, nothing. This tautology forces one, however, to begin in a different way. The beginning can no longer be the end. This complicates things! Let us suppose that death is the final cause and political cruelty the material cause, who precedes them? Who has come before? Who is the forerunner?

Here is where one is forced to imagine, to invent, to create something like Marguerite's life. Alas! Here one strikes an impasse. If Marguerite really did exist, then the dark cavern of our slow death, that unbearable cavern which is at the same time the cause and the effect of cruelty, that cavern I have been in for so long and perhaps forever, that opaque night does not exist.

Either Marguerite did live and I am not in this dungeon, or I am in this dungeon and consequently Marguerite was only a dream, a novel of love. Such is the dichotomy that produces absolute evil. The fact remains that there is only one solution to the existence of time, and that is Marguerite. Marguerite must exist. But if she does exist, then absolute evil does not exist. Now, it does exist since I am suffering because of it. Thus Marguerite must exist without existing.

She is a story to tell in the evening in order to dream, a story that gives grounds for hope. It is always and only about dreaming enough to cross through time. We invent the beginning that consciousness needs to survive... We write the literature that lets us breathe... The moral capital of our goddamned existence rests in an imagined world! Literature supports an unbearable being. Non-

existence carries existence. This is the lesson that every man ends up discovering as soon as he discovers that he lives and dies in the dungeon of a perfect clock. Death's mechanism.

So then, after the collective intoxication that Marguerite's last monologue ignited, when all was finished, when the exaltation vanished in the embers, I found myself once more in the eternal dungeon of the Inquisition, where we have all been cast since the beginning of time. My solitude seemed to me infinite.

Other years passed. We have little idea of the cave in which our essential solitude rests until we have lived in a dungeon of the Inquisition. Yes, once a week I went out for the Office and the holy mass, but they crucified Christ in it and ritualized his Gospel. I went to the Office to see if all the exits had been blocked. Yes, I did savor the physical light for a moment, but alas! my poor eyes were no longer able to endure it. I could scarcely hold my eyelids sufficiently half-open to place one foot ahead of the other. And when they returned me to my cell, to my absolute night, my two hands reared up against the door frame with all their strength as I was beaten with sticks and thrown back into the darkness.

So, in my hole, I went to my memories. I moved around a few still-shining objects. Yes, the Gospels are only imaginary works perhaps, but life depends on them.

At times I probed the existence of the keeper of memories: myself. He was an author. He looked, he manipulated clays and colors, he took away here, he added there. It wasn't a story any more, it was a novel. My novel had an author and that author wasn't yet a corpse. As for William of Paris, he was a corpse; he couldn't think up on his own the novel he needed to justify his crime. He couldn't imagine Jesus, Beatrice, Flore, and Marguerite! He could imagine only crucifixion, death, massacre and the end.

The author of a Gospel only exists if a mother has given him her breast. Loving his mother's milk gives him sufficient existence to write a Gospel.

If Brother William were the sterile continent, he couldn't be a fertile author. No more than a whale can swallow the ocean, could he put an end to life. On the contrary, as a sea monster he could only throw up Jonah, only vomit Marguerite.

Perhaps I had dreamed all my life, but I was not a dream. I truly existed, because I was truly suffering.

Yes, I admit it, when I began to play with my memories I dreamed a lot and I made up a lot. Then the dreamer became aware of himself. I was, by that time, no longer dreaming, but witnessing. Like a child punished too long in his room, I told myself stories. But the content of my story wasn't random. Marguerite isn't just any character; with a few others, she holds existence.

When the fire went out and I found myself back in the darkness of my tomb, it seemed to me that God had forsaken me. I was living from memory. But my

memory was in fact weakening because of hunger, humidity, rheumatism, a cough, and above all the absolute darkness into which I had been thrown. So I made things up, I filled the holes of time. At the end of a certain time, I no longer distinguished the creations of my imagination from the recollections of my defective mind. And all this froze in ice.

And then, I understood that my imagination was not working in just any manner, but working according to a principle. That woman's life was writing itself thanks to an unshakeable logic; I was discovering a theorem of what is alive as meticulously as Euclid had discovered certain theorems of what is not.

Without the existence of Marguerite, the history of men could not survive. My story with Marguerite obeyed a necessity, a logic of life. Novels are necessary lives.

In the night, the machines of time were cleaning a Gospel, the Gospel of Marguerite, the Gospel of Love, the only Gospel possible, whose forms will multiply until the end of time. Marguerite was necessary, impossible, but necessary, and so Marguerite lives eternally like numbers live eternally, in things and at the same time in thoughts, never separated from the giant tree of life. I found her number by induction and deduction; I discovered her life by attention and recollection. Yes, I have to admit it, Plato's Ideas do exist, but they are neither principles nor models, but persons who obligate themselves to an existence that gives life. There are necessary beings, and Marguerite is one of them.

In conclusion, she is right here in my dungeon, right next to me. Like a number that wants to apply itself to a thing, she wanted to apply herself to me. She was watching for the opportunity.

The Starry Night

And then one day, a desperate day when my two hands were sliding along the bricks of my cell's former window, as I was wearing out my skin in the vain hope of finding a crack, no matter how minute, where a drop of light might seep through, a single drop, at the moment when I was about to break down in tears once again, I felt a presence arrive behind me.

- Marguerite! I sighed.

She covered my arms with her giant heron's wings. For quite some time, she followed my movements. My hands slid along the wall. My arms were coupled with hers. I felt their lightness. They moved like a dancer's arms. Then she took the initiative in movement. Her hands caused a light to appear, coming out of the wall like a vapor. The vapor curled around me.

We played with that vapor of light for a moment. And my body, weightless and powerless, surrendered itself completely to the dance. I was a muslin veil on the body of a bride...

And then I was drawn up out of my prison. Was I a little more dead or a little more living? I didn't know. And this left me perfectly indifferent.

I was at the same time movement and number. My arms lived in her arms, my legs, in her legs, my chest, in her chest. All was deliverance in this last eruption of my suffering.

She kept me whole as a cloud preserves within itself the unity of the emanations rising from plowed ground.

And she tore me away from the world.

It was pitch dark, a perfectly transparent night. The torches of the convent grew more and more distant beneath me. I was climbing, and the city resembled a delicate illumination on a coarse parchment.

How mild the air was, and how unconstraining! How good it was to meet my mother again among the stars.

The world, once more in its brilliance!

Then I heard her voice on my skin, speaking reason:

- Look, Guion, and see.

And I saw.

The night, my night, I had thought it empty and annihilated. It is fertile and translucent. In its so-subtle substance all the energies turn, and concentrate on themselves. Stars take fire and join together, ray by ray. A world of stars.

Because the night sinks into its own shadows, the light flashes out.

My night, my sister. I see you at last. You too are groaning in your solitude.

No part of your body has forgotten the lost love. In my dungeon, I reflected your distress.

Stars blazed out, by the thousands of thousands. Masses of stars, and then masses of masses of stars turned like clouds of dust in an icy desert. I hear the stars roll in their light, they rang out with all their vocal cords. A star is a cry in the night.

There where I came from, my too-stiff eardrums heard nothing; my eyes, too weak, saw nothing, but here where I am, I hear and I see.

Little by little, all the universe came to us. We could not understand it. But every atom is alive, feeds on light, and assembles itself according to the instructions of the rays. The Child is configured in the belly of the night.

His form is still vague, but it is immense and shining.

Night, my night, I meet you at last. I missed you! I am leaving my indifference at last. I am just now learning that man regards you as nothing. It is terrible news.

I see you now, for, in the dungeon, I have tasted my solitude.

Night does not respond to just any thing. It accepts all, receives all, endures all, but responds only to love.

For the one who sees nothingness, it is nothingness; for the one who sees No Thing, it is No Thing, womb of the Child.

But where has the father gone? He has given his seed, and he has hidden himself. We carry his embryo. It is the function of the Child to enlarge the father. To make of our solitude, a brotherhood.

The Kingdom of brotherhood is coming soon. The stars, the spheres, the human animals and the inhuman animals are organizing. Brotherhood is quivering, fetal, in the cosmic egg.

We have experienced the beginnings of brotherhood in this world.

The night, my night, our night, it is she who has linked us person to person; she is the great connector, the soul and fiber of our loves. She has found the way to weld us from within, from solitude to solitude.

I feel the father: a point of truth in the bottom of my soul, the fraternal uniting that sets us out on the quest for love, the consciousness that binds all together.

Marguerite was like a chariot of fire and she carried me off with her. She bore me off on other globes. Everywhere beings were living, working, attempting brotherhood.

And we plunged into a blue sphere draped with white clouds. It was a very beautiful country there. It was autumn.

I recognized the landscape. A family was working around the house. It was my

family. And I was on the thatched roof of the cottage.

So I never had climbed down from there.

The beauty of life was calling out to me. The man was enthroned on his roof and had just finished adjusting the last tile on the clay crest of the roof. He had cemented it to the thatch with a wadding of sticky clay. The roof would not leak. He was seated straddling the roof. The autumn had been as prosperous as it was demanding. The final effort finished, he didn't want to do anything more; he couldn't do anything more.

His eyes took advantage of this to wander as they willed, as if the paralysis of his limbs gave him wings. Here and there on the wave of the hills, big and bulbous cottages appeared, bordered by dark hedges. Squares of wheat yellowed the backs of the ridges. In the distance, some women were returning from the fields. Birds flitted around their heads, on which baskets of grain were balanced...

This man on the roof of his cottage: he too seemed very beautiful, for he was tasting the beauty of the world. He had traveled so much, and gotten lost so often. But never had he lacked sincerity for very long. Never had he turned his back for long on the requests of his burgeoning consciousness. He was a poor guy, but a man of good will, too.

I too was the fruit of the night, an open act of love.

It can be told. Yes, it can be told: we are delivered up to the truth once and for all, and, as a result, brotherhood is coming, always slowly, sometimes with difficulty, but it is coming. What brings the stars together also brings the elements together. What brings the elements together brings us together. We will not escape brotherhood any more than the elements escape life.

The conditions of existence and the existence of conditions are inexorably linked. This is hope's foundation. Creation creates the conditions for a greater creation. The degeneration we knew on earth in times past was a preparation whose form might have been lightened.

We can imagine, make things up, deceive, keep on doing it, construct religion over religion, destroy religion over religion, a world always precedes us, a world always envelops us, a world always follows us, and everything finally surrenders to the truth, not to endure it, but to accomplish it. Born from Love, we are created to love.

From the roof where I was, my cleansed eyes drank up the world. In the field, next to the stone stable, some women were hoeing, and children were running around a little donkey. A little further away (I recognized her by her way of walking), Beatrice was firmly holding a plow drawn by an ox, held in its turn by a young woman, Maiffe.

Beatrice stopped, looking around her as if someone had called her. But she saw no one. The ox turned its head in my direction. Maiffe wanted to make the ox advance, but it refused to go forward.

- The wind is turning, Beatrice exclaimed. You might say that the times are changing. Benoit hasn't taken his vows.

And I got a wave of happiness right in the face. All my body trembled. A gust of wind uncovered Beatrice's head. Her white hair floated in the wind, and I saw her middle-aged face.

- Yes! I'm sure of it, the times are changing, Maiffe continued as she led the ox. Soon I will see my brother return to the house with a companion.

The ox remained motionless for one more moment. The sky seemed made of crystal.

The two women and the ox resumed the movement of plowing. The opened soil was moist. A vapor rose up from the tillage. The smell of the earth intoxicated the man who looked down from the roof.

My heart broke in the middle out of perfect joy. All was fulfilled.

What is it, the transparency of heaven? It is that Beatrice can never be taken away from me. From everywhere, I can see her beauty.

My body had collapsed at the foot of the walled-in window. A stream of blood slipped over my lips, for the stone wall had badly scraped my forehead, broken my nose and torn one of my eyebrows. The salty taste of blood made me smile. The smile was permanent.

I was happy.

I felt the ground to measure how much blood had been lost. There had been a lot. I took my wooden bowl in my hands. I pressed it against my chest. I fainted, happy to be done with it.

I woke up again. In the blood, I touched what seemed at first to be a stem of straw. It was a quill sharpened for writing.

I heard the door open. But I didn't see anything, only darkness. It was a moonless night, no doubt. A monk approached. Who else could there be in these places. He said to me in a gentle voice:

- But you're seriously wounded!

I heard his torch crackle, but I didn't see him. I understood that I was blind, permanently blind.

After my convalescence, I had the right to all the inner courtyard every day. They left me entirely free in this world of smells and flowers. My mind was confused. I was living imprisoned in a moment that moved around with me. I could no longer discriminate between the images of the past, the impressions of the present, and the apprehensions of the future. Everything was contemporaneous.

The young monk came to listen to the story that came out of my mouth. By an incomprehensible miracle, I had permission to write my Gospel, for a Dominican master, the provincial of Alsace, did not want to lose any memories

of the forerunner from Valenciennes. The young monk did not understand my face, however.

My face is the happy mirror of the night.

Appendix: Marguerite Porete, beguine of the Free Spirit

The mystical life has often been associated with the struggle against the flesh and its passions, a struggle leading to a union symbolized by the marriage of the soul with God. In the background: a sort of competition between the love of God and human love. It was nonetheless possible for married people to unite with God, but it was a less certain way. In the second half of the Middle Ages, a woman opened very wide the gates of another way, that of uncontractual married love, the way of free love, not of a liberated bodily love, but on the contrary, of a love set free by the liberation of the body's desires, a route obviously heretical, but perhaps more evangelical than it appears.

Marguerite Porete is reputed to have been a beguine of the Free Spirit. Before speaking about the Free Spirit, let us speak about beguinages in their medieval form, that preceding the Council of Vienne (1311-1312), which condemned them. Next we will summarize a few elements of the way proposed by Marguerite in her magnificent *Mirror of Simple Souls*.

Who were the beguines before their condemnation?

It was a "feminist" movement before the name and before our way of understanding it. Its origins are obscure; several hypotheses explain their name, the most plausible of which directs us to the German verb *beggam* which means ask, beg, beseech. It is a name that reveals more the persecution of those who despised them than the spirit they sought to develop, for they didn't beg, quite the contrary. These women explored ways other than those of marriage (at the time, a contract of submission) or the monastery (with vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, a chastity generally confused with continence). They were searching for another type of relation to the body, to men, and to God; they were aspiring to a greater economic, intellectual, spiritual and social autonomy.

The birth of the movement is situated in the twelfth century. At the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, the movement was firmly organized. There were hundreds of beguinages and thousands of beguines in Alsace, in Belgium, in Germany, in the Low Countries and in France. Each beguinage was autonomous and directed by a Grand Maiden. The beguines didn't marry, but didn't take any vow of chastity either. Their movement did not exclude male sympathizers, who were called *beghards*, and for whom they sometimes had a "crush" (in French, "beguin").

One finds among them women of every social class. Education was well developed, for it was through their education that they achieved economic and social autonomy. One finds them in different sectors of the economy: health (hospitals, midwives...), education, handicrafts (weaving, artistic embroidery, tapestry...), care for the dying, burials...

The Free Spirit

The beguine movement was not a monolithic ideology. Several contradictory currents passed through it, among others the exploratory wing of the Free Spirit. This had to do with varied and explicitly non-conformist tendencies. Among the Free Spirit beguines, one finds very ascetic women, inspired by the radical Franciscans, or by the disciples of Ortlieb who scorned not just sexuality, but reproduction also (as with the Cathars, one had to avoid providing the bodies necessary for the incarnation of souls). Others, inversely, proposed giving nature all it needed, responding to the body's desires (which must not be confused with the cravings conditioned by society). Some of them, like Johannes Hartmann, declared themselves nihilists before Nietzsche or libertines before Sade. Some others thought it necessary to follow the ascetic way during the first stages of spiritual life then, once liberated, the woman or man could follow all their desires since these were healthy and holy. But the great majority of beguines followed voices more acceptable for the Middle Ages, although hope for an autonomy always remained at the base of the movement.

Marguerite proposed to respond to the needs of nature. At first glance, one might see a platitude in this. On the contrary, this apparent concession to the body results from a radical change in world-view.

Courtly love

Courtly love, its literature, its songs, its customs strongly influenced the movement. In courtly love, desire is considered to be reciprocal (subject-subject relation, desire has no object, but only subjects) and it constitutes the principal dynamic of human life. Nonetheless, in courtly love the roles are reversed: the woman is Lord, the man, the vassal. Marriage is perceived negatively; it goes counter to love because it results from the social rationale, it has a "why". Adultery is preferable since the lovers are in that case bound by something more sacred than marriage; their desire is without a "why", and so is free. This is not, however, about jumping into debauchery; on the contrary, in the fin'amors, desire is allowed to ripen at length and is elevated above reason. Courtly love prefigures Pascal: "The heart has its reasons that reason knows nothing about". It makes unselfish love sacred. Pleasure (because courtly love isn't just platonic) as much as suffering (it is often an impossible love) both participate in the eternal union of the lovers, not through human marriage, but through a union sealed by destiny.

The persecutions

At the beginning of the fourteenth century the persecution of the beguines began, regardless of doctrine. They were in their entirety considered heretics from the sole fact that they sought autonomy in regard to the hierarchical Church (which the beguines named the little Church, in contrast to the great Church, the spiritual brotherhood of all humans). After the Inquisition trials of Marguerite de Porete, one at Cambrai (against her work) and the other at Paris (against her person), and her condemnation to the stake in 1310, the movement was globally condemned by the Council of Vienne. Repression and persecution

raged, chiefly in Alsace and in Germany. The movement survived partly in secret (as with the Friends of God) and partly thanks to formulas of compromise (association with masculine official communities or assimilation into a pious organization).

The pursuit of beguines was justified by two principal reasons: heretical (not orthodox) ideas passed through the movement, and the "unfair" competition the beguines gave the authorized religious communities in the areas of health, education, handicrafts and burials.

Save for the obvious influence of Hadewijch of Antwerp, nothing in Marguerite Porete's writings permits us to precisely situate her thought in one or the other of the currents that crossed the great beguinage movement. She herself declares that she scandalizes the beguines as well as the ecclesiastics: "Beguines say that I am in error, as well as the priests, clerics and preachers, Augustinians and Carmelites and Friars Minor." One presumes that she is not formally attached to a beguinage and that she would be a kind of independent and itinerant female cleric.

Her book *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (the literal title: *Mirouer des Simples Ames qui en vouloir et en desir demourent*[Mirror of simple souls who remain in will and in desire]) reveals to us a very cultivated, self-educated woman (her language has very little of scholasticism about it), a woman who doubtless practiced introspection seriously, of an intelligence remarkable for its psychological analyses, and whose frankness strikes us at first sight.

What we know of the life of Marguerite Porete

Marguerite Porete (Porete means little onion) was a native of Hainaut and very likely of Valenciennes. She would have been born between 1250 and 1260. She was described sometimes as a very learned beguine cleric (professional copyist), and at other times as a wandering beguine (Free Spirit). She described herself as a "begging creature who has nothing to beg".

She belonged to the diocese of Cambrai. Her first work, inspired by courtly love, was concerned with "fin amour". It appeared around 1290. "Fin amour" is the final stage of a relationship that is free, without any bargaining and so without any specific expectation, that is to say without will (since it is entirely desire). It appears after having passed through many trials. It is characterized by a transcendent joy which cures the frustrations that are the hallmark of desire in concrete life. Desire is not only a source of frustration, it is also the source of an enthusiasm that dissolves the sufferings inevitable in pleasure and the happiness of loving.

We know almost nothing about the life of Marguerite Porete, except that her first book on "the being of refined love" was burnt on the public square of Valenciennes in 1300 by order of the bishop of Cambrai, Guy II de Colmieu. The latter forbade Marguerite to disseminate any other books and doctrines on pain of being considered a relapsed heretic (which signified an automatic death sentence). Marguerite reoffended with *The Mirror*, which she sent to the bishop

Jean of Chalon-sur-Marne, among others. She was denounced by the inquisitor of Haute-Lorraine (Guy II had been replaced by Philippe de Martigny, who had been involved in the trial of the Templars.

Faithful to "her free soul which answers to none if it does not wish to", she refused to swear an oath and survived eighteen months of imprisonment. Marguerite was then condemned as a relapsed heretic. After a procedure (auto de fe) that was rather summary (twelve theologians of the University of Paris declared their opposition to certain of her affirmations), on the 31st of May, the Inquisitor general of France, William of Paris, handed her over to the secular arm to be burned alive, which was done on the following day, the 1st of June, 1310, at the Place de Grève in Paris.

According to the continuator of the Chronicle of Guillaume de Nangis, the nobility of her attitude and her devotion moved to tears the crowd that attended the spectacle. Marguerite's death was said to have led to uprisings and rebellions in Paris, in the region of Langres, and in southern Germany.

It is also known that a cleric of the diocese of Cambrai named Guion de Cressonaert, probably a disciple or companion of Marguerite, attempted to intervene in the "trial". This made him an accomplice (no accused had the right to a lawyer; on the contrary, any witness favorable to the accused came to be suspected of heresy). This man who, according to some, became insane, proclaiming himself "the Angel of Philadelphia", was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Despite this course of events, Marguerite's work has not been without support. During her lifetime, Godefroid de Fontaines, ex-regent of the faculty of theology at Paris (1285-1286) and two other censors, one of the Cistercian family and the other of the Franciscan family, considered Marguerite's Mirror orthodox. Their criticisms were limited to the fact that her work allowed of several interpretations and that, in order to understand it correctly, a well-informed person was required (the same criticism would be made of Meister Eckhart).

Marguerite Porete's heresy must be understood in its context. The Inquisitor, William of Paris, was not without political intentions. With Philip the Fair, he was compromised in the trial of the Templars. What the State feared as much as the Church regarding the beguinages was nothing less than the loss of control over women and the institution of marriage.

Several incriminating extracts from the Mirror would serve as the basis for the redaction of the infamous decree *Ad nostrum* which the Council of Vienne would make use of to globally condemn all the beghards, beguines, and supporters of the Free Spirit. As we have pointed out, when Marguerite speaks of surpassing the virtues, the council imagined a rejection of virtues; when Marguerite speaks of a union with God, the council saw an absolute identification with God; when she speaks of inner peace, the council understood it as inner apathy; when she speaks of a direct relation with God, the council saw a denial of the sacraments; when Marguerite asks that nature be given what

it wants, the council feared lust.

In spite of her tragic death and the destruction of her book (some copies did survive), Marguerite's teaching was perpetuated by, among others, Heilwige Bloemardine of Brussels (died 1335), but above all through the work of Meister Eckhart. Certain sentences of the Dominican master are direct quotations from the Mirror. The text of the Mirror would circulate anonymously in different versions (Latin, English and French, among others). It would be rediscovered and published by Romana Guarnieri in 1965.

The Mirror of Simple Souls

In the Mirror one finds the following themes:

- A soul touched by divine grace is without sin.
- The body bears no guilt; its innocence reduces appreciably the significance of original sin.
- The disappearance of the feeling of guilt contributes to the simplicity of heart necessary for a love without "why", a love which is not a "bargaining" between a dependent and guilty person (the human being) and a powerful and faultless person (God).
- This liberation of love makes possible "courtly love" between the soul and God since it eliminates the idea of duty between the lovers.
- The Deity (the Source that divinizes) is immanent in creation, but this does not prevent it from being transcendent (more than creation since it is pure creativity).
- Creation does not operate according to Plato, by the recollection of an intelligible and thus knowable model. Creativity is real; it is participative; every creator invents, it is an unpredictable adventure, and creativity always wins out over the ability to know. The musician creates a work that transcends all the abilities of knowledge, since that work is living, moving, and fertile.
- Femininity is a living image of the Deity.
- Creation is a theater (a place of tragic creation) within which develops what cannot be created directly but can only emerge from conflicts intrinsic to creation: true virtues like courage, which can only emerge where fear is experienced; feelings, which are impossible without the world's contradictions; brotherhood, which can only appear among social beings put to the test...

As Beatrice of Nazareth and other beguines had done, Marguerite distinguishes seven "stages of initiation" at the end of which the soul attains union with God. But these stages are not like a ladder, a continuous progression; on the contrary, the text jumps over all the stages and goes backward, following a path more experiential than linear. At the end, desire and the two subjects it unites are no longer obstructed by psychological, social and intellectual obstacles.

Will and Desire

One cannot understand Marguerite's thought without carefully distinguishing "will" from "desire". Will brings with it the complement "object", while desire begins a reciprocal and free relationship between two concrete subjects. In purified (that is to say deconditioned) desire, love unites the soul with God. Marguerite asks herself: "Why do such souls have any misgivings about taking what they need when necessity demands it?" The theft of a good that is a necessity for a person from an organization that does not necessarily need it is not a theft, but a good deed, a sort of self-defense against extreme poverty. "They (the beguines) should give to nature what nature demands." It is about keeping the body connected to the reality that surrounds it, not only in order to live, but in order to blossom. The important thing is to live like a child, by pure love, because you are worth the trouble.

The beguinage of Valenciennes

Marguerite was no doubt indirectly attached to the Valenciennes beguinage, which managed the Saint Elisabeth hospital. The rules of the Valenciennes beguinage give us an idea of the kind of life these beguines led.

- The beguines elected the headmistress of their House themselves.
- Leadership, as much on the material plane as the spiritual, was the responsibility of the Grand Maiden.
- A council of beguines assisted the Grand Maiden.
- The beguinage had its own parish, directed by a pastor assisted by two chaplains, all three elected by the Governor and the beguines.
- Women went into the beguinage without pronouncing any vows, the only condition being to promise to lead a humble and devout life as well as to respect the rules of the House. No dowry was required of the postulants. Each one kept the right to freely dispose of her property. The community accepted women from every class and station.
- All, whatever their station, were obligated to work at various tasks, industrial (spinning and weaving), agricultural, educational, or care of the sick in hospitals. Outside of work, the beguines dedicated themselves to an intense spiritual life. A regulation provided for assistance to the poorest among them.
- Dominicans and Franciscans regularly came to preach in their church.

Criticisms of the beguines

They were criticized for interrupting sermons, debating in places of worship, propagating new ideas, and misleading the naive. Artisans thought that they offered unfair competition. The burghers didn't like their self-sufficiency and their economic independence. The religious communities thought that they maintained among the poor and underprivileged an affection and an authority rivaling their own.

Their way of living modestly, but without a vow of poverty; piously, but without dependence on the ecclesiastical organization; not married, but not

necessarily continent; intellectually awakened but not confined to scholasticism; insubordinate, but not rebellious, won over the populace. In comparison, the official Church looked too ascetic among the monks and too luxurious among the bishops. In sum, the beguines opened a way that was moderate, lay, evangelical, just, and accessible to all of society.

Theologically, it was considered that the beguines spread above all four heresies:

1. One can gain access to the divine without passing through an ecclesiastical intermediary.
2. The soul is created and willed sovereign and free.
3. The relation with God rests on free and reciprocal love and not on subjection.
4. The soul does not have to struggle against a sinful nature; the body and nature are not tainted with evil leanings. The heart should advance without any other consideration than love.

Marguerite Porete's originality

Marguerite Porete asserts the primacy of freedom. "God cannot endure that any power remove my will without my will consenting to it." But freedom does not consist of willing an object and procuring it. Freedom is not exercised in unilaterally defining what should satisfy an individual. On the contrary, freedom only has meaning in free relationships, in relationships where the future cannot be defined by a single member of the relationship. For example, reason can't define the virtues in order to then struggle to appropriate them to itself through various exercises. Marguerite asserts: "Would that the soul discharge the virtues, and no longer be at their service, for they are no longer of any use to her, whereas it is they, the virtues who work for the soul."

The "initiation" consists of penetrating into desire without any preconceived image of God, of the soul, of virtue or of sin. Such an "emptiness of image" has nothing to do with nihilism or with the rejection of imagination. The exercise of non-self-will is not easy. The first stage of the mystical approach is directed at the meeting with oneself.

Marguerite is not satisfied with borrowing the rhetoric of courtly love; she appropriates its ethic of perfect gratuitousness. Love is quite simply the natural state of desire when it is not victim of a unilateral will to arrive at a predefined result.

However, Marguerite Porete's conception of love can be distinguished from courtly love on several points:

- Courtly love makes of the lady (French "dame", from Latin "domina"), the object of an impossible love. For Marguerite, God is the Far-Near. He is so close and personal that he almost merges with the nucleus of the soul. He is so manifest in all things that he envelops all of nature without merging with it. In brief, God is not just an object of love, but a subject of love, at the same time

within and without.

- In courtly love, the lady is suzerain and the man is her vassal. The fief is the lady's body, but it is rarely taken hold of. The noble lady belongs to a rank superior to that of the knight, and if he is a baron, she is queen. Her reputation is so great that the love felt by the knight ennoble him without any physical contact being necessary. The kiss suffices; it is the equivalent of a dubbing, and has a contractual value. The knight celebrates his lady's worth, and physical desire is sublimated in poetry. In brief, it is a love that severs itself from the flesh so as to assure its gratuitousness. As a result, the love potion between the two lovers becomes the omen of a curse. Desire burns with unfulfillment. Marguerite Porete's Far-Near is here not the lady, but the knight. The soul comes to torture God with the desire she creates in him; she forces him to suffer from love. She manages to feel her divine Knight's desire; she feels it in the bottom of her own soul, and it is this desire that makes her live out of an "inner trembling".

- Courtly love aims at making the desired being not an instrument of pleasure, but a subject of pleasure, that is, an end. What is suspect is not pleasure, but that form of pleasure which consists of the supposed satisfaction that the possession of an object can produce, that is to say, control of it. Desire is totally different; here, pleasure is the fruit of a relation where each one is co-creative. Courtly love attempts to liberate pleasure from the will to conquer (to possess). However, it does it by abstracting the relation. Marguerite doesn't seek to make love abstract. God must not be reduced to the state of an image, a representation. He has a body: Nature.

- In courtly love, pleasure creates itself. The other is an abstraction that feeds personal fantasies. Pleasure is, at bottom, solitary. Obviously, the body suffers from that abstraction, for physical desire consists of interacting with another body. This suffering, however, builds courtly love. The more I suffer from the physical lack of the other, the more I enjoy her abstract presence. On the contrary, Marguerite Porete is searching for concrete experience with God through herself and through Nature.

- Courtly love implies that physical pleasure destroys otherness, whence its scorn for the carnal act. In sensual pleasure, the other supposedly becomes replaceable. One body could be substituted for another. This has little to do with experience. On the contrary, no body is identical with another, so the physical complementarity is not universal. Conjugal love has, then, an irreplaceable concrete value.

For Marguerite, Love is above all, even God. Marguerite Porete does not want sexual repression (the platonic relation with an image of the other) to intensify mystical impulses and strange experiences. It is above all not about manufacturing "mystics" with "repressed" emotions. Conversely, to counter such an error, she proposes giving nature all that suits it (which requires the greatest discernment).

Lucretius spoke of the unfortunates "possessed by amorous ardor" in these

terms: "Their prey, he hugs her so that it hurts/ Biting and kisses ruin her lips./ Impure, their pleasure hides stings/ Inciting them to wound the object, no matter what it is,/ From this arise the seeds of their passion." Such a love is a struggle against desire, it is will against desire. Marguerite Porete goes exactly in the opposite direction.

In fact all of Marguerite Porete's philosophy is summarized thus: if there is no loving look, God is worse than the original Chaos of the Egyptian, Greek, or Roman myths. For Chaos, the unconscious cruelty of the storm, of chance or accident, we can endure, but the cruelty that constitutes the rationale of politics, the cruelty that has become the general economy of heaven and of earth, this makes "intelligence" worse than chance, planning more sadistic than accident, the "good" worse than evil, "order" more systematically murderous than savage life.

Either the cruelty in Man is only a sickness, in which case we will hope and work for our health; or cruelty in man increases with the consciousness of power; in this case, let us unite against Man. Let us destroy him. Let us allow life to return to its full unconsciousness.

But consciousness is a component of being, so being is developed by consciousness and consciousness inevitably leads to brotherhood out of pure necessity, that is to say by the finitude in which the essence of creativity, limitless in principle, is incarnated.