

NUNS AND SOLDIERS

IRIS MURDOCH

INTRODUCTION BY
KAREN ARMSTRONG



PENGUIN BOOKS

NUNS AND SOLDIERS

IRIS MURDOCH

INTRODUCTION BY
KAREN ARMSTRONG



PENGUIN BOOKS

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Introduction](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

PENGUIN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CLASSICS NUNS AND SOLDIERS

Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin in 1919, grew up in London, and received her university education at Oxford and later at Cambridge. In 1948 she became a Fellow of St. Anne's College, Oxford, where for many years she taught philosophy. In 1987 she was appointed Dame Commander, Order of the British Empire. She died on February 8, 1999. Murdoch wrote twenty-six novels, including *Under the Net*, her writing debut of 1954, and the Booker Prize-winning *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). She received a number of other literary awards, among them the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince* (1973) and the Whit-bread Prize for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974). Her works of philosophy include *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1993), and *Existentialists and Mystics* (1998). She also wrote several plays and a volume of poetry.

A former Catholic nun, Karen Armstrong teaches at Leo Baeck College for the Study of Judaism in England. Her books include *The Battle for God; A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*; *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*; *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis*; *Islam: A Short History*; and her biography, *Buddha*, published in the Penguin Lives series.

By the same author

Philosophy

SARTRE, ROMANTIC RATIONALIST
THE FIRE AND THE SUN
ACOSTOS: TWO PLATONIC DIALOGUES
METAPHYSICS AS A GUIDE TO MORALS
EXISTENTIALISTS AND MYSTICS

Fiction

UNDER THE NET
THE FLIGHT FROM THE ENCHANTER
THE SAND CASTLE
THE BELL
SEVERED HEAD
AN UNOFFICIAL ROSE
THE UNICORN
THE ITALIAN GIRL
THE RED AND THE GREEN
THE TIME OF THE ANGELS
THE NICE AND THE GOOD
BRUNO'S DREAM
A FAIRLY HONOURABLE DEFEAT
AN ACCIDENTAL MAN
THE BLACK PRINCE
THE SACRED AND PROFANE LOVE MACHINE
A WORD CHILD
HENRY AND CATO
THE SEA, THE SEA
NUNS AND SOLDIERS
THE PHILOSOPHER'S PUPIL
THE GOOD APPRENTICE
THE BOOK AND THE BROTHERHOOD
THE MESSAGE TO THE PLANET
THE GREEN KNIGHT
JACKSON'S DILEMMA

Plays

A SEVERED HEAD (with J. B. Priestley)
THE ITALIAN GIRL (with James Saunders)
THE THREE ARROWS

THE SERVANTS AND THE SNOW
THE BLACK PRINCE

Poetry
A YEAR OF BIRDS
(Illustrated by Reynolds Stone)

NUNS AND SOLDIERS

IRIS MURDOCH

INTRODUCTION BY
KAREN ARMSTRONG



PENGUIN BOOKS

eISBN : 978-1-101-49426-4

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand,
London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell,
Victoria 3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,
New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany,
Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,
Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in Great Britain by Chatto & Windus Ltd 1980

First published in the United States of America by The Viking Press 1981

Published in Penguin Books 1982

Edition with an introduction by Karen Armstrong published in Great
Britain by Vintage, an imprint of Random House UK Ltd 2001

Published in Penguin Books 2002

Copyright © Iris Murdoch, 1980

Introduction copyright © Karen Armstrong, 2001

All rights reserved

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either
are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and
any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments,
events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

CIP data available

<http://us.penguin.com>

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult at first, perhaps, to imagine two groups of people who have less in common than the nuns and soldiers of the title, but a possible link is suggested in the very first scene of the novel. Guy Openshaw is dying and, with the terrible eloquence of so many of Iris Murdoch's characters, he unflinchingly contemplates the prospect of his imminent extinction. Does one, he asks, die as an animal, in exhaustion or in some kind of trance? 'Our breaths are numbered,' he remarks. 'I can see the imaginable number of my own - just coming - into view.' He wants to die well, 'but how is it done?' When will he decide to stop shaving forever? Guy's mind is beginning to fragment: he utters disconnected, mysteriously elusive phrases, which disturb his wife Gertrude and his friends. They show that he has already started the journey into 'that future when I won't exist any more'.

Human beings are the only animals who have to live with the knowledge of their own mortality. This fear of annihilation, of nonbeing, is a constant reality in our lives. We are creatures who fall very easily into despair, and we have been ingenious in our search for solutions that will save our sanity. Many of us prefer not to think of the void that awaits us some time in the future, but we can never entirely block out the reality of death. Other people choose to confront the spectre, and to lose their fear of extinction by meeting it head on. This is the task of the soldier. He undergoes a rigorous training that enables him to walk directly into the firing line, ignoring, for what he sees as a higher good, that clamorous instinct for self-preservation which has enabled our species to survive. The soldier's disciplined lack of self-regard has long been seen by poets and philosophers as an emblem of human courage. And yet this heroism also reveals the tragedy of our predicament, because it brings no special dispensation. Homer's military heroes all fear death, because they know that it leads only to a shadowy nonexistence in the underworld. The single appropriate response, as they see it, is to behave nobly in the face of this unavoidable fate.

But there is another form of courage, which has fallen somewhat into disrepute in our secularized society, but which had also been hailed as heroic. This is the path of the monk, the nun and the mystic who voluntarily adopt a lifestyle that has been carefully designed to quench the selfishness and egotism which, they believe, hold human beings back from their full potential. The Buddha, for example, was not seen by his contemporaries in the sixth century B.C.E. as a feeble, deluded drop-out when he left the world to pursue the spiritual life; he was often described in martial terms, as a young nobleman 'capable of leading a crack army or a troop of elephants'. An ascetic was seen as a pioneer who, at great cost to himself, faced up to the void to bring some vision of hope to more ordinary mortals. The monastic life has emerged in strikingly similar forms in nearly all cultures, and must, therefore, fulfil a need for many men and women. It has been found that the monastic regime and such disciplines as classical yoga or contemplative prayer constitute a devastating assault on the ego and eventually take the 'I' out of the thinking of a skilled practitioner. Like the soldier, therefore, the nun also seeks an experience of annihilation, but if she is sufficiently dedicated, she discovers that this death to self brings her an enhanced mode of being, a transcendence that gives her a sense of infinity and eternity in this mortal life. This transcendence has been called many things: Nirvana, the Tao, the Sacred or Brahman. Buddhists would claim that there is nothing supernatural about it but that it is an essential component of our human nature. Jews, Christians, and Muslims, however, have personalized this transcendence and called it 'God'. But all agree that to attain an experience of this reality, one

must die to the selfishness and egotism that fetters us to an inferior, incomplete version of ourselves.

But such self-abandonment is very difficult. Soldiers can become deserters and nuns can leave the convents, as I did, because they do not really want to leave themselves behind. In their private lives, soldiers can be as selfish as any civilian, and nuns can be as trivial and egotistic in their cloister as anybody else. Nevertheless, the ideal persists. A significant group of people have found that they become most fully themselves when they give themselves away; and that when they deliberately court annihilation and nothingness, they encounter a larger reality.

In the ancient world, people explored this paradox by means of myth, which has aptly been called a primitive form of psychology; it charts the elusive, interior world of the psyche in its stories of death and resurrection, and of a hero's descent into the underworld to gain new life and insight. Iris Murdoch, however, does not use the archaic symbols of labyrinths, monsters and a far-off, distant time. In this novel, she is writing a modern myth set in contemporary, well-heeled London. And the soldier and nun of this novel, both of whom are present at Guy Openshaw's deathbed, are fully involved in ordinary, civilian life. Peter Szczepanski, a Polish exile, known to his friends as the Count, is not a member of the armed forces but his personal history has, he feels, made him a conscript in the hopeless battle for his home-land. He has no illusions about Poland in the last years of the Cold War (when this novel is set), but he is still convinced, in spite of everything, that Poles aspire to a 'spiritual destiny, an anguished longing for freedom of spirit'. He feels that as a Pole he too is somehow enlisted in the ranks of those who fight oppression everywhere, regardless of their personal safety, until after 'their brief, and apparently useless struggle for freedom and virtue, they rotted away quietly into a slow anonymous death'. In real life, the Count is merely a civil servant, but his belief that he should be involved in this heroic battle has set him apart. It affects his physical, heel-clicking bearing, and informs his moral behaviour. He knew 'that he was not a gentleman volunteer in the army of the moral law ... He stood in his mind as still and expressionless as the soldiers at the Unknown Warrior's grave.' Spiritually, the Count stands at attention, but beside a void, because the Poland of his imagination has been obliterated by the terrible events of the twentieth century, which he constantly reviews late at night in his lonely flat.

Anne Cavidge, on the other hand, has been a nun in a Roman Catholic enclosed order, but when the novel opens, she has left her convent. She too faces an emptiness. For years the religious life had made sense to her, but gradually her belief in the personal God of Christianity has faded away. Yet she cannot abandon the ideal. She intends now to live in the world as a secret nun, an anchorite, 'the spy on a non-existent God'. What Anne has discovered is what the theologians have called 'the God beyond God'. At a certain point, mystics in all faiths realize that the myths and doctrines of their tradition are only man-made; they are simply 'pointers' to a transcendence that cannot be expressed in normal words and concepts. They often call this transcendent dimension of experience 'Nothing', because it bears no relation to anyone or anything in the ordinary sense of these words. It is not 'another being', they insist; it cannot even be said to exist, because our notion of 'existence' is far too limited to be appropriate here. This Nothingness is in fact the goal of the mystical quest. As the fourteenth-century contemplative Meister Eckhart explained: 'Man's last and highest parting comes when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God.' Anne is now groping past the God of conventional religion towards this Void. When she has a vision of Jesus, he is a Buddhist Christ, who tells her that he cannot save her: she must save herself and find her own answers. Anne is determined not to fall back into the triviality of her life before she entered the order. She still has the impulse to rush forward into an apparent oblivion, in rather the same way as she plunges on one occasion into a dangerous sea. Now she realizes that she must be 'alone ..., with no plan and no visions, homeless and invisible, a wanderer, a

no one'.

Not everyone is capable of this type of self-abandonment, however. Yet we all need to be saved from our fear of death and our suspicion that life is essentially without meaning. We all seek ecstasy and an experience that takes us beyond ourselves. If we do not find this in conventional religion, we turn to art, music of all sorts, dance, sex, sport or even to drugs. This search for some form of transcendence is basic to our condition. Iris Murdoch is one of the few modern novelists to take this quest seriously. She is not afraid of themes that are often dismissed by the secular intellectual as 'religious'. But instead of describing conventional faith, she depicts a spirituality of everyday life, showing what it is in human experience that lies behind the myths and practices which have become debased and incredible to an increasing number of people.

Art is one of the chief ways of endowing our lives with some ultimate value, and in some Murdoch novels, characters discover that a painting, for example, can startle them out of their self-obsession and give them intimations of a reality that is wholly separate from themselves, absolute, and entirely removed from their personal needs and desires. Tim Reede, a distant cousin of Guy, and his girlfriend Daisy are painters, but they are certainly not producing work of this calibre. They pride themselves 'on being free and having no possessions', but they have got stuck, artistically and personally, in a destructive mode of life and find that they cannot progress. Tim in particular lacks the dedication and discipline that is as essential for an artist as for a nun or a soldier. As a result, he can copy other artists' work to perfection, but produces nothing valuable of his own. He is also chronically short of money.

But when, after Guy's death, Tim goes to live in the Openshaws' house in France, as a caretaker, he has a classic experience of the numinous. Long before human beings mapped their world scientifically, they developed what has been called a 'sacred geography'. Certain places - mountains, groves, or rivers - have seemed to speak of 'something else'. The devotion to a 'holy place' was one of the earliest and most universal expressions of the religious impulse, and is so common that it must tell us something about the way men and women have experienced the physical world as a place of wonder and mystery. Even today we have not secularized the world entirely: many of us have special places to which we like to repair in a moment of crisis or for renewal; these places may be linked with our childhood and have something of the glamour of beginnings; they may be connected with an important experience, when we felt we were living most intensely; or something strange in the locality may fill us with awe. Tim has no religious beliefs and certainly does not attribute his experience in France to supernatural deity, but when he suddenly finds himself confronted by a great rock face, he feels that dread, exhilaration and joy, which the German philosopher Rudolph Otto describes in *The Idea of the Holy* as characteristic of an encounter with the Sacred. Tim is both afraid of the rock and yet irresistibly drawn to it; it is, in Otto's words, *terrible et fascinans*. He also has 'that pure, clean, blessed beginning-again feeling'. Immediately, he sits down and begins to paint, producing his first serious work for some time.

In his normal life, Tim is perpetually on the scrounge. Anne Cavidge once caught him stealing food out of the Openshaws' fridge. He is constantly dodging and ducking; his motto is the Greek verb *lanthano*: I escape notice. In his ceaseless, uphill struggle for survival, he is often economical with the truth. But there is something about the rock and the small round pool beneath it that shocks him out of his endless compulsion to turn everything to his own advantage. It makes him aware of a dimension beyond himself. The rock is not a scene that Tim can exploit for his own profit, turning out one of his usual daubs to sell at his local Bloomsbury pub. He felt that it would be sacrilegious to drink from the pool or to bathe in it. And once he has glimpsed a reality which is entirely separate from his concerns

(in Hebrew the word for 'holy' is *qaddosh*: Separate, Other), he is ready not only to paint again but to fall in love.

Few writers have been able to describe the cataclysmic and numinous experience of love as vividly as Murdoch. Today we tend to write more freely about sex than our ancestors, but can be rather embarrassed by the phenomenon of 'falling in love'. But for Murdoch, love is no delusion but a revelation. The sudden realization that another human being exists in an absolute sense is another of the ways in which men and women have found holiness in our profane, flawed and tragic world. Out of the blue, Tim and Gertrude, Guy's widow, are seized with love for one another. Gertrude experiences this visitation of Eros as an extremity. It is an 'unmistakable seismic shock; that total concentration of everything into one necessary being, mysterious, uncanny, unique, one of the strangest phenomena in the world'. The beloved becomes an expression of everything that gives life ultimate value, rather as 'God' did in the age of faith. Like the disciplines of religion, love transforms the lover. Gertrude 'had a new consciousness, her whole being hummed with a sacred love awareness'. Other characters in the novel speak of their love in similar terms.

I became a different person, I lived in a different world where everything was new and bright, but all my ordinary judgements left me. It was as if my mind was drained clean and I had a new mind, beautiful and clear but unfamiliar and hard to manage. All the dull old usual realities were gone.

For Murdoch, love is a transcendent experience, which takes hold of the lover in rather the same way as men and women used to feel possessed by a god.

Of course, a realist will see this as over the top. We know that human love rarely remains on this sublime level. The scales soon fall from our eyes, and we then see the beloved as he is, warts and all. But Murdoch is well aware that love does not often work out. In this novel, indeed, love is usually painful and hopeless. We find that there is a chain of suffering: the Count is in love with Gertrude, who is in love with Tim; Anne Cavidge loves the Count; Manfred, Guy's cousin, is in love with Anne and Mrs Mount is in love with Manfred. In the normal course of events, it seems, love is not returned. This revelation of holiness may seem a benign visitation at the outset, but it brings only pain. Yet this is where more ordinary human beings can become nuns or soldiers, because unrequited love itself can force us to transcend the self. It gives us nothing, for our devotion is concentrated on a person who is scarcely aware of our existence. As Anne explains to the Count, who feels that he cannot stay in London to be a daily witness to Gertrude's marriage to Tim: 'This is what Polish heroism is for, to be nobody and nothing, and try after all to enjoy it.' Unloved lovers are soldiers like the Count, standing constantly to attention before the oblivious beloved. They are not unlike Anne, beseeching her 'nonexistent God'. This type of love can go bad and lead to bitterness; or it can lead to a heroic self-abandonment, as, constantly disregarded, the self-important ego dwindles away.

The novel concentrates, however, on the story of Gertrude and Tim, who, like many of the heroes of mythology, has to undergo a series of ordeals, before he can make his love for Gertrude a viable reality. One peak experience is never enough; it has to be creatively integrated into daily life. A crucial moment in Tim's spiritual journey is his final departure from Daisy, who has been his companion for years. For once, Tim is acting selflessly and against his own desires. He is deliberately walking into a terrifying vacuum. Yet both Tim and Daisy experience his departure as a moment of grace, but also as a death. They have deliberately chosen the annihilation of their relationship and, inevitably, are putting to death a crucial part of themselves. They can thus share a moment of revelation. When we look at somebody with our own well-being constantly in mind, we cannot see the

person as he or she really is. Our vision is distorted by a subjectivity which is destructive and exploitative. When Tim finally has the courage to set Daisy free, he sees her transfigured. They no longer view each other through the prism of their own selfishness. Each feels that the other has become a god. They have seen what is sacred in the other.

Finally, Tim has to undergo ordeal by water. This is a frequent motif in Murdoch's novels; characters often have to endure some watery trial before they can see their way clearly. In many cultures, the symbol of immersion in the deep represents a rite of passage, the emergence of a new reality or a profound transformation. We see this in the biblical myth of the Israelites who escape from slavery by passing through the miraculously parted Sea of Reeds. The Christian sacrament of baptism is another instance of this universal symbolism. Tim falls into a dangerous canal when, disregarding his own safety, he tries to rescue a drowning dog. This moment of gratuitous and disinterested compassion leads to his salvation. Swept along by the canal into the depths of the earth, he emerges safely into the sunlight, battered and dishevelled, and makes his final, successful return to Gertrude.

Human beings need salvation. This does not mean 'going to heaven', a concept which both Anne and Guy dismiss as an anti-religious idea. As we live our precarious lives on the brink of the void, constantly coming closer to a state of nonbeing, we are all too often aware of our fragility. But we will not be rescued by a supernatural deity nor by the crucified Christ. We have to make an effort of imagination to save ourselves. Murdoch's novel shows that, in Robert Browning's words, we have 'finite hearts that yearn', but, as St Augustine observed, it is this yearning that makes the heart run deep. It seems to be characteristic of the human mind to have experiences and to imagine realities that transcend it. Love, like religion, may be a delusion, but if we are sufficiently ingenious, it can sometimes save us. The Count tells Anne that for years his unrequited love for Gertrude brought him some consolation. 'I did it all, I enacted both sides of the relation, and this could be done because she was inaccessible.' He adds: 'We dream that we are loved, because otherwise we would die.' At the end of the novel, Anne reflects that this is also true of the religious quest. We imagine God or Christ to save ourselves from the bleak realities of our existence, but if it is truly creative this effort can itself bring a measure of relief. Jean-Paul Sartre defined the imagination as the ability to think of what is not there. It is, therefore, the chief religious faculty, since it enables us to conceive the eternally absent God. But in order to glimpse this transcendence, we must give ourselves away. It seems that the discipline of the nun and the soldier, which requires an absolute self-abandonment, brings its own freedom and its own peace.

The novel closes with Anne 'homeless and free ... facing the void which she had chosen'. But it is not a depressing conclusion. Iris Murdoch was an important novelist because she reminded us of truths which the dearth of religion in our society has obscured. But she is able to merge this mythological vision with the comedy of manners. We are not simply suffering, yearning creatures. We are also absurd, and, in her kindly, dispassionate way, Murdoch points this out. There are moments of vintage Murdochian comedy in this novel. There is the robust, bracing humour of Daisy; the poignant vanity of Mrs Mount, who habitually rearranges her face before looking in the mirror, so that she always sees a radiant, serene and fulfilled image of herself; and the ludicrous egotism of Tim and Gertrude, as they fall back from their grand vision into the self-regarding complacency of marriage. Like all good comedy, Murdoch's humour is rooted in sorrow and pain, but it also cuts us down to size, and reminds us that however great our aspiration, however much we suffer, and however arduous our quest, we remain little creatures, who should not take ourselves too seriously.

CHAPTER ONE

‘WITTGENSTEIN -’

‘Yes?’ said the Count.

The dying man shifted on the bed, rolling his head rhythmically to and fro in a way that had become habitual only in the last few days. Pain?

The Count was standing at the window. He never sat down now in Guy’s presence. He had been more familiar once, though Guy had always been a sort of king in his life: his model, his teacher, his best friend, his standard, his judge; but most especially something royal. Now another and a greater king was present in the room.

‘He was a sort of amateur, really.’

‘Yes,’ said the Count. He was puzzled by Guy’s sudden desire to belittle a thinker whom he had formerly admired. Perhaps he needed to feel that Wittgenstein too would not survive.

‘A naïve and touching belief in the power of pure thought. And that man imagined we would never reach the moon.’

‘Yes.’ The Count had often talked of abstract matters with Guy, but in the past they had talked of so much else, they had even gossiped. Now there were few topics left. Their conversation had become refined and chilled until nothing personal remained between them. Love? There could be no expression of it now, any gesture of affection would be a gross error of taste. It was a matter of behaving correctly until the end. The awful egoism of the dying. The Count knew how little now Guy needed or wanted his affection, or even Gertrude’s; and he knew too, in his grief, that he himself was withdrawing, stifling his compassion, coming to see it as fruitless suffering. We do not want to care too much for what we are losing. Surreptitiously we remove our sympathy, and prepare the dying one for death, diminish him, strip him of his last attractions. We abandon the dying like a sick beast left under the hedge. Death is supposed to show us truth, but is its own place of illusion. It defeats love. Perhaps shows us that after all there is none. I am thinking Guy’s thoughts now, the Count said to himself. I do not think this. But then I am not dying.

He pulled back the curtain a little and looked out into the November evening. Snow had begun to fall again in Ebury Street, large slow flakes moving densely, steadily, with visible silence, in the light of the street lamps, and crowding dimly above in the windless dark. A few cars hissed by, their sound muted and softened. The Count was about to say, ‘It’s snowing,’ but checked himself. When someone is dying there is no point in telling him about the snow. There was no more weather for Guy.

‘It was the oracular voice. We felt it had to be true.’

‘Yes.’

‘A philosopher’s thought suits you or it doesn’t. It’s only deep in that sense. Like a novel.’

‘Yes,’ said the Count. He added, ‘Indeed.’

‘Linguistic idealism. A dance of bloodless categories after all.’

‘Yes. Yes.’

‘But really, could I be happy now?’

‘What do you mean?’ said the Count. He was always, now, frightened that even in these sterile conversations something terrible might be said. He was not sure what he anticipated, but there could be something dreadful, a truth, a mistake.

‘Death is not an event in life. He lives eternally who lives in the present. To see the world without desire is to see its beauty. The beautiful makes happy.’

‘I never understood that,’ said the Count, ‘but it doesn’t seem to add up. I suppose it’s out of Schopenhauer.’

‘Schopenhauer, Mauthner, Karl Kraus - what a charlatan.’

The Count looked surreptitiously at his watch. The nurse put a strict time limit on his conversation with Guy. If he stayed too long Guy began to ramble, the abstract moving on into the visionary, the mind-computer beginning to jumble its items. A little less blood to the brain and we are all raving lunatics spouting delusions. Guy’s ramblings were to the Count unspeakably painful: the helpless still self-aware irrationality of the most rational of minds. What was it like within? It was the pain-killing drugs, of course, the cause was chemical. Did that make it better? It was not natural. But was death natural?

‘Language games, funeral games. But - the point - is -’

‘Yes?’

‘Death drives away what rules everywhere else, the aesthetic.’

‘And without that?’

‘We can’t experience the present. I mean dying does -’

‘It drives away -’

‘Yes. Death and dying are enemies. Death is an alien voluptuous power. It’s an idea that can be worked upon. By the survivors.’

Oh we shall work, thought the Count, we shall work. We shall have time then.

‘Sex goes, you know. A dying man with sexual desire - that would be obscene -’

The Count said nothing. He turned again to the window and rubbed away the misty patch which his breath had made upon the glass.

‘Suffering is such muck. Death is clean. And there won’t be any - *lux perpetua* - how I’d hate that. Only *nox perpetua* - thank God. It’s only the - *Ereignis* -’

‘The -’

‘That one’s afraid of. Because there is - probably-a sort of event - half an event - anyway - and one does wonder - what it will be like - when it comes -’

The Count did not want to talk about this. He cleared his throat but not in time to interrupt.

‘I suppose one will die as an animal. Perhaps few people die a human death. Of exhaustion, or else in some kind of trance. Let the fever run like a storm-driven ship. And in the end - there’s so little of one left to vanish. All is vanity. Our breaths are numbered. I can see the imaginable number of my own - just coming - into view.’

The Count continued to stand at the window staring at the huge slow illuminated snow flakes showering steadily out of the dark. He wanted to stop Guy, to make him talk about ordinary things, and yet he felt too: perhaps this speech is precious to him, his eloquence, the last personal possession of the breaking mind. Perhaps he needs me to make possible a soliloquy which soothes his anguish. But it’s too fast, too odd, I can’t play with his ideas like I used to. I am dull and I can’t converse, or is my silence enough? Will he want to see me tomorrow? He has banished the others. There will be a last meeting. The Count came to Ebury Street every evening now, he had given up his modest social life. Soon there would be no more tomorrows anyway. The cancer was advanced, the doctor doubted whether Guy would last till Christmas. The Count did not look that far ahead. A crisis in his own life was approaching from which he carefully, honourably averted his eyes.

Guy was still rolling his head to and fro. He was a little older than the Count, forty-three, but he

seemed an old man now, the leonine look quite gone. His mane of hair had been cut, more had fallen out. His scored forehead was a dome from which all else fell away. The big head had shrunk and sharpened, accentuating his Jewish features. A glittering-eyed rabbinical ancestor glared out through his face. Guy was half Jewish, his forebears Christianized Jews, wealthy men, Englishmen. The Count contemplated Guy's Jewish mask. The Count's father had been ferociously anti-Semitic. For this, and for much else, the Count (who was Polish) did constant penance.

Trying at last to assert ordinariness the Count said, 'Are you all right for books? Can I bring you anything?'

'No, *The Odyssey* will see me out. I always thought of myself as Odysseus. Only now-I won't get back-I hope I'll have time to finish it. Though it's so awfully cruel at the end ... Are they coming this evening - ?'

'You mean - ?'

'Les cousins et les tantes.'

'Yes, I imagine so.'

'They flee from me that some time did me seek.'

'On the contrary,' said the Count, 'if there is anyone whom you would like to see, I can guarantee that that person would like to see you.' He had picked up from Guy a certain almost awkward precision of speech.

'No one understands Pindar. No one knows where Mozart's grave is. What does it prove that Wittgenstein never thought we'd reach the moon? If Hannibal had marched on Rome after the battle of Cannae he would have taken it. Ah well. *Poscimur*. It sounds different tonight.'

'What does?'

'The world.'

'It's snowing.'

'I'd like to see -'

'The snow?'

'No.'

'Manfred?'

'No.'

'It's nearly time for the nurse.'

'You're bored, Peter.'

This was the only real remark which Guy had addressed to him tonight, one of the last precious signs, in the midst of that appalling privileged monologue, of a continuing connection between them. It was almost too much for the Count, he nearly exclaimed with pity and distress. But he answered as Guy required him to do, as Guy had taught him to do. 'No. It isn't boredom. I just can't pick up your ideas, perhaps I don't want to. And not to allow you to lead the conversation - would be fearfully impolite.'

Guy acknowledged this with the quick grimace which was now his smile. He lay quiet at last, propped up. Their eyes met, then shied away from the spark of pain.

'Ah well - ah well - she shouldn't have sold the ring -'

'Who - ?'

'En fin de compte - ça revient au même -'

'De s'enivrer solitairement ou de conduire les peuples.' The Count completed the quotation, one of Guy's favourites.

'Everything's gone wrong since Aristotle, we can see why now. Liberty died with Cicero. Where's

Gerald?’

‘In Australia with the big telescope. Would you - ?’

‘I used to believe my thoughts would wander in infinite spaces, but that was a dream. Gerald talks about the cosmos, but that’s impossible, you can’t talk about everything. That one knows anything at all ... is not guaranteed ... by the game ...’

‘What - ?’

‘Our worlds wax and wane with a difference. We belong to different tribes.’

‘We have always done so,’ said the Count.

‘No - only now - Oh - how ill’s all here. How much I wish I could -’

‘Could - ?’

‘See it -’

‘See?’

‘See it ... the whole ... of logical space ... the upper side ... of the cube ...’

Through the door which Guy’s wife Gertrude had quietly opened, the Count could see the Night Nurse sitting in the hall. She rose now and came promptly forward, smiling, a sturdy brunette with almost dusky red cheeks. She had changed her boots for slippers but still smelt of the open air and the cold. She gave out an unfocused friendliness, her fine dark eyes rather vaguely danced and twinkled, she was thinking of other things, satisfactions, plans. She tossed and patted her wavy dark hair, and had a little air of capable self-satisfaction which would have been pleasing, even reassuring, in a situation which admitted of hope. As it was there was something almost allegorically sad about her detachment from the misery that surrounded her. The Count stood aside to let her in, then raised a hand to Guy and departed. The door closed. Gertrude, who had not entered with the nurse, had already gone back to the drawing-room.

The Count, it should be explained, was not a real count. His life had been a conceptual muddle, a mistake. So had his father’s life. Of remoter ancestors he knew nothing, except that his paternal grandfather, who was killed in the first war, had been a professional soldier. His parents and his elder brother Jozef, then a baby, had come to England from Poland before the second war. His father, his name was Bogdan Szczepanski, was a Marxist. His mother was a Catholic. (Her name was Maria.) The marriage was not a success.

The father’s Marxism was of a peculiarly Polish variety. He grew to consciousness in a wrecked post-war Poland, drunk with independence and with having asserted its nationhood in the best possible way by smashing a Russian army outside Warsaw in 1920. Bogdan was politically precocious, a follower of Dmowski, but an admirer of Pilsudski. His patriotism was intense, narrow and anti-Semitic. He left his mother and a house full of sisters at an early age. He thought of becoming a lawyer, and was briefly a student at Warsaw University, but was soon involved in politics. (Possibly he worked as a clerk.) His hatred of Rosa Luxemburg was only second to his hatred of Bismarck. (He hated a great many people, past and present.) An early memory was of his mother saying that Rosa Luxemburg deserved to be murdered because she wanted to give Poland to the Russians. (His father, whom he could scarcely remember, had of course performed a first paternal duty by telling him that

all Russians were devils.) Yet, though he never stopped hating Rosa Luxemburg (and was mildly cheered up when she eventually was murdered), some hard absolutist streak in his nature led him towards Marxism. He felt himself destined by fate to be the creator of a pure Polish Marxism. He had a cousin who was a member of the small illegal Polish Communist Party, and with whom he had fiercer arguments. Although the party was not only pro-Russian but also full of beastly Jews, the youthful Bogdan was curiously drawn to it. There was an intensity, an absolute, in Marxism which attracted him. It was a 'short path'. It was idealistic, anti-materialistic, violent, and did not promise ease. Surely Poland demanded no less than such a total dedication. Yet, as he later told his son, his particular patriotism did not allow him to become a communist. He remained a furious isolated idiosyncratic Marxist, the only man who had really understood what Marxism meant to Poland.

He got married in 1936. Then Stalin intervened in his life. The Polish Communist Party had never been more than a puny inefficient instrument in the hands of the great Russian leader. Polish communists would be displeased by a Russo-German rapprochement. Besides, they were infected by the virus of patriotism, and could play no role in Stalin's plans for Poland which could not be better played by the Red Army. So, with that calm purposive clear-headed ruthlessness, so characteristic of his policies and of their success, Stalin quietly had the Polish Communist Party liquidated. Bogdan's cousin disappeared. Bogdan himself, a self-confessed maverick Marxist, an intellectual, a typical trouble-maker, was now in danger. In 1938 he arrived in England with his wife and son. In the summer of 1939 he decided to return to Poland. However events had moved too fast for him and he was incarcerated in England, to be the frenzied and miserable spectator of the subsequent fate of his country, and to be tormented ever after by the terrible guilt of not having fought on Polish soil.

The Count was born just before the war and his first awareness was that he had had a brother, but the brother was dead. The brother had been wonderful. The Count, though lesser, must be a comfort, substitute for his exiled parents. With the dawn of consciousness the fact of exile came too. The Count's first perception was of a red and white flag. The wonderful brother had been killed in an air raid. Warsaw had been destroyed. These were the Count's first data, clearer to him almost than his parents were. Bogdan, cheated of his return home, and now, again quite illogically, an ardent admirer of Sikorski, had joined the Polish Air Force, now being formed in England under the aegis of the government-in-exile. He wanted to get into the Parachute Brigade, and dreamt of returning home from the sky as a liberator, soon to become a leading statesman in the independent post-war Poland. However he never left the ground, since a stupid training accident returned him early to civilian life. He took employment (again probably as a clerk) with the Polish government in London. Here he consumed his heart and his time in hatred of Russia (hatred of Germany was taken for granted, that was scarcely an occupation) and in vain attempts to penetrate the high-level scheming which obsessed his more powerful compatriots. He (of course) offered his services as a courier to the underground Home Army in Poland, but was refused. (The Count never doubted that his father was a very brave man who would eagerly have given his life in the service of his country.) He was able to follow in some detail (and later often rehearsed to the Count who as a child was maddeningly indifferent to the fate of the Pripet Marshes) the agonizing diplomacy whereby, after Sikorski's death, Mikolajczyk attempted to please Britain by placating Stalin, without giving away Eastern Poland to Russia.

The Red Army had of course entered Poland in September 1939, as agreed with the Germans. The news that the Russians had then secretly murdered fifteen thousand Polish officers was one of the shocks which Bogdan's consciousness had to withstand and his ability for hatred to digest in the earlier part of the war. By this time too there were tales of how the Germans were managing their part of Poland. In the words of the German governor, 'the very concept *Polak* will be erased for centuries

to come, no form of Polish state will ever be reborn, Poland will be a colony and Poles will be slaves in the German empire'. Rage, hate, humiliation, passionate love, mortally wounded pride so contended in Bogdan's soul that it sometimes seemed he might die of sheer emotion. When young the Count (forced to relive these horrors and determined not to be damaged by them) marvelled at his father's lack of realism. Could he not see how helpless and unimportant Poland was? How could Churchill and Roosevelt have been expected to care about the Polish frontier? Obviously history intended, and had always intended, Poland to be subservient to Russia. In fact Poland had not done too badly out of the war as far as territory was concerned. Later, about all these things, the Count felt differently. Bogdan's war, and in some ways perhaps his life, ended on October 3, 1944. The Warsaw Rising, the great insurrection for which all Poles had been waiting, began on August 1, when the guns of the Red Army were rattling the windows in the city. The Poles in Warsaw began to fight the Germans. The Russian advance paused. The Red Army did not cross the Vistula. The Russians withdrew. The Soviet Air Force disappeared from the skies. Unhindered German bombers skimmed the city roof tops. Meagre supplies of arms were dropped by the British and Americans. Desperate appeals for help, to Moscow, to London, went unheeded. The Polish Underground Army fought the Germans alone for nine weeks. Then they surrendered. Two hundred thousand Poles were killed. The departing Germans blew up what was left of Warsaw.

As a child the Count did not want to hear of these things. He was early aware of himself as a disappointment and a substitute. He shrank away from his father's guilt and misery and humiliated pride. He did not want to join in the endless agonizing postmortem. (And Stalin said ... and Churchill said ... and Roosevelt said ... and Eden said ... and Sikorski said ... and Mikolajczyk said ... and Anders said ... and Bor-Komorovsky said ... and Bokszczanin said and Sosnkowski said ... and so on and so on.) While his father, who by this time had hardly anyone to talk to except his son, went on and on about the Curzon Line, the Count, whose ambition was to pass his exams and be an ordinary English Schoolboy, wrote carefully in his exercise book *Miles puellam amat. Puella militem amat*. He did not want to hear of those centuries of misery, of 'partitions' and betrayals and Teutonic Knights and what happened at Brest-Litovsk and what mistake Duke Conrad made in 1226. He would not worship Kosciuszko and Mickiewicz or even remember who they were. Worst of all, while his mother was stubbornly refusing to learn English, he was stubbornly refusing to learn Polish. (His brother Jozef had spoken excellent Polish of course.) After he went to school he uttered not another word of Polish, addressed in Polish he replied in English, then affected not to understand, then genuinely did not understand. His father gazed down at him with unspeakable pain and turned away. The tempest which raged in Bogdan's soul rarely expressed itself physically. The Count could remember a few terrible incomprehensible Polish rows, his father shouting, his mother weeping. Later his father withdrew from his wife and child and also from his London compatriots. He never spoke again of returning to Poland. His mother and sisters had disappeared during the rising. He stayed on in England, a country whose self-interested perfidy he could not forgive. When the London Polish government (no longer the Polish government) was disbanded (some to choose exile, some to scramble back to Poland to try to gain some foothold in the new, as it soon became, Communist government), Bogdan took an office job in an English insurance firm. His idiosyncratic Marxism, unfed by any hope, had now dwindled and been succeeded by a fierce hatred of communism. He watched the events in eastern Europe with an almost spiteful pessimism. He now occupied himself with detesting Gomulka. He was momentari-

- [download online Scent of the Missing: Love and Partnership with a Search and Rescue Dog](#)
- [download online Medea: A Modern Retelling pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [click The Complete Ian Fleming](#)
- [read Historical Dictionary of Mesopotamia \(Historical Dictionaries of Ancient Civilizations and Historical Eras\) \(2nd Edition\) pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)
- [read Aesthetic Rivalries: Word and Image in France, 1880-1926 \(Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship between the Arts\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [click *Driving Mr. Yogi: Yogi Berra, Ron Guidry, and Baseball's Greatest Gift*](#)

- <http://metromekanik.com/ebooks/Scent-of-the-Missing--Love-and-Partnership-with-a-Search-and-Rescue-Dog.pdf>
- <http://test1.batsinbelfries.com/ebooks/Introduction-to-Wine-Laboratory-Practices-and-Procedures.pdf>
- <http://serazard.com/lib/The-Ramones--Ramones--33-1-3-Series-.pdf>
- <http://diy-chirol.com/lib/Narcissus-and-Goldmund.pdf>
- <http://twilightblogs.com/library/Against-Proclus-On-the-Eternity-of-the-World-6-8--Ancient-Commentators-on-Aristotle-.pdf>
- <http://test1.batsinbelfries.com/ebooks/Pride-and-Prescience--Or--A-Truth-Universally-Acknowledged.pdf>