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From Siberia to Provence, my Escapades



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*Hier beginnt der Arsch der Welt.
Here begins the asshole of the world.*

Signs planted at the border between Germany and Russia in 1941.

Foreword

To speak the good is a noble but naïve desire; the good gives itself only to silent hearts, and is untranslatable into deeds. To speak the beautiful is a mad but celestial ambition, even if most such attempts founder in greyness for want of talent. To speak the true is a stupid and depraving pretension; it is the sole justification for the logorrhoeas that fill today's literature, whether from poets, philosophers or novelists.

The first two calls have been gnawing at me since childhood; I have never seriously considered the third. And yet it is to this very exercise that I am going to apply myself in this pretentious and uncertain little opus. In the tree of my worries, I intend to leave the peaks, the flowers and the shadows, to attend to the roots. Despite appearances, this is the most transparent part of the tree, which is the very opposite of my tastes for obscurity, even for darkness. Curiosity, challenge, confession, the duty of memory – I reel off these usual platitudes, and find no direct and indisputable spring in them to motivate me.

My pen always wanted to give itself to the creative gaze; it mistrusted contemplative eyes. And it is to eyes – what am I saying, to feet and to muscles, in short – to pale reason, that I now deliver it, ashamed and confused. How will the soul, until now the sole organ of my verbal outpourings, how will it accept its mutation into mind, clipping its wings to lean down and focus on the traces of the real? My mind is sedentary of horizons, and my soul is nomadic of firmaments. So I shall abandon my star, to traverse my own ground, my own walls, my own doors.

After thousands of pages scribbled in my capricious, tottering French, on eminently intoxicating yet abstract subjects, in a poetico-philosophical tone and by oblique paths, I shall now exhibit the capacities of my sobriety and uprightness. To fail at this would mean that, once again, I had succumbed to an irresponsible lyricism – a prospect that no longer discourages or intimidates me. But this will not be a chronicle, rather a sequence of scenes, often timeless or untimely. I repeat: this is not a natural need, but a cultural exercise. And like all my previous writings, this one is solicited by no one, and will be read by no one. I address it to the sole person concerned with my peregrinations – to myself, the child. Paradoxically, having written until now in the name of cultural worth, this time I must place myself at the service of natural duty. The visceral impulse contradicts measured technique. The beginning, the dynamism, the potentiality, turn away from the sequel, from energy, from finalities.

The confessional genre bores me stiff. If I were to write according to the obsessions with exactitude of St Augustine, Rousseau, or Tolstoy, I would be the first to blush. And not because of the filth to be confessed, but because of the suffocating fidelity to the real. All that is real is common, flat, and humiliating. I shall therefore decorate my narratives with a few digressions. They will also be escapades, that primordial element in which my feet, my thoughts, my states of mind find themselves.

My native country, Russia, is today of a tedious homogeneity. It resembles that medieval Russia, denatured by the Mongols and wallowing in abject servility, squalid ignorance, and blind hatred of the foreigner. It also increasingly resembles Stalinist Russia, a survivalist conformism having succeeded the fear of death. But the same need to venerate a leader, his unique and irreplaceable thought, his salvific and protective wisdom.

So, Russia is no longer a country of contrasts, as it was before the October

Revolution and during the early years following the fall of tsarism.

In Imperial Russia, there was a Europeanised government, a civilised and parasitic aristocracy, an intelligentsia inflamed by ideals of liberty and ready to do battle with the rotten anachronistic regime, artists of a crazy talent, of an unheard-of originality, of an inimitable nobility. All together, they represented a thin layer, above an ocean of muzhiks, straight out of the Mongol 'civilisational' mud.

In Leninist Russia, a few hotheads, professional revolutionaries, gentle dreamers, wanted to offer the country a radiant future, where the ploughman and the cook would take the state's helm, where the strong would stand in solidarity with the weak, where the economy would be placed at the service of a free and fraternal justice, where the state would serve an ardent idea and not a cold market. The country was economically backward, ruined by war, crushed by injustice, and it was to become the beacon for all of humanity turned generous, much like the France of the Bastille and the Paris Commune. The result: a country cut in two, by two clans of equal ferocity; a savage struggle, in which the worst triumphed. The aristocracy, the peasantry, the clergy, all exterminated, the country was delivered to a gang of incompetents and murderers. The effect on civilisation would prove comparable to the disaster caused by the Mongol humiliation, seven centuries earlier.

I speak of this homogeneity because in my Siberian childhood, just after the War, I was still aware of two kinds of Russians – a majority of feeble souls, stupefied by poverty, and a minority of survivors, dignified in their memory of another universe, less violent and more harmonious.

And it was in Aix-en-Provence, in the 1970s and 80s, that I found a confirmation of this tribal division. The Russians I met there had the faces of that dying minority, which had illuminated my native penal colony, amidst the

inexpressive darkness of savage and brutal faces. A terrible mutation of these faces is one of the most staggering shocks I experienced upon discovering the Russia of yesteryear.

N., a survivor of the civil war, left Russia aboard a submarine. A flotilla of a hundred and fifty ships set off from Crimea, to run aground at Bizerte. N. wrote five immense volumes of memoirs of this tragedy; I may have been the sole reader of this titanic work, since, upon his death, his French wife threw into the trash all the papers of the singular deceased, written in an indecipherable language.

The grandfather of Mr N. Kovalenko was commander of the Russian squadron anchored at Villefranche, as a sign of the Entente Cordiale. N.K. was a fervent Orthodox, holding firmly to the subtleties of the Procession of the Holy Spirit, excluding the Son from that divine machination.

Three princes and two duchesses could complete this complacent picture. The descendants of D. Chakovskoi and N. Obolensky have nothing princely about them; they are in trade and artisanal fishing.

I now come to Prince S. Vsévolojtsky. His case explains the appearance, on this page, of this lineage of Russians vanished forever. S.V. was married to the Duchess of Leuchtenberg (only one family in Russia bore this exotic title, the Duke of Beauharnais being its ancestor). Her mother, after the [Revolution](#), welcomed in Germany a mad Polish woman who passed herself off as the Grand Duchess Anastasia, miraculously survived from the massacre of the imperial family in the Urals. I crossed paths with this grand lady when she was ninety-five years old.

In the entrance of his modest flat in Aix-en-Provence, Prince S.V. displayed his family tree. I have never seen one so well stocked – thirty-seven

generations! At the very top stood the name of Rurik, the first Grand Prince of the first Russian state of [Novgorod](#), in the 9th century. Well now, if I wanted to present my own tree, I too would start from that fine city of [Novgorod](#). This desire for a reunion with that shipwrecked Russia therefore owes much to that good S.V., who became an Orthodox priest. Other curious points in his biography: his grandfather was Intendant of the Imperial theaters, and his great-great-grandfather fought a duel with Turgenev.

Alas, beyond my great-grandfather Nicephorus, the void opens up. And this Nicephorus (bearer of victory, in Greek!) was neither a boyar, nor a hussar, nor a nihilist – he was a boorish peasant, fond of vodka, adventure, idleness, and pillaging. At roughly the same time when Flaubert was writing his first letter to Louise Colet and M. Bakunin was joining R. Wagner on a barricade, my scoundrel of an ancestor, to escape enforced transportation to sinister Siberia, decided to go there of his own free will. Disgusted by the plough, he became a gold prospector. But I am getting ahead of myself. I will stop here, to resume this narrative later.

On my Russian vicissitudes, I write in France. I must cast a few bridges between the two countries, so that an improbable, putative, imaginary reader may see both extremities, without losing touch with the more familiar of the two.

My native Country

Usually, that word – History – is uttered with great solemnity. I am deeply sceptical of it: this History teaches us nothing useful, didactic, or exemplary. Its only interesting chapter is devoted to Myths. Without myths, no memory deserves our respect or our curiosity. A pity that today's historians rummage through cadastral archives with far more verve than through astral chronicles.

So, the incursion of History into these pages follows a basely practical interest, without a trace of pedantry. I need to lend a semblance of eventful density to the three known generations that preceded my birth.

So, to Vercingétorix and Clovis, I shall have to add Rurik and Vladimir the Red Sun, so that the two labyrinths touch and orient the gaze in one same direction.

The cheerful, fallen ploughman, the brigand turned gold-prospector, my great-grandfather Nicephorus, would be greatly flattered if he knew all the care I am going to take in tracing the path leading to him, from the mists of time.

Heroic Troy and the romantic Golden Fleece are, alas, beyond the reach of Nicephorian destinies. But I neither lower my arms nor my pen; I am going to tackle Antiquity itself, nonetheless.

The Roman Empire incorporated many non-Latin tribes, including the Hellenes and the Gauls. Let us pass over the Iberians, Numidians and other Phoenicians. Much has been written about these, drawing daring parallels between, on the one hand, the historical trajectories of Carthage, Greece and Rome, and on the other, Russia's path, destined for a Carthaginian decline,

facing a Persianized Germany and Romanized USA.

In non-Roman Europe, three large groups remained: the Germans, the Slavs, and the Turkoman and Iranian nomads. We know well the original homelands of the Germans and the nomads; with the Slavs, History is elusive or stuttering, their cradle placed now in Illyria, now in Dacia, now in Brandenburg.

The Great Invasions (called, euphemistically, by the Germans and Slavs – displacements or migrations) carved up the Empire. It was a domino effect: the nomads pushed the Slavs, the Slavs pushed the Germans, the Germans crossed the Roman frontiers, to take up mercenary work or indulge in pillage. These waves ravaged all of Western Europe and swept over the African continent. The Germans occupied Gaul, Spain, (Great-)Britain, the Maghreb. The Slavs pushed as far as the Adriatic, the Black Sea, and north-eastern Germany.

A brutal reversal occurred under the grandsons of Charlemagne. The Germans, still a minority in the West (the future Francia of Charles the Bald) and the center (the future Holland, Alsace, Burgundy, Savoy, Piedmont), renounced the single state and turned towards an ethnically pure state, in East Francia.

The Slavic world stretched from Schleswig-Holstein to [Novgorod](#), the White Sea, the Volga, the Don, the mouth of the Danube, the Dardanelles, Dalmatia, the future Austria. Austria-Hungary, moreover, is the result of simultaneous thrusts, coming from the East (the Hungarians, those Finno-Ugrians from the Urals) and from the West (the Bavarians, jostled by the Franks), definitively separating the Southern Slavs (Yugoslavs and Bulgarians) from the North-Eastern Slavs (Czechs, Poles, Russians).

The Franks concerned themselves less and less with their old Western colonies. They set upon their brothers in blood and language – the Saxons, the Bavarians, the Lombards. The first, in reaction, gave rise to the *Drang nach Osten* (push

towards the East), the second created Austria, the third fled as far as Sicily, to merge there with Latins, Moors, Byzantines, and Normans.

But let us return to our Western Franks, at the time of the Oaths of Strasbourg. Incidentally, at the same moment as this first document, written in French, bore witness to the birth of a nation, Greek monks were bringing to the Slavs, in Moravia, their first alphabet, the Cyrillic (first Glagolitic), still in use in today's Russia.

The first contact between French and Russians occurred in the 9th century on the Rhine. The henchmen of Louis the Pious intercepted there those they took for Viking spies (who were warring everywhere, from the British Isles to [Novgorod](#) and Byzantium). They were, indeed, Scandinavians, who at the time were ravaging the western coasts (and creating the first known Russian state!). But on deepening the inquiry, there was the surprise of learning that they were diplomats, returning from ... Constantinople and heading towards their sovereign at ... [Novgorod](#)! A pretty legend, slightly at odds with the dates, but so charming that I offer it up to your incredulity.

The Norman origin of Rurik, the first known prince of [Novgorod](#), is doubtful, but so many myths cling to this version that we ought to pull it out again, if only so that a poetry, so rare in these parts, may emerge from it and soften us. One of these myths tells that, bored to death among the Novgorodian drunkards, he fled to Spain (much as the future Henry III would later give the slip to the Varsovians), where he waged war, with his Visigoth buddies, against the Saracen.

Since the Russian chronicles are silent on the state structures before Rurik, he is considered the founder of the Russian state. Moreover, no material trace of the existence of this city in the 9th century has ever been found, even though the

Normans designated Rus' by the name of *Gardarika* – land of cities, and [Novgorod](#) – *Holmgarder*, the Capital! This Germanic word for capital (the German *Hauptstadt*) and above all its Greek equivalent, *Metropolis*, would play a bizarre, legendary role in Russian history. The Russians translated literally, by a calque, the Greek word *metropolis*, which gave – *mother of cities*. This strange expression today gives rise to so many vehement discussions between Russians and Ukrainians. The latter forget the etymological meaning of this exotic term and interpret it poetically, as designating a city which would be the origin of all the others, while dominating them with its maternal power. They refuse to accept this utterly simple and obvious observation, that alongside the second, chronologically, Russian capital, Kiev, cities such as [Novgorod](#), Vladimir, [Moscow](#), and [Saint Petersburg](#) were, at one time or another, also mothers of Russian cities.

After Rurik's flight to Spain, his Norman companions-in-arms (Prince Igor first, then Prince Oleg and Princess Olga – names of Scandinavian origin) set about, from [Novgorod](#), pillaging the neighbouring regions, while founding other principalities here and there. One of these was called Kiev, which quickly flourished, eventually outclassing [Novgorod](#) in attractiveness, power, and civilisation, since the Christian Byzantines were closer than the pagan and barbarian Vikings, and the Russified Nordic Novgorodians cast envious glances towards Byzantium (their longships, coming from the Baltic, could easily be conveyed from [Novgorod](#) to the Dnieper River, which flows into the Black Sea). The two sisters, the cathedrals of Saint Sophia, would be erected simultaneously in [Novgorod](#) and Kiev in the 11th century, following the Christianization that had occurred a century earlier. But from the end of the 9th to the beginning of the 12th century, Kiev would be the Russian capital.

[Novgorod](#) would take its revenge in the 12th century, when Kiev fell into ruins, following the raids of the nomads of the great Steppe and fratricidal rivalries with other Russian principalities. But until the 14th century, the unity of Russian civilisation, including its language (the same language was spoken in [Moscow](#) and Kiev, whereas in [Novgorod](#) they spoke a distinct dialect, rather like the difference between the *langue d'oïl* and the *langue d'oc*), remained intact. The first fracture between the two Russias, that of the South and that of the North (in the West – [Novgorod](#), in the East – [Moscow](#)), occurred with the occupation of Southern Russia by coarse Lithuanian pagans (later converted to Catholicism). Yet it was precisely in Kiev that Russia converted to Orthodox Christianity, for over three centuries. Paganism and, later, Catholicism, over two centuries of domination, broke certain ties with the Orthodox heritage. Still, it was perhaps the lesser evil, compared with the terrible Mongolization that fell upon Eastern Russia.

Pope Innocent IV corresponded with two Russian grand princes, Daniel, of Southern Russia (the future Ukraine), and Alexander (the future Nevsky of Eisenstein, conqueror of the Swedes and the Teutonic Knights), of North-Eastern Russia – [Novgorod](#), Vladimir, and [Moscow](#). The good Pope gave them the title of *Rex*. Our Ukrainian friends translated this medieval term as *Roi*, in the modern sense, and proclaimed, anachronistically, the creation of a mythical medieval Kingdom of Ruthenia.

Alexander Nevsky of [Novgorod](#) is the Russian Vercingétorix, with a shift of twelve centuries; victor over the Sword-Brothers on Lake Peipus, he was subjugated by the Mongol hordes, he presented himself to the Great Khan, insulted, humiliated, but narrowly escaping the garrotte that put an end to the great Gaul. With a reversal of chronology, one could say that the counterpart to

Clovis appears in the person of Vladimir, the Russian Grand Prince who converted Russia to Christianity in the 10th century, five centuries after Clovis's act.

Unlike Kiev and Vladimir, [Novgorod](#) was spared by the Mongol incendiaries and throat-cutters. It was a member of the Hanseatic League and experienced a republican period (from the 12th to the 15th centuries!), during which a certain taste for civil liberties was maintained. The final catastrophe came with Ivan the Terrible, a sanguinary Eastern despot, who devastated the city and exterminated its rebellious population, drowning thousands of insurgents in a river.

To the political decline (or rather annihilation) of [Novgorod](#) was added the economic disaster of the 19th century: for the route of the first railway, between [Saint Petersburg](#) and [Moscow](#), the very Prussian Tsar Nicholas I demanded a perfectly straight line, which excluded [Novgorod](#), situated a few dozen kilometers from this cursed line. My ancestor Nicephorus was therefore born under this sovereign, narrow-minded in politics and incapable in economics.

Finally, the last tragic episode took place during the last world war. The city was entirely razed. The Francoist *División Azul* distinguished itself in this carnage, alongside the Wehrmacht. A few churches from the 11th and 12th centuries were restored after the War.

So, Nicephorus the Novgorodian, born in the mid-19th century, had run-ins with the police, who were on his trail following a few misdeeds, bordering on brigandage and even homicide. Then a happy circumstance presented itself: the government, anxious to populate the empty spaces of Siberia, organised a free deportation of volunteers who had something to reproach themselves with

before the State, ready to turn a blind eye to the unfortunate criminal past of these Far-East enthusiasts, in exchange for an occupation of Siberian lands, facing the distant Chinese, who were casting their eyes in the same direction as the Mongols, six centuries earlier.

And so here is my Nicephorus, landing in the region of Novo-Nikolayevsk (this settlement, later to become the capital of Siberia, would be crossed by the [Transsiberian](#), twenty years later). To make himself forgotten, he plunged, with a small group of other cutthroats, into an impenetrable [taiga](#), around a large river, the [Tom](#)'.

The spelling of this last name makes me think of my perplexity when faced with French phonetics. For in French, one has this opposition: *gêne – geigne, conne – cogne, manne – magne*. The 'hard' vowels oppose the 'soft' vowels. But why does this phenomenon not apply to any other consonant? Incomprehensible! In Russian, most hard consonants have a 'soft' counterpart, hence – the [Tom](#)'. On another register, I take the syllables *lia, lié, lio*, and I do not understand why it is impossible in French to render the syllable with the vowel 'i', in place of 'a', 'e' or 'o', and why the Italians spell it – '*gli*'! It is as enigmatic as the need the Spanish have to slip an 'e' before initial 'st' or 'sp', or the difficulty Germans have in pronouncing, at the beginning of words, the sound 's' and not 'z'.

But let us return to our adventurer Nicephorus in the land of bears and lynxes. It was not the fish, highly prized by gourmets, nor the bear, highly prized for its pelt, nor even the cedar wood, that most fascinated my great-grandfather on the banks of this great river, already a few hundred meters wide, five hundred kilometers before it throws itself into the king (or rather queen) of Siberian rivers, the Ob'.

What gleamed in Nicephorus's calculating eyes was Gold! The rush for

the cursed metal lasted half a century, before disappearing under the blows of the Soviet secret police, who were enchanted by these spots, ideal for setting up islets of the Gulag archipelago, the nearest road and the [Transsiberian](#) being over a hundred kilometers away. It was here that the most abominable (according to Solzhenitsyn) of all Siberian camps radiated – the Kamychlag, the camp of the rushes. A century later, I still knew hunters emerging from the [taiga](#) with a few nuggets which they resold to the gold mafia or to corrupt policemen.

It was under the new Emperor, Alexander II, that these two sons were born: my great-uncle Procope and, finally, my grandfather [Plato](#). Nicephorus had the final opportunity to lay out his innumerable sins before the Almighty towards the end of the 19th century; like any buccaneer or hitman, he certainly did not die in his bed. In the family, it was said that a bear got the better of Nicephorus. I lean towards a dark story between rival gold-prospectors, as told by more malicious tongues; the great solitude of these mad forests lends itself so well to profitable homicide in total discretion.

It seems that the sole wish uttered by Nicephorus before expiring was his desire that his two sons take women named Eudoxia for wives, this name being borne by his heroic spouse, who followed him from gentle [Novgorod](#) to the fearsome Siberian forests.

[Plato](#) inherited the soothing traits of the first Nicephorus – easy-going, lazy, resigned. Procope was much more enterprising; at the beginning of the 20th century, he was not content to take up his father's gold-prospecting trade, he added to it the trade in bear skins, and, later still, that of ... bicycles. At the time, that was the equivalent of our smartphones or tablets – the cutting edge of progress! And just before the Great War, Procope opened the first cinema in my native town. But I must not burn too many stages.

Women have a weakness for winners. Procope married his radiant Eudoxia, who had received a certain education, a lively mind, attuned to deaf dangers and silent opportunities. [Plato](#), too, had his share of another Eudoxia, a wary one, hailing from some Uralian tribes, where Russians, Udmurts, Bashkirs, and Tatars mingled. She jabbered in those wild tongues, as I was able to observe seventy years later, in that Gulag Babylon that our village had become.

Everything smiled upon Procope; misery pursued [Plato](#). The Great War upset this imbalance. Procope, the valiant and conscientious patriot, donned the infantry uniform and went to relieve the poilus, in a bad way on the Somme, by picking quarrels with the Teutons in East Prussia, not far from the [Novgorod](#) of his ancestors. [Plato](#), the shirker, like Ivan of Murom in the Russian *bylins*, lolled about warm on his Russian stove and found, without any remorse, fallacious medical excuses to be exempted from military service.

Then came the first debacle, the February [Revolution](#), in 1917. Procope, smelling trouble, no longer wanted to obey the officers – too dangerous in the eyes of the soldiers' committees which were beginning to slaughter the wearers of golden epaulettes. Here he is on a train for Siberia, following more or less the same route as that taken, at the same time, by the unfortunate Nicholas II, deported by the Provisional Government, the Court of London having refused to welcome its august relative (George V and Nicholas II were, however, close relatives and, moreover, striking lookalikes).

Optimistic and carefree, [Plato](#) took advantage of the war to give his Eudoxia two children, including my [mother](#), Pauline, and my uncle, Michel.

Procope tried to catch up – his three sons, Alexis, Alexandre and Nicolas, were born in the middle of the civil war, which, in Siberia, lasted almost five years. (Judging by the first names in the family, one will see later a Latin wave – Victor, Valéry – succeed the pro-Greek current.)

A quarter of a century later, I was to see the traces of this war on the mantelpiece of my native *izba*. And since Procope, obviously, was on the side of the Whites, and Plato was predestined to espouse the cause of the Reds, I heard two opposing, yet surprisingly convergent, bells. Three or four times our town changed masters, but the ritual aspect of the transfer of power showed no notable deviation from general customs: the victors dragged shackled vanquished towards the river, which flowed three hundred meters from our *izba*. My grandmother Eudoxia and my great-aunt Eudoxia often went to that river to wash their linen; and there they observed the same scenes: the happy triumphant of the just cause drew their sabers and decapitated the unlucky deviationists. Thirty years later, I would witness the appearance, on the steep banks of the Inia, of human bones. The spring thaws and floods eroded these banks and brought to potential ethnographic museums material for reflection and remembrance. The mantelpiece of our *izba* still bore traces of bullets, red and white alike.

Plato's pro-Red zeal was not rewarded; he was employed as a night watchman in a coal mine, which filled him with contentment, since this job left vast opportunities for naps and solitary, cheerful drinking bouts.

The scoundrel Procope sensed very early which way the wind was going to blow. Quick as a flash, he sold his house, his cows, his bicycles, closed his cinema and declared himself a proletarian. The brotherly Plato offered him half of his *izba* and vouched for Procope's loyalty towards the power of the workers and progressive peasants. Soon, in an *izba* of forty square meters, divided in

two, there swarmed six children (my aunt Olga came to swell the Platonic tribe) and four adults.

The immediate consequences of the [Revolution](#), apart from the halving of the number of Siberians (how easy it was to send *ad patres* those like you, when your enthusiastic leader qualified them as vermin!), these consequences, therefore, were quite radical and innovative: one discovered famine, hitherto unknown in Siberia; rags and coarse antediluvian boots became the common lot; crockery, housing, all domestic tools regained the state of innocence of the 12th century; morals, already not very refined, harked back to the Mongol heritage; yes, I see clearly that civilizations are mortal, Valéry would say nostalgically, if one showed him the way of life of Siberian miners.

The first fifteen years of Soviet power, which saw, in the European part, famines carry off millions of victims, were more clement in Siberia. Everything white was promptly exterminated; that was one less half of mouths to feed. Our two brothers have vegetable gardens, where potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, peas, and tobacco grow. Procope goes so far as to plant elderberries, currants, raspberries. The Eudoxias take care of salting, jam-making, and hams.

Then came the horrible thirties. Out of forty houses in our lane, thirty paid tribute to the Stalinist Moloch. Shot, drowned, deported a dozen parallels further north, there to succumb to mosquitoes, cold, or the bad temper of the guards. Look at the data of Memorial, that foreign agent as this association for the memory of the victims of Stalin's executioners is called today – nine out of ten victims are clodhoppers, peasants or workers, and not wicked intellectuals, seeking perfidiously to restore the power of industrialists and generals, in connivance with London, Tokyo or New York.

This purge brought about the fall in the standard of living, a tenfold

shortage in everything, famine, generalized fear, the spread of denunciation, the explosion of the trade of informer and camp guard. The supple Procope hid portraits of Trotsky and Radek (themselves placed over that of Nicholas II, and then, of Lenin), putting over them that of Stalin. One day, in the sixties, I would find them at his place, hidden behind the portrait of Khrushchev, soon covered, in its turn, by the latest one – that of Brezhnev.

Procope did not know that there was never any going back, in Russian history. Each new page there effaces completely all the preceding pages, so that the new potentate may fully enjoy all the exclusive virtues of a father of the nation.

At the age of twenty, [Mother](#) received training as a [pharmacist](#) and immediately married P.I., a Siberian of the old stock, without a history, without compromise with enemies of the people, but without being on the side of the camp guards either. Immediately, two children are born: Ludmila, who very quickly died of cold, and Victor, who, while fuelled on adulterated but robust-making vodka, would die of hunger much later. The third child, Valéry, predestined for suicide, was born three weeks before the German invasion.

When the Patriotic War broke out, Procope had three sons of military age, between eighteen and twenty-two, and [Plato](#) – his only son Michel. All left for the front in July 1941. Michel escaped the holocaust; the three children of Procope and [Mother's](#) husband, P.I., were killed before autumn. At the same time, Herr H.G. Gadamer was giving his lectures on The People and History before tender and grateful French prisoners...

The three sons of Procope were liquidated by the SS, in the future *Lebensraum* of the supermen – in the forests of Belarus, far from university amphitheatres and from the zone covered by the Geneva Convention on

prisoners of war. Procope pinned their posthumous medals onto the portrait of Stalin; his Eudoxia collapsed with grief, lost her head; she would linger on for a few more years, tenderly supported by the faithful Procope.

Mother, having two mouths to feed, left her **pharmacy**, where her salary condemned her little ones to a slow death, and went to work in a mechanical construction factory, as a simple laborer, forging bayonets and other lethal delights. Twelve to fourteen hours a day. No holidays or Sundays. Lifting metal parts weighing dozens of kilos. No heating; the machine tools were placed directly on the beaten earth. Her husband's death brought the family a loaf of bread per week, which was far from negligible.

In the sixties, I found **Mother's** factory in exactly the same state. The only progress consisted of the presence of trophies from Magdeburg – a few lathes and milling machines with Gothic inscriptions. **Mother** was very excited and happy at the idea that I too would one day find myself facing those steel monsters. She had no doubt that I would be entirely capable of it.

At the same time, Sartre was writing *Being and Nothingness* and Camus – *L'Homme révolté*, complaining that the deliveries of Beaujolais Nouveau were taking longer than reasonable. Cocteau wrote *The Beloved Indifferent* for Édith Piaf, which enjoyed enormous success with the officers of the Wehrmacht. Picasso painted *Bull's Head* and sold it advantageously to art lovers of the occupying force. P. Claudel versified a vibrant *Ode to Pétain* and stigmatized the infamous Russian rabble, incapable of appreciating the contribution of European civilization.

The Russians quickly understood the meaning of the struggle: the German treated him as a subhuman; the Russian had to either die, or be deported beyond the Urals, or become a slave to the master race; all culture would be forbidden to

him, four years of primary school and nothing more; Leningrad and Moscow would be razed and flooded; he would be housed in mud huts, from which he would be dragged once a year, to be loaded into trucks and driven, at dawn, through the gleaming streets of new Aryan cities, with marble palaces, fountains, statues; crushed by so much magnificence, he was supposed to languish in his inferiority and submit willingly to the masters of the universe.

This monumental tableau was not drawn by Stalinist propaganda, but by his adversary Goebbels, very faithfully translating the intentions of his Master of Berchtesgaden. If you have read this Doctor's *Journal*, you will no longer need to rummage through archives to understand the meaning of the struggle that the Third Reich waged on both fronts. The partisan of Bolshevism will learn, moreover, that the Doctor wrote a play, entitled *Struggle of the Working Class*, subtitled *a socialist drama*. Admiring the anti-bourgeois chiefs, he would also write a laudatory essay – *Lenin and Hitler*. He would attribute to himself the invention, or rather the plagiarism, of the Nazi salute: he found it in the gesticulations of ... Lenin!

Every intellectual should have two bedside books: Goebbels's *Journal* and P. Valéry's *Cahiers*. The first – to understand that the words pure, great, noble, high must be cloistered in our soul, without the right to venture out into the street; the second – to feel what language and intelligence represent, in our thirsts for music and creation. After reading the first, you will vote, with a clear conscience, for the insignificant shopkeeper and will flee any tribune, whether of the Right or Left. Reading the second will render Aristotle and Kant useless, and will make you seek music in your own states of mind (Valéry would say – mental states). My friend R. Debray would be revolted by the first suggestion, but would subscribe to the second. Brothers, like lovers, are not always in the same place, but they look in the same direction, in search of their stars.

Verticality creates fraternity; horizontality produces the herd.

The war in the East was therefore by no means ideological, but racial. If in the West, the democracies were confronting totalitarianism, in the East the German came to settle his millenary accounts with the Slavic subhuman. The Nazis shot the political commissars, declared the Soviet elite, as they would have shot, in other circumstances, popes or writers or princes, if they had been considered the better defenders of Slavdom.

Tortured by that Asiatic despot Stalin, reduced to material and spiritual misery, following the massacre of the nation's vital forces, reduced to the state of slave of the totalitarian state, the muzhik found his dignity and his courage, to annihilate the most modern, best-equipped and best-trained war machine in history. In his thousand-year history, he knew only those four years of freedom. But more than 95% of young Russians, between 18 and 25 years old, fell in four years of war, and they carried away with them the mystery of their sacrifice and their combative spirit.

In my childhood, I encountered a few of them; often mutilated, always bitter, little by little forgetting the meaning of their own struggle, stupefied by the avalanches of a new Bolshevik propaganda, falsifying everything, degrading everything, disfiguring everything. They understood well their own signboards, which they planted on the German border – *This is Germany, the accursed*; they continued not to understand the meaning of the German signboards that the Nazis displayed on the Russian border – *Here begins the asshole of the world* (*Hier beginnt der Arsch der Welt*).

The end of the war approaches; [Mother](#), so young and so beautiful, still goes to

- *My native country* -

the factory; I am not yet born.

Siberia

I came into the world just after the war, father unknown. The state of orphan suits me well; everywhere, I am drawn towards solitude; I never knew any family, intellectual or professional support, and I never felt it as a lack. Not even as a concern.

In Goethe's *Faust*, Concern remains the last challenge, once Lack has been set aside. And Heidegger takes up this theme, making the Concern of Being the foundation and justification of existence.

Accommodating Lack and transforming the Concern of Being into a Thirst for Becoming – that is, replacing the horizontality of action with the verticality of dream – I created for myself a universe of grace, opposed to the world of weightiness.

This last child of Mother's had very little chance of seeing the light of day. In the first years after the War, misery reached its peak. Skeletal ghosts, surviving demobilized soldiers, shadows of cripples or amputees, recycled into nocturnal thugs or daytime drunkards, made daily life apocalyptic, Dantesque. No light came to soften the thick blackness in which a semblance of life unfolded, where one had to fight every day for a scrap of bread, where vermin, stench, and the violence of gestures and words chilled the bravest of optimists.

The whole family, all of Mother's colleagues and neighbors, advised her to have an abortion. There was one single exception, one single voice, in that pitiless but just chorus – it was Plato. He told his daughter to keep this child,

who, unlike children born in better and more placid times, would remind her of the horror of an infernal life, of suffering, and would console her in a more clement life. He was optimistic, my gentle [Plato](#). Or rather, he believed that every man should be capable of creating his own unreal cocoon of sensibility, where he would be cut off from the inevitable abomination of real life – that is, a life of filth and brutality, the only one he knew. He was a dreamer, my old [Plato](#), with his white beard and his broad, naive smile.

In the 21st century, I revisited my native [izba](#); it had not changed. The same shadowy, mistrustful, burdened characters hugged the walls or drowned themselves in mud or vodka. I found again the hook in the ceiling from which my cradle had hung; it moved me more than the poplars planted by [Plato](#), or the decorative planks along the roof that I had driven in myself, at the age of six, under grandpa [Plato](#)'s supervision.

The descent towards the [Inia](#) showed no sign of the change of century – the same mud, the same blackness of the century-old logs, the same chaos of mismatched planks, crying ruin and rot, around the walls, defying learned verticality and petty-bourgeois embellishments. Time arrested, somewhere a century back, or two, or three, or rather seven. The breath of the Mongol whirlwind, in the streets and in the heads, was perceptible.

In the river, kids of my former age were bathing. I heard the same talk that I myself had held, more than half a century earlier – very, very far from what one hears at Trouville or Saint-Tropez, something visceral, motionless, frozen, ignorant of the pulse of the times. The mobile phone was the only subject that bore witness to the change of century. A life arrested, a sensation difficult to

create artificially; I followed it, holding my breath, my head incredulous, my eyes carrying me back to the heart of my childhood.

At the beginning of the 20th century, my *izba* was thus divided into two symmetrical parts, but of unequal upkeep. At Procope's, order and cleanliness reigned; at *Plato*'s, Asia (that of Genghis Khan, not that of Confucius or Buddha) imposed its chaos and filth. The very active Procope lived with his Eudoxia and his youngest son, Pierre (the latter would become an officer, serving at the polygon where thermo-nuclear bombs were tested; bald at 25, he quickly died from the effects of radiation).

The carefree *Plato* counted on his own wary Eudoxia to keep the tribe alive, which already numbered, before my birth, the two sisters, Pauline and Elisabeth (Olga and Lubov' had already left the paternal home), and my two half-brothers, Victor and Valéry, aged eight and four.

Plato, so as not to appear too irresponsible because of his terrible encouragement of *Mother*, made an exceptional effort, fashioning a wooden cradle which he himself suspended from the ceiling of our room. The *izba* comprised three rooms: an airlock of six square meters, reached by a stoop of three steps, a kitchen, with a Russian stove, a trunk and a bed for Eudoxia and *Plato*, and a room, shared by the radiant Elisabeth, a beautiful blonde with blue eyes, like *Mother* herself, and our family, with, now, three little savages.

Fifteen years later, I still saw my cradle, tenderly kept by *Plato* on the stove, in the hope that Elisabeth, too, would finally multiply the offspring of the Sounaïkin family (yes, that was indeed the surname of Procope and *Plato*, and which I should have borne myself; but the Administration saddled me with the

name and patronymic of Victor and Valéry's father; by inserting into those initials that of my first name, I obtained P.H.I., which would serve me as a pseudonym, once I began writing in French).

Plato's family name, Sunyaykin, has a strange Chinese ring to it, as does that of my good classmate A. Ruzmaïkin, who was recently preparing NASA missions in California, at the J.P.L. lab. Sasha knew a life even more horrible than mine; his alcoholic father terrorized his ten children; axe in hand, or, as the case might be, cudgel or empty bottle, he raged, accumulating grudges and scars. Their shack was ten times more squalid than mine, a few meters from a hideous slag heap, where the coal from a neighboring mine was dumped. The snow there was never white; the drinks – never below 40%; the settling of scores – never amicable. Sasha and I had a good laugh about it all, in his magnificent villa in Santa Monica. His wife, sister of the great R. Feynman, found us singularly lacking in critical sense regarding the abominations of the one-party regime. Our laughter, she thought, betrayed a certain complacency with the totalitarian order.

It was near the stoop of my native *izba* that my half-sister Ludmila died of cold, ten years earlier. The door of the airlock had been left open, in the middle of winter. Three meters too many cost her the life.

The airlock served to protect the *izba* from the outside cold; a barrel was placed there to serve as a water tank, which had to be fetched, a kilometer away, from an open-air well. The adults carried a yoke; the kids dragged a bucket. At five years old I carried out my first supply mission. However, from -40° onwards, I was exempt from water-carrying chores. Plato was very proud of his

protégé the water-carrier, as well as of his sledge, made of birch wood.

In the kitchen of eight square meters reigned the stove, with, above it, a kind of shelter, with a bearskin, where a little one – me, in this instance – could stretch out, nice and warm. For six years, it was my refuge, my secret garden, my natural paradise. Just below, where the coal was stored, crickets kept me company at night.

In the room of ten square meters, there were two beds; one for Elisabeth and the other for [Mother](#), who shared it with her two sons. My cradle swung between the two; during the day, when [Mother](#) was struggling in the factory, making shovels, axes or picks, and my grandmother was stirring jars of cucumbers or tomatoes, it was [Plato](#) who took care of my bottles, my nappies and my sleep. I believe that, of all that was mineral, vegetable or animal, I was the only one, along with vodka, to inspire in him such tenderness and unfailing loyalty.

In my first three years, the only event worth mentioning would be my secret baptism. The State being resolutely atheist and fighting, without pity, any weakness for outdated superstitions, it was out of the question for [Mother](#) to take me to a [church](#); she would risk losing her precious job as a manual laborer. It was Grandma Eudoxia, secretly, who concocted a perilous plan, unknown to my cowardly family. She took advantage of the presence in the town of two guests, from [Kemerovo](#) and [Novosibirsk](#) (my godmother Gertrude and my uncle by marriage Vassily, my godfather), to put her plan into action.

One day, she took me under her arm, carried me, hugging the walls, to the neighborhood [church](#), where the frightened and worried godmother and godfather were waiting. A pope, terrified by so many dangers incurred

(baptisms, like church weddings, were extremely rare; a vigilant scientific atheism relied on a police force in the service of the Party), the pope therefore botched the ceremony, sparing me from being fully immersed in holy water, but nevertheless making me swallow a large spoonful of what he called Cahors wine! Having discovered authentic Cahors wine a quarter of a century later, I can certify that the man of God was lying – it was eau-de-vie, colored with local wild berries.

I wouldn't even remember this episode, were it not for its sole 'practical' consequence, four years later: Grandma Eudoxia brought out my little cross, on the day of my entry into 'big' [school](#), and hung it around my neck. This did not escape the vigilance of my classmates. A gang of atheists in short trousers formed behind me and, at recess, rushed at me. I would never see my poor lead cross again. This misadventure would make me more sympathetic to popes and the reading of the Gospels more touching (it was on [Sparrow Hills](#), in [Moscow](#), that I would indulge in these broadenings of the mind, if not these elevations of the soul).

I was in my fourth year. Here my first memories begin to glimmer. Wonder at the daisies, dahlias, ox-eye daisies and dandelions that invaded the little yard; the ban on approaching the pig that Eudoxia kept at the bottom of the garden; friendship with Procope's dog, Signal – a friendship that turned to terror once he bit me; the discovery of our lane, which bore a suspicious name – [Theater](#) Street.

I distinctly remember a certain embarrassment in spelling this incomprehensible name before my first playmates. The others evoked prestigious street names like: Tenth Anniversary of the Revolution, Ventilation,

Paris Commune, Slag Heap. Much later, Procope would explain to me the origin of this incongruous name of *Theater*. The origin, it came from Procope himself! The affair went back thirty years, in Tsarist Russia; Procope opened in our town the first cinema hall; these halls were called, at the time, cinema-theaters – hence this exotic name!

The marvellous *Theater* Street was a muddy, winding sewer, of black and clayey earth; the irresistible run-off of spring waters dug deep gullies there, down to the river *Inia*; neither *asphalt* nor pavements nor flowerbeds marred this landscape, which had remained unchanged since the passage of the Mongols, seven centuries earlier. Beyond the *Inia* began the terrible *taiga*, or more precisely, a *sogra*, an undergrowth, a slightly tamed prelude to the unleashed symphony of the wild forests.

In Northern Europe, one can imagine, without too much difficulty, what the Siberian summer and winter are like; one need only add a little lyricism to the summer tableaux and a little dramatism to the winter rigors.

But no intuition can render the epic spectacle of the Siberian spring. Everything begins with a deafening crash, most often in the middle of the night. The break-up! The ice, which covers up to a meter of the *Inia*'s surface, bursts, explodes, to the sound of terrible cannonades. All the local urchins rush there. A fascinating joust begins: the kids jump from one ice floe to another, under the tender eyes of their parents. It's a baptism of courage and dexterity. I passed my exam at six years old, by falling into the icy water. I had to run, shivering, a few hundred meters to my *izba*, where kind Grandma Eudoxia rubbed my bluish body and gave me a blazing hot tea, accompanied by a few sweets. He who has seen on screen the poor Teutonic knights struggling amid the broken ice of Lake

Peipus, in Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, may have an approximate idea of the discomfort experienced by an unfortunate, armed or unarmed, thrown into that icy horror.

Festivity was rare, in those times of shortages and famines. For six months, the [Inia](#) turned into a gigantic skating rink; for my fifth birthday I received a pair of ice skates, which I strapped onto my heavy felt boots. If the ice was covered with too much snow, I took my skis; it was slower, less exciting, required less dexterity and exposed one more to the danger of frostbitten toes.

In width, the [Inia](#), in summer, is only thirty meters. After the break-up, it floods kilometers of the surrounding forest. One of my most beautiful early spring memories is of a boat trip that the great [Plato](#) offered me! A boat ride through a wild, reborn forest – a fabulous wonder, in the true sense of the word! The purpose, in part, was indeed aesthetic – it was a matter of picking Siberian primroses and snowdrops. But there was also a gastronomic component. A few non-flooded islets remained dry; hares were fleeing at the foot of the trees; [Plato](#) caught them by the ears and threw them into the boat (I would learn later that my [Plato](#) was plagiarizing Nekrasov's grandpa Mazaï). Before my ashamed eyes, I still see those trembling little creatures, still partly keeping their winter white fur, before it turns grey-brown in summer. The snowdrops were for the dreamy [Mother](#), the hares – for the cook Eudoxia.

For a long time, I have felt myself a traitor to Nature. Culture took hold of me very early, too early. And it was at the age of four that this betrayal began.

Every evening, when my brothers were engaging, with their numerous friends, in games that called upon muscles and courage, [Mother](#), back from the

factory, completely exhausted, made me sit down and read me fairy tales, which required only my virgin ears and my credulous eyes. This was the decisive, capital, founding event of my entire existence. The first printed names I saw were those of H.C. Andersen, Ch. Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, A. Pushkin. In that time of distress, Tom Thumb, Puss in Boots, Snow White helped me to constitute a grandiose universe, from which I have never emerged.

How to formulate this beneficent, soothing effect, reconciling me with all the horrors of the world? – a clear certainty, that true life is elsewhere! From then on, I would vegetate in the real world, that of adults, of producers, of actors, and I would live in that of my dreams, where the marvelous non-existence of images or states of mind guarantees me non-encounter with them, thus preserving for them a purity that even my touchings-through-emotion or, later, through creation, would not trouble. A thirst to be maintained, rather than quenched. The tear and the ink, rather than the gesture and the blood.

[Mother](#), I will carry to my last breath my gratitude for your hands, blackened by so much steel you handled, so that your three ungrateful sons would not starve to death. But I will carry above all an immense shame before your eyes and your mouth, which brought me the most precious nourishment, that taste of elsewhere, and which I never managed to make you understand, so that you might rejoice in it.

This decisive cut between the invented and the real would be reinforced by a second reason, totally independent of the first. In Russia, one needed neither profound perspicacity nor high contemplation to notice that the verb could evolve without any direct relation to reality.

The official verb flattered the cow-milker, the young and the strong, tenderly caring for the old and the weak. It announced our superiority over the world of old Western bankers in matters of rockets, aeroplanes and pig-iron production. The beautiful Soviet songs dug this gulf even deeper: a piercing lyricism, radiant melodies, sweet sadnesses and irresistible enthusiasms emanated from them. One had to close one's eyes to enjoy them. One opened them, and a cold horror paralyzed them on the spot: everything, in the social domain, was but an infinite greyness, a misery that nothing picturesque or light relieved.

But, unconsciously, I drew from it this firm conviction (which I still hold), that the verb wishes, can or must create its own kingdom, with frontiers, colours and perspectives freely chosen by a soul, breaking its solidarity with the mind. And man is worth by this irresponsible and free creation.

When I would observe, much later, a complete fusion between the beautiful and the true in Europe, I would not change my mind, I would remain with my dream, which promises me only solitude and suffering, but protects me from the routine of the herd or the boredom of the machine. In Europe, indeed, one hears speeches about taxes, elections, employment, political, economic, intellectual rivalries; then one turns one's head towards real daily life – one finds an impeccable coincidence, congruence, parallelism; one reads and lives the same subjects and phenomena, nothing is distorted, falsified, diverted. Very reassuring for the citizen, very depressing for the poet.

From then on, with fairy tales, ice skates and Nordic skis would no longer be my keenest pleasures. I would still enter, every summer, my native [taiga](#) with Grandma Eudoxia, to pick wild currants and raspberries, but my heart would

already be elsewhere, in the midst of those enchanted and still inaccessible pages, from which so many marvels flood me, that my soul longs to inhabit. I say soul indeed, since the mind, as I would see it later, was evidently placed closer to the body than to the heart.

If my internal sentimental conversion, through fairy tales, was immediate, my external social conversion occurred much later: the extreme misery I had known ultimately brought a strange proximity to real life – a curious parallel with a similar role that fairy tales had brought me, to familiarize me with true dreams.

This haunting sensation of a world forever unknown, forever inaccessible, and yet intensely lived, with admiration and unfailing fidelity, this sensation provoked another consequence, this time practical rather than moonstruck. A need for escapes, for escapades, for absences, for abandons, for erasures. In the first quarter of a century of my existence, five escapades followed. It would be comical to measure them in distances separating me from my cradle: a few hundred meters, a hundred kilometers, three hundred, four thousand, six thousand. All these escapades, except one, the first, I undertook alone.

At a well-rounded four years old, I concocted, before two mates of the same age, a vague theory according to which, by following the banks of the [Inia](#), one could reach the great river, the Ob', which flows into the Arctic Ocean. Fully determined, we set off, the three of us, in a good (!) direction. After three hundred meters – an unforeseen obstacle, a stream more than a meter wide barred our way. Panic, tears, mutual recriminations. A peasant heard us whining and whimpering, came to save us, questioned us and took us back to our

respective parents. For the others, it was a regulation spanking. As for me, I was congratulated by [Plato](#), tenderly sermonized by [Mother](#), and ridiculed by the others. Four years later, I would prepare my next escapade much better. All the following escapades were resounding successes!

In the [izba](#) I discovered the soul of my people; on feast days, we crowded around a coarse table, laden with salted or pickled cucumbers and tomatoes, steaming potatoes, smoked herrings, raw onions. Bottles of adulterated vodka crowned everything and brought on the central moment of these festivities – the songs. All the women rested their saddened heads on hands pressed against a cheek and struck up nostalgic songs, featuring above all coachmen, freezing in the snowy steppe, or Cossacks, promising their beauties a swift return from the campaigns to which their horse and saber called them. I still keep the same pleasure in humming these tunes of an unbearable melancholy. M. Kundera, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, mocks the magnificent song of the Caspian buccaneer Razin; I have held an unforgiving grudge against him for it.

I would one day be able to observe that even the most illiterate muzhik has something moving to say about the Russian soul, just as the most primitive French peasant will say something sensible about the French spirit; and the heaviest German butcher will say something touching about the German heart.

As good descendants of the Novgorodians, Procope and [Plato](#) often evoked the Mongol razzie of the Middle Ages, without however realizing to what extent those cursed uncultured and boorish horsemen left shameful traces in the Russian mentality: guile, theft, brutality, negligence in housing, in clothing, in town-planning.

But let us return to my reading sessions. I was approaching my fifth year, and **Mother** could no longer bear my bookish voracity. A happy occasion simplified my relations with the written word. **Plato** was becoming more and more short-sighted; his glasses no longer sufficed. But he was so keen to read the local newspaper, *The Miner*. What intrigued him most there were the news of the Korean War, which had just broken out. **Plato** tried his luck: he began by showing me the letters of the alphabet, pronouncing the corresponding sounds and waiting to make of me an appointed reader of his newspaper.

The miracle took place, after a week, even though I still had great difficulty reading numbers. Poor **Plato** would never know the exact number of aeroplanes the wicked American lost in that inaugural year of my new dignity in the empire of letters.

The complicity with **Plato** was total. He, like **Mother** herself, would never yell at me, although occasions were not lacking. The divine bottle exerted its charms on **Plato** until his last day, to the great dismay of Eudoxia, who cited to him the edifying example of Procope, always sober in body and mind. As much, according to my partial memories, Procope's *izba* sparkled with a thousand embellishments, as much **Plato**'s displayed leprous stains everywhere.

Plato entrusted me with highly confidential missions, linked to the drinks outlet, located in the only asphalted street in the district. This last point is not without importance, since until the age of seven, I knew no summer shoes; I therefore went barefoot or in slippers borrowed from my elder half-brother. Concerned for maximum comfort in my clandestine travels, **Plato** was happy to know my feet safe on the **asphalt**, as I ran, his 25-centiliter bottle of vodka under

my shirt and my heart pounding, to escape the pitiless seizures practiced by Grandma Eudoxia on any deliverer of suspect liquids. In any case, I ended up ousting all competition, since Eudoxia never suspected to what extent I could be complacent towards vice, which, moreover, gnawed at the whole region. She let me slip away, knowing my harmless attachments only to books and cucumbers, and not to the machinations of the thugs who dominated the neighborhood. Yet I behaved like a thug.

I was six years old when Elisabeth brought her lover into the *izba*. Things got complicated. We had to clear out, to leave room for the young turtledoves. *Mother's* factory granted her a room, in a communal flat, in a squalid wooden *shack*, without sewerage, without toilets; eight square meters were supposed to suffice for the four of us. Vermin, cockroaches and bedbugs infested the rooms and kitchens, all struggle useless, the flats not being well insulated from one another. Wretched planks were permanently rotten, frost and rain quickly getting the better of any repair.

Fields of mud stretched all around. In winter, one saw no white snow, everything was covered with a thick black layer of coal; the mine was less than a kilometer away, with its terrible slag heaps. But, oh wonder, a few meters away appeared the first *asphalt*, culminating in the city center.

It was now a city! Since the town, which once bore the name of Kolchugino (coming from the expression *chain mail*!), was proclaimed a city, saddled with a resounding name – *Leninsk*!

In the city center, I saw, for the first time, Stalinist buildings of four stories, with balconies! Notables lived there, appointed by the Party committee. I dared not imagine myself living in such a palace; I felt much the same feelings

as, according to Goebbels, the conquered Slavs were supposed to feel, driven in trucks, at dawn, through the gleaming new Germanic cities, on Slavic soil.

In the meantime, I had to get used to carrying, every day, buckets of waste water towards an abominable rubbish pit, next to the communal toilets.

Every day, it was a struggle for survival. The shops were empty, money rare and appetites perpetually on the prowl. How many times did [Mother](#) get me up around four in the morning, so that I might take my turn in the queue forming in front of the bakeries. And sometimes it paid off! I returned, triumphant, with a black loaf under my arm (white bread, I would discover much later!).

Two or three times a month, we achieved a feat, so festive, so joyful – we procured 'meat'! In reality, it was rotten sausages; what real meat was, I would only learn five years later.

In winter, the gastronomic feast took the form of a firm white pancake, which is how frozen milk was sold at the market! I carried this heavy pancake under my arm, sometimes sucking on it along the way. At home, it melted in a saucepan, to become milk again and serve for cooking real barley pancakes, in our communal kitchen, shared with the Polish family, suffering much more than us from the dark precariousness of existence.

In summer, one saw at the market Yellow-skinned people from Central Asia, with their load of melons and watermelons; their steppes were quite close, half a thousand kilometers away. Incidentally, one of the two branches of the [Transsiberian](#) crossed Muslim Kazakhstan, for about a hundred kilometers, passing through the town named Saints Peter and Paul; the Bolsheviks removed Saints from this incomprehensible name, and the Muslims, today, kept the rest.

The meager bookish culture of Stalin's commissars also explains the

existence in [Moscow](#) of streets bearing twisted and indecipherable names such as: Erection-of-the-Cross, Epiphany, Forerunner-of-the-Lord.

Another great feast awaited me – I got my first pair of summer shoes! I was hopping with impatience, 'big' [school](#) was opening its doors to me, even though I had not yet reached the obligatory seven years.

Our journey to the shores of Lake Baikal, where my uncle Michel lived, was a lesser feast than my first day of [school](#). Michel's son, Hermann, would become a geologist; he would traverse all of Siberia, in search of gold, nickel, and diamond deposits. Friend to Siberian tribes and their Eskimo cousins, he would participate in ski races, 60 km, between Chukotka and Alaska (I bear, moreover, like my cousin, the first name of the first bishop of Russian Alaska; one might see in this one more hypothesis about my origins). Hermann today lives in exactly the same small town, on the same shore of Lake Baikal, that S. Tesson recently approached and described.

But I am getting bogged down in material details; I shall return to the 'spiritual'. I had already read, by myself, all the fairy tales contained in [Mother's](#) very rich library. And now I was discovering the hundreds of books that [Mother](#) kept under our bed, on [Theater](#) Street, and which I discovered in our wretched chicken coop.

It would seem that the treasury of [Mother's](#) factory was very poorly kept. The management, unable to honor its salary obligations, offered the workers compensation in kind. Food, alas, was not on the list of products offered. It could be saucepans, postcards, buttons, sweets or ... books. Thus it was, to the

detriment of our earthly appetites, that the country sustained our celestial appetites! And I discovered, dazzled, fantastic authors. There were, of course, J. Verne, F. Cooper, M. Twain, R. Stevenson, A. Green, B. Kaverin, but also Balzac, Stendhal, Hugo, Dumas, Maupassant, Zola, R. Rolland, Galsworthy, Dickens, Thackeray, Steinbeck, J. London, Goethe, H. Heine, Th. Mann, S. Zweig and so many others, not to mention the Russian authors.

Mother could have served as a propaganda poster, to illustrate the civilizing work of Soviet power. I would rather associate that power with the countless queues I stood in, to buy matches, slippers, margarine, nails, pens, sweets etc. Even for cinema tickets, one had to wage real battles, the most impatient spectators not hesitating to force their way to the box offices, climbing over the shoulders and heads of the understanding and laughing competition. Fights, brawls, pugilism, knife attacks animated our interminable waits. In three cases out of four, we returned empty-handed; and we got up an hour earlier, for the next dawn queue-taking. We lived on hope, as M. Proust's marquises would confirm.

The project for my second escapade had been maturing since I learned that my godmother might belong to the same family as my putative father. I never pestered *Mother* about my progenitor; evil tongues pushed horror as far as supposing him to be German! Now, my godmother was called Gertrude, she had just moved to the chief town of the province; I wanted to have my mind clear and conceived a plan for a lightning visit to this tall and beautiful lady, who had already come to *Theater* Street, where the haughty features of her face left troubling memories in the family, bordering on hatred and malevolence.

So as not to return to this thorny subject of my origins, on the paternal side, I shall evoke my last attempt to attach my blood to an unknown lineage. I had twenty-four hours left, before taking the Moscow-Paris [train](#), at Bielorussky Station. On a [Moscow](#) boulevard, I stopped in front of a town hall information kiosk. An occult and obscure force pushed me towards the window, where I mechanically filled in a form for an address search, slipping into it one of the three names that were invoked in the neighborhood of our family in Siberia, in allusion to my elusive father. I did it, quite unconsciously, without any preparation, any emotion, any expectation, any hope. After a minute, my form was handed back to me – it was completed with a surname and a telephone number. And there was an address! Pushkin Square, a ten-minute walk from where I was.

Next to the imposing Rossiya cinema, and above a café where one savored an excellent hot chocolate (my student years would take me there so many times; an all-too-complaisant Natalie would take G. Bécaud there to mythologize this Pushkin chocolate), I find the building indicated on my scrap of paper, I go up to the second floor, I ring.

A dumbfounded lady abruptly opens the door and throws at me: Doctor, at last, how slow you are! I am speechless, emotion chokes me, my denials are inaudible. The lady leads me to a room, where I see an old man, quite pale, at the bottom of his bed, in a sorry state of disorder.

The lady slips away just long enough for me to throw these mad words in the face of the dying man: Did you know Pauline I., in Siberia, at the end of the War? The panicked old man sits up in surprise, his wide eyes expressing fear or hostility. We could already hear the lady's footsteps, returning from the kitchen down the corridor; the Yes rang out like a death knell in my incredulous ears, I rushed towards the exit, the lady accompanying me with her hateful and

frightened gaze. Thirty years later, a Russian oligarch would want to show me his new luxurious offices – they were in the apartment of my presumed ancestor! Silent mafiosi were setting up their shady computer-selling businesses there. But the café was still there; bitter melancholy spoiled my pleasure in drinking a cup, as before.

But I had to pack my bags, or rather fill my boxes with books, my only baggage that I will bring later to distant France. The paternal chapter was closed. But at the age of eight, genealogical prospecting was less dramatic. I already had Gertrude's address. In the middle of winter, I undertook a journey of a hundred kilometers, by bus. The bus was not heated; the temperature hovered around – 40° Celsius.

In the Siberian winter, night falls early. The bus had not covered half the distance when it broke down, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night. Inside, it was between -10 and -20°; the terrified driver fussed around the bonnet, in vain. The passengers feared the worst; mobile phones would not appear for another half-century.

My biggest worry was my feet. I had already lost, on two occasions, the skin of my toes, frozen during my bold cross-country skiing outings. I curled up on my feet, my *shapka* pulled down, to protect my mouth. The passengers ended up throwing the wretched driver out, so that he might walk to the nearest village to seek help. This violence was inhuman, since in that region, the nearest village could be 30 kilometers away (for the rest of Siberia, it could be up to 100).

The poor man could lose his life there, traffic at that hour and in that weather being very thin. Nevertheless, after two or three hours we were rescued by a truck. I arrived in [Kemerovo](#); my godmother Gertrude spoiled me with her

strudel; she gave me a scolding for not having said anything to [Mother](#). I reassured her, saying that since my early childhood, [Mother](#) had been warned that my urge to run away could reawaken at any moment, without warning.

The atmosphere became so relaxed and even cheerful, that I set aside the object of my visit, as grave as it was unexpected. Gertrude must have attributed my geographical fancies to a misunderstanding within the family and did not question me further. I returned to the fold after three or four days.

Twice, I was sent to holiday camps for young Pioneers. At the little school, where boys and girls wore the same short skirts, I had already known collective rejoicings and sorrows; in the camps, I felt just as uncomfortable. I was clumsy in everything: in games, in telling jokes, in setting up dirty tricks against our counselors.

I saw bears roaming free, I had a great fright, being stung by a nasty tick, carrier of encephalitis; I feasted on wild strawberries, so fragrant and juicy; the canteen, after the permanent hunger at home, filled me with joyous contentment, with its barley porridges; the pine and cedar forests were intimidating and grandiose. So many squirrels and lynxes brought to this epic landscape – life, beauty, an elsewhere, worthy of my dreams.

I made a great discovery in our rabbit hutch. If on [Theater](#) Street one saw only Russians, on Kirov Street (yes-yes, it still makes one think of theaters, but this time, we were far from ballet; unlike the theater on the Neva, which is now called the Mariinsky Theater, my street still bears the name of this muzhik, slaughtered by Stalin, to whom he apparently cast a shadow), yes, on Kirov Street, I made the acquaintance of numerous tribes, the most conspicuous of

which were made up of Poles and Germans (it is, moreover, the presence of the latter that accelerated my preparations for Escapade number two).

The Great Russians, to whom my family referred, did not represent an absolute majority there. The habit of living among these three ethnic groups seeped so deeply into my consciousness, that it was only ten years later that I realized that my best friend at the time was a Pole, E. Saltiewski, and my little girlfriend, I. Nietzer, was a German.

In the former's family, I listened, with the same tears in my eyes, to the famous *Farewell to the Fatherland* by Oginski. Eugene's family was deported to Siberia after the partition of Poland between the Nazis and Stalin, but I would only learn that much later. My girlfriend Inna would end up returning to her ancestors' country, to Germany; she would be horrified by Germanic coldness and would devote herself, with fervor, to the holy Orthodox faith, the existence of which she had previously not even suspected. I received from her a capital lesson, so that I might come to appreciate the importance of the choice of constraints in creation; she quoted me a verse by Angelus Silesius: *Mensch, sei wesentlich*. Since then I have tried to avoid all that is inessential. The sequel proved to me the immense merit of this intellectual discipline.

Childhood wants to fill everything with happiness and carefreeness; melancholy and sensitivity to suffering visit us only in adolescence. At the Moscow [Conservatory](#), I would see Repin's painting [The Slavic Composers](#), where I would discover the heads of Chopin and Oginski. Eugene's parents introduced me to another way of being Slavic, with more dignity, pride and that enigmatic freedom, that most incomprehensible need for most Russians. I am obviously only translating my very vague impressions into today's expressions.

The German Inna gave me my first German lessons; her teaching was so penetrating that I keep intact a tonal and melodic closeness to that language, which has become almost my second mother tongue. Polish, unfortunately, faded quite early, since poor Eugene killed himself at the age of fourteen.

I was the only Russian able to communicate with the Poles and Germans in their language; appreciated by some, suspected of betrayal by others. Moreover, the majority of my classmates were children of deportees. Upon the announcement of Stalin's death, the whole country was plunged into tearful lamentation; in [Leninsk](#) I heard no sobs; I saw, on the other hand, some glimmers in the eyes, visibly recovering some vague hopes in the midst of hell.

A Polish family, originally from Galicia, shared our communal flat. Through the partitions, I heard joyful voices, that spring of 1953. A third of our schoolteachers (there were no male teachers) were Volga Germans (incidentally, my godmother Gertrude came from that region, populated by Germans since the 18th century). They too did not hide their relief, discreet but easily perceptible.

My half-brothers felt at ease in our proletarian depths. The elder, Victor, became a formidable hunter. Respecting the local rite, he killed his first bear with a dagger, without a single scratch. A dozen bears followed, bringing him a certain material ease, thanks to the sale of their pelts, valued as blankets during the harsh winter nights. Lightheartedly, Victor became a miner in a coal mine, which for us would mean free heating – lorries often missed the bends.

Moonshine stills were running at full tilt in the city's outskirts; my brothers indulged in them abundantly and frequently. [Mother](#), to compensate for these holes in the family budget, often got up around four in the morning, to go and unload lorries and earn a few missing roubles. Ten years later, she would

shorten her nights with the same exertions, to send me, the student, ten or fifteen roubles. But I would only learn this later. Never was my shame sharper nor my tears more genuine.

Valéry was discreet and timid; he played the guitar, like [Mother](#) (I still hear her singing the Georgian song about Queen Tamar). Studies bored them both, and Valéry would join [Mother](#) in her steel factory, as a blacksmith. Don't imagine electronic command with a nice keyboard; it was a twenty-kilo hammer, which he had to wield, bare-chested, to forge axes, anvils or stove plates.

Both would let themselves die, with a certain passive and resigned consent, helped by stupefying alcohol and by the interminable social tunnels with no spark at the end.

Well, dramas in the streets of [Leninsk](#) were our daily bread. I still see my friend Alexander, today a Californian, surrounded by a gang, brandishing knives before his face, while one of them held me back, promising me my life. Helplessness, cowardice, betrayal – that is how I would relive this scene a hundred times, flooded with shame. But Sasha never held it against me; he knew better than I the reasonable conduct to adopt in mortal danger; he lived daily the violence, the ferocity, the bestiality of our fellow citizens.

I return to the (relative) joys. My third escapade loomed on the day I made the acquaintance of my charming cousins, Svetlana, Lydia and Galina, who came to [Leninsk](#) for [Plato](#)'s funeral. Yes, I was [ten years old](#) when my best benefactor and mentor, my tenderness and my gentleness, succumbed to his drunkenness and his laziness. He had known three emperors and half a dozen General Secretaries. At the funeral, Eudoxia prophesied to me: no one will ever

love you like grandpa [Plato](#).

I asked the pope if I could keep as a souvenir the paper band, with pious scribbles on it, that encircled [Plato](#)'s white forehead; the pope, furious, promised me outer gehenna for such gross offences against religious dignity. As for the loves to expect, Eudoxia, fortunately, was wrong both in the past and in the future. I knew two splendid loves: from [Mother](#) and from my French [companion](#), which fully filled my need to be loved. But Eudoxia was right about friendships: no friendship brought me as much naive complicity and smiling tenderness as [Plato](#)'s debonair warmth. My questionable expeditions to the drinks outlet, which perhaps cost [Plato](#) a few fewer years to live, I now relived as romantic epics, imagined and schemed by my wise accomplice.

My cousins were daughters of [Mother](#)'s sister, Lubov', a very bizarre character, with a Mongol face. Heavy suspicions must have weighed upon Grandma Eudoxia's conjugal virtues. Their father was my godfather, a peasant from Ryazan', in central Russia. A very representative muzhik: drunkard, lazy, pleasure-seeking, light heart and heavy soul.

There were three hundred kilometers to cross. This time, I was going to take, for the first time, a train. Without warning anyone, I turned up at [Novosibirsk](#) station (ex-Novo-Nikolayevsk). Before taking the tram to cross the Ob', I was struck by the gigantic Opera House. It was there that I would listen, the next day, to my first opera – *The Flying Dutchman*.

I got a telling-off from Lubov' for my wild and discourteous improvisations. But food and a camp bed were assured me with much indulgent warmth. My cousins were very curious to get to know this little savage, straight out of the [taiga](#). This family would meet a perfectly ordinary fate, in those times

of violence and misery: the youngest would have her throat slit by a jealous boyfriend and the next one would commit suicide for sentimental reasons. Nothing out of the ordinary, then; one sees that everywhere, routine, the norm; destiny, as the Russians trivialize it and the Germans dramatize it.

On my return, [Mother](#) begged me to keep her informed of my next escapade, which she knew was inevitable.

Summer lasted a month and a half. I remember that abundant snow that fell on our streets on a 22nd of June. By early August, the trees were already bare. At first, winters enchanted me, then they horrified me. School closed at -40° ; my record was -52° . With the $+47^{\circ}$ I experienced in Sevilla, that makes a spread of 99° . Would I one day cross the 100° difference mark?

I saw sparrows fall down dead from -45° . We amused ourselves by spitting in the air and hearing an icicle fall, resonating as if it were crystal. The cruelest joke consisted in proposing to a novice to lick a metal object; it was instant superglue.

How I loved that admirable S. Tesson, with the account of his stay in rural Siberia! I recognized every little detail of my Siberian peregrinations. He is a man of heightened sensitivity, an incorrigible dreamer, a nomad of the feet, as I am of the soul. To live seemed to me the synonym of escaping. To flee is to command – that is what we might have said to each other, in the middle of our itineraries, crossed in opposite directions!

There are fantastic chiasmus in our reciprocal paths. And even in the genres we advocate. I am incapable of such spontaneity and continuity in a narrative of what I would have seen or lived. You will learn better about the living environment of a Siberian from S. Tesson, who stayed there a few

months, than from me, who dragged my feet there for seventeen years! On these pages, you will no doubt learn nothing important about my states of mind; you will discover the smallest wound in S. Tesson's soul, in his heartbreaking pages of sincerity and vulnerability, while remaining precise!

In reverse, I strip myself naked in my abstract maxims; beyond them, there is nothing to discover in my secretive person; they would only be appreciated by the red heels of the 18th century. But poor S. Tesson is non-existent in his wretched collection of aphorisms, with a lamentable lack of originality, depth and even height. He comes from a culture of the mind, a tranquil and moderate culture, to end up in an unleashed and grandiose nature; I leave that same nature, to bathe in the restlessness and overflow of a culture of dream.

The Académie Française has just co-opted a new member, A. Makine, who spent his childhood in the same places as me. As with S. Tesson, the public appreciates the authenticity of endings and mistrusts the invention of beginnings. S. Tesson will find his old soldiers, and A. Makine his black-faced miners; me, I will stay with my fairy tales.

Adolescence comes late in Siberia. At fourteen, I barely knew a few emotions and troubles, in a body still too juvenile. The warm countries, where temperaments seek ecstasy under a mischievous sun or by a caressing sea, those countries began to attract me. And I was already considering my next escapade, to complete my tour of the family.

In the Caucasus lived my aunt Olga, with my cousin Ludmila and my cousin Boris. My uncle Michel, with a son who also bore my Germanic first name, joined my aunt; they were fed up with the eternal snows, much like

myself. It was a matter of covering five thousand kilometers. Seasoned by the three previous escapades, I launched into the fourth, light of heart, lighter than my purse, which did not even provide for a return ticket, as three years later in my [Moscow](#) raid.

[Mother](#) was informed of my departure. The stated pretext was quite original: the monotony of my grades at school – always the best in all subjects – might have created in me a suspicion of complacency on the part of my teachers, I should put myself to the test in a setting where I would only be an intruder, to be sure of my 'objective' abilities.

The journey lasted almost six days. I made a stopover in [Moscow](#). I had already read Balzac and Stendhal, I wanted to let out a cry upon arriving at Kazan Station: here is the capital I am soon going to conquer, with my untarnished talents from an occult and obscure province!

The proud and beneficial jolt did not happen; quite the contrary, I saw a mass of closed, narrow, uniform faces. I quickly understood that in Siberia one could still glimpse reminiscences of free expressions on the faces of the last rebellious ones. In [Moscow](#), all the faces spoke servility, fear and scoundrelism.

I crossed Red Square (which I had seen, like G. Bécaud, white with snow, but also black with crowds and green with fear); I glimpsed behind the [Kremlin](#) walls the domes of three magnificent cathedrals. I discovered a civilization that was cruelly lacking amid the Siberian huts. The churches were my most beneficial surprise.

In a world closed to Beauty, my thoughts were paralyzed, seeing no airhole opening onto intelligence, elegance, nobility. The traces of centuries

more clement to the Beautiful brought me a first little itch in the place where wings must grow.

I closed myself off more to men and became even more attentive in the choice of books. Not to read, but to live! Elsewhere-life began to take on more realistic contours. Soon would come my first rhymes and my first rhythms. The poet was born in me that day, with the awareness that the beautiful can harmonize with the true, that art can not only substitute itself for life, but accompany it without friction or rejection. Not fraternally, perhaps, but artistically. Life can be intense, and art must be!

And here I was, in sight of the Caucasus mountains. It was the end of summer. I discovered real apple trees, apricot trees, walnut trees, plum trees. Before the vines and orange trees I remained speechless; they were closer to my fairy tales than to reality, where one plays, works, calculates. I devoured with my eyes the cypresses, the olive trees, the laurels; I knew their names only from exotic Eastern books.

Aunt Olga lived in a superb villa, surrounded by gardens and vineyards. Her husband, Timothy, a former KGB colonel, had distinguished himself during the war by punch operations, such as the expulsion of entire nations from the Caucasus and Crimea, for collusion with the enemy.

In the family, they were all a little embarrassed to receive a shaggy, dishevelled, bewildered character in rags, stammering incoherent words to justify his unexpected arrival. I felt a little relief upon learning that I might, perhaps, dissipate some of their sadness, since their son Boris had just left home to learn the fine trade of artilleryman on the shores of the Sea of Azov. Moreover, my cousin would no longer need tutors; I swore I was competent in

all school subjects (at the time, I was not so sure).

The city was founded by Catherine the Great and was called Catherine's-Gift; after the [Revolution](#), the new masters did not rack their brains and mechanically renamed it [Reds'-Gift](#) ([Krasno-dar](#)). Its inhabitants were descendants of the famous Zaporozhian Cossacks, known for their wild indiscipline. Over the years, from Ukrainians they became Russians. A geo-ethno-political curiosity was that on the other side of the strait (in Homer, this was the frontier between the world of the living and that of the dead), Russian-speaking Crimea was recently given by that idiot Khrushchev to Ukraine!

The Siberian muzhik had no idea of superiority or inferiority in cultural heritages; he lived in total ignorance of the outside world; his savagery rested on no historical consideration, he had no History (I would learn one day that for Hegel, Siberia was the most impenetrable corner of the planet for any culture whatsoever). The Cossack, on the other hand, kept a millenary memory; he knew the Pole, the Turk, the Caucasian highlander, the Muslims; his judgments were ideological and racial; tribal arbitrariness was his law and rule; his potential cruelty made me shudder. I wondered if starry ignorance was not the lesser evil, compared with hateful knowledge.

These Cossacks helped Catherine to push the Turk back to the Danube, to fix there the new frontier of Russia. But she wanted to get rid of this undisciplined horde; Crimea was promised to the Great Russians, so the Cossacks were dispatched to the Turkoman steppes of the Caucasus, in support of the Don Cossacks who had only made a few audacious incursions there.

At school, things went better than expected. The teachers were more primitive than in Siberia; the young Cossacks, friends of the steppe, turned out to be more loutish and inert than my Siberian forest colleagues. My grades were the same as in Siberia; the bet could be considered, very quickly, as [won](#).

For two years I enjoyed the kindness of my excellent aunt, who introduced me to the sea. In Sochi, I saw for the first time an infinite horizon; I already knew the infinite starry firmament, admired in the Siberian forest.

I would return to that sea five years later, in my second year as a student; the [University](#) had two holiday camps on the shores of the Black Sea, the other being in Abkhazia. That year, my cousin Boris was at the southern tip of the USSR, his cannons pointing at Afghanistan; I was at the northern tip, in Murmansk, where one of my classmates was training in the rough trade of submariner.

A little later, twice I would tour Crimea. From its antique four-winged plane, a tipsy pilot would drop me off at Odessa, where I would be very disappointed by the local fish; in the Siberian rivers one found tastier ones. But the Opera there was distinctly more elegant than the one in [Novosibirsk](#). Its architecture smacked of Austria-Hungary.

The North-South opposition, which I now carry, rather unconsciously, dates from my stay among the Cossacks. Smile visiting me much more rarely than dream, I would feel, most often, on the side of the Nordic dreamer than the Southern singer.

I had discovered the Russian colonies of Transcaucasia, on the occasion of military training, in my fourth year at [University](#), when I would don a tropical

uniform, shorts, hat, high socks, in a Red Army base in Azerbaijan. There I would discover Muslims, donkeys and figs. Beneath an artificial hill, I would see an air surveillance center, where on giant screens one could see all the planes moving, from Pakistan to Israel.

Nothing to be done, my tastes remained unchanged: the forest and verticality attracted me more than the sea and horizontality. The tree, more than the ship, received the treasures to be transmitted to the beyond. I would only discover much later the immense satisfaction of messages entrusted to a distress bottle. To know that, one would have to read Hölderlin or Celan.

After two years spent in [Reds'-Gift](#), I returned to the fold. I avoided [Moscow](#), I stopped briefly at [Stalingrad](#). The recent titanic battle was still felt; a tragic city, so much blood has soaked its soil, so many echoes did the miraculous victory have. Along the way, I discovered the Kalmyk desert, the steppes, the symbolic role of the great Volga: old Russia only beginning on its western bank; the region between the Volga and the Urals was populated either by indigenous Finno-Ugrian tribes, or by descendants of Turkoman tribes, drawn into the Mongol adventure in the Middle Ages.

In the Urals, one sees very beautiful mountains, rivers, lakes, forests; there is everything there to make a Russian Switzerland. Beyond the Urals, for almost a thousand kilometers, stretched the sad steppe of Western Siberia; only the melancholy birch groves brought a few diverting spots. The universe of the [taiga](#) had, as an outpost, the capital of Siberia, [Novosibirsk](#), where I left the [Transsiberian](#), to branch off towards the South-East, in the direction of Mongolia; [Leninsk](#) was halfway.

In Siberia, I had two more classes to do. I was returning from Europe, with a much more contrasted and nuanced vision of my country. I was just beginning to understand the itineraries of my companions in misfortune. I now realized that my maths teacher was German, my English teacher – Jewish, my physics teacher – a former countess from [Saint Petersburg](#), expiating the sin of her origins. Almost all – deportees!

I learned that Dostoevsky, after serving his penal servitude, settled very close to our Siberian [shack](#), an exact copy of [his](#). He got married in that [church](#). In a neighboring school taught the son of the great poetess A. Akhmatova; his deportation was the origin and theme of his mother's moving *Requiem*, which I would only read ten years later. I now understood why the level of our teachers, both pedagogically and intellectually, was clearly above what I saw in [Reds'-Gift](#), the Caucasian one.

But these politico-historical considerations were not at all at the center of my worries; I was obsessed by poetry. The Russian one, I already knew quite well; I started on the German: Hölderlin, Goethe, Schiller, Rilke, George, Trakl, Hesse. My English was too poor; I read in translation Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, Poe, Yeats. Byronism influenced me more than the others; I was thrilled by the marvelous Rilke.

Poetry, in Soviet Russia, enjoyed an incredible prestige. Only mathematicians, physicists and actors could rival poets. The immense greyness of daily life made any flight towards abstract knowledge or trances into the unreal precious.

All totalitarian regimes want to redeem in the beautiful, in dream, what

they fatally miss in the true, in the real. Democracy and general satiety blow away any need for vertigo and leave us alone with the boredom of the real.

I was, like so many Russians, a shameless waster of my gifts. The European detects very early the most promising channel for his most realistic talent, and does everything to follow it. And I knew so many Russians who, like myself, were seized with boredom once a certain peak of knowledge was reached. Which leads to so much amateurism, errors of direction in careers, heavy final disappointments, collapses and irreplaceable voids.

A prestigious tradition existed in the USSR – high-school Olympiads. Of all subjects, mathematics was the most prominent. In this discipline, which did not inspire in me boundless admiration, I was, nevertheless, [winner](#) first in my city, then in my region, and finally in all of Siberia. [Moscow](#) was waiting for about fifty of the country's best high-school students for the national Mathematics Olympiad. My performance was mediocre; my competitors from the capital largely dominated this competition, leaving me with a burning desire for revenge. For that, I had to [return](#) to [Moscow](#) to follow the best teachers. However, this bitterness was quickly dispelled by my return to poetry.

But the call of the capital remained; I had to choose the path. What I dreaded was the humiliating political pressure that prevailed in almost all higher education institutions. I found three branches where this pressure was weaker than elsewhere: mathematics, diplomacy, theater. I had antipathy for the first, I was useless in the third, the second remained.

And so it was, with my gold medal in my pocket (it is something rarer than *mention très bien* in the French baccalaureate), I left my [lycée](#) and arrived

in [Moscow](#).

At the Institute of International Relations, in a chic district of [Moscow](#), the admissions committee promptly and ironically rejected my application. Access to this institution was reserved for the children of the regime's bigwigs; every Muscovite knew that; I swallowed the rebuff, my head empty and my arms hanging down. I had not a sou left in my pocket, to pay for the train back to Siberia.

[Novosibirsk](#) University, because of my Olympic laurels, had offered me a place without competition, but the acceptance deadline had passed. Fortunately, on the same metro line, three stations further, was Moscow [University](#), the very one where, a year earlier, I had measured myself against the best mathematicians. I went there; at the Faculty of Mathematics, it was the penultimate day of registration for the entrance exam. I did not yet say to myself: what am I doing in this galley; I felt the relief of one who was drowning and suddenly caught, at the last moment, a plank, rotten but floating.

And so began my decisive rendezvous with [Moscow](#).

Moscow

The vertigo of greatness, most often artificial and superficial, is characteristic of countries with a great capital, overwhelming the provinces by its weight. Such was the case of France and Austria, and to a lesser extent of England. Italy and Germany suffer from this lack of a single center.

In Italy, the rich and enterprising North looks down on the unindustrious Rome; the charming German university towns, heirs to the country's political fragmentation, welcome the brightest youth, while Berlin, Munich and Hamburg content themselves with being politico-economic centers.

In Russia, for two centuries, two capitals, [Saint Petersburg](#) and [Moscow](#), vied in the qualities of their great schools, with comparable weights. Since the [Revolution](#), [Moscow](#) has outrageously dominated the scientific scene and, to a lesser extent, the artistic scene. This process accelerated further with the devastation of [Leningrad](#) during the Patriotic War.

The provinces lagged enormously behind these two capitals. But the essential part of the backwardness of most Soviet higher schools was due to their isolation from the rest of the developed world. Only a handful of these schools could rival European and American ones. Charlatanism was present in most Russian schools. Brandishing the highest rate of 'scholars' in the world was a sad comedy. Closing them would have been a measure of common sense – academically, economically, and humanely.

The Moscow Department of Mathematics was among half a dozen of the best schools in the world, comparable to the ENS on rue d'Ulm or Princeton University. This is no longer the case today, alas.

The entrance exam consisted of eight tests; two thousand candidates, for about a hundred places; at the end of the exam, I placed myself among the top five (in *la botte*, as my ENA-graduate daughter Anastasia would say; to be *cacique*, as my friend from the École Normale, R. Debray, would say; two of these *caciques* would be witnesses at my wedding, ten years later).

The Muscovites, whom I had known and admired the previous year at the Olympiad, became more respectful and friendly. Regional accents being almost non-existent in Russia, no one could guess my origins. Being accustomed to a somewhat stilted tone, I passed for a Baltic. I would make a tour of the Baltic countries three years later – I would find there only clodhoppers, heavy and inexpressive; I should have refused those dubious Muscovite compliments.

Here I am in the university city, right next to the Stalinist skyscraper of the [University](#). We are four in the room: an Azerbaijani, a Ukrainian, a boy from the North, a Siberian. Very quickly, I noted the absence of personality and originality in my provincial colleagues; the Muscovites are better educated, more ironic, have multiple centers of interest and descend from families where art and science met in all simplicity and found a common language of exchange.

The provinces would definitively disappear from my 'intellectual' horizons. I would become a Muscovite, before becoming a Parisian. Moreover, upon arriving in Paris ten years later, I was welcomed by my [companion](#)'s uncle, for whom I served as co-pilot to cross the city from the Gare du Nord to the Porte d'Ivry, without a single wrong turn!

At the [University](#) entrance, I was very moved by the inaugural speech of the great academician Kolmogorov; the words he used most often were – love, passion, imagination, creativity. He placed beside the mathematician – the poet and the musician. First and pleasant surprise! Contempt for the physicist, as for any other applied science, followed.

Fifteen years later, in France, I would search in vain for the slightest reference to love or passion in the regard upon the splendid edifice of great mathematics. Henceforth, one practices this noble profession everywhere with as much passion as accountants or lawyers.

Kolmogorov quoted this remark of the great D. Hilbert: that ex-mathematician did not have enough imagination, he became a poet. He evoked Pythagorean or Galilean philosophy, which made mathematical concepts a veritable ontology, the very foundation of the real world. The marvelous congruence between gratuitous abstraction, naive intuition, rigorous logic and empirical observation should make any philosophically inclined mind pensive.

Another academician, P. Alexandrov, made an unforgettable impression on me. He studied in Germany, where he knew Einstein. He spoke six languages, but the height of his culture was his passion for music. He organized, in our university city, his Musical Tuesdays, which a handful of students attended; the Master came with his records; a quarter of an hour for the music, two hours for his impassioned commentaries; he would gesticulate, start, hum, drum with his fingers, tell anecdotes from the lives of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven. He wept with us, scolded us for our lack of sensitivity or too much reasoning in our clumsy attempts to analyze and understand the mysterious origin of the emotions aroused by noble music. The only art without intermediaries; the only

art which, while unfolding in irreversible time, places us before the being – that is, before the space, as manageable as one wishes; the only art, in the end, divine, since inexplicable.

And this same Alexandrov, so refined, so profound, of such delicate taste, had practiced – as I would learn much later – informing, in the thirties. He was at the origin of the repressions against those who retained a little critical spirit in the face of the barbaric regime which, by its brutality and incompetence, was devastating the country.

Twenty years later, I would meet Grothendieck, a Fields medalist, a brilliant and eccentric mathematician. Everything he said about mathematics was banally yawn-inducing. He made me read thousands of pages of his future book *Récoltes et Semailles*, which he feverishly scribbled towards the end of his life, pages that were to expound his philosophical views on the central problems of life – it was an endless jumble of platitudes.

Decidedly, the purest geniuses – mathematical and musical – very rarely lend themselves to philosophical exercise, which requires unifying intelligence, nobility of judgment, and poetic irony. What made Grothendieck intimately close to me was the tragedy of his mother's death, which he lived as atrociously as I did mine. He wanted to stop his work on Mathematics, but could not; I, in the same state as him, stopped my research in Artificial Intelligence. But one day, we both turned towards philosophy. 10% of his production was published and 15% of mine. And French was not our native language!

Even later, I read a work by one of my professors, Manin, with the fine title *Mathematics as Metaphor* – an empty, superficial discourse, unable to go

beyond the exclusively mathematical framework to pour itself into a life of ideas, images and drives. But it was not disappointment that I felt; rather, a recognition that the distribution of talents is truly divine, escaping all linearity, monotony, monolithism.

Musicians, too, shine by their intellectual nullity, while there are so many painters who are very imaginative with words; it would seem that the brush goes hand in hand with the brain. Notes, apparently, on the contrary, drift away from it.

From the second year, one had to choose one's chair; I chose the most abstract, least applicable discipline – algebra. Among the professors in my chair were young men under thirty – Arnold, Guelfand, Manin. I followed the seminar on Galois theory by Shafarevich, friend of Solzhenitsyn and great dissident, a brilliant algebraist and handsome man. At his dacha, he gathered students inclined towards politics or history; they imagined themselves heirs to the Decembrists; danger excited them, the atmosphere of a noble conspiracy tickled them, the Master's courage fascinated them. Subsequently, Shafarevich himself would be expelled from the [University](#); one of my friends who frequented him was interned in a psychiatric hospital, where he underwent veritable pseudo-medical torture (today, he is a very great mathematician, member of the Royal Academy of Norway). And this most brilliant man would later compromise himself with his morbid anti-Semitism, so widespread in the southern provinces from which he came. Decidedly, a particular talent guarantees neither particular nobility nor universal intelligence.

After the first year, during the summer holidays, I took part in an exotic

adventure: about fifty students asked to be sent to the most inhospitable northern region, to help the peasants and, above all, to test their resistance to the rigours of the wilderness. Somewhere between [Moscow](#) and the White Sea, a village was dying. There was neither electricity nor telephone; we were asked to build a sort of cowshed there.

The first passable road was 50 kilometers away. Clouds of mosquitoes, horseflies, ticks pursued us everywhere. Provisions were stored in a hole dug in the ground. One morning, we found it completely ravaged by a bear. The prospect of famine loomed. This was one of the rare occasions where I could be proud of myself: with two young Muscovites from good families (my future wedding witnesses), we were the only ones not to give in to discouragement and to raise the spirits of the most panicky. A good lesson in nobility! I was astonished at myself and swore to keep henceforth, and in all circumstances, my soul high, even while lowering my eyes and my arms.

Science smiled on me; during the first three years of study I had excellent grades in all mathematical subjects, and I even received a Lenin scholarship, reserved for the best. With Marxist philosophy, a compulsory subject, things went sour. For the seminars, each professor kept a log of student interventions; I discovered, proudly, that my name was the only one opposite which there was not a single cross – no voluntary interventions!

The gregarious and humiliating aspect of these brainwashings repelled me more than the very content of this official philosophy (diamat). When, twenty years later, I would discover the real Marx, I would conceive for his lyricism and vehement tone much sympathy and even admiration. Moreover, it is in France that I would meet my first Marxist; in Russia, the reasoning of the Bolsheviks

was closer to the body of Genghis Khan than to the spirit of Marx.

But at the end of these first three years, the typically Russian phenomenon occurred – I lost all appetite for this science, whose fundamental bases and essential results I now, however, mastered. The routine of professionalism loomed, threatening; I noted my incurable original flaw – an immoderate taste for beginnings and horror of intermediate, accumulative, repetitive steps. I preserved the essential – mathematics is divine, it is the real world's ontology!

Almost by inertia, I held course for the remaining two years; my thesis on spherical functions in compact spaces was a swan song, today totally mute or inaudible.

I evolved, nonetheless, in an exceptional intellectual milieu; nowhere else did I experience such a clear feeling of being in the presence of a true elite, elected by taste and sensibility and not by money, power, nor even by particular knowledge. I often went to the Moscow [Conservatory](#), to two or three theaters, to art galleries. In these places, the overwhelming majority of the public was youth, students. I constantly ran into my [University](#) colleagues there.

The shortage of books was experienced even more acutely than that of sausages or socks. Queues of several hundred meters formed in front of bookshops on the day of publication of books by Hemingway, A. Dumas or E.M. Remarque (Harry Potter had not yet been invented). I know that this enthusiasm did not arise from an inner need, but was dictated by the greyness and boredom outside.

Today's Russia, ravaged by supermarkets, finds itself at the same level of bookish inculture as the USA. Modern German music and theater suffered the

same misadventure. It is not in indigence, with reduced choices, that one recognizes a noble head, but, paradoxically, in opulence, when, at last, the question of priorities and choices arises. And fidelity and sacrifice, those two signs of nobility, are only valuable with the possibility of filtering and voluntary constraints. It is easier to maintain a common position against suffocating heaviness than to create and maintain a pose of personal grace and breadth, in the midst of a peaceful tepidity.

Despite the paltry servility of their acts, most students, in their dreams, deplored the absence of freedoms and the suffocating pressure of the cretins who ran the country. I would learn one day that there was an informer in every group (about twenty students). Taking advantage of the opening of the KGB archives in the 1990s, a friend showed me my own file, with three letters of denunciation, written by the informer of our group, with his name in full! His father would be Prime Minister in a 'democratic' Russian government. This makes me think of the most sinister character I ever met in the USSR, the Party secretary of my Department, [Sadovnichy](#).

When it came to my departure for France (I will return to this final episode in my Postface), this odious character, swollen with his unlimited power and impunity, exercised all his spite on me for two entire years. I still see the enjoyment on that thick brute's face. I wouldn't even have mentioned this episode if this cruel and ignorant monster were not, today, in the 21st century, the Rector of Moscow [University](#) and a close associate of Putin!

But I return to my studies. I moved into the [University](#) skyscraper; I shared my room with an East German, which considerably refreshed my

German. By a footbridge, one accessed the Faculty directly: the 18th floor of the City communicated with the 12th of the Faculty, where my dear algebra chair was located.

In the immense [University](#) building on [Sparrow Hills](#), one found everything: restaurants, pharmacies, a Post Office, a theater, a cinema, swimming pools, bookshops, doctors' offices, shops, concert halls. Marble, bronze, mosaics, everything was monumental, majestic. As in all the great works of the Stalinist era, the laborer was essentially composed of Gulag residents. But as long as I remained within the walls of this enormous edifice, I was not troubled by this unfortunate circumstance. It would take until the power of this country turned on me myself, for me to become solidary with the other victims. Selfishness, cowardice, indifference? – I could not say.

I still had to prepare my Thesis. My thesis director gave me the title of an Italian journal (*I Rendiconti del Circolo matematico di Palermo!*), where there was a capital article, treating the subject of my thesis. I immediately enrolled in an Italian course (still in the [University](#) building). After two months, having read my first books by Pavese and Moravia, I went to fetch the journal – the article was in French! A language of which I did not know a word.

Here I am tackling my sixth language! After French, I would only tackle two additional languages – Spanish and Latin. Spanish was taught to me by a Venezuelan revolutionary, in exchange for my maths lessons (he was applying to the Department of Mathematics of the Lumumba University; he was the future number one enemy of France, [Carlos](#), Ramírez Sánchez; my friend Régis Debray certainly benefited from Che Guevara's Spanish lessons...).

Latin came from my family jealousy: my daughter, at the École des

Chartes, knew it, and I did not. I ended up reading St Augustine and Horace in that magnificent language, so free, so expressive, so subtle.

With the extinction of my interest in mathematics, I returned to my poetic exercises and began to frequent the brand-new [Library](#) of Foreign Literatures, located on a quay of an affluent of the Moskva, the Yauza, opposite another Stalinist skyscraper. I met its young director there, who, later, kindly would welcome me, a vagabond, a homeless man, spending nights in railway stations and living on translations of technical articles, under an assumed name.

From my prolonged stays in this [Library](#) I derived a perfect knowledge of Paris; I knew by heart the names of all the streets, all the museums, libraries, squares, churches, theaters, concert halls, stations, statues, fountains, etc. The great lady, guardian of those welcoming walls, has just retired; may she be thanked there.

The Lenin [Library](#) also saw me often. From its 18th-century building one could see the [Kremlin](#) tower through which Napoleon left, to blow it up and head towards the Berezina. The Bolshevik leaders, in the company of their foreign guests, entered the [Kremlin](#) through this tower. Once I saw Brezhnev's cortege; between the Moskva bridge and the [Kremlin](#) drawbridge, a character fired at Brezhnev, without hitting him; the Voice of America would announce the name, profession and age of the terrorist – it was me! Only the University was not the same; the dissident came from [Leningrad](#). He would end up in a psychiatric hospital, and I would receive, from certain dissidents, undeserved congratulations.

But the most picturesque event occurred in a 14th-century [Monastery](#),

right in the center of [Moscow](#), the [Monastery](#) of the Nativity. Squatted by the intellectual bohemia, it housed in its cells a few eccentric artists, poets, musicians, painters. I came across a handsome young man, with long hair and a singing voice; E. Wittkowsky knew a dozen languages and wrote sophisticated, rich and harmonious poetry. But his prestige among the youth was due to his extraordinary talent as a translator of poetry. Our friendship was born of an equal love for the great Rilke, that unique poet by his poetico-philosophical intuition, which places him on the same level as Valéry.

E. Wittkowsky was already surrounded by a dozen translator-students, who venerated their master, which was only largely deserved. He proposed that I translate some poems of Rilke and take charge of the German section of his 'school'. I pushed my audacity as far as translating even one of Rilke's *Requiems*. But I quickly had to bow to an undeniable fact: the master's translations were distinctly freer, more imaginative, more flexible, more natural. And since I have always had the habit of doing only what no one else could have done in my place, I immediately renounced my pitiful amateurism. I have not returned to it since.

But those evenings, in a monk's cell, remain engraved in my memory. E. Wittkowsky called his circle *Russian Boys*, although there were also several girls. Moreover, it was in [Moscow](#) that I discovered what the most overwhelming femininity would be. It was, to my eyes, contact with beauty. In Siberia, they were splendid forest girls; in [Moscow](#), they were those who could have varied contacts with beauty, the most fruitful of which came from art, but elegance of dress or speech also contributed.

Women have the same avidity for power and the same taste for violence as men. But they transform themselves more rarely into torturers and rejoice in it much less loudly than men. This is one of the reasons for the discrimination they

suffer. With the disappearance of all contact with beauty, woman becomes a mannish creature like American women, or bestial like Siberian city-dwellers.

At the [Monastery](#) of the Nativity, the philological work was, of course, the main thing, but I especially see again those faces, so young, so moved, so noble, reciting poems in English, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish. E. Wittkowsky's knowledge of the history of European poetries was unbelievable, encyclopaedic, precise. One would say that in the 16th century he frequented Scottish pubs or sailed on Flemish canals. He knew everything! How many times we roamed, at night, the two of us, on those beautiful deserted boulevards of [Moscow](#), evoking so many poets' names; he could quote me hundreds of poems, in all languages. He would master Portuguese, Celtic languages, Afrikaans and so on.

Unlike Europeans, the Russian Boys were indifferent to everything outside the poetic empire. Clumsy, maladjusted, marginal. But nowhere else would I experience such a sensation of fraternity. And shared tears, tears of happiness, tenderness, unbearable emotions. It was with them that I understood that the greatest misfortune that can befall a man is to no longer love, no longer know how or be able to love.

Later, I would put E. Wittkowsky on the trail of Valéry, who would become his favorite author, the most delicate to understand, feel and translate. French poetry being the most sophisticated in Europe, mere linguistic knowledge is not enough to appreciate at their true value the finest French pens. No imbecile can shine in French poetry; which, on the other hand, is very frequent among Germans and Russians, because of the ease of purely sonorous illusions. In French, poetry is not in the lexicon, the rhythm, the measure; it is in the audacity of unpredictable encounters between words, images and ideas.

In that [Monastery](#) of the Nativity, I touched, for the first time, the fiber of friendship – a friendship bordering rather on the sacred than the fraternal. I never knew that sensation, either before or after. But E. Wittkowsky ended up breaking that fine enthusiasm, because of my interpretations of Valéry's poems, which he contested tooth and nail, and never wanted to admit his errors. I still keep, however, a thick bundle of his very dense letters, received in France; I replied to them with my intense missives. Knowledge versus recognition (gratitude and/or echo of the ineffable).

Another [Monastery](#), that of the [New Maidens](#) (Novo-Devichy), would see, a few years later, another of my capital encounters. Two crowns above two heads, mine and that of my Provençal [companion](#). A slightly drunk pope, but delighted to finally welcome a hothead, courageous in these times of militant and vigilant atheism, made us drink the famous (infamous!) and false Cahors wine, just as a quarter of a century earlier, another pope, on the edge of the Siberian [taiga](#), had done. Two frightened witnesses, whom I had to bribe to reward them for possible reprisals from the secret police, took a few photos, which we would never see. The KGB might perhaps look there for proof of my anti-State, anti-Bolshevik science, anti-people-of-sufficient-reason felonies.

What is a dream? – a promise that only wants to be maintained and not fulfilled. Therefore, something that lies beyond existence, moves only by its inexistence. Friendship would have belonged to that ephemeral and narrow circle, where the Good, Nobility, nascent Music and the dead God awaited me. I would have to content myself with reinventing them, each time a blessed void presented itself, I would introduce voices, rhythms, melodies, but not faces, alas.

Once the diploma in my [pocket](#), I fell into a tragicomic trap, which one could not imagine anywhere but in Russia. Freshly graduated, we were besieged by recruiters. Questionnaires had to be filled out; one of them came from the Ministry of Defense; a trick question, syntactically twisted, was asked in their questionnaire: is it excluded that you would envisage serving in the Army? Almost all answered sensibly No, four only, including me, dared the Yes. Now, it was precisely these four, plus a fifth (who would obviously be our informer), who were called up!

I have never carried the slightest martiality in me. But thanks to the gold braid of staff officer, I remained in [Moscow](#). In the fifties, this Research Institute housed the most powerful computer in the country; the trajectories of all the first sputniks, as well as intercontinental missiles, were calculated there. Nowadays, one amused oneself there with the mathematical modeling of international conflicts, modestly imitating the RAND-Corporation, one of those American research institutes under the aegis of DARPA. It became a hideout for colonels approaching retirement. I met there submarine commanders, who passed under the North Pole aboard their monsters, capable of annihilating the entire planet, rocket specialists who had installed their terrible devices in Cuba ten years earlier.

We proceeded by pillage and plagiarism of our colleagues across the Atlantic. I also put my hand in it, digging through the yellowing issues of *Operations Research*. I was made a specialist in mathematical models in game theory, conflict theory, dynamic programming. The emoluments were very generous, three times higher than those of our civilian colleagues. In fine private mansions, in the most upscale districts of the capital, I met generals and GRU spies, military intelligence. The latter occupied magnificent ultra-modern

buildings, right next to our Institute. The intellectual indigence of these austere warriors was as flagrant as that of our civilian chiefs, if not more.

As was to be expected, my three other victims of arbitrariness became, or rather continued to be, political dissidents. The informer had his contract with the Army renewed, and we left this privileged and ultra-narrow-minded milieu. I would no longer hear the noise of helicopter rotors or tank engines, like on the day of the invasion of Czechoslovakia (an armored division and an airfield were five kilometers from the [Kremlin](#)).

I settled in a mathematical linguistics laboratory at Moscow [University](#), in the splendid offices of an 18th-century palace, right opposite the [Kremlin](#), less than two hundred meters from its severe walls. My exercises in automatic translation made me deepen the wonder of natural languages; I ended up understanding that there exist only two subjects worthy of high philosophy – consoling trickery and linguistic caprices. And it is always thanks to linguistic cognition that I definitively lost all interest, and even all respect, for the study of being, freedom, truth, rigor, which the ignorant of incurable suffering and of the saving word continue to extol, not to mention logic, reserved for mathematicians alone.

My entire professional life was an interminable succession of ruptures, abandons, new spheres and old loyalties to the non-existent, the invisible, the unrealizable. So many trades, abandoned at their peak, so many manias, saved from total shipwreck. Which means that I count as many triumphs as debacles, with the places and dates identical, but evaluated by judges rarely compatible – the soul or the mind. I would learn one day that they lodge in the same organ and are only its two hypostases. They convert into one another by entrusting

themselves either to nobility and creativity, or to intelligence and power.

I made this capital discovery very early – our weaknesses, our dead ends, our anxieties more clearly harbor our best talents, keep more secrets and promise more surprises. Any authentically philosophical mind should have begun with this difficult certainty. The taste for writing, too, comes from this surprising observation, that, in our twilights, what remains most alive are the unventured gestures, the unfound words, the uncomprehended moments. Writing is an attempt to save what was, tragically, lost or missed.

The soul, very early, murmured words of consolation and caress to me; the mind, later, dazzled me with the wonder of language. Outside these two facets, every deployment of knowledge, ambitions or masteries seemed to me, henceforth, futile, pedantic, mechanical.

This is why, fifteen years later, my explorations of Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel brought me only boredom, contempt, disgust. These rats of reason or of libraries would never have suspected the possibility of a soul. The very words soul, desire, passion take on, under their pens, a sense so dry, so abject, that I retained only repugnance from them.

But, as a logician (I had indeed learned Gödel's theorems!), I was appalled by the use these 'scholars' made of terms such as: rigor, prove, truth, knowledge. The best symbol of this sterile indigence – Hegel's *Science of Logic*, where I did not discover the slightest trace of a science or a logic. By science, they mean accumulation of knowledge, and by logic – means of drawing consequences from it. If only they spoke, like the Ancients, of Wisdom and Logos! Since wisdom can be reduced to Caress, and Logos – to Word!

With my poetico-philosophical ambitions, I feel isolated. I can appreciate the nobility of Nietzsche, the intelligence of Valéry, the style of Cioran, yet none of them possesses the virtues of the other two! And I aim for or seek the complete man; I feel myself the bearer of a system, which, obviously, does not guarantee the success of its expression.

And Aristotle, Descartes and Kant, who are men of system, failed their exercises. The banality of means limited the first; the absence of finalities flattened the second; prosaic beginnings ruined the third's ambition. And all three cruelly lack weapons of style and soul of nobility. But they sought fundamental liaisons between the call of the Good, the brilliance of the Beautiful and the power of the True. The presence in the mind of this great triad is a sign of intelligence and greatness. But how difficult it is to preserve a balance between the depth of a mind and the height of a soul! This talent is perhaps the rarest of all.

I attempted to achieve this balance in my disproportionate collection of maxims. I received no echo, no support, no understanding. Must I repeat, with all fools, that one cannot be right against everyone? To palliate this untenable attitude, I addressed myself to the dead, through quotations, which substituted for the ideal interlocutor of a poet – God.

So I address myself neither to man, nor to colleague, nor to accomplice, but to cemeteries, where memory, culture and caress lie. *In the Beginning was the Caress* – such was the title of one of my works, presenting no interest to this busy humanity. I hope that such will be the conclusion of this bitter essay.

Postscript

Siberian childhood and adolescence definitively formed my character and temperament. Neither [Moscow](#) nor Europe added anything significant to my view of life, of passions, of men, of creation, of knowledge. But it is not the very content of my Siberian experiences that shaped me, but their chronology: the dream of the soul, the misery of the body, the freedom of the mind.

If, like most of my companions in misfortune, descendants of deportees, I had followed this evolution in reverse order, it is highly probable that, at the end of the journey, I would have lacked both the purity and the will sufficient to espouse the empire of dreams. I would have become a man of action, conducting my life with open eyes, and not a man of dream, traversing life with closed eyes.

I would have been a man of the forest and of fraternity, and not a man of the solitary tree and the sacred. I would have addressed to the world Noes full of spite, contempt and resentment, instead of my enthusiastic, immaterial and irresponsible Yeses.

I would have known the clarity of borders between good and evil, between action and dream, between power to be trained and weakness to be caressed, between troubled life and serene art;

I would have ended up detaching myself from values and cultivating entire axes, aesthetic intensity preferred to ethical density, both extremes receiving the same acceptance from aesthete and ascetic.

Two years of vagabondage, in that [Moscow](#) that had become hostile. No more work, no more roof overhead, no more supportive friends nor salutary acquaintances. Alone, in the street, in railway stations, in libraries. How many eyes averted at my approach, for fear of compromising themselves. I slept in station waiting rooms, in university residence corridors, in library halls, in apartment entryways, on a camp bed.

All because of a beautiful Provençale girl, met during her Russian language training at [Moscow University](#) and in love with Russia. Her dream was to settle in Russia. I visited dozens of institutions likely to employ a European – everywhere, an icy reception, mistrust.

Attempts to rent an apartment ended with the discovery of microphones in the chandeliers and eviction before the end of the lease. Eleven Paris-Moscow journeys in two years, to appease the marriage officials.

To give herself hope, during the last of these journeys, she put wallpaper in her suitcase, for our hypothetical *izba*, somewhere in the countryside. The final argument – a pregnancy; a woman doctor does everything to injure the embryo and make the imperialist intruder abort. Fortunately, our son Julien, in perfect health, is doing splendidly. The mother returns to France, cursing our torturers.

There remains the last solution – to join my family in France. I set out on the calvary of the Party bureaucrats' offices, where I beg for a piece of paper, obligatory for any candidate for a trip to the West, a paper called a *characteristic*. Usually, it is a formality, since these worthy candidates are

already approved by some State body. The text of this *characteristic* was practically identical for everyone. It stipulated that the applicant was politically educated and ideologically mature. This was followed by a list of laudable achievements: good chess player, writes for the wall newspaper, participates in rubbish collection. My case fell outside this pre-programmed framework. The Party secretary of the Department of Mathematics, my last employer, the heavy and foolish informer, [Sadovnitichy](#), could therefore allow himself every form of torture and harassment, faced with an off-track element.

He took full advantage of it, that sinister [Sadovnitichy](#), today, in the XXI-st century – the Rector of Moscow [University](#)! From interview to interview, his sniggers about my meager political zeal, not to say its total absence, noted in my indifferent attitudes, grew increasingly violent and hostile.

There remained a few weeks before Julien's birth. Three or four miraculous events occurred, one after another: the old rector of the [University](#) dies, he is replaced by a young physicist; Giscard d'Estaing is due to come to [Moscow](#), bearing a list of separated families; my [companion](#) manages to mobilize the president of the Franco-Russian group in the Senate, J.-L. Vigier, who receives his Russian counterpart and, during sumptuous receptions, wrings from him a promise to intervene in our favor.

I rush into the new rector's office, I shout that I have had enough of Comrade [Sadovnitichy](#)'s torture sessions, and that I am going to throw myself under the wheels of Giscard's limousine, if they do not deliver their dirty *characteristic* to me; to my astonishment, the rector calls the visa service and promises them the delivery of the paper before the end of the week. I cannot believe my ears; I do not believe in the strength of my arguments. Either the

rector is aware of a decision from above, or he belongs to a world radically different from [Sadovnichy](#)'s, since he is an intellectual outside the Party. Moreover, he would be found dead three or four months later. Accident, apparently.

Moreover, the Helsinki Accords, signed by all European countries a few months earlier, mentioned the reunification of separated families. I entered the French embassy, to test their position. I learned of the existence of a short-list of eight names, including mine, concerning the most urgent cases, and that Giscard d'Estaing would present it to Brezhnev. One day, when my visa was already ready, the French Consul, Monsieur Lespès, would slip to me, in a firm and grave tone: if you do not leave within forty-eight hours, you will never leave – we know this from a reliable source. I [rushed](#) to tie up my only baggage, the boxes filled with books. Two thirds of these books would be stolen from me at the Brest(-Litovsk) customs.

On the short-list, I would see the name of B. Spassky, former world chess champion. I would learn later that he had got married almost the same day as me, at the same [Moscow](#) registry office. We landed in Paris almost the same day. Subsequently, his life turned sour; in full paranoia he left his French home, to return to Russia, mad, amnesiac and hostile towards the whole of Europe.

The visa service received my *characteristic*. I was not supposed to know it. The rector received me a second time and read me a few extracts from this document: "unreliable character, capable of betrayal, fortunately harmless, due to lack of means to harm, of interest to the French party for unknown reasons, getting rid of him presents no loss."

I set foot on French soil for the first time at Maubeuge, close to the Belgian border. The case must be rare enough to be reported. At the Gare du Nord, I was awaited by Uncle Jean; I spent a few delicious but still ghostly hours in his Parisian apartment. I could only speak of French nasal vowels, of the Château de Pierrefonds, restored by Viollet-le-Duc, of the houses in Paris where the Three Musketeers had lived. Nothing natural, living, current, simple.

The train awaited me at the Gare de Lyon. The last straight line closed my wanderings. My fifth and last [escapade](#) ended with heart palpitations more irrational than ever. The abstract France that I already loved was to meet France in flesh and bone. Caresses or roughness? Impossible to foresee. Only one thing was certain: I am faithful to my first emotions, sown by my [Mother](#), with the fairy tales, whose magical atmosphere I knew how to keep, amid the despairing horrors. Why would I not keep it in the midst of happiness, so close and so improbable. The Nature of my childhood passed the torch to a Culture that would henceforth be mine. And did I not sense this encounter in my Siberian [izba](#), above the books read by [Mother](#), tears in her eyes and her hand on my head.

The Russia of the 21st century is foreign to me. For eight centuries, this country has struggled between the call of a culture of the soul – a call growing ever weaker, the call of its European origins – and the brutality of a visceral nature, imprinted in its body by the Mongol nomad. But if the very brief cultural periods were only sparks, quickly extinguished by the surrounding darkness, the natural periods, characterized by a power of darkness, are prolonged, until yet another catastrophe, briefly opening the eyes of lost men, in an instantaneous

flash, only to plunge the country back, immediately, into the long ensuing night. Such were the attempts of Peter the Great, Catherine II, Alexander I, Alexander II, Gorbachev.

The Russian's primary need is the well-known one: my own pleasure above all (the famous *svoyevoliye*, so well analyzed by Dostoevsky). To exercise, with impunity, one's arbitrary will within a State, a region, a city, a business, a gang, a family. Freedom as the absence of law; the cult of irreplaceable despots, at every level, and consequently, respect for the thief, the cheat, the thug, the bandit.

The current regime presents itself as a unique fusion between criminal banditry, economic banditry and political banditry, all with the same level of education. This natural Mongolism is accompanied by a cultural Mongolism. Pushkin, Tchaikovsky, Tolstoy have almost entirely disappeared from the horizons of the vast majority of Russians. Historical knowledge does not go beyond the last fifteen years, further disfigured by a stupid, hateful, unilateral propaganda.

The intelligentsia, growing ever smaller, is excluded from public debates and retreats to its kitchens, to indulge in lamentations, which that scoundrel of a muzhik mocks, pleased to see the country run by scoundrels of the same nature, of the same ilk as himself. The sight of a ruling class more refined than his own bands of thugs annoys and inconveniences him. Hence the sincere support enjoyed by the mafia in power.

Paradoxically, the Americanization of economic mores accounts for much of current Russian brutality. In the USA, this harshness is tempered by an independent judiciary and precise Law. In Russia, justice is at the service of mafia clans and the law is diverted to the benefit of the powerful.

The words freedom and democracy have become insulting there. The word sovereign has taken on an unexpected laudatory coloring. Ignorant, violent, coarse characters have invaded the public scene. A handful of intellectuals, survivors of the purges, are excluded from it. No impartial debate, no reference to scientific knowledge, to competence, to intelligence. The loyal thug reigns unchallenged.

What can one wish for this unhappy country? – until now, only regicide by the Orlov or Pahlen counts could deflect the barbaric currents. But today, in the absence of any elite, aristocratic or intellectual, any coup d'état will inevitably lead to an absurd and bloody civil war. Internal peace might awaken liberal inclinations, which is why it is the worst danger for the plutocrats; to ward it off, external adventures are to be feared.

Europe senses this Russian drift, but misinterprets it and, above all, sees its false origins, reduced to a will to dominate or expand, instead of concerning itself with human rights and individual freedoms in that country.

A frank Russophobia prevails in the minds of European leaders. Ignorance of History, disinterest in liberalization in a country doomed in advance to servitude, the need for a strongly antipathetic enemy – such are the mainsprings of European policy towards Russia. It is much easier to assume before public opinion than to devote oneself to hunting down bearded Islamic fanatics. The latter will take advantage of this irresponsible political deviation, to sow ever more terror and chaos in this Europe, deprived of ideals, values and global strategy. One can appease a thug, wounded in his self-esteem but eager for recognition and material goods, one will never manage to calm an ascetic fanatic, ready to give his life to hurt an irreducible enemy.

Alas, I will see neither a democratic and pacified Russia, nor a France led by Chateaubriands or Lamartines, nor even by de Gaulles or Mitterrands. But while the civilized thug will not break his country's socio-economic balance, the barbarian thug will sink his backward country deeper into the sewer of corruption and arbitrariness. I see in France very lively islets of culture, nobility and intelligence; that is enough to maintain my optimism. Russia inspires in me only a dark pessimism, with no outlet towards tolerance, gentleness of soul or openness of mind.

Finally, I must mention two figures, two heroes of French history, both condemned to death, the first by the Nazis, the second by a Latin American junta, both miraculously saved. Thanks to the first, President of the Franco-Soviet friendship group in the Senate, I set foot in France, in this country I already loved. Thanks to the second, a revolutionary, France's foremost pen, I was able to live the reality of the French spirit, of which previously I could only dream. Their names are J.-L. Vigier and R. Debray.

Images



The Cathedral of Saint Sophia in [Novgorod](#), 11th century. My great-grandfather Nicephorus left this region in the 19th century, at the end of the 1860s. The first capital of Russia, the first city where the word liberty ever resounded for the first time, the only great city to escape the destructive fury of the Mongols. Alexander Nevsky set out from here, to meet the Teutonic Knights.



A troupe from an amateur theater in my town. Photograph taken in 1917, just before the [Revolution](#). [Plato](#) was celebrating his 40th birthday. [Mother](#) had just been born. These are not the same faces that I encountered in Soviet Russia. Two incompatible universes. The first one is dead. In thirty years, the country changed its face(s). Ultimately, I would only love a ghost country, a vanished culture, a lost sensibility, men with a devastated heritage.



My native town – Kolchugino (Chain Mail). The city center, where notables lived, but the communal shacks where we, the wretched ones, languished, were not far away.



My native *izba*, seen from Theater Street. On the right, Procope's two windows; on the left, [Plato](#)'s – where I was born. The row of blue planks under the roof was put up by me, at the age of six. The communal chimney still bore traces of bullets from the Reds and the Whites, from the Civil War of 1917-1922. The poplars that surrounded the house are no longer there. One sees neither elderberries nor raspberry bushes either.



View of Theatre Street, opposite my *izba*. Snow is more pleasant to look at than summer mud. From the mist and the Sun's weakness, the temperature hovers around -40° . This is where I got on my skis or ice skates, to head down towards the *Inia* and continue gliding on its frozen surface for kilometers. There were only huts like these, where the lowest depths of the most destitute proletariat took refuge.



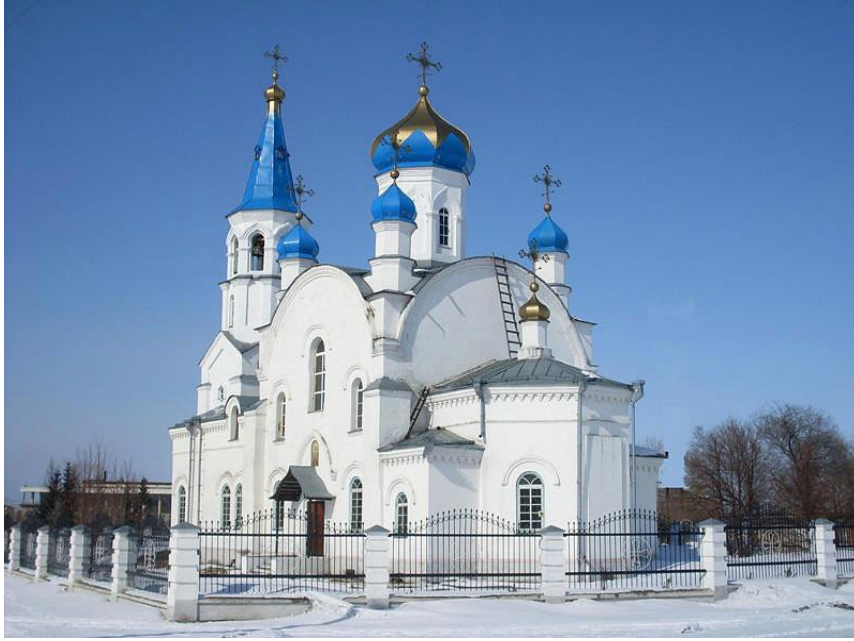
We had to leave my *izba* on Theater Street. *Mother's* three little savages, aged 6, 10 and 14, would move away from the tomatoes, cucumbers, peas and other raspberries of my grandparents, to settle in a communal *shack*, near my first *school*. I am more than ready to enter it.



My gentle [Plato](#) and Grandma Eudoxia. I say
goodbye to my [izba](#).



The author of my most useful and irreplaceable teachings, [Mother](#), on the banks of the [Tom'](#). Her life was nothing but an endless tragedy. Widow, labourer in a sordid metallurgical factory, misery, famines, deaths, suicides, the ingratitude of the children whom she cared for with a selfless and sacrificial love.



The church where I was baptized, but at the time it was much less gleaming. The popes followed this evolution: from humble consolators, persecuted by an atheist regime, they became arrogant and wealthy supporters of a corrupt mafia regime. Nevertheless, next to the horrible architectural kitsch of the oligarchs, the churches represent, today, rare reminiscences of a vanished civilisation.



It was in this pharmacy that [Mother](#) began her professional career, at the end of the 1930s. [Asphalt](#) made its appearance there a quarter of a century later. The drinks outlet, which I secretly supplied to Grandpa [Plato](#), was opposite. At the time, pharmacists learned Latin; all labels bore names in Latin characters. To make picks, five years later, Latin was no use to [Mother](#).



In this shack, I spent ten years. Our yellow window is upstairs, centre-left. Most deportees lived in this kind of log building. There I discovered electricity and running water! But these were the only 'modern' conveniences. In those horrible overhead pipes, gas circulates today. Sewerage and toilets are promised for 2050.



The shacks of the 1950s, including ours, at the start of Kirov Avenue. The sight of asphalt and buses fascinated me in 1952. Snowdrifts could reach several metres. We built ice palaces, by watering the snow from inside the caves and digging passages. It was especially on Theatre Street, where our kitchen garden offered a more suitable building site for architects than the public square bordering these shacks.



The shack at Kuznetsk, where Dostoevsky lived after his release from penal servitude. This whole region was nothing but a gigantic penal colony, where I was born, a century after Dostoevsky's passage. He got married there.



Dostoevsky got married in this Siberian church, a hundred years before my birth.



The Inia. On the banks of this river, peaceful in summer, asleep in winter and impetuous in spring, my first escapade matured. The undergrowth opposite was entirely submerged by the spring floods. A little further on, the [taiga](#) began. For me, it was not yet the habitat of the bear or the deportee, but the storehouse of mushrooms, currants and raspberries. And of honey, which the bear disputed with me.



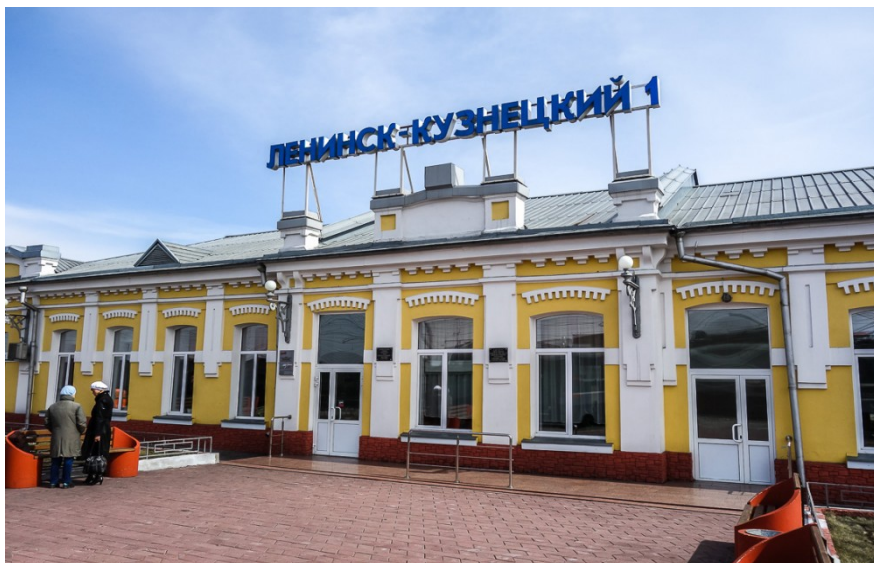
This is how the objective of my second escapade presented itself, in 1954 – the chief town of our Department, Kemerovo. Compared to [Leninsk](#), a little less coal on the snow and a lot more chemical poisons in the air. The [taiga](#) has almost entirely disappeared there; the civilising [Transsiberian](#) was too close.



My first school. It was made of wood. To get there, I only had to cross a pretty square of wild apple trees; this was perhaps one of the reasons for my academic successes: at home, there was no place to do my homework, so I did them, lying in the clearings of the square, which in reality was only an old undergrowth. This school went up to middle school level; after one year at high school, I would leave for the Caucasus.



I am ten years old. I am on the far left, in the middle. I am beginning to prepare my second escapade. I was already the most sullen, evasive and mannered. The discomfort in the face of the collective, the shame of bearing on my rags the stigmata of my misery. Nevertheless, for the ten years to come I would have the best grades. A very small consolation, next to the great one – my first serious readings.



Kolchugino station. It was from here that I left for my third and fourth escapades. At the entrance, one could see an immense samovar, with an aluminium jug attached to it. Freezing passengers could drink steaming tea there. From there, eight hours to cover three hundred km, a hundred hours – for four thousand km.



Novosibirsk, the Opera House. Image from the 1950s. The objective of my third escapade. I listened here to *The Flying Dutchman*, my first opera. In the main street, I saw for the first time stone buildings from before the [Revolution](#). It was like the discovery of the Pont du Gard by a Buco-Rhodanian who never left his rotten buildings.



The city of Reds'-Gift (Krasnodar), formerly Catherine's-Gift, where my fourth escapade took me. The South, mildness, a peaceful and flourishing province. Traces of private property, distinctly better maintained than our communal shacks. Some perceptible sounds of a dull revolt, coming from the night of time. And I was a contemporary of the deportees of the 20th century, not of the 18th.



Me, in 1961, in [Reds'-Gift](#), among the Cossacks. I am at the top, in the middle. The rural, peaceful, sedentary origin of these rustics, after my violent Siberian scoundrels with their nomadic and sombre spirit, that origin leaped out at me. From this episode of my biography onwards, I would lean definitively towards the troubles of the soul and not its peace.



Returning from my fourth escapade, I stopped at Stalingrad. The statue of the Motherland. I returned there in 2012. Around – steppes as far as the eye can see. And a desert, on the other side of the Volga. Tamerlane stopped here, sparing Russia a second devastation, after the Mongols. I visited the native village of the Cossack conqueror of Siberia, Ermak.



The competitions begin, the Mathematics Olympiads. At 16, before winning the Olympiads of the town of Kolchugino, of the Department, of Siberia... My expression growing ever darker and my hair – in rebellion. My friend would become a helicopter pilot, would track the mujahideen in Afghanistan and would end up, shot down by Bin Laden's Stingers, perishing there.



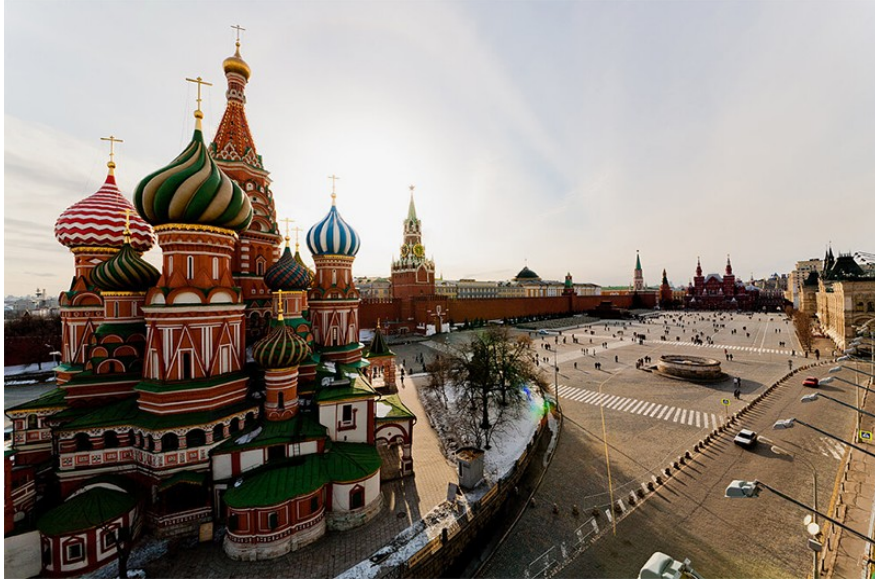
In front of my high school, in 2015. On the ground – one of the rare lexical signs of the 21st century: *you, you will be creative!* This word, *creative*, followed a strange trajectory in Russia – it means: to be enterprising, to know how to seize opportunities, to embark on questionable but audacious enterprises, to deserve good incomes, earned in the service of oligarchs. *If you say you are intelligent, why are you so poor?* – I read this advertisement from a bank recruiting creatives, in [Stalingrad](#).



Just before leaving to storm [Moscow](#), in 1963. With [Mother](#) and my nephew Alexandre, son of Valéry. From then on, I would cross the frontier between Europe and Asia thirty times, by the [Transsiberian](#). Neither Michel Strogoff nor B. Cendrars nor J. Kessel knew it better than I. Haunted by famine, it is not of forests, lakes, mountains, rivers that I would keep the clearest memory, but of tea on the train itself, [Mother's](#) hard-boiled eggs, cucumbers bought at the countless stations of the four-day journey.



Finished, the final year. In front of my high school. Note the socks... I am at the bottom, in the middle. Boys were rare to push their studies as far as high school. The street, the forest, the mine exerted a stronger and more immediate attraction on their hotheads. The soft, the effeminate or the intelligent felt inferior, in the midst of beautiful girls, more at ease in their skin. All the teachers were deportees or children of deportees: two Germans, one Slavic Muscovite, another Jewish, two from Petersburg.



Red Square, with St Basil the Blessed, the work of Ivan the Terrible, from the 16th century. The Saviour Tower dates from the 15th century.



Four centuries later, after Great [Novgorod](#), here is the fourth mother-of-Russian-cities, Golden Moscow, the Kremlin. As for Nicephorus, a century before me, these places would serve as a stopover for our final destinations. Between [Novgorod](#) and Siberia, between Siberia and Provence. Before Moscow, I knew only space; here, I would discover time.



The [Kremlin](#) wall. It is through the right tower that Napoleon entered and left the burned capital.



Twelve years, spent in and around this building. Lomonosov University. One can see the window of my student room and, in the middle of the central part, the windows of my algebra 'chair'. On the left and right – the despised Faculties of Chemistry and Physics. The [Kremlin](#) is hidden by the central tower, but one glimpses the Moskva. On the site of the skyscrapers to the left, Napoleon waited for the delegation of boyars, with the keys to the city, which never came.



The Transsiberian. When I was a student in [Moscow](#), I took it dozens of times. The first time was my fourth escapade. The last – to see the Altai again, in 2015.



It was in this 18th-century building, the old Moscow University, opposite the [Kremlin](#), that my last [Moscow](#) office was located. I take part in obscure research on the automatic translation of natural languages, on human memory. I teach, occasionally and out of inertia, mathematics. Thanks to [Carlos](#), my Spanish improves. He teaches me that, for Castro, the USA are governed by the robot, and Russia – by the dwarf.



The Library of Foreign Literatures. Spanish, Italian, French – it was in this order that I learned these languages here, while refreshing my German and English. A tram line connected this place with the [University](#) on [Sparrow Hills](#). But no doubt I would not have mentioned it, if these hospitable walls had not welcomed me so often, when I found myself thrown out into the street.



The Lenin Library, with a statue of Dostoevsky. After the [University](#), it was the place I frequented most.



A branch of the Lenin Library. The windows of the main reading room looked out onto the [Kremlin](#).



Carlos, Ilich Ramírez Sánchez. In my last, fifth, year at [University](#), I gave him maths lessons, in return he taught me Spanish. To work on my vocabulary, he insisted on books by José Martí, but I insisted that we first read the *Caballero de la triste figura*. Very quickly, I was already serving as a guide to Cuban schoolchildren on Red Square. He, in [Moscow](#), played Don Juan rather than Don Quixote. Later, automatic weapons suited him better than mathematics.



In the Monastery of the Nativity, from the 14th century, in [Moscow](#). The only religion practised here half a century ago was poetry, which animated the rhymes, notes and brushstrokes of the young artists, squatters of the cells from which the monks had been chased out another half-century earlier. These were dark and picturesque ruins; the 'Russian Boys' met there once a week.



The Moscow Conservatory. Once a meeting place for intellectuals. Today, musical sensibility, talent and taste persist in [Moscow](#), despite the intrusion of consumerism.



The Slavonic Composers (Russian, Czech, Polish), a painting by I. Repin.



Saint Petersburg, formerly Leningrad. I often took the *Red Arrow* (the Soviet TGV), to understand what Europe looked like.



My most detested Russian character, Sadovnichy, my torturer. Former Party secretary at the Faculty of Mathematics. Today, rector of Moscow [University](#). A sadist. A nonentity as a mathematician, he was the Faculty informer. Doctors of Science had to tremble in his office, to obtain authorisation to go to Bulgaria or Romania for a conference. My thesis director even wrung from him an agreement for a seminar in Italy. He brought me back books by Leopardi, Pavese and Moravia from there. After the fall of the USSR, idealistic purity lasted only a few months; the pestilence of thugs quickly made its definitive return.



At the end of my [University](#) studies, [Mother](#) came to [Moscow](#). I am still not very smiley. I no longer live except for poetry, and mathematics sinks into my indifference. Never again would I live such a coexistence between a growing inner solitude and a brief fraternity with poets, even more lost than me. The rather distant disdain for the regime turned into a frank visceral repugnance.



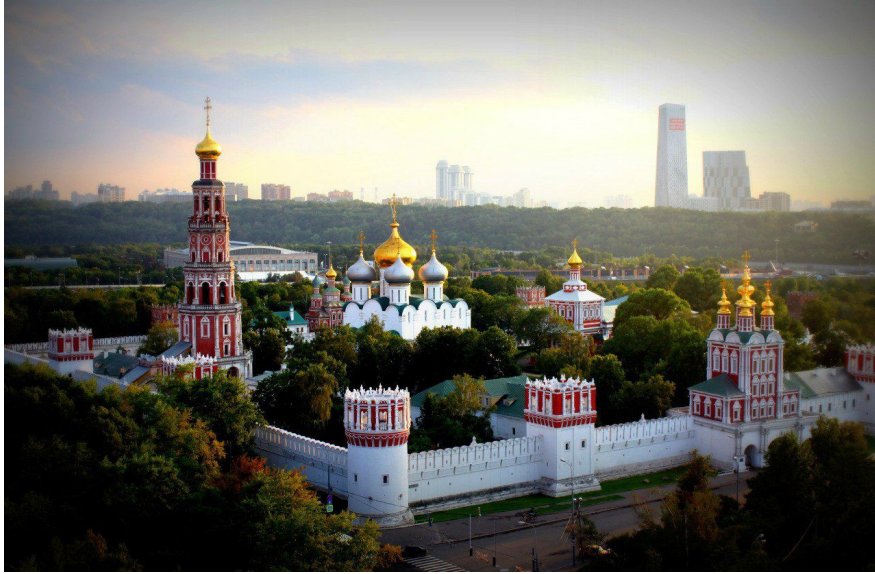
Mother, in the 1990s.



She opened me to the world where words,
ideas, images took the form of caresses.
Rosine, thanks to whom I realised what was
destined only for unspoken dream.



[Mother](#) and Rosine, near [Moscow](#), in 1975, after our wedding. A veranda in a dacha, a sofa covered with a bearskin – this was our first refuge. A pretty river, the Istra, magnificent forests. A year earlier, in the middle of winter, we crossed these forests on skis and got lost. Night fell; an unexpected chance saved us: we came across a railway line. I would make this route several times, so symbolic, so memorable, so Russian.



The Monastery of the New Maidens, from the 16th century. My last raised fist to my stepmotherland. The Party secretaries looked askance at my marriage, but it delighted the pope of this cloister of maidens; he was so bored with only officiating for the deaths of old women; a young wedding brought something rare and exhilarating to this outcast of materialist science.



A few friends, mathematicians or poets, on the eve of my departure for France. There were many tears, sudden and irrational. Soviet champagne had nothing to do with it. Cyrille, a great mathematician, champion of international Olympiads, next to me, would come to see me in Provence, as would the two other poets. But what could we say to each other, mathematics having died in me, and poetry having died in Russia.



Belorussky Station. The Moscow – Berlin – Paris train. I took it at the end of 1975, three weeks before Julien's birth. I see again the Stalinist skyscraper in Warsaw, Stalin's gift; Friedrichstrasse station in Berlin, with faces relaxed in the West and tense in the East; the stop at Braunschweig, in the middle of the night, where I read *US Army* on a door, three metres from the train window; the black cathedral of Cologne, casting its shadow over the station.



My first 'physical' contact with France, 2 December 1975, at Maubeuge station. Useless at singing and dancing, I was ready to launch into these exercises on the deserted and frozen platform. I risked no ridicule from my travelling companions; only one African student remained in my carriage. He was the first (and the penultimate) to get off at the Gare du Nord; seeing him, my Uncle Jean said to himself: why didn't they warn me that Rosine had married a Black?!



Provence – the place of my last escapade. My children danced in a folk group...



Julien and Anastasia, on the edge of the taiga, after a mushroom-picking expedition. The eldest of Nicephorus, Procope, was born in this forest, in 1870. Eight years later, my grandfather [Plato](#) was born. For them, the taiga was bear, gold and mosquito; for me – raspberries, currants, wild honey, flowers.



Julien, on the banks of the [Tom'](#), where Nicephorus took refuge. The true [taiga](#), the impenetrable one, begins on the other bank, the eastern one. The river and its tributaries carried gold. Highway bandits (in reality, there were not even small ones) were recycled here as gold prospectors. I still saw men emerge from the [taiga](#) with a few nuggets.

Index des Noms

Akhmatova A.	53	Cyrille ami	134	Hemingway E.	63
Alexandre Nev.	13,29,85	Daniel pr. Gal.	13	Henri III	11
Alexandre neph.	108	Debray R.	23,60,67,82	Hermann cousin	38,48
Alexandre uncle	18	Descartes R.	72,73	Hesse H.	53
Alexandre friend	45	Dickens Ch.	38	Hilbert D.	59
Alexandre I.	79	Dostoïevsky F.	79,116	Hitler A.	22
Alexandre II.	16,79	Dumas A.	38,63	Hölderlin F.	52,53
Alexandrov P.	59,60	Einstein A.	59	Homère	50
Alexis friend	61	Eisenstein S.	13,29	Horace	65
Alexis uncle	18	Élisabeth aunt	25,27,36	Hugo V.	38
Anastasia daugh.	58,65,131	Ermak	105	Iline P.	21,25
Anastasia Gde-Duch.	V	Eudoxie gr.mom	16-21,28,29-32,34,37,48,49,93	Iline terr.	66
Andersen Ch.	31	Eudoxie gr.aunt	16-21,28	Innocent IV	13
Angelus S.	42	Feynman J.	26	Ivan of Murom	17
Aristote	23,72,73	Feynman R.	26	Ivan le Terr.	14,110
Arnold V.	61	Flaubert G.	V	Jean uncle	78,129
St-Augustin	11,65	Gadamer H.	21	Julien son	76,77,131,133,134
Bach J.	59	Galilée G.	59	Kant E.	23,72,73
Bakounine M.	V	Galina cousin	45	Kavérine B.	38
Balzac H.	38,48	Galois É.	63	Kessel J.	108
Beauharnais E.	V	Galsworthy J.	38	Khrouchtchev N.	20,50
Beethoven L.	59	de Gaulle Ch.	81	Kolmogorov A.	59
Ben Laden	106	Gengis-Khan	25,62	Kostiaev V.	106
Boris cousin	48,50,51	George S.	53	Kovalenko N.	IV
Bouddha	25	George V	17	Kundera M.	34
Brejnev L.	20,66,78	Gertrude god-moth.	27,39-41,43	Lamartine A.	81
Byron G.	54	Giscard V.	77,78	Lénine V.	20,22,62
Carlos terr.	65,114,118	Goebbels J.	22,36	Leopardi G.	123
Castro F.	114	Gödel K.	72	Lespès cons.	78
Catherine la G.	50,51,79,103	Goethe J.W.	23,38,53	Leuchtenberg T.	IV
Celan P.	52	Gorbachev M.	79	London J.	38
Cendrars B.	108	Goumilev L.	53	Louis le Pieux	11
Cervantès M.	118	Grimm fr.	31	Lubov' aunt	25,46
Chafarévitch I.	61	Grin A.	38	Ludmila cousin	48,53
Chakhovskoï D.	IV	Grothendieck A.	60	Ludmila half-sis.	20,28
Charlemagne	10	Guelfand I.	61	Lydie cousin	45
Charles le Ch.	10	Guénieva E.	66	Makine A.	48
Chateaubriand F.-R.	81	Che Guevara E.	65	Manine I.	60,61
Cioran E.	73	Hegel G.	50,72	Mann Th.	38
Claudel P.	22	Heidegger M.	23	Martí J.	118
Clovis	9,14	Heine H.	38	Marx K.	62
Cocteau J.	22			Maupassant G.	38
Colet L.	V			Michel uncle	18,21,38,48
Confucius	25			Mitterrand F.	81
Cooper F.	38			Moravia A.	65,123

Mozart W.	59	Poe E.	54	Svetlana cousin	45
Napoléon	66,112,113	Pouchkine A.	31,80	Tamerlan	105
Nékrassov N.	30	Poutine V.	64	Tchaïkovsky P.	80
Nicéphore gr.gr.fath.	I,9, 14-16,85,111,131, 133	Procope gr.uncle	16-21,27, 28,34,35,88,131	Tennyson A.	54
Nicolas oncle	18	Proust M.	39	Tesson S.	38,47,48
Nicolas Ier	14	Pythagore	59	Thackeray W.	38
Nicolas II	17,20	Radek K.	20	Timothée uncle	50
Nietzsche F.	73	Razine S.	34	Tolstoï L.	11,80
Nietzer I. friend	42	Remarque E.M.	63	Tourgueniev I.	V
Obolensky N.	IV	Répine I.	43,121	Trakl G.	53
Oginski S.	42,43	Rilke R.	53,54,67-69	Trotsky L.	20
Olga tante	19,25,48,50	Rolland R.	38	Twain M.	38
Onichtchik prof.	65	Rosine	45,58,69,77, 126,127,129	Valéry half-bro.	18,20, 25,28,44,90,108
Orlov cte	81	Rousseau J.-J.	II	Valéry P.	19,22,23,66-68, 73
Pahlen cte	81	Ruzmaïkin A.	26,45	Vassily god-fath.	27,46
Pauline moth.	18,20, 21,24,25,25,27,30, 31,33-41,44-46,48, 79,86,90,92,94,108, 124,125,127	Rurik	I,9,11,12	Vercingétorix	9,13
Pavese C.	65,123	Sadovnitichy V.	64,77,123	Verne J.	38
Perrault Ch.	31	Saltiewski E. friend	42,43	Victor half-bro.	18,20,25, 44,90
Pétain Ph.	22	Sartre J.-P.	21	Vigier J.-L.	77,82
Piaf E.	22	Schiller F.	53	Viollet-le-Duc E.	78
Picasso P.	22	Shelley P.	54	Vladimir Gr.Duke	9,14
Pierre le Gr.	79	Soljénitsyne A.	16,61	Vsévolojsky S.	IV,V
Pierre uncle	25	Sounyaykin	28	Wagner R.	I,46
Plato gr.fath.	16-19,21, 25-29,32,35-37,45, 86,88,91,94,131	Spassky B.	78	Wittkowsky E.	66-69, 119
		Spinoza B.	72		
		Staline J.	III,19-23,36,37, 42,43,58,64,65,134	Yeats W.	54
		Steinbeck J.	38	Zola E.	38
		Stendhal	38,48	Zweig S.	38
		Stevenson R.	38		

Contents

Foreword	I
<i>My native country</i>	7
<i>Siberia</i>	23
<i>Moscow</i>	57
Postscript	75
Images	83
Index of Names	139
Back cover	

My pen always wanted to give itself to the creative gaze; it mistrusted contemplative eyes. And it is to eyes – what am I saying, to feet and to muscles, in short – to pale reason, that I now deliver it, ashamed and confused. How will the soul, until now the sole organ of my verbal outpourings, how will it accept its mutation into mind, clipping its wings to lean down and focus on the traces of the real? My mind is sedentary of horizons, and my soul is nomadic of firmaments. So I shall abandon my star, to traverse my own ground, my own walls, my own doors.

The confessional genre bores me stiff. If I were to write according to the obsessions with exactitude of St Augustine, Rousseau, or Tolstoy, I would be the first to blush. And not because of the filth to be confessed, but because of the suffocating fidelity to the real. All that is real is common, flat, and humiliating. I shall therefore decorate my narratives with a few digressions. They will also be escapades, that primordial element in which my feet, my thoughts, my states of mind find themselves.

