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SHAKESPEARE AND ROHMER

Two Tales of Winter

Like the previous chapter, this one concerns both a literary text and a film—in this case, not a film that is a close adaptation of a text, with tantalizing differences, but a film that is something like a commentary on a text. Eric Rohmer's film bears, in French, the title *Conte D'Hiver*, which is almost the canonical French title of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. I shall, to distinguish it from the play, translate it as it is advertised in English, namely as *A Tale of Winter*.

The play and the film are relatives of the genre of narrative I have named the comedy of remarriage. That this narrative ends, not as in classical comedy, with a marriage, but with a remarriage, means, as I have emphasized, that the narrative begins, or climaxes, with a divorce, or some equivalent separation, not at any rate with some simple misunderstanding, or defiance, or confusion (as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*); so the adventure of getting the pair not simply together (which had already happened), but together again, back together, is not one of overcoming external obstacles to their union, but one of overcoming internal obstacles. What this overcoming requires is not a moral reevaluation of particular actions or decisions that have come between them, but the revision and transfiguration of their way of life. In a phrase, the dimension of morality raised in these narratives is that of Emersonian perfectionism.

Overcoming an inner obstacle is manifested in *A Tale of Winter* as what Rohmer's character Loic calls a resurrection, and characterizes as fantastic. I note his claim in a gesture of gratitude to Northrop Frye, whose *Anatomy of Criticism* made so strong an impression on me when it appeared in the years I was beginning to teach. In Frye's description of Old Comedy the woman of the principal pair undergoes something like death and resurrection. Frye explicitly contrasts this with the example of (unspecified) Hollywood comedy. But some equivalent of resurrection or rebirth is blatant

in *The Philadelphia Story* (as Mike carries Tracy like a child in his arms from a body of water and Tracy raises her head to say that she is not wounded but dead), and in *The Awful Truth* (as Lucy, by let's say metempsychosis, becomes Jerry's sister). And since marriage, as I have argued, is an image of the ordinary in human existence (the ordinary as what is under attack in philosophy's tendency to skepticism), the pair's problem, the response to their crisis, is to transfigure, or resurrect, their vision of their everyday lives, something that requires, in words I recall George Eliot gives to Daniel Deronda, "the transmutation of self" which "is happening every day." The form the revision takes I have articulated as recognizing the extraordinary in what we find ordinary, and the ordinary in what we find extraordinary. The particular slant given to this perception in Rohmer's meditation on Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* can be said to be an interpretation, or transfiguration, of the woman's fatal patience, and impatience, in "The Beast in the Jungle" and in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.

In Rohmer's film, a pair of young lovers, Felicie and Charles, as they part, having spent an indefinite portion of the summer together at the seashore (perhaps it is an island), arrange to meet again. Charles is temporarily traveling outside France and can provide no useable address, and the address Felicie gives him proves to be incorrect.

We cut to five years later, some days before Christmas, and find Felicie to be the mother of a daughter, Elise, whose father is the unlocatable man of that summer adventure. With each of the two men now in her life (Loic, a philosopher, and Maxence, the owner of a beauty salon in which she is employed), each of whom wishes to marry her, Felicie discusses her inexplicable dumbness in having given the wrong address to the love of her life. She also discusses with them, and with her splendid mother, with whom she and her daughter live when she is not staying at Loic's house, her ideas about love. She makes clear to each of the men that she does not love him as she loved Charles. She tells Loic that she loves him and is grateful to him for his friendship but is not intensely attracted to him; she is attracted to Maxence physically and, when he tells her he has left the woman he was living with, she decides that she loves him enough to live with him.

She and Elise move to the city of Nevers with Maxence, who has bought a salon there, but the following day she recognizes that, as she tells him, she

is not madly in love with him and therefore was mistaken in believing she could live with him. This revelation has something to do with a revelation she had earlier that day while she was visiting a cathedral with Elise, who insisted they go inside (something Felicie herself had no interest in doing) to see the Nativity scene.

Back in Paris, Felicie tells Loic she has not returned to begin again with him. She wants to have his company however, and they go together to a performance of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, of which Rohmer's film shows most of the final scene of resurrection. The play affects Felicie profoundly. Afterward she and Loic discuss the play and Felicie relates her experience of it to her revelation in the cathedral, where, she announces, she felt alive to her existence in a way she had experienced only once before, five years earlier with Charles. She describes her senses of true and false faith in a way that impresses Loic, not least because he hears in her words an unlettered discovery of insights brought to philosophy by Plato and by Pascal and Descartes, and she concludes that, whether Charles returns or not, she will not live in a way that is incompatible with their finding each other again.

It is by now the day of New Year's Eve. As she and her daughter are returning in a bus—one of the many vehicles, private and public, we have seen them in around Paris—to her mother's house for a family gathering, they encounter Charles. He is with another woman and Felicie, after saying to Charles that she was dumb to make the mistake with the address, grabs Elise's hand and dashes off the bus. The woman Charles is with is a friend who knows about the contretemps with the address and is not surprised when Charles rushes after the pair. What Felicie and Charles find to say to each other in the public street, and how their ecstatic yet ordinary re-encounter is related to the ecstatic and metaphysically extraordinary re-encounter staged at the close of Shakespeare's play, it is a proof of Rohmer's genius to discover.

I have been finding Rohmer's film to contain—more with each viewing—surprising and beautiful confirmations of the sort of claim I made for *The Winter's Tale* in an essay I published in 1986. At the opening of that essay I note that at the end of Shakespeare's play a dead five- or six-year-old child is left unaccounted for. And I sense that Rohmer's camera's repeated cuts, in *A Tale of Winter*, to five-year-old Elise alone, is as if to assure itself of her

existence. Yet confirmation in Rohmer's film of my earlier thoughts on the Shakespeare play was initially hard for me to believe.

Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* is split into two parts. The first part comprises Acts I through III, in effect a compressed tragedy revisiting the insane intensities of jealousy interrogated in *Othello* (the madness made starker by the absence of a separate Iago, but lodged in a more emotionally plausible rival). The second part, somewhat longer, comprises Acts IV and V, working through its great pastoral celebration of nature in Act IV to a transcendental, nearly religious, return in Act V of reality which tragedy, or something like it, had denied. (How near the religious the return is, and in what sense near, is an explicit question, both of the play and of the film.) The emphasis of my essay on *The Winter's Tale*, extending the preoccupation of my companion essays on Shakespearean tragedy, is on the world-destroying skepticism formed in Leontes' mad state of mind in the first part of the play. Rohmer's film, on the contrary, seems as it were to skip that first half and to begin with an epitomizing of the late-summer festival engaging a country town, which makes up the bulk of the second part of Shakespeare's play. Rohmer transfers the jollity of this pastoral setting to a montage of a pair frolicking on a beach and taking photographs of each other and biking through the woods and fishing and cooking and making love, which seems precisely to avoid the part in which Leontes' madness drives the plot.

So before getting into Rohmer's film's response to, or perhaps its competition with, Shakespeare's play—one may even find in it more generally a declaration of film's competition with theater—let me just indicate what I have argued about Shakespearean tragedy in relation to philosophy's concern, through so much of its modern period, with the crises of knowledge associated with the religious and scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, linked with the names of Luther and Galileo and Newton. Modern philosophy is familiarly taken to begin with Descartes's subjectifying of existence (as Heidegger envisions the matter), showing the power of doubt to put into radical question the existence of the world and of myself and others in it, retrievable only in my recognition that I cannot doubt that I think, backed by the consequent discovery that my thinking ineluctably recognizes, as it were bears the imprint, of the existence of God. Much of subsequent philosophy—professional, academic philosophy at any rate—has retained the skepticism but lost the route to God, making the existence of the world a persistent, epistemological problem of knowledge

perpetually unjustified. My claim for Shakespearean tragedy has been that, in the generation preceding Descartes's beginning of modern philosophy, Shakespeare was already, in the main characters of his tragedies, exploring characters whose destructiveness can be seen to arise out of this epistemological lack of assurance, but in each case directed to a different topic, a different way in which the foundation of a life seems to give way before a moment of doubt, casting the world into a hostile, worthless chaos. In Othello's case it is a doubt, expressed as jealousy, about Desdemona's faithfulness; in the case of King Lear it is about whether he is loved; in Hamlet's case about the worth of human existence, about the curse of being born, of being mortal; in Macbeth's case about the identity or nature of his wife.

In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes' wish to kill the world, what of it is his, arises from something that, while resembling Othello's consuming jealousy, is more directly related, as I there emphasize, to a response to his wife Hermione's pregnancy, expressed as a doubt that his children are his. My essay on *The Winter's Tale* elaborates an argument for this emphasis; in what follows here I shall simply assume and assert it. Leontes' madness is magnified as it is shown to spread to his doubt that his five- or six-year-old son is his, from its concentration on the unborn child almost come to term in Hermione's body. For this present pregnancy he has at least the grace, or curse, to construct evidence identifying an alternative father, his returned childhood friend Polixenes. That *The Winter's Tale* differs from the plays in which skepticism produces only tragedy—so that it is traditionally classified as one of Shakespeare's late romances (together with *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*)—I find marked specifically by a peculiarity of Leontes' basis for doubt (whether his children are his), which is (unlike the doubts in the major tragedies, which are about faithfulness more generally, or about the worthiness to be loved, or about the worth of human existence, or about the nature of one's spouse) not a doubt that a woman is apt to be vulnerable to. What would it look like for Hermione to doubt whether her children are hers? I am careful to say that it does not follow that women are in general not vulnerable to what philosophy calls skeptical doubt, only that where they are, their doubt of existence is apt to be expressed otherwise than toward their progeny, and in some emotion other than doubt. (They may have some anxiety about the father of their child.)

I am going to argue that Rohmer does in fact reveal in the figure of Felicie a kind of skepticism (one centered on questions about herself but somehow

bound up with her sense of disappointment in others), and that it too is overcome by something that resembles faith but that is also to be distinguished from what we may expect of faith. This suggests that the first, tragic half of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, as well as its reparative second half, is after all under discussion in Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter*. But if so, then something in Felicie's strangeness to the world, let's call it her stubbornness or perverseness, which everyone around her feels in her—it seems part of her attraction to them as well as of her annoyance or puzzlement to them, say her mystery, her unknownness, something she feels in response to herself—this perverseness must function in her world in something like the way Leontes' extravagant and lethal strangeness functions in his world.

Here, if it can be made out, is a remarkable result, since it means that the consequences of melodramatically tragic action, to which human folly subjects us, is active pervasively, below the level of notice, in the world of everyday existence, the insistent habitat of Felicie. In my various discussions of skepticism, in relation to Descartes, Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein, and so forth, principally worked out in my book *The Claim of Reason*, skepticism contrasts with what, in reaction to the skeptical threat, we can see as ordinary or everyday life. Skepticism breaks into that life, with a surmise that I cannot live with, that the world and I and others are radically unknown to me. I *must* find a way to put this doubt aside—perhaps through what Pascal calls the taste for distraction, or what Hume depicts as the desire for sociability, or what Kant calls recognizing the necessary limits of human understanding, or what Wittgenstein calls the limits of my language. But if Rohmer's suggestion is valid, our temptations to skepticism, or say to a knowledge beyond human powers, are unannounced and may be at work anywhere, woven into the restlessness of vacations at the beach as well as into the business of getting along every day with others back in town, walking along the streets with them, and through tunnels and down and up stairs in their company, riding with them in trains, and subways, and buses, and automobiles.

In order to pursue this counter-vision of Rohmer's, I am going to take Rohmer seriously as a thinker, one whose organ of thought is the motion picture camera. "Take him seriously" means grant him the power to be engaging intellectually claims made by writers such as the five he cites specifically. In addition to Shakespeare, there are E. M. Forster, Victor Hugo, Pascal, and Plato. Forster's novel *The Longest Journey* is under discussion early, as Felicie returns to Loic's apartment to tell him she is leaving him for

Maxence. The passage in question is one, at the opening of the novel, in which a character imagines a cow standing in a field and—in an epistemological mode made famous by Moore and Russell at Cambridge in the years between the world wars—is moved to speculate (in contrast, as I recall it, with the cow’s contentment) on the doubtfulness of our knowledge of the existence of the external world. (There is a comparable cow at the opening of Nietzsche’s first Untimely Meditation, on history.) Toward the end of that same evening, Loic recites a poem of Victor Hugo’s with immense flair, at the same time both movingly and quizzically, dramatizing an intellectual cast of mind that both attracts Felicie and puts her off. He is identified as a trained philosopher and a believing Catholic, neither of which Felicie trusts. (It may be pertinent that E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* are significant novels that have also provided the bases of notable films.)

As Loic, later, drives Felicie to his apartment after they have gone together to the performance of *The Winter’s Tale* (their going together happens more or less by chance when Felicie visits Loic to tell him that she has suddenly left Maxence, but not in order to return to Loic), their discussion of the play focuses on signature passages in the writing of Pascal and of Plato, neither of whom Felicie has read but whose intuitions—what Loic calls her “instinctive science”—capture something essential in what these monsters of intellect have brought to the cultural table. Loic says, impressed by the accuracy of Felicie’s formulations, “You’re killing me.” It would be a possible measure of Rohmer’s seriousness to suppose that he has meant his camera to validate, or discover, the fact that instinctive science, anyway, instinctive philosophy, should be expected to begin in the articulation of an individual’s intuition, before or beyond education. (This would form a comment on the debasement philosophy suffers when it arises from articulation without intuition, giving the impression of thoughts as mere, or empty, words. This is a way of putting what distresses both Loic and Felicie, in different, conflicting, ways, in that earlier discussion in his apartment, which touched upon skepticism and metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls, the topics of Pascal and of Plato that come up in the long car ride.)

But what does it mean to say that Rohmer’s camera can “validate,” or “discover,” intellectual origins? What is revealed to it? What attracts its attention? What authorizes its witnessing? A Rohmer film characteristically includes a passage in which a woman is taken out of the ordinary by a transcendental

moment, a declaration that the world we are given to see, like the words we are given to mean, is not all the world there is, and not all we mean. A favorite instance of mine is in Rohmer's film *Summer* (also called *The Green Ray*, perhaps to distinguish it from his film *A Tale of Summer*), in which a woman, wandering away from a boring dinner party, becomes lost in an indefinite stretch of trees, and as a wind animates the trees into a state of shivering, the woman begins to sob, one would not say from a fear of being actually lost, and if from a sense of aloneness, then no more from loneliness than from a perspective of a place in nature in which she feels unencumbered, we might say feels no longer out of place, shaken by an ecstatic sense of possibility. (I note that in Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter* there is a shivering tree in the poem of Hugo's that Loic recites.) The ecstatic insight Felicie will attain during the car ride is achieved by evidently opposite conditions. There she and Loic, whose love for her she accepts but cannot return, are not open to stirring wind and sky but enclosed together in a small, cave-like space, cut off from the world, human and natural, wrapped together in the woman's mood.

In that mood, stirred by Shakespeare's play, Loic raises the most obvious question about the play, namely whether the woman at the end is brought magically back to life or whether she is to be understood as not having died. Felicie explains to Loic that, although unlike her he is a believer, he does not recognize faith; as if whether Hermione had died or not died is inessential to the play's issue. Felicie goes on to inform Loic of a fact that he will be surprised by, that on the day she left Maxence in Nevers, she found herself praying, and what is more, praying in a church. So we have accordingly in *A Tale of Winter* to consider two kinds of time—a time of the experience of transcendence (in the church, and at the play) and a time of articulation or understanding of that experience (in the car ride). Freud's name for this temporal relation is *nachträglich* (meaning supplementary or extra), but his use of it (notably in the case of interpreting the primal scene) is not simply that something supplements or augments what has been experienced, but that in returning to what has happened, that is to say, in retrospect, the return reveals it for the first time, as if the first time it happened was in a dream. (I take Emerson's linking of Intuition with Tuition, a link he calls thinking, to be such a relation.) Dreams enter remarkably into Shakespeare's text of *The Winter's Tale*, as when Hermione says to Leontes, "You speak a language that I understand not: / My life stands at the level of your dreams,"

and Leontes replies, “Your actions are my dreams.” These are explicit announcements that what happens requires a time for understanding or recognition. And I note in addition that the idea of what happens leaves its mark on Rohmer’s text. Various people say: “It just happened”; “The things that happen”; “It could have happened to anyone.” In a Freudian world of human interaction almost nothing *just* happens, so to justify the qualification “just” requires the most careful attention. We shall therefore have to come back to this.

We know as soon as we know that Rohmer is producing a meditation on Shakespeare’s play, not merely including comments here and there about certain of its themes, that he cannot avoid the maximum theatrical stake of Shakespeare’s structure, namely to consider whether the statue’s being replaced by life *holds*, or “works,” theatrically, whether the audience is given enough motive to stay with the moment. I know prominent and gifted Shakespeareans who cannot find, or have not found, that that concluding scene does hold them, the scene of awakening or resurrection. This constitutes a drastic criticism of a work that for gifted others achieves the highest level of theater. By “not avoiding the maximum theatrical stake” I mean that Rohmer creates an analogous moment in his film, namely in the return of a long-absent parent.

Whether this moment holds us in Rohmer’s film does not so much depend on overcoming scientific incredibility—chance encounters in a bustling city are familiar enough events—as on whether we are held moment to moment, from the recognitions of and by the lover/father Charles to the concluding ecstasy of the line “These are tears of joy” and its repetition by the child, who thereby receives a concept she cannot then and there encompass. Its time of understanding, or revised understanding, if it comes, is years away. The film’s attention to the child’s absorptions suggests to me that the line joining tears and joy, taken from her mother, begins in her some measure against which to criticize the lesson so much of the world likes to teach, namely that existence is inevitably as melancholy as most grownups assume is natural to the human condition.

But when do we know that Rohmer’s film is serious about—is measuring itself against—Shakespeare’s play? I suppose an early incontestable moment—a fixed, topological point of identity between these works—is Felicie’s self-identification in her conversation with Maxence the weekend she travels to Nevers to visit him in anticipation of joining him permanently

with her daughter, Elise. In a long exchange with Maxence, in which his open sympathy evidently confirms her decision to make the move, she gives an explanation of how, at the close of the summer at the beach, she happened to give the man called Charles a false address and of why he had at the time no address to give her, and why she could not be located in a city register because her last name was not that of her mother (who used her maiden name, and with whom she lived when she was not with a man), nor was her name that of her sisters (who had changed their names in marrying). She concludes this exchange by observing, "I'm the girl no one can find." Now this is a fair reference to Shakespeare's Paulina's line that brings Hermione as it were to life: "Turn, good lady, / Our Perdita is found." Since Paulina's line occurs in the final scene of the play, which Rohmer incorporates most of in soon showing Loic and Felicie at the play, Felicie will hear her own line almost repeated back to her as part of her transformative attendance at the play. Do we imagine that Felicie takes Paulina's line to contradict hers, or the other way around? Does she, that is, take herself there as an echo or as a shadow, a negative, of Perdita? Presumably that is under discussion in the conversation in the car ride, which we owe more attention.

Before that, we already have enough undeniable connection between Rohmer's film and Shakespeare's play to be alerted to fainter allusions between them. Take, for example, the pictures that Felicie's daughter Elise draws (five years old, plus, I suppose, a few months; the film, after the opening montage, specifies its setting as across the winter solstice to New Year's Eve) of flowers and a princess and a clown, which can be taken as references to principal motifs of Shakespeare's pastoral Act IV in Bohemia, where Perdita is queen of the annual sheep-shearing festival. And given the importance in others of Rohmer's films of the perspective in moving from place to place and back again, as if one is at home nowhere, I am prepared to take the pair of visits from Paris to Nevers as some allusion to the move and return from Shakespeare's Sicilia to Bohemia. Indeed I am prepared to consider the connection, perhaps yet fainter, of Felicie with hairdressing as a witty, citified reference to sheep-shearing, since both modes of hair cutting are associated simultaneously with festivals and with money, and represent places where the woman both is and is not in place. (In Shakespeare's festival, Perdita is an unrecognized princess playing the part of its queen.)

A more serious, no doubt, or more explicit connection between the film and the play is Loic's insistence, in the first conversation in his apartment

with his intellectual friends, on the difference between religion and magic or superstition, which also recalls lines we hear in the depicted scene from *The Winter's Tale*, as Hermione obeys Paulina's instruction to show life, and Paulina instructs the onlookers, "Start not; her actions shall be as holy as / You hear my spell is lawful"—to which Leontes will respond "If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating." This oblique association of Loic with Shakespeare's Paulina, marking Loic as the friend and protector of Felicie, thus links Felicie with Hermione as well as with Perdita, a mother as well as a daughter (both of which Felicie is shown to be, unlike any woman in Shakespeare's play).

The play insists on the mother and daughter resembling each other, accented in the briefly shocking moment of incestuous desire when Perdita is presented to Leontes as the betrothed of Florizel (the son of the friend whose death Leontes had sought in his early madness) and Leontes declares that he would ask for her for himself, upon which Paulina instantly intervenes. It is more to Rohmer's point to underscore, rather than incestuousness (suggesting the prerogatives and the unsociability of absolute power), the plain fact that all mothers have begun as daughters, as necessarily as that all who are old were young. That such truths may amount to revelations seems to me remarked in the way Felicie's wonderful mother accepts the reality of Felicie's erotic life. When to Felicie's saying she prefers Maxence's roughness to Loic's sweetness, her mother replies, "Sweet men are rare," I find myself recalling the opening scenes of Felicie and Charles playing at the beach, as if these are images of her mother remembering her own youth. And the mother's acceptance of life, of a future in which she will no longer participate, is expressed in the simplicity with which she remarks, when at the end she sees her granddaughter alone on the living room sofa, having withdrawn from the power of her parents' joyful embraces, "Your mother and papa are together" and asks if she isn't glad.

A comparatively tiny, yet still incontestable, fixed point between the play and the film, and perhaps most puzzling, is the rediscovered father's (Charles's) punctual and happy impulse—having been prompted to ask "Is this my child?" and been answered by Felicie, "Doesn't she look like you?"—to sweep the child up into his arms. When Leontes asked of his five- or six-year-old son, "Art thou my boy?"—having noted, "They say [your nose] is a copy out of mine"—it expressed a sentiment, or presentiment, that sent Leontes (or else was a desperate argument meant to stave off his being sent)

into his first open speech of derangement, relating passion to infection and to dreams that question what is and is not possible. What is the point of this juxtaposition of Charles and Leontes—or is it rather a juxtaposition of Felicie and Leontes, since it is she who asks the question of resemblance between father and child? That she particularly notices noses is shown in her remarking, at Nevers, the nose of a saint's effigy. Earlier we heard her comparing men's looks in conversation with her sister, saying that she agrees her nose is like Loic's and adding that she never liked her nose. (This at once plants the idea of Loic as her brother, which she will later confirm in saying that if they had met in another life they might have been brother and sister, and anticipates the idea that she wants the child to have the father's nose, not hers, hence she as if restates Leontes' question of comparison.)

The point of contrasting Charles with Leontes cannot be to emphasize Leontes' stretch of madness—how can anything emphasize it more than the suddenness and avidity of his own embracing of his madness? And it can hardly be put there to emphasize Charles's normality, since almost anyone is different from Leontes, and cannot be called normal on that account. Perhaps it is to question what would count as normal in an abnormal world, anyway a world in which we have no measure of the normal, we might even say no measure of the natural. The great question of the pastoral sequence, the longest act of the play, may be taken to be whether nature itself, or whether the entire realm of art, can either of them be taken as such measures. It is a world—the human world is one—in which anything can happen; anyone may become lost in it; anyone may be found anywhere. The opening words of Shakespeare's play are: "If you shall chance . . ."

Let us stay with the fact that it is in Felicie's mind that the contrast between Charles and Leontes is made; she would have heard Leontes' questioning of resemblance at the performance of the play we have witnessed her witnessing. So what relation are we to derive between Felicie and Leontes from recognizing that, like Charles, she takes a question bearing on the faces of father and child out of Leontes' mouth, thus momentarily impersonating him? This somewhat deranged displacement may have enough force to push to a crisis what I was calling Rohmer's "seriousness" in invoking his various ingestions, both huge and tiny fragments, of Shakespeare's play, to ask from the beginning what it is in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* that has demanded Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter* as a meditation upon it.

I cited as an opening response to their connection the incontestable allusion of Felicie's "I am the girl no one can find" to Paulina's declaration "Perdita is found"; and now with the further, odder, alignment of a line of Felicie with words of Leontes, I am led to suggest—of course in retrospect, in remembering, in recounting, in reconstituting, in recognizing—that the onset of the meditation is shown in the very fact that the very opening of the film is a montage of summer playfulness on some seacoast a train ride, then a ferry ride, from Paris. (I ask nothing much right off from the knowledge that Shakespeare's tale moving by sea between Sicilia and Bohemia requires imagining that Bohemia has a seacoast, a matter of some unkind merriment or distress to Shakespeare's critics and editors for centuries.) More serious for us is that the opening montage of pleasure ends by recurring to a scene of intercourse whose conclusion motivates the film's first words, as the man says, "You're taking a risk"—making explicit the possibility of pregnancy, something the woman evidently wishes to risk, as her enigmatic, spontaneous laugh in response indicates. I understand this as a sort of materialization of the invisible intercourse that has sacked Leontes' mind ("Go, play, boy, play: thy mother plays, and I / Play too; but so disgrac'd a part, whose issue / Will hiss me to my grave.")

In my essay on Shakespeare's play I make a lot of the fact that the body of the play (after the familiar Shakespearean device of a scene of prologue in which an exchange between subordinate characters prepares more of the issues of the world of the play than could be guessed) begins with the words, "Nine changes of the watery star" (that is, the moon), words that mark the fact that Hermione is nine months pregnant (she will deliver a day or two later), and simultaneously mark the time that their speaker, Polixenes, Leontes' brotherly visitor, has been present in Sicilia. It is Leontes' striking together these two facts that ignites his mind. I contend that it is the fact of Hermione's pregnancy that drives Leontes mad, which means that his jealousy of Polixenes is a cover for that madness. (As in my essay on *Othello* I contend that Othello's jealousy of Cassio is a cover for his bewilderment at Desdemona's separate, erotic responsiveness to him, to Othello.) Why it is that the pregnancy threatens Leontes, why he develops a psychic ruse to deny his role in it, I do not suppose we are given to know—perhaps it is because the birth will speak of his mortality, of one who should die after him, perhaps because it signifies his separateness from Hermione, something coming between them. (I am perhaps encouraged in taking Rohmer's

preoccupations to heart just here, because of a stunning film he made a few years earlier, *The Marquise of O*, whose subject is a mysterious, as it were fatherless, pregnancy.) Leontes recovers his sanity the instant he learns that both his children are, as he believes, as good as dead.

But how would the conjunction or conjecture of pregnancies affirm a further connection between Felicie and Leontes, rather than simply between Felicie and Hermione? I do not say the conjunction with Leontes is as simple, but I point to a moment in which Felicie's pregnancy is the object of some madness of her own.

Go back to the conversation with Maxence when she visits him in Nevers in anticipation of moving there with him. In trying to explain how she can have given Charles the wrong address—really it was only the wrong town, each town with an unresonant name (like not remembering whether Leontes is the King of Sicilia or the King of Bohemia)—she recalls that she realized her error when she made the same slip “six months later on the birth-certificate forms.” So she connects the slip with her pregnancy. Both may be thought to be accidents. She concludes her account to Maxence by declaring—with an explanation that excludes explanation—“I was dumb. Stark, raving dumb.” Maxence responds to this in a way that shows what Felicie had described to her mother as Maxence's intelligence, resembling Charles's in being self-won, not self-conscious, but unlike Charles's in lacking refinement. Maxence says: “You can't say ‘stark raving dumb.’ The expression is ‘stark raving mad.’” And when Felicie replies, “You see, I am inarticulate,” he returns, “It could happen to anyone.”

This exchange is clearly enough a preparation for the re-encounter with Charles on the bus, as Felicie, seeing him only after he has seen her, and as Elise says “Papa,” picks up the thread of the same explanation, in roughly the same tone, averring that she was just dumb, nothing else, whereupon, perhaps noticing that Charles is with the woman he is seated next to, she takes Elise's hand and dashes with her off the bus, leaving Charles a confused instant in which to follow, with a parting word to his companion. The difference this time is that Felicie has given the explanation to the right person. The explanation has never worked in the past, when she always sounds as if she is saying it to herself and that she doesn't believe it. Charles is the right person because that there *is* no explanation is precisely what he needs to hear, namely that there is no impediment between them in the world, that they are free to pick up the thread where they left it.

A question arises for me here that I may seem to have been avoiding and which I must not neglect to specify. May Charles be understood to recover (let us say, by metempsychosis), the figure of Florizel in Shakespeare's play—the Prince of Bohemia, son of the man Leontes had imagined in his murderous jealousy to be his wife's lover? This would seem somehow to follow from my earlier proposal that Rohmer had transposed Shakespeare's pastoral, from its place as succeeding the tragedy or (tragedies) of the opening acts of the play, to the play's opening assertions of nature in the film, preparing the ground for a miraculous deflection of (if not tragedy, then) misadventure. My problem with drawing this implication is that the invocation of Florizel follows, let me say, too mechanically. The other transfigurations (of Loic out of Paulina, of Felicie out of Hermione and Leontes as well as out of Perdita, of the girlchild Elise out of the dead boychild Mamillius), each lend a new cast to Shakespeare's texture. (I might say that I am working with an idea that Rohmer's film proposes itself as a metempsychosis of Shakespeare's play.) The idea of Charles as Florizel merely follows from the empirical fact that he is the only man for Felicie on their summer island. He has not been shown to perceive, through his love of her, the royal Felicie in the transitory garb of a festival queen.

It may be of help to ask: Which Shakespearean *pair* does Charles/Felicie fit? Not exactly Florizel/Perdita, since Florizel does not *return* to Perdita, nor vice versa. But also not the pair Leontes/Perdita, unless Rohmer is deliberately stressing the incestuous moment in Shakespeare's narration. And not Leontes/Hermione, if I have perceived correctly that both of these participate in the figure of Felicie. Just possibly Rohmer is suggesting that Charles hints of Florizel's fleeing father Polixenes, as if holding open the question whether there had been an element of the real in the cause of Leontes' original jealousy.

Perhaps the very instability in identifying Charles's relation to Felicie's multiple metempsychoses is the cause of my wishing to describe their re-encounter as I did a moment ago, insisting on the rightness of her telling Charles in effect that there is no impediment (on her side) to their, let us say, remarrying. Perhaps we can say: Charles's reference to Shakespeare's play is not to a particular *character*, but rather to a particular *relationship* to Perdita, namely that the man she would give herself to in marriage is felt by her to be, or to have been, under a prohibition from giving himself to her (a prohibition also based on misinformation about, one could say, her proper

address). If we say that for her the pregnancy was the impediment, this may be understood, for example, as her fearing that it would cause the man to leave, or cause him to stay for the wrong reason. Here is this film's presentation of a central formulation I have offered of remarriage comedy, that, in contrast to classical comedy, in which a pair who are made for each other face obstacles on the path of finding each other, in remarriage comedy a pair who have found each other face obstacles in maintaining the knowledge that they are made for each other.

Have I said enough, or imagined strongly enough, to satisfy us in shadowing Shakespeare's play with Rohmer's film, where the tale lasts roughly sixteen days, through Christmas to New Year's Eve, rather than roughly sixteen years, as in Shakespeare's telling? I find, for example, that I accept the instruction and the happiness of Rohmer's depiction of a run of dumb luck—can we speak of a dumb miracle? But why isn't it *just* dumb? This option is open to us to take—as it is, more or less, in Shakespeare's conclusion.

Here what I earlier spoke of as Rohmer's raising the issue of the competition of film with theater comes to the surface. Let us ask: What is the difference proposed in Rohmer's film between a photograph's being replaced by life and a statue's coming to life? One might answer that it is the difference between the wondering whether you know that a person exists, is alive, and wondering whether you know the person's identity. The statue is not a reminder, it is not dispensable, in this granting of life, it has a (virtual) life of its own. The dispensability of the photograph is declared when Charles says that he recognized Felicie even though he had no photograph of her. But is the photograph dispensable when, as in the case of the child, it is all she has as proof of her father's identity? His photograph stands for her for his reality the way the crèche stands for her for the reality of the birth of Jesus.

The instantaneousness of still photographs stops time, they are death masks of a time; to add that motion pictures animate these masks might suggest the irreducible (if mostly ignorable) experience of magic in our exposure to photographs, still and in motion. It is a theme of my early book on film, *The World Viewed*, that if we say theater originates in religion and is never fully free of that origin, then we should say that film originates in magic. In both *The Winter's Tale* and *A Tale of Winter*, the relation of art or image to reality is portrayed, or recaptured, as miraculous, specifically as resurrection. But to say so may seem to cheapen or take for granted the value

of the work of film, since its version of resurrection is achieved, let's say, automatically. (Film becomes the very picture of a dumb miracle.) But I find that Rohmer's questioning suggests that we as readily cheapen or take for granted the work of theater, the fact that it achieves its version of resurrection (maybe not automatically, but nevertheless) instantaneously, achieves let us say metempsychosis, the replacement in a body of another soul. (If we say both transformations are the province of both film and theater, then we have to specify the difference of proportion in each.) Both transformations are occurrences of our everyday. And Rohmer's great subject is the miraculousness of the everyday, the possibility and necessity of our awakening to it every day, call it the secularization of the transcendental. This makes it seem that the transcendental precedes the secular. Is this wrong? Perhaps our various arts are in disagreement, or competition, over the order of precedence.

There is no denying what Maxence says: What happened to Felicie could happen to anyone. That, however, poses a further question that may take us to a more satisfying place to stop. *What* happened to Felicie?

When Maxence stumbles onto her having as it were failed to say she was stark, raving mad—I do not suppose him to sense that that is perhaps what she *wanted* to say—and having instead said something meaningless, or anyway something that hasn't been given a meaning, namely that she was, or is, stark raving dumb, her interpretation is that she is inarticulate, which we have ample evidence that she is not. The fateful inarticulateness lay in her misspeaking her address to Charles, the thing Maxence will help her remember is called a lapsus, what Freud called a slip, an *acte manqué*—in the Standard (English) Edition of Freud's works, translated as a parapraxis. The issue here is not what motivated the slip but what it signifies as a mental state between being dumb and being mad, what it signifies that it has, with however different effects, the same consequence on her world as Leontes' madness, however motivated, had on his. Namely, it excluded from that world the one each has loved, with whom each has produced a child. (Nothing with so massive a consequence actually counts for Freud as a "slip," any more than it could count as such, I would like to add, in J. L. Austin's work on excuses, which has things as significant, in their way, to say about slips as Freud has.)

The idea of inarticulateness specifically links Felicie's sense of her condition with the inarticulateness of Leontes' derangement, as well as with Othello's decline, as he loses consciousness, into babbling, both cases I have described in terms of world-shattering skepticism, revealing itself as

requiring, and desiring, the destruction of language, words having become unbearable. Felicie's sense of inarticulateness, we might say, betokens a milder form of skepticism, an expression of the everyday mistrust of the world, a sort of mistrust of existence and of what there is to say about one's existence. One might think of it as the necessity of exposure to the world as the precondition of knowing it—expressed in those slights, distractions, misgivings, contretemps, defensive silences, withdrawals, reservations, that deal little deaths through your earthly career. It happens to everyone; it is done by everyone. Why Felicie would mistrust the one by whom she becomes pregnant and to whom she was saying goodbye for a while, what madness or rage she may have for a moment felt at his intrusive and absorbing role in what was her transformation into a mother, we shall not know. She is the girl they can never find. Who is not?

But we are shown (or we eventually learn that that is what we are shown) her overcoming of her distance from this man in the presence—no less, no more—of the Nativity scene her daughter is looking at in the otherwise vastly empty church, still in Nevers. In the car ride after the performance of *The Winter's Tale*, Felicie will name to Loic this moment of her presence at the image of divine birth, or more precisely at her daughter's witnessing this image (presented as indistinguishable in itself from human birth) as her having prayed, but not as she was taught to pray as a child. She goes on to describe the experience, with Loic's help, as a meditation, one in which she was not thinking but rather was seeing her thoughts, which came to her as with a total clarity, or with the clarity of totality (she describes herself as feeling full). It is rather a denial or curtailment of Descartes's cogito argument (that I know I exist because I cannot doubt that I think); it is a meditation in which, like Descartes, she overcomes her skepticism, concluding here however by affirming her existence as independent of whether what the world calls the world (or perhaps calls God) is present or absent. She says she felt then that she was herself.

We might say that what Shakespeare's play enabled her to articulate was that she is found, by herself. And since that means, as she says, that she has found Charles within her desire, she can say further (afterward, back in Loic's apartment, as he ratifies their conversation by reading from Plato) that it does not matter whether Charles actually returns. Which is to say, it will not affect how she lives now. Or rather, as she says more precisely: she will live in a way that is not incompatible with their recovering each other.

Loic is moved to say to her in the car—in response to her acceptance of her understanding—that if he were God he would particularly cherish her. She replies: “Then God ought to give me back Charles.” And when Loic then indicates that that is too much to ask, Felicie corrects the philosopher: “I am not asking God to give him back.” That is to say, He simply *ought* to, it would make the world better. It ought to be better.

Felicie’s interpretation of her prayer—intuiting Pascal’s Wager on immortal joy and Plato’s argument for the preexistence of the soul—is her way of marking the difference of Emersonian perfectionism from utilitarianism, whose calculation of pleasure is anything but Pascalian individual riskiness; and equally from Kantianism, whose universalization by the moral law she denies when, as when Loic once said to her that her words are meaningless to him (it was perhaps when she said she could understand the preexistence of the soul, that she felt that she and Charles had met in an earlier life), she replies, “I saw it; you did not.” She acts neither from reason (she once remarks that she doesn’t like what is plausible), nor from inclination (she speaks instead of avoiding what is counter to her convictions) nor from hope (startling Loic by saying that not everyone lives with hope, clearly not meaning that she lives with hopelessness). She exists, as her thoughts exist; she loves; she counts herself happy.

Thinking of her happy, I wonder if we have material at hand now with which to give an answer to the question I raised about her enigmatic laugh at Charles’s observation, in their prologue, that she is taking a risk. Go back to my observation that Felicie’s “slip” concerning her address cannot be understood as a Freudian slip. Since I still imply that her blanking out has significance, what register of significance can or must we attribute to it? At a minimum mustn’t there be some sense that she does not want, or is not ready to have, Charles present with the appearance of the child, or, since she is perplexed by herself, does not want to want that?

Her blank, or *contretemps*, concerning her giving the wrong address, cannot directly be filled in, as if it were replacing a substitute by an original, as a Freudian slip can be, by what Freud calls, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, “a symbolic representation of a thought.” An example reported by Freud is a case of someone’s “mistakenly” or “accidentally” using a house key to try to enter his office at night, which becomes interpreted as meaning that the person would rather be entering his house than working at night. What might Felicie’s thought have been? To arrive at an articulation of

her giving a wrong address we would have to have some reason for her not wanting to be found, specifically not by the man whose child she is bearing. (I assume we have no reason to surmise, as Charles seems to have surmised when they met five years later on the bus, that she had been pregnant with someone else's child.) Don't women want to be with the father of their child, if they love him madly? We know she wants in principle to live with some man, and that she has found neither a sweet nor a bluff man to be possible. If there is meaning in her madness toward Charles it bears on why she is less ready to live with him than with his child. Why would she, in other words, wish to be the girl *he* can never find? Or is it, rather, that it is he to whom she is not prepared to give her address now? As if the woman in Rohmer's film has been confirmed by Shakespeare's play in thinking that men in general, with whom one is in love, are some kind of menace to their child at the time of its birth.

This woman is the antithesis of Lisa in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Felicie has no specific reason to believe the man would find the child unwelcome, a threat to his accustomed intimacy and privilege with the new mother, hence a threat to the well-being of the child. Still, Charles did raise the thought of her taking a risk. Did he mean taking a risk not simply of becoming pregnant, but at the same time, for the same reason, a risk in trusting him? Is this enough to cause some skepticism about Charles? She will answer Charles's question, on his return, about whether she has known other men, in a way that indicates that Loic and Maxence have afforded her what experience she has of men. It is not a great deal to go on.

Here is perhaps the simplest hypothesis answering the enigma of her laughter. She laughs at Charles's suggestion of risk (partly no doubt because a risk for mad happiness appeals to her, as in her Pascalian wager; but essentially) because there is no risk, since she knows she is already three months pregnant. This would explain also her detail of filling out a birth certificate six months after she and Charles parted. (There are two scenes of intercourse; my simple hypothesis requires that the earlier, in which the sound track records orgasm, dates her conceiving early in the summer, the later dates the end of summer—the sequence that follows it is of their parting, and her giving her address, after the ferry ride back to shore.)

However ordinary this young woman's tastes and accomplishments are shown to be, we have seen that she is some kind of spiritual genius, in something like Emerson's sense of demanding her uniqueness to be recognized,

expressed as her “asking a lot” of men—for example, she wants them to pray for her in church “from the bottom of the heart,” meaning to pray as if they *were* her; she wants them to know life from life, not from what others have said about life; she wants them masterful and submissive, intelligent and sweet; sometimes she wants to sleep next to them when she doesn’t want to go home, yet does not then want to make love, in this sense wants to be a child taken care of but not even answerable to a wonderful mother (whatever happened to her father, Charles is the only man she takes home to her mother’s house); and she wants them to find her without her giving her address, she wants to be *returned* to, freely, to be found as herself, loved madly.

What gives this relatively unlettered, relatively inexperienced young woman so much as the idea that there are such things to want (or to want to want)? Which I imagine comes to the question: Where do the ideas of “instinctive science,” or intuitions that become philosophical tuitions, come from? Which philosophers before Wittgenstein and Emerson really care about this sense of the origin of philosophy? I think at once of moments in Descartes (proving the existence of God by means of discovering God’s stamp in oneself) and in Nietzsche (understanding the significance of music by understanding the deliverances of the womb). And I think that Rohmer’s sense that Plato and Pascal care about such originations is right. But they are perhaps too easy to praise in this regard: I mean too easy to praise without fully knowing whether one believes or understands them.

In a sense there are really three tales in our two texts, but one of the tales is interrupted. The interrupted tale is begun by Mamillius, Leontes’ son, the announcement of whose death awakens Leontes to his folly. Near the beginning of Shakespeare’s play, Mamillius begins a story that he turns to whisper into his mother’s ear. His mother Hermione had asked him for a merry tale but Mamillius, asserting his independent will, replies: “A sad tale’s best for winter: I have one / Of sprites and goblins.” Then, as Hermione accommodatingly replies “Let’s have that, good sir . . . and do your best / To fright me with your sprites: you’re powerful at it,” Mamillius begins: “There was a man . . . / Dwelt by a churchyard,” whereupon Leontes bursts in full madness upon the scene and disarms the intimacy between mother and son. You might say that Shakespeare’s tale is about why Mamillius’s tale is thus interrupted; or you might say that Shakespeare completes the tale of a man who dwelt by a churchyard, since Leontes has visited Hermione’s burial place

every day for sixteen years, and at the same time Shakespeare has deferred to Hermione's wish for a merry tale by providing a happy ending at the grave site. You could also say that Rohmer has contested Shakespeare's completion of the tale by declaring that a woman does not know where the man may exist, an ignorance that haunts her own existence as much as any sprite or goblin, and that Rohmer responds to Hermione's readiness to be frightened, say by the almost hopeless odds in the tale, not so much against finding the man as against keeping faith in finding the man.

It is clear enough that Rohmer overcomes our epistemological sophistication with probabilities by giving a child the last words, but more systematically by trusting the infantile economy of the demand for the coincidence of fantasy and reality that film seems born to satisfy—as if our hard-won grown-up work of learning not to wish for the impossible has brought us the danger of forgetting how to believe in the possible. Call it our unnecessary and unwilling suspension of belief.

In *A Tale of Winter*—along with other of Rohmer's sorts of cinematic discovery, such as how to capture the interest in the minimal sense of an event in the world, the fact that in each instant, as Samuel Beckett puts the matter, something is taking its course, or as in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical"—Rohmer discovers the vision or interest of film in a world of strangers passing, on their individual mortal paths, and oneself as a passerby among others, each working out a stage of human fate. The vision, as I am calling it, is one in which it comes to us that no one of us need have been in precisely this time and place, coincidentally with the event or advent of precisely each of the others here and now; yet just this scene of concretion is an immortal fact for each of us, each having come from and each going to different concretions, each some part of the event of each that passes.

Emersonian transcendentalism speaks ahead to Rohmer's. From Emerson's "Self-Reliance": "Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events." Some in my hearing have taken Emerson here to be speaking conservatively, as if not, and urging us not, to disturb events; in short as if his words had been "Accept the place the *society* of your contemporaries has found for you," namely a place of conformity—even though Emerson notes a few lines later that such an acceptance would amount to our becoming "cowards fleeing before a revolution." The place the divine Providence has found for you, on

the contrary, among exactly these contemporaries, a place unknown to them, would be that place from which to turn to what it is yours to find.

I add the confession that I associate the little group of three children as the concluding image of Rohmer's film with the opening image of childhood in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*—in both of which the child reads to me, among other ways, as the witness of its elders' lives, an image of children as beneficiaries and victims of the unclear world we have to leave to them. The rest of the *Investigations* is then a record of our discovering the capacity to come specifically, concretely, patiently, to their aid in clarifying it, something not perfectly distinguishable from coming to ourselves.

