the *Country Doctor*, in which he describes a strange bloody wound, he sees the anticipation of his hemoptyses, which occur shortly thereafter. An even more impressive coincidence when, in March 1924, the terminal phase of the illness begins with an extinction of the voice: he has just completed his narrative *Josephine*, in which he writes about a singing mouse who believes herself blessed with an exceptional gift for chirping and whistling, because she is no longer capable of the means of expression that are in use by her people. He then says to Klopstock: "I think I undertook my research on animal chirping at the right moment." How not to evoke here his remark about the anguishing discovery of the writer when the latter, at the last moment, sees himself taken at his word by reality? "What I played at will really happen." Was it like this for him? The play of speech coming visibly and painfully to its end, did he refuse to speak further of it, henceforth applying all of his attention to greeting in silence the silent approach of the event? Yet this distrust of words does not prevent him from pursuing his task of writing to the end. Much to the contrary, no longer able to speak, he is permitted only to write, and rarely has agony been so written as his. As if death, with the humor that is particular to it, had thus sought to warn him that it was preparing to change him entirely into a writer—"something that does not exist."[7]

§ 28 The Very Last Word

Commenting one day on Kafka's letters that had just appeared in their original text, I said that the *Complete Works* would always be missing a last volume because the nature of posthumous publications was to make them inexhaustible. Why? First of all, for reasons of fact. Missing at the time were the letters to his fiancée, Felice Bauer, letters that a difficult negotiation had momentarily excluded from the edition. Information that was capable of shedding more light on the encounter with Dora Diamant, the encounter with which his life ended, was also missing and no doubt will be missing for a long time, not to say forever. (By this I mean not the outside testimonies that can still be gathered, but Kafka's judgment, his speech, the notes of his *Diary*.)

This commentary is approximately ten years old.[1] Now (since October 1967) that we are in possession of all of the letters to Felice B., with few exceptions, including those to Grete Bloch, the enigmatic friend of the couple (that is to say, a volume of more than 700 pages); now that we have in hand the documents collected slowly and conscientiously by Klaus Wagenbach (the first volume of the biography he is working on appeared in 1958 and was translated in the Mercure de France Editions; then there is the *Kafka-Symposium* edited by him with several authors, which brings together documents on diverse and unelucidated points, in particular a chronology of the texts, as well as a long and important

letter, addressed to the sister of Julie Wohryzeck, the second fiancée; and finally there is the little book from Rowohlt Editions, a sort of Kafka by Kafka [and by Wagenbach], the restricted form of which makes it easier for us to recognize what is known, what is not known, or what is not yet known of a life henceforth too manifest), we are closer, but also almost deflected from asking the true questions, because we no longer have the strength to let them come to us in their innocence, to hold them away from the biographical reports that attract and engulf them by giving them fuel.

1. Let us try to bring together several features in order to free ourselves of them. After reading the letters as if in a single movement, we should perhaps ask ourselves if they teach us anything new, other than the always hidden becoming of what is said in the hope of being clear. First, what is confirmed: every time Kafka enters into a relation with the feminine world, it is a sort of grace, levity, a seductive and seducing temptation. His first letters are borne by a desire to charm, which charms. Even when he writes to Mlle. Bloch, of whom, at least in the beginning, he asks for nothing except a friendly sympathy or a contact in confidence, he does not fail to write in such a way that the young lady, still very young, will be visibly troubled by them to the point, voluntarily, involuntarily, of contributing to the rupture of the first engagement, and then later, of perhaps inventing a strange episode, an imaginary child that she attributes to Kafka. (Let us just say that this is a hypothetical episode that K. Wagenbach makes the mistake of transforming into a certainty when it remains at the limit of the probable-improbable.)*

Even if the difficulties come very quickly—and in some sense almost immediately—they are at first part of a movement of young passion, which does not lack a certain happiness. It is during this relatively happy period (with utterly black moments) that he writes *The Metamorphosis* (of this narrative he says to F., "It is such an exceptionally repulsive story that I am putting it aside to rest and think of you: it is more than half finished, and on the whole, I am

* See the end of the chapter.

not displeased with it, but it is infinitely repulsive, and, you see, such things come from the same heart in which you reside and which you tolerate as your residence"). He met her, who will twice be his fiancée, in August 1912 (in Prague, at his friend Max Brod's parents' house); he writes to her a few weeks later (end of September) and soon thereafter almost every day or several times a day. It is at the beginning of 1913 that relations all of a sudden become more gloomy. On several occasions, Kafka confirms this change: "I am different from the way I was in the first months of our correspondence; this is not a new transformation, but rather a relapse and one that threatens to last. . . . I was different in the beginning, you will concede this; it is not anything that could not be repaired except that it is not a human development that has led me from here to there, but, on the contrary, I have been entirely transported back onto my old path and between roads there is no direct connection, not even a zigzag communication, but a sad path through the air followed by specters." Why? To this question we can give only inconclusive answers.

It is approximately at this time that, prompted by his feelings and no doubt solicited by his friend, Kafka considers traveling to Berlin, after evading an encounter at Christmas: a trip that appeals to him, repels him, and will nonetheless take place on March 23. Almost all the encounters will be disappointing. Reading the letters (we do not know those of the young lady except indirectly), we have the feeling that Felice appears more reserved than affectionate and, as socially vivacious as she proves to be when she is with others, she seems lifeless, distraught, or tired when, rarely, they happen to be alone. This, at least, is Kafka's impression, as he formulates it to her (but that should not be accepted too readily; just as when he declares himself incapable of social relations, he contradicts the testimony of his friends who saw him, amiable, at ease, and often warm, although sometimes, it is true, withdrawn and strangely absent). About Felice, he always said he recognized in her the qualities he thinks he does not have: she is a young woman who is sure of herself, active, courageous, knowledgeable in business; from which it would be too easy, and no doubt deceptive, to

conclude that she attracts him through what he lacks; physically, she is far from pleasing him right at first; in his Diary, he describes her in terms of an almost cruel objectivity and, what is worse, he will speak of her to Mlle. Bloch with a certain repulsion (her spoiled teeth, her spotted, rough skin, her bony skeleton). And at the same time he loves her—passionately, desperately. At the same time: *in the same time*; this is all that can be said about it without falling into psychological futility. Should it be added that she represents life, the chance to live? The possibility of a reconciliation with the world? This is true, but according to what truth? I would say instead—and this is the feature she has in common with Milena and perhaps with Julie Wohryzeck as well as with the unknown woman from Zuckmantel and the adolescent girl from Riva—that she bears, in the manner of a memory, the trace of the absence of trace, that is, of a non-culpability, which does not signify innocence exactly. On the first day of the first encounter, when he notes in his Diary, "Mlle F.B., . . . bony and empty face openly bearing its emptiness," the word *empty*, here not only repeated but bared, not as a feature of insignificance but as the discovery of an enigmatic possibility, makes him feel the attraction of a flaw that is like the absence of error, this "outside error" whose obviousness the feminine world incarnates, but also already incarnates, in its presence, the equivocal separation. From this world, in effect, all temptations come (which should not, however, be understood in a naively Christian sense as seduction of the flesh, although Kafka has here, too, as we know, his difficulties).[2] It is rather the temptation of a life that attracts him because it seems so strange in its remoteness from guilt, but such that the attraction immediately makes the one who is subject to it forever guilty by turning him away from himself, doomed henceforth to the deception of the turning away and fated to the enchantment of oblivion: this will be one of the meanings of *The Trial* and also, in part, of *The Castle*, both of which were written under the provocation of the strangeness of the feminine.

(In a letter to Weltsch, at a particularly unhappy moment, Kafka explains himself with his unfailing lucidity on what his friend, also very lucid, calls Kafka's happy feeling of guilt: "You think that my

feeling of guilt is an aid, a solution, no, I have a feeling of guilt only because for my being it is the most beautiful form of remorse, but one does not need to look at it very closely to see that the feeling of guilt is nothing but the exigency to go backward. But immediately, much more formidable than remorse and far above any remorse, the feeling of freedom, of deliverance, of measured contentment already rises." To feel guilty is to be innocent because it is to strive, through remorse, to erase the work of time, to free oneself from error, but hence to render oneself twice guilty, because it is to devote oneself to the idleness of the absence of time, where nothing more happens and is thus hell or, as Kafka himself says in this letter, the inner courtyard of hell.)

2. Yet why, after the first months of an alliance passionately in search of itself, does everything become more unhappy? I spoke of the trip to Berlin; nothing can be explained by this. What does he himself say about it (for our task is only to repeat him)? During the same period, as he wrote in tormented but impetuous bursts, and an almost timeless regularity (every night in the infinity of the night: *The Verdict*, just one month after having met F.B. and two days after sending her the first letter; then the continuation of his novel, *Amerika*; and at the same time, *The Metamorphosis*), suddenly the writing stops and comes to an end. Not only this, but in rereading the "notebooks of the novel," he is convinced that, with the exception of the first chapter, which does not depart from an inner truth, "all of the rest was written only in memory of a great but radically absent feeling and must be scrapped, that is to say, of the more than 400 pages only 56 have the right to remain."

It is a commonplace to show Kafka struggling for the solitude of writing and Kafka struggling for the exigency of life, which passes by way of the necessary relations with men, which thus passes by way of marriage or salvation in the world. Numerous passages of the correspondence—numerous: let us say almost innumerable—would confirm it. He has barely begun to write to her with whom he is not yet on familiar terms, than he confides in her without reserve: "My life consists and has in fact always consisted in trying

to write and most often in failing. But were I not to write, I would remain stretched out on the ground, deserving nothing more than to be thrown away. . . . As thin as I am . . . there is nothing in me that, with regard to writing, is not already superfluous and superfluous in the good sense. . . . Even the thought of you is related to writing, only the ups and downs of writing determine me, and surely, during a barren period, I would never have had the courage to turn to you." Felice soon takes fright at such outbursts and advises him, as a reasonable person, more moderation: "My heart [he responds] is more or less in perfect health, but it is not easy for any human heart to hold out against the melancholy of bad writing or against the happiness of good writing. . . . Were you to consider my relation to writing, you would cease to advise me '*Maß und Ziel*,' moderation and limitation: human weakness is but too drawn to setting limits to everything. Should I not engage everything I have in the one thing I am able to do? . . . It may be that my writing is nothing, but then and certainly I am truly nothing."[3] Then comes the surprising letter of January 15, 1913, in which, to her whom he already considers to be his life companion, he describes the ideal existence that he proposes to her: "One day you wrote that you would like to sit beside me while I wrote; but think of it, then I would no longer be able to write (as it is, I barely can), but in that case I could no longer write at all. Writing means opening oneself to measurelessness; the extreme openness in which a person already feels he is losing himself in human relations and from which, if he is a being of reason, he will always try to withdraw, stricken—for every person wants to live for as long as he is alive—this openness and this gift of heart are not enough for writing, not by far. What from the surface is recovered below by the act of writing—unless it goes otherwise and the sources of the depths are silent—is nothing and collapses the moment a true feeling comes to shatter this ground situated above. This is why one could never be alone enough when one writes; this is why there is never enough silence around one, when one writes; night is still not night enough. . . . I have often thought that the best way for me to live would be to set myself up, with my writing material and a

lamp, in the innermost room of a spacious locked cellar. I would be brought food, but always far away from the place in which I would be sitting, behind the cellar's outermost door. My only walk would be to fetch this food, in my bathrobe, through the many vaults of the cellar. Then I would return to the table, I would eat slowly and solemnly, and immediately after I would begin writing again. The things I would write! The depths from which I would tear it! Without effort! For extreme concentration knows no effort. The only reserve being that I would not be able to keep it up for long, and at the first failure I would fall into a grandiose fit of madness, perhaps impossible to avoid even in these conditions. What do you think, my dearest? Do not shrink from your cellar dweller!"

This narrative (for it is one) is impressive, but at this date, still enlivened by the illusions of youth: Kafka first seems to believe (does he believe it?) that when Felice understands the necessity of the underground life, she will be happy with it, happy with the cellar, because the cellar will also belong to her ("*a cellar*," he will say a little further on, "a sad possession for you all the same"); then he seems to believe (but does he believe it?) that the cellar might suffice for his isolation and bring him aid: the cellar, the emptiness of a presence full in its retreat, habitable and comfortable; in other words, madness itself, but well converted and as if protected (in the years 1915–1916, when he looks for a room in the city in which to work, he cannot even tolerate that it should be deprived of a horizon, but this is because he is then in the truth of solitude, no longer in his musing). It is indeed true that almost all of his behavior with Felice seems capable of being explained by his sole desire to protect his work and by the wish not to deceive his fiancée about the conditions of their future together, if ever there is a future: barely, he says, will they see each other for an hour a day. Later, after the rupture of July 12, 1914 (when he is brought to trial), when, in November, he again takes up his explanation with the young lady, it is this truth that he will propose to her with new authority and austerity: "You were unable to see the power that work has over me; you saw it, but only incompletely, very incompletely. . . . You were not only the greatest friend, you were at

the same time the greatest enemy of my work, at least considering things from the point of view of work, and as the latter loved you at its center beyond all limits, it had to defend itself against you with all its might in order to protect itself. . . . You want me to explain why I behaved thus,[4] and this explanation consists in this: your fear, your disgust were constantly before my eyes. It was my duty to watch over my work, which alone gives me the right to live, and your fear showed me and made me fear (with a fear much more intolerable) that here was the greatest danger for my work. . . . This is when I wrote the letter to Miss Bloch. . . . Now, you can turn the whole thing around and say that you were no less threatened in your essence than I and that your fear was no less justified than mine. I do not believe that this was the case. I loved you in your real being and it is only when it touched my work with hostility that I feared it. . . . Even if this is not altogether true. You were threatened. But did you not want to be? Ever? In no way?" (A questioning traversed by the movement of sovereignty that was also the least visible, the least contestable part of Kafka: of the writer in him.)

3. The conflict of writing and life, reduced to such simplicity, can offer no sure principle of explanation, even if to explain here is but the deployment of affirmations that call forth one another in order to put themselves to the test without limiting themselves. To write, to live: how could one hold oneself to this confrontation of terms that are precisely so poorly determined? Writing destroys life, protects life, demands life, is ignorant of life, and vice versa. In the end writing has no relation to life, if it is not through the necessary insecurity that writing receives from life, just as life receives this necessary insecurity from writing: an absence of relation such that writing, as much as it gathers itself in the absence of relation by dispersing itself in it, never refers to itself in this absence, but to what is *other than* it, which ruins it, or worse yet, disrupts it. Kafka is made aware of this "*other than*"—the other in the neuter—that belongs to writing insofar as writing cannot belong to itself, cannot designate a belonging, through the obstinate, interrupted, never broken, never questioned attempt to be united with Felice, to

rejoin her (rejoin the disjunction). His relations with the young woman are first and foremost established on the level of written words, consequently in the place that words control and under the truth of the illusion that they necessarily provoke. When he tells her (and before they meet in Berlin for the first time), "It sometimes seems to me that this exchange of letters, which I almost incessantly long to get beyond in order to arrive at reality, is the only exchange that corresponds to my misery (my misery, which naturally I do not always experience as misery) and that were we to cross this limit that is imposed on me, we would be led to a common unhappiness," he is still only expressing the apprehension of an encounter frightening in all regards, but he also senses the contradiction to which he is exposing himself. Through letters—this mixed communication, which is neither direct nor indirect, neither of presence nor of absence (he designates it as a hybrid or bastard, *Zwitter*)—he shows himself, but to someone who does not see him (one night, he dreams that Felice is blind), and if he thus wins the young woman, it is in the mode of non-possession and also of non-manifestation, that is, of non-truth ("I am going to Berlin for no other reason but to tell and to show you, who have been misled by my letters, who I really am").

In a certain sense, at least in the dramatic course of the year 1913, which will lead, even before the official engagement, to a first rupture, the only thing at stake for him is the truth: the truth about him or, more precisely, the possibility of being true. How to avoid deceiving the young woman? How to convince her of what he is, as he is in the depths of solitude that he reaches only in the nights of writing? How to unveil himself in such a way as to be seen as he searches for himself through invisibility which is outside of all veiling and all unveiling? "My letter today will arrive torn; I tore it on my way to the station in a movement of impotent rage at not being able to be true and precise when I write to you, such that even when I write, I am never able to hold you firmly or to communicate to you the beating of my heart, there being nothing from this moment on to expect from writing." And a little earlier, in a manner that is even more striking: "Naturally, I cannot forget

you when I am writing to you, because I can never forget you at all, but I would like in some way not to rouse myself from the dizziness of the reverie without which I cannot write to you, by calling your name." Practically speaking, this movement can be translated in this way: to say everything (and not only to her, but to the father of the young woman, as to the higher authority), which means to tell how he will make her unhappy or, more precisely, the impossibility of communal life to which he is condemning her, and this with nothing to make up for it, so that she may accept it and see it precisely as impossible, from which it will follow that none of the answers that she gives him can satisfy him. For if she says to him, perhaps out of levity, out of affection, perhaps also out of a proper concern for nuances: "you speak too abruptly about yourself," or else "things are perhaps as you say, but you cannot know that they will not change when we are together," this hope that she maintains despairs him: "What do I have to do? How can I make you believe the unbelievable? . . . "There exist hindrances that you know to a certain extent, but you do not take them seriously enough and you would still not take them seriously enough, were you fully aware of them. No one around me takes them seriously enough or one neglects them out of friendship for me. . . . When I see how much you change when you are with me and the indifferent fatigue that takes hold of you then, the young woman normally so self-assured, whose thinking is quick and proud . . . the result of this is: I cannot assume the responsibility, for I see that it is too great, you cannot assume it, for you hardly see it."

This on the one hand. But on the other hand if, convinced or eventually hurt, she takes her distance, becomes reticent, formulates doubts, writes less, then he becomes all the more despairing, for he has the feeling that she misjudges him precisely because she knows him, thus deciding according to the knowledge he gives her of himself, instead of deciding, not blindly, not by weighing the reasons, but in all clarity under the attraction of the impossible. There are, he says, three answers; there are no others that she can make: "It is impossible, and therefore I do not want it." "It is impossible, and for the time being, I do not want it." "It is

impossible, and therefore I want it." This third answer, the only correct one (which might, inspired by Luther, take this form: "I cannot do otherwise, in spite of everything"), Kafka will one day deem to have received it—he, too, out of lassitude, from her whom he then calls his "dear fiancée," not without adding: "I will say for the last time that I am insanely afraid of our future and of the unhappiness that may arise as a result of my nature and my faults in our life together and that must first affect you, for I am at bottom a cold, egoistic and insensible being, in spite of my weakness that dissimulates but does mitigate it." Where the impossible speaks, a relation of strangeness (of transcendence?) is introduced that cannot be designated as such, a relation in which it would be deceptive to see any trait of the sublime (in the romantic manner), but which Kafka nonetheless refuses to perceive in terms of practical reason. When Felice, overwhelmed, and perhaps rightly so, writes to him: "Marriage would lead us both to give up many things; we do not want to weigh the side on which the greatest weight would be; for both of us, it would be great," he is deeply hurt, precisely because she reduces here the impossible to a sum of possibles, producing thus a sort of bargaining of accounts. "You are right, we must keep accounts; unless this is, not unjust, but deprived of meaning. . . . This is, in the end, my opinion." And finally the exigency of truth always returns: "A lasting life together is impossible for me without deception, just as it would be impossible without truth. The first glance I would cast upon your parents would be deceptive."[5]

4. Before going on, I would like to quote two or three texts that are among the most serious. I quote them as if in parentheses, not because they are of secondary importance but because of their seriousness. They explain why (this is not the only reason; it is even a reason that Kafka expressed himself, to himself, only at very critical moments), when he believes he is losing the young woman who seems so remote from him, he is immediately certain of losing himself. "In my letters, my perpetual concern is to free you of me, and as soon as I have the appearance of success, I go mad." It is not the madness of a lover split between movements of opposing

passions, it is madness itself from which she, Felice—and she alone, because she forms his only and essential human bond—can still protect him, for she is still capable, when he is not writing and at times when he is, of keeping him away from the monstrous world that he carries in his head, a world that he does not dare confront except in the nights of writing. "Traversing the nights in a fury of writing, this is what I want. And to perish thus or to go mad, this is also what I want, because it is the long-anticipated consequence." But immediately the other affirmation, the desire to find in her, against this threat, a recourse, a protection, a future: "It is a justifiable anguish that prevents me from wishing you were coming to Prague; but more justified still and much exceeding it, the monstrous anguish that I will perish if we are not together soon. For if we are not together soon, my love for you, which does not tolerate any other thought in me, will direct itself to an idea, a ghost, something altogether unattainable, altogether and forever necessary, that would, in truth, be capable of tearing me from the world. I tremble as I write this." Which I will permit myself to translate in this way: I tremble with writing. But what writing? "You do not know, Felice, what a certain literature can be in certain heads. It creates constant havoc like monkeys in the treetops instead of walking on the earth. It is being lost and not able to be otherwise. What should one do?" Whence, again, no longer the desire or the hope of being protected by Felice, but the fear of being exposed to a more serious threat while under her protection and the worse fear of also exposing her to a danger he cannot name: "At present, I only torment you in my letters, but as soon as we lived together, I would become a dangerous madman fit to be burned. . . . What holds me back is, in some sense, a command from heaven, an anguish that cannot be appeased; everything that seemed of greatest importance to me, my health, my small resources, my miserable being, all this, for which there is some justification, vanishes before this anguish, is nothing compared to it and is used by this anguish only as a pretext. . . . It is, to be perfectly frank, and so that you are able to recognize the degree of my madness, the *fear of the union* with the most beloved being and

precisely with her. . . . I have the definite feeling that I will be exposed to doom, through marriage, through this *union*, through the dissolution of this nothingness that I am, and I will not be exposed alone, but with my wife, and the more I love her, the swifter and more terrible it will be."[6]

5. When, in Berlin for the first time, he sees her whom he had approached only through the detour of letters, he will be as if repelled from all living relations. And, upon his return, he writes to her: "My true fear—certainly nothing more grievous could be said or heard: never will I be able to possess you. In the most favorable case, I would be limited to kissing your casually abandoned hand in the manner of a crazily mad dog, which would not be a sign of love, but of the despair that you would feel for an animal condemned to muteness and eternal separation. . . . In short, I would remain forever excluded from you, were you to lean toward me so far as to be in danger." To Brod, he will confide the next day: "Yesterday, I sent the big confession." Thus it is a confession. We must not give it too simple a meaning, however, one that would contradict what we know of his various brief affairs about which his friends speak. In 1916 in Marienbad, when he sees in Felice a being he could love, more than from at a distance, he writes again to Brod. I will recall three features of these very controlled reflections that he then composes for the benefit of his friend. "I did not know her at all" [until the final days in which he established intimate relations with her],[7] "what bothered me [prevented me], other scruples not withstanding, was, essentially, the fear of having to regard as real the one who writes letters to me." Here, therefore, and very distinctly, the retreat before the reality of presence is expressed, not as such but through the relation of writing (the non-presence of writing), that is, the refusal to pass from one to the other, the impossibility of this passage. Second indication: "When [at the moment of the official engagement ceremony] she crossed the great hall and came to my encounter to receive her engagement kiss, a terrible shudder ran through me; the matter of the engagement, accompanied by my parents, was for me and at every step a constant torture." From

which one must remember, however, that what is disagreeable to him to the point of horror is not contact with a feminine face but rather, through it, the approach of conjugality, the falsehood of his institutional obligations and also, certainly, of everything that the word *marriage* evokes for him, and first of all, conjugal intimacy, which in his parents always filled him with disgust, because it reminded him that he was born of it and still always had to be born in connection to those "distasteful things."[8] It is the very idea of marriage—the law, in other words—both solemn, sovereign, but also sovereignly impure (and sovereign because impure) that, as Felice crosses the great space of the hall to make her way toward him, an infinite insurmountable space, rises up and imposes its sanction on him, a sanction that is like a punishment in advance.[9] Finally, and this is the third feature—the strongest, perhaps—he will say to Brod, evoking his new familiarity with Felice: "I have now seen the confident intimacy in the gaze of a woman and could not remain closed to it. A laceration as a result of which many things that I had always wanted to keep protected (it is not anything in particular, but a whole) are brought to light [*aufgerissen,* are torn from me] and, through this laceration [*Riß*] so much unhappiness will emerge, this I also know, that the entire life of a man cannot suffice, but I did not call forth this unhappiness, it was imposed on me." I think this passage is important. It gives not only the meaning of what happened in Marienbad in 1916[10] (this finally changes nothing as to the difficulty of their relations, which confirms that this difficulty had yet another origin), but perhaps the meaning of the entire story with the young woman, a story the decisive nature of which Kafka never misrecognized, even apart from his own feelings, for he knew that it helped change him almost radically, in the sense that it unveiled him before his own eyes and constituted a warning that it was his duty never to forget. Through it, in effect, he was put to the test of "the laceration"; the circle in which he had thought he could keep himself pure, as much by the constraints of isolation as by the pressure to write—pure, this means without falsehood, which does not mean true (this he never thought but, rather, outside falsehood, just as outside truth)—was broken, and with a break that did not take place at

such and such a moment or because of particular events, but revealed itself as always having taken place, as if beforehand, before any place and before any event. A revelation that, in turn, did not occur at a specific moment or progressively, no more than it was empirically or internally experienced, but was implied, put into practice in his work and in his relation to his work.

6. This, then, was the great "warning." The letters to Felice only confirm it, in my opinion, and they do this in two ways.

A) During his entire youth as a writer—a youth that came to an end (markers are still needed, however indecisive and however deceptive they may be) with the "failure" of his youthful novel (*Amerika*)—he had confidence in writing, a tormented confidence, most often unhappy, but always intact again. His thought was that writing—if ever he could write—would save him, this word understood not in a positive sense but negatively, that is, would defer or delay the sentence, would give him a possibility and, who knows? Provide a way out: who knows? Who knows? To live in the cellar, to write in it endlessly and without any end save writing itself, to be the inhabitant of the cellar and thus dwell (live, die) nowhere but in the outside of writing (but, at this moment, for Kafka, this outside is still an inside, an intimacy, a "warmth," as he writes in this very revealing sentence: "I cannot be thrown out of writing, for I have sometimes thought that I am already settled at its center, in its greatest warmth."). "Ah, if only I could write. This desire consumes me. If above all else I had enough freedom and health for this. I don't think you have understood that writing is the only thing that makes my existence possible. It is no wonder, I express myself so badly, I only begin to awaken in the space of my inner figures." From which one must conclude that in this space, he maintains the hope of reaching a certain awakening. However, little by little and always suddenly, without ever renouncing the exigency of writing, he will have to renounce the hope that this exigency seemed to carry: not only is writing essentially uncertain, but to write is no longer to maintain oneself intact in the purity of the closed circle, it is to attract the dark powers toward the upper reaches, to give oneself to their perverse strangeness, and perhaps to

join oneself to what destroys. I am not saying that he needed the interminable failure of his story with Felice (he certainly needed much more, much less as well) to arrive at this insight—hidden, moreover—about his future as a writer, but these two movements point to one another by way of each other, not because they are directly linked but because they repeat at different levels the condition of absence—of alterity—(the rupture, but in the rupture, the impossibility of breaking it off) that precedes and ruins and supports any possibility of a relation, be it the very relation engaged in the movement, removed from any affirmation of presence, that is the movement of writing.

B) Barely has he begun to correspond with Felice than he makes her this essential confidence: "It is one of my failings that I cannot write down in the flux of a single continuous movement what has gathered itself in me according to a preestablished order. My memory is definitely bad, but even the best memory could not help me to write down even a short part of what had been premeditated [thought out in advance] and simply marked, for within every sentence, there are transitions that must remain suspended [in suspense] before the actual writing." In truth, if he thus confides himself to her whom he still does not call Felice, it is because six days earlier he had been victorious in his attempt at uninterrupted writing, having completed *The Verdict* in an eight-hour stretch, in a single nocturnal stroke, an experience for him decisive, which gave him the certainty of a possible contact with the unapproachable space, and he noted in his *Diary* immediately: "My certainty is confirmed, *it is only thus* that one can write: with such a flow of coherence, with such perfect openness of the body and soul." Search for absolute continuity—the uninterrupted in all senses: how to maintain an outside of writing, this lack where nothing is lacking but its absence, otherwise than by a perpetuity without dissidence—a transparency, as it were, compact, or a compactness, as such, transparent—given in time as outside of time, given in one time as infinite repetition? "I need isolation in order to write, not like a 'hermit' but like a dead man. In this sense writing is a deeper slumber, thus a death, and just as one will not tear a dead man from his grave, at night I cannot be torn from my table. This has no

immediate bearing on my relations with men, but it is only in this rigorous, continuous, and systematic manner that I can write and thus also live." Yet, the characteristic of such a movement—the interminable according to all dimensions—from which it first seemed to him that only his manner of living (the office work) kept him at a distance, but with which he indeed had to recognize that this distance was in a relation of "essence," always deferred because continual and, by this continuity, united with difference; Kafka was only slowly persuaded and always had to persuade himself that he would never possess this movement except as lack (rupture or absence), and that it is on the basis of this movement as lack that he might also—perhaps—be given to write: no longer, then, the uninterrupted in its becoming, but the becoming of interruption. This was his eternal struggle. All of his unfinished works—and first of all the first novel, the incompletion of which was as if his condemnation as a writer, and thus also his condemnation as a living man, incapable of living with Felice[11]—put in some sense before his eyes their own completion, this new way of completing themselves in and by interruption (under the spell of the fragmentary). However, unable to be anything but *blind* to what could be read there, unable to reach it except through an exigency that he came up against in order to destroy himself and not confirm himself in it, he had to agree (and so it is every time for the writer without indulgence) to see the power to read himself taken away from him, unaware that the books he believed not to have written and that, from that point on, he intended for definitive destruction, had received the gift of being almost freed from themselves and, by erasing all idea of a masterpiece and all idea of a work, of identifying themselves with the *absence of book*, thus suddenly for a moment offered to our own powerlessness of reading, *absence of book* soon itself deprived of itself, overturned, and finally—become work again—reestablished in the assurance of our admiration and our judgment of culture.

7. Kafka—the correspondence confirms it—did nothing (except at certain moments when he lacked the strength) to break, by means of a deliberate initiative, with Felice: contrary to certain biographical affirmations, when he stands trial in Berlin in the

Askanischer Hof, in face of a tribunal consisting of his fiancée, the sister of his fiancée (Erna), the friend of his fiancée (Grete Bloch), and his only ally and friend, Ernst Weiss (but hostile to Felice and to this marriage), in no way is it his design to be done with a situation by which he sees himself condemned, whatever the result. Before leaving for Berlin, he writes to his sister Ottla: "Naturally I will write to you from Berlin; for the moment nothing certain can be said either about the thing itself or about me. I write not as I speak, I speak not as I think, I think not as I should think, and so forth into the greatest depths of obscurity." Nothing can be interrupted, nothing can be broken off.** The illness itself (which intervenes barely a month after his second engagement; the official engagements never lasted more than a few weeks), to which he gave the all too clear meaning of a spiritual symptom, could decide nothing: all still depended upon the young woman ("Do not ask me why I draw a line. Do not humiliate me thus. One word, and I am again at your feet."). The tuberculosis is only a weapon in this fight, a weapon that is neither more nor less effective than the "innumerable" weapons he has used until this point and that he enumerates in the next-to-last letter of the correspondence, when summing up all the events of the past five years: the names by which he designates them, not without a certain irony, include "physical incapacity," "work," "avarice," designations that all tend toward what cannot be designated, even when he adds, "Moreover, I am telling you a secret that for the moment I do not believe (although the obscurity that falls around me as I try to work and think might convince me of it), but that must be true: I will never be in good health again. Precisely because it is no longer the tuberculosis that is being stretched out on a deck chair and tended to, but a weapon the external necessity of which will survive for as long as I am alive. And the two cannot remain alive together."

However, he also says the most likely would be *eternal struggle,* that is, the impossibility of putting an end to it. When, a year later, in the Stüdl pension in Schelesen, he meets Julie Wohryzeck, with

** See the end of the chapter.

whom he becomes friends the following season under conditions of extreme physical and moral deprivation, through a new engagement immediately broken; when, almost at the same date, he abandons himself to Milena's passion and to his passion for her, and would like to bring the young woman to break up her marriage in the prospect of a very uncertain union; when, finally, he appeals with Dora Diamant to the sky itself, through the intervention of a very revered rabbi (Gerer Rebbe, friend of the young woman's father), for the authorization of marriage and receives, with a shake of the head of absolute denial, a silent refusal, ultimate response and, as it were, consecrated (yet, all the same, a response that indicated, be it negatively, in the form of an impugnment, a recognition of sorts from above), it is always to the same rupture that he exposes himself, experiencing it each time at the limit, as the impossibility of breaking off or, more profoundly, as the exigency of exclusion, which, having always already been pronounced, must always again be solicited, repeated, and, through the repetition, erased, in order—by perpetuating itself—to reproduce itself in the powerlessness, infinite and always new, of its lack. Is it therefore the world and life with which he would like to be reconciled by these attempts at marriage, the real nature of which he does everything in advance to exhaust? It is rather with the law that he pursues the tragic game (provocation and interrogation), the law, which his obstinacy—gentle, that is, inflexible—expects to pronounce itself, not by authorizing him or even by striking him, but by designating itself as that which cannot be made attributable, in such a way that he might be able to sense why writing—this movement from which he had hoped for a kind of salvation—has, always and as if forever, put him *outside* the law or, more precisely, has led him to occupy this space of the *outside,* radical (aorgic) exteriority, about which he cannot know—except by writing and by writing to the point of non-writing—whether, exterior to the law, it indicates the limit of the law or indicates itself in this limit, or else, provocation of provocations, exposes itself as disturbing or preceding all law. It remains striking that even before the marriage with Dora Diamant has been challenged by the highest court,

Kafka carries on regardless and, in opposition to social mores, arranges with the adolescent girl a sort of conjugal life together. Dora is nineteen years old, he is forty: almost his daughter or his very young sister (precisely, he never hid his preference for the young Ottla, about whom he said, in all innocence of language, that she was his sister, his mother, and his spouse). As always, the transgression—the decision to fail in what could not exist—precedes the promulgation of the interdiction, thus rendering it possible, as if the limit were to be crossed only insofar as it is impossible to cross and reveals itself to be uncrossable only by the crossing itself. The "No" of the rabbi briefly precedes his death. Was Kafka finally allowed to break off? Liberated, could he finally write, that is to say, die? Finally. But already eternity was beginning: the posthumous hell, the sarcastic glory, the exegesis of admiration and pretension, the great sealing off of culture and, precisely here, once again this last word offering itself only in order to simulate and dissimulate the anticipation of the very last.

* Obscure and unhappy story. This is what we know of it, at least what I know of it. Grete Bloch, 22 years old at the time and a recent friend of Felice, went to Prague on Felice's behalf and met Kafka in October 1913. She lived and worked in Vienna. Kafka begins to write to her, and what results is a correspondence made up of approximately 70 published letters, from October 29, 1913, to July 3, 1914. On July 12, the engagement is broken off. In the month of October 1914, the young woman writes to Kafka in an attempt to reestablish relations between the formerly engaged couple, relations she had contributed to ruining; Kafka answers on October 15; it is the last letter (to G.B.) that we have. According to the editors, Erich Heller and Jürgen Born, there is no proof that Kafka continued to write to her. (I find, in the *Diary* for the date October 8, 1917, when, having fallen ill, he must take back his "word" from his fiancée: "accusatory letters from F.; G.B. threatens to write me.") He sometimes speaks of her to Felice, either to ask for news or to send his regards, even advice, and also, at a painful moment, signs of deep sympathy. We know that Felice, Grete Bloch, and Kafka took a vacation trip together in Bohemia on May 23 and 24, 1915. Let it be added that the letters, published today, although marked by a desire to please, often with very affectionate, almost seductive words, remain at the same time rather ceremonious: "Dear Miss Grete" is the most tender address. What else do we know? This: Max Brod published parts of a letter that Grete Bloch, on April 21, 1940, sent from Florence to a friend in Israel. She reveals to him that she had a son who died suddenly in Munich in 1921, when he was seven years old: an "illegitimate" child whose father was not named, but the addressee of the letter (Brod's only guarantor in this story) maintained that Grete Bloch regarded Kafka as the father of the child. What is there to say? In a certain manner, obviously nothing. Let us indicate the reasons for doubt, reasons that are themselves dubious. Wagenbach asserts that beginning in the fall of 1914, a regular and intimate correspondence is established between Grete B. and Kafka, but no doubt he is making a mistake; the only known correspondence lasted from the fall of 1913 to the summer of 1914, and was never such that it would allow one to conclude that there was a relationship between the two correspondents. Naturally, we do not know everything. If one recalls the rule of absolute candor that was always Kafka's (when he has broken with Felice for the first time and spends several days of intimacy with the young Swiss woman in Riga, he does not fail, as soon as relations have been reestablished, to tell everything to her who is no longer his fiancée), it seems very unlikely that he could have kept silent about such a relationship, one that would also have been a double betrayal. Nonetheless, one could imagine that he kept silent in order not to compromise G.B. Such a strangely equivocal situation. The following testimony must also be mentioned: friends of Grete Bloch said that the young woman, during her stay in Florence (thus at the moment when she revealed the story of the child), gave signs of profound melancholia or delirious distress. But what is such an assertion worth? It is as vague as it is grievous. Imaginary or not, the child of which Kafka was unaware had this spectral existence, real-unreal, that does not allow one, for the moment, to give it life outside dreams. Grete Bloch and Felice remained friends until the end. When she had to leave Germany, Grete confided to her friend one part (approximately half) of the letters she had received from Kafka. The rest she deposited in Florence with a notary who later put photostats of them at the disposal of Max Brod. Twelve of these letters had been torn in two in a "rather bizarre manner," but with the exception of one, they were able to be put back together because one of the halves was in the hands of Felice, the other with the notary in Florence. Grete Bloch, who lived in Israel from the time she left Germany, had the misfortune to return to

Italy and, when the country fell under Nazi occupation, she was taken away with many other Jews and died during the deportation or in a camp: an inquiry by the Red Cross has not allowed it to be known with certainty. Felice escaped from such a fate: married, she lived first in Switzerland and then in the United States, where she died in 1960. I will also add: in Kafka's *Diary,* in January and February 1922, during his solitary and very tragic stay in Spindlermühle—he is still friends with Milena, but without hope—certain notations can be read in which the initial G. appears; thus on January 18: "A little peace; on the other hand, G. is arriving. Deliverance or aggravation, one or the other." On February 10: "New attack of G. Attacked from the right and from the left by extremely powerful enemies, I cannot escape." And on January 29, although no name intervenes and in a manner that is enigmatic, which led me some time ago, perhaps rashly, to read these passages in the light of an almost "mystical" obscurity: "Attack on the way, at night, in the snow." "I got away from them," and later, on March 24: "How I am spied on; for example, on the path on the way to the doctor, on the path constantly." Texts of an oppressive strangeness. Wagenbach, who knew the manuscript of the *Diary,* seems to have read: "New attack by Grete." I give this indication, without knowing more.

** To offer better proof of this to myself, I would like to establish a short chronology of the ruptures, at least during the course of the first two years. They begin almost at the same time as the correspondence, which begins, it should be recalled, on September 20, 1912. Already in mid-November, Kafka writes (the young lady had remarked without malice that she did not always understand him or that certain traits of his made him strange to her): "Let us be done with it, if our life is dear to us." Distraught, the unfortunate Felice then appeals to Brod, who answers her: "I beg you to let many things pass with Franz, given his pathological sensitivity; he obeys his mood [*Stimmung*] of the moment. He is someone who wants the absolute in everything. . . . He never accepts a compromise." On November 20, Kafka writes again: "But I do not have any news from you. I must therefore openly repeat the adieu that you silently gave me." Following which their written relations take up their passionate course once again.

In the beginning of January 1913, the change, which is no longer one of circumstance or of mood, begins to take place in Kafka, one that will not cease to aggravate itself without, however, attenuating the relationship—

deepening it, on the contrary. On March 23, meeting in Berlin. After which, the letter of confession: "My true fear: never will I be able to possess you," which for him does not at all signify that he is moving away from her, but she seems to take it otherwise: she spaces out her letters, takes advantage of a trip to Frankfurt to interrupt them, with a casualness that almost drives Kafka mad. On May 11, another meeting in Berlin during the vacation of Pentecost. This meeting gives him a little hope, the hope that one day, at least, he "will be able to seriously discuss with her [about their future] a certain number of dreadful things and thus little by little to reach fresh air." All the same, he adds: "When I was packing my bags in Berlin, I had a completely different text in my head: 'Without her, I cannot live, nor with her either.'" The torment of the truth comes, and at the same time, in a letter begun on June 10, which is interrupted, then courageously finished on the sixteenth: "Would you like to think it over and consider if you want to become my wife? Do you want this?" Following which there is a debate that will come to an end on July 1 (1913) with these words: "So you want, in spite of everything, to take the cross upon yourself, Felice? To attempt the impossible?" It is after this that the first serious breakup occurs. The couple—engaged out of intimate feeling, not officially—do not meet up to spend their vacation together. Felice has a rather cheerful stay in Westerland ("What awaits you is not the life of the happy people you see in Westerland, not a joyful chatter arm in arm, but a cloistered life at the side of someone who is morose, sad, silent, discontented, sickly, bound to literature by invisible chains"), Kafka goes off to Vienna under the pretext of a congress, then to Italy, where he writes that he will stop writing to her: "I can no longer go forward, it is as if I were ensnared. We should separate" (September 16, 1913). He remains for some time in Riva, becoming friends with the very young G.W., the "Swiss woman."

Back in Prague, he will receive Grete Bloch's visit; she is sent by Felice to try to clear up the misunderstandings. The correspondence is far from starting up again with the same impetus. On November 8, he goes to Berlin for an interview and manages to catch only a glimpse of her in effect, F. escaping out of intention or negligence, we do not know. At the beginning of March 1914, still in Berlin, an explanation leaves him altogether discouraged, and he notices that Felice tolerates him with difficulty. Meanwhile, the correspondence with Miss Bloch continues to become more and more cordial: "You are too important to me. . . . Your little card made me happier than anything I received from Berlin. . . . Dear Miss

Grete, I have an ardent desire to see you and as if a manifest nostalgia. . . . Who in Berlin, for the love of God, can have designs on your head other than to caress it?" And when Felice says to him, "You seem to be very attached to Grete," he does not defend against it. However, on the twelfth and thirteenth of May, the encounter takes place during which the official engagement is decided. (The ceremonial celebration, with invitation, kiss, and congratulations, will be observed on June 1.) Kafka comments on the event for Grete: "Berlin was neither good nor bad, but in any case as was necessary for my undeniable feeling." And for Felice: "In spirit, I am united with you in a manner so indissoluble that no blessing of any rabbi could touch it." But Kafka continues to write to Grete, sharing with her his disenchantment, even his repulsion: "Sometimes—you are the only one to know it for the moment—I really do not know how I can assume such a responsibility, nor how it came to my getting married." This is one of the letters that Grete (with what intention?) communicates to Felice, as we learn on July 3, 1914, when he writes to Miss Bloch, breaking in so doing, or shortly thereafter, with her: "You should not have quoted letters. . . . Well then, I have therefore convinced you, and you begin to see in me not Felice's fiancé but Felice's danger." There are also painful debates on the material conditions of their future; Felice desires an apartment to her taste and comfortably furnished (the apartment, moreover, will be rented), just as she does not wish to give up a normal social life. Kafka is finally brought to trial at the Askanischer Hof on July 12, 1914, and the official break of the engagement occurs, much to the horror and surprise of both families.

I will stop here with this short history of the ruptures. The correspondence resumes in November 1914, again through the mediation of Grete Bloch (in the *Diary*, on October 15: "Today, Thursday . . . letter from Miss Bloch, I do not know what to do about it, I know it is certain that I will remain alone. . . . I also do not know whether I love F. (I think of the disgust I felt at seeing her while she was dancing . . .), but in spite of everything the infinite temptation returns," but never again at any moment will the exchange of letters regain the same flow as in the beginning. Kafka has changed and is changed: since July 29 (thus fifteen days after his condemnation) he has begun *The Trial*, writing every evening, every night, for three months. In January 1915, he will see Felice again in Bodenbach, without any real inner rapprochement. It will take the happy reunion of Marienbad in July 1916 for it to be again a question of engagement and, with the engagement, also a question of new ruptures.

§ 29 Friendship

How could one agree to speak of this friend? Neither in praise nor in the interest of some truth. The traits of his character, the forms of his existence, the episodes of his life, even in keeping with the search for which he felt himself responsible to the point of irresponsibility, belong to no one. There are no witnesses. Those who were closest say only what was close to them, not the distance that affirmed itself in this proximity, and distance ceases as soon as presence ceases. Vainly do we try to maintain, with our words, with our writings, what is absent; vainly do we offer it the appeal of our memories and a sort of figure, the joy of remaining with the day, life prolonged by a truthful appearance. We are only looking to fill a void, we cannot bear the pain: the affirmation of this void. Who could agree to receive its insignificance—an insignificance so enormous that we do not have a memory capable of containing it and such that we ourselves must already slip into oblivion in order to sustain it—the time of this slippage, the very enigma this insignificance represents? Everything we say tends to veil the one affirmation: that everything must fade and that we can remain loyal only so long as we watch over this fading movement, to which something in us that rejects all memory already belongs.

~

I know there are the books. The books remain, temporarily, even if their reading must open us to the necessity of this disappearance into

which they withdraw themselves. The books themselves refer to an existence. This existence, because it is no longer a presence, begins to be deployed in history, and in the worst of histories, literary history. Literary history, inquisitive, painstaking, in search of documents, takes hold of a deceased will and transforms into knowledge its own purchase on what has fallen to posterity. This is the moment of complete works. One wants to publish "everything," one wants to say "everything," as if one were anxious about only one thing: that everything be said; as if the "everything is said" would finally allow us to stop a dead voice, to stop the pitiful silence that arises from it and to contain firmly within a well-circumscribed horizon what the equivocal, posthumous anticipation still mixes in illusorily with the words of the living. As long as the one who is close to us exists and, with him, the thought in which he affirms himself, his thought opens itself to us, but preserved in this very relation, and what preserves it is not only the mobility of life (this would be very little), but the unpredictability introduced into this thought by the strangeness of the end. And this movement, unpredictable and always hidden in its infinite imminence—that of dying, perhaps—arises not because its term could not be given in advance, but because it never constitutes an event that takes place, even when it occurs, never a reality that can be grasped: ungraspable and henceforth entirely in the ungraspable is the one destined to this movement. It is this unpredictable that speaks when he speaks, it is this which in his lifetime conceals and reserves his thought, separates and frees it from all seizure, that of the outside as well as that of the inside.

I also know that, in his books, Georges Bataille seems to speak of himself with a freedom without restraint that should free us from all discretion—but that does not give us the right to put ourselves in his place, nor does it give us the power to speak in his absence. And is it certain that he speaks of himself? The "I" whose presence his search seems still to make manifest when it expresses itself, toward whom does it direct us? Certainly toward an I very different from the ego that those who knew him in the happy and unhappy particularity of life would like to evoke in the light of a memory. Everything leads one to think that the personless presence at stake in such a movement introduces an enigmatic relation into the existence of him who indeed decided to

speak of it but not to claim it as his own, still less to make of it an event of his biography (rather, a gap in which the biography disappears). And when we ask ourselves the question "Who was the subject of this experience?" this question is perhaps already an answer if, even to him who led it, the experience asserted itself in this interrogative form, by substituting the openness of a "Who?" without answer for the closed and singular "I"; not that this means that he had simply to ask himself "What is this I that I am?" but much more radically to recover himself without reprieve, no longer as "I" but as a "Who?," the unknown and slippery being of an indefinite "Who?"

~

We must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement. Friendship, this relation without dependence, without episode, yet into which all of the simplicity of life enters, passes by way of the recognition of the common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them, not to make of them a topic of conversations (or essays), but the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even on the most familiar terms, an infinite distance, the fundamental separation on the basis of which what separates becomes relation. Here discretion lies not in the simple refusal to put forward confidences (how vulgar this would be, even to think of it), but it is the interval, the pure interval that, from me to this other who is a friend, measures all that is between us, the interruption of being that never authorizes me to use him, or my knowledge of him (were it to praise him), and that, far from preventing all communication, brings us together in the difference and sometimes the silence of speech.

It is true that at a certain moment this discretion becomes the fissure of death. I could imagine that in one sense nothing has changed: in the "secret" between us that was capable of taking place, in the continuity of discourse, without interrupting it, there was already, from the time in which we were in the presence of one another, this imminent presence, though tacit, of the final discretion, and it is on the basis of this discretion that the precaution of friendly words calmly affirmed itself.

Words from one shore to the other shore, speech responding to someone who speaks from the other shore and where, even in our life, the measurelessness of the movement of dying would like to complete itself. And yet when the event itself comes, it brings this change: not the deepening of the separation but its erasure; not the widening of the caesura but its leveling out and the dissipation of the void between us where formerly there developed the frankness of a relation without history. In such a way that at present, what was close to us not only has ceased to approach but has lost even the truth of extreme distance. Thus death has the false virtue of appearing to return to intimacy those who have been divided by grave disagreements. This is because with death all that separates, disappears. What separates: what puts authentically in relation, the very abyss of relations in which lies, with simplicity, the agreement of friendly affirmation that is always maintained.

We should not, by means of artifice, pretend to carry on a dialogue. What has turned away from us also turns us away from that part which was our presence, and we must learn that when speech subsides, a speech that for years gave itself to an "exigency without regard," it is not only this exigent speech that has ceased, it is the silence that it made possible and from which it returned along an insensible slope toward the anxiety of time. Undoubtedly we will still be able to follow the same paths, we can let images come, we can appeal to an absence that we will imagine, by deceptive consolation, to be our own. We can, in a word, remember. But thought knows that one does not remember: without memory, without thought, it already struggles in the invisible where everything sinks back to indifference. This is thought's profound grief. It must accompany friendship into oblivion.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Georges Bataille, *La Peinture préhistorique: Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art* (Skira).

2. The word *transgression* certainly does not have the same meaning in each of these two moments. It would require lengthy elaborations to try and justify the use of this word in the first case. It seems, however, that later, when man in progress comes to surround himself with certain prohibitions, it is because of the fortuitous "transgression" of the gaps through which nature has, as it were, exceeded and transgressed itself as far back as the distant *Dryopithecus*. As strange as this may appear, the subsequent possibility of prohibition perhaps always arises from, and forms itself upon, an initial transgression. First we "transgress," and then we become conscious of the way thus opened by establishing bounds, defenses, which often limit us at other points altogether: the law, always breached because it is unbreachable.

Chapter 2

1. This text was written in 1950, when the last of the three volumes of *La Psychologie de l'art* appeared. All three volumes were published by Albert Skira, beginning in 1947, in an edition that Malraux has since substantially revised (*Les Voix du silence*, Gallimard).