Nothing on earth & Sparsely furnished worlds: narrative fiction and the problem of incompleteness

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Nothing on Earth

&

Sparsely furnished worlds: narrative fiction and the problem of incompleteness

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contain any material written or published by another person, except where due reference is made in the text. No part of the thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or diploma at any institution of higher education.

Thomas Gibson (Candidate)
ABSTRACT

Part A: Creative component

Nothing on Earth

The novel tells the story of an amnesic voyager, or ‘fugueur’, who is trying to retrace his own forgotten journey through the island of Madagascar. As he attempts to uncover what he has been doing in the country, and thus what might have compelled him to travel there, he finds himself repeatedly delayed by the people he meets along his way. But although these encounters on the road distract him from his search, they ultimately prove to be no less important to it than the clues he manages to recover. Raising as they do the themes of loss and memory, place and belonging, hope and nostalgia, they hold up a series of distorting mirrors to his own strange situation.

Part B: Theoretical component

Sparsely furnished worlds: narrative fiction and the problem of incompleteness

The thesis examines the ‘gaps’ in narrative fiction and what they mean for our understanding of fictional objects. In the philosophy of fiction it is sometimes argued that such objects are peculiarly incomplete, due to the fact that they are only partly determined by the fictional text in which they are constructed. What the narrative fails to tell us about the object leaves a gap in the object itself. Against this view, it is just as often argued that the objects are complete within the fiction, although they are only very partially revealed by the lacunary narrative. What the narrative omits to tell us leaves only a gap in our knowledge.

It is argued that neither of these positions can give an adequate account of the complex ways in which the gaps in the narrative affect our perception of fictional objects. What the narrative leaves unsaid has a decisive, yet rarely acknowledged, influence on the ‘ontological appearance’ of the fictional world—the sense of its reality or unreality, completeness or incompleteness, particularity or universality, and distance or proximity to the actual and familiar.
In order to explain this influence, the thesis sets out a broad typology of narrative gaps, providing examples of the varied ways in which they can be employed in literary works. At the same time narratology is used to show how the effect of these omissions, or the way in which they are interpreted by the reader, depends fundamentally on narrative form. What emerges from this analysis is a general way of reading narratives ‘in the negative’, according to their kinds and ways of leaving out. Only through such reading is it possible to arrive at a more nuanced answer to the question of how the gaps in the narrative affect the ontological texture of the fictional world.
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Part A

Nothing on Earth
It is still early morning when he finds the station. On the grey cement-block wall of the building, written in police blue, is a sign which reads POLISY and an emblem of a long-horned bull. Without pausing to catch his breath, he runs up the stairs and pushes the door, entering a bare room lined with metal filing cabinets and lit by a single window. At the end of the room, facing him, a man in a pale brown uniform is standing on a desk, reaching up to tap a light tube on the ceiling. The man glances down.

‘Plus tard, Monsieur. Le poste n’est pas ouvert.’

‘No,’ he gasps, ‘it’s urgent. C’est grave.’

For a moment the man on the desk looks back at the light, then he steps to the floor and takes up a packet of cigarettes, apparently prepared, or at least not refusing, to listen. But now the policeman is waiting he finds that the words have escaped him.

‘I . . . ’ is all he manages.

‘Vous êtes anglais?’

‘Oui . . . non . . . Australian.’

The policeman frowns at this distinction, or perhaps only at his lighter, which he shakes beside his ear.

‘Et vous êtes tourist?’

‘No . . . I don’t know, not exactly.’

So what exactly, the policeman asks, still in French, would he say that he is doing here?

‘Je ne sais pas.’

With no change of expression, the man in uniform draws deeply on his cigarette and leans back on the desk. ‘Vous ne savez pas,’ he says, exhaling.

‘No, that’s right, I don’t remember. Je l’ai oublié. J’ai oublié tout . . .’

‘Oublié,’ the gendarme repeats.

Afraid that his voice will fail again, he only nods. It is hopeless. Who will believe him when he can hardly believe it himself?

But now the gendarme is reaching out and clicking his fingers impatiently: ‘Votre passeport, Monsieur.’

‘C’est à l’hôtel.’

The gendarme frowns: ‘Quel hôtel?’
‘Fila . . . Filo . . .’
‘L’Hôtel Filefana?’
He thinks so, yes.
‘Et votre nom, Monsieur? Your name?’
‘F . . . ’ he begins, but at that moment the interview is brought to a halt. With a sudden bang of the door, a man in a straw hat bursts into the room and starts shouting at the gendarme in an unknown tongue, stabbing his hand towards the street to indicate, presumably, some accident or misdeed outside. In a trail of smoke the gendarme follows the intruder out, not bothering to excuse himself as he leaves.

Now left alone, he goes to the desk and takes a cigarette from the gendarme’s packet, which he lights with trembling hands. Through the dust-streaked window he can see a group of boys on a grassless field behind the station practising karate, their thin limbs twisting athletically against the sunlit orange earth. It’s not possible. From his throat comes a cry he has not heard since he was a child. What has happened to him?

He lowers himself onto a chair and sits completely still. On the wall in front of him there are scraps of sticky tape and remnants of posters, a clock whose second hand twitches at the bottom of its arc without moving forward. Everything stands out with a peculiarly distant clarity, as if seen backwards through binoculars. Eight days, he thinks. Eight days of night.

He watches the ash from the cigarette break off and settle on his lap, an inch of pale grey fluff. So whose clothes is he wearing? The floral shorts he pulled on in the hotel room are certainly not his—they are hideous—and nor is the shirt, although it has a perfume which he knows. Vanilla, it occurs to him; his clothes smell of vanilla . . . But as he sniffs at his sleeves he hears footsteps on the stairs and gets up with a start.

It is not the gendarme who appears first this time, but another officer, a stocky man with a closely cropped head and an air of authority, a sergeant perhaps, who on seeing him in the room turns back to his colleague to demand an explanation. As the gendarme obliges, the sergeant glances back at him with increasing frequency, each time with a widening smile of amusement which soon spreads to the gendarme’s face as well. When the sergeant is satisfied with what he has heard he holds up a hand and, still smiling broadly, sits down behind his desk.

‘Vous souffrez d’une perte de mémoire, c’est ça?’
That’s right, he answers. He can’t explain it.
At this the sergeant’s eyebrows lift ambiguously: ‘Qu’est-ce que vous faisiez hier soir?’
Last night? He doesn’t know . . . He can’t even remember how he got here.
The sergeant examines him with a bloodshot gaze and winks, conspiratorial. ‘Vous aimez boire un coup, hein? C’est juste la gueule de bois!’ To make himself clear he forms a bottle with his fist and sucks on his extended thumb.

‘No, it’s not . . . ’ he begins.

But the sergeant, without listening, swivels on his chair and pulls something from the filing cabinet behind him: a tin cup and a wide-necked jar in which some kind of fruit, lychees perhaps, are turning in transparent fluid. He half fills the cup and thrusts it towards him.

‘Buvez!’ he commands. ‘C’est le remède, ça.’

Sensing he has little choice, he takes a sip of the fruity rum and puts the cup down with a clatter. The sergeant leans back in his chair and studies him anew, massaging the back of his head.

‘Vous tremblez,’ he observes.

He looks down at his hands, unable to still them.

‘Vous êtes malade? Vous avez une fièvre peut-être.’

‘Perhaps . . . ’ His voice, too, is trembling.

In the same unrecognizable language as before the sergeant confers for a minute with the gendarme, then stands up from the desk. His colleague, he announces, will take him to the clinic; it is a doctor he needs, not the police. And holding out an arm he shepherds him towards the door.

Without wasting any time the junior officer puts on his cap and leads him back out to the street, an orange road lined with tall orange houses which he barely saw as he ran through the town and does not recognize. He turns and looks up dizzily at the wooden balconies that jut above him, at the same time dazed and tensed for flight. Then a shout makes him jump. Already some way down the road, the gendarme has stopped and is beckoning impatiently; he runs to catch up. To his relief the road ahead of them is empty, save for two very thin men dressed in what appear to be togas, their faces grave, who avert their eyes as they pass. As they get closer to the centre of the town, however, he can sense curious eyes all around him, peering out from the roadside shops and stalls between the stacks of food and cartons on the counters. The young women stare at him in seeming amusement: a freak. What has happened to him?

Suddenly his guide turns down a steep lane carpeted with husks of maize, which falls towards the terraced rice fields in the valley plain. On either side are houses built from the same orange clay as the road, though whitened in patches with lime or blackened by soot. For the second time the gendarme glances back to make sure he is following, but still he says nothing.
Like the police station, the clinic is a low cement-block building set back slightly from the neighbouring houses. While the gendarme speaks to the nurse at the desk he waits in the doorway and clings to the wall, again overcome with a sense of vertigo, as if the linoleum floor were tilting beneath him. Then the gendarme turns and, with a mockingly courteous sweep of the hand, transfers him into the care of the nurse, at whom he casts a sporting wink as he leaves. The nurse points at a bench. There he waits until a few minutes later a doctor in a white coat appears and beckons for him to come into the surgery.

‘Bonjour,’ says the doctor when he has closed the door behind him, proceeding like the policeman in a trilled and unfamiliar French. Is it correct, he asks, that he feels feverish?

Perhaps, he answers. Perhaps it’s only the heat . . .

The doctor slides a thermometer up his sleeve: ‘And you have the amnésie, uh-huh?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Since what time?’

In the man’s tired eyes he sees a look of concern, even kindness; suddenly the words tumble out of him.

‘I’m not sure, I think it’s just over a week. I arrived on the twelfth, so it must be. I found the stamp in my passport this morning, but I don’t remember, I don’t remember a thing . . . I just woke up in the room and there were soldiers outside . . . There were soldiers in the street, they were singing . . .’

‘Doucement, doucement.’ The doctor holds up his hand. His English, he apologises, is not very good. Tell him slowly, he says, in French if he can. What is the last he remembers?

It’s strange, he replies after a moment, it’s not easy to say. For the last few weeks he has been working late. One day is like another . . . Surely he knows what he means, he adds helplessly. One’s life can become a little vague.

The doctor nods uncertainly, then he reaches for the thermometer and holds it to the light. ‘Pas de fièvre,’ he says, ‘c’est pas le palu.’

‘Le palu?’

‘La malaria.’

So it is not malaria; yet, despite the news, he feels no relief.

As the doctor puts the thermometer back in its glass he frowns: ‘So one week you voyage and remember . . . nothing?’

‘Voyage? I must have done, yes.’

And everything before he left his own country? His name, for example? His date of birth?

Of course, he says, he knows who he is . . . At least he thought so until now.
The doctor gets up and runs his fingers over his skull, then examines his pupils with a torch.

‘Que c’est étrange. I think you must rest here some more time. D’accord?’

He nods in relief, the sweetness of surrendering to expertise.

‘Bon,’ says the doctor, ‘venez,’ and, opening the door, he leads him down the corridor to a small hospital room, where he instructs him to wait while he fetches something to calm his nerves.

When the doctor has gone he lies down on the trolley-bed and stares up at the ceiling, across whose flaking surface a gecko is running upside down. Made dizzy by the movement he closes his eyes until the doctor returns carrying two pills in a plastic cup, which he refers to as ‘the calmative’. Although it might make him drowsy, the doctor warns, he should try not to sleep; in a short while he will have to answer more questions.

With surprising speed the pills do their work. His heart slows and his head hums with an electric murmur which is constant, reassuring. The doctor will take care of him; he should have come here first. But now that he is lying still even the calmative is not enough to keep his thoughts from circling back to those moments in the hotel room. Once again he can hear the din of the soldiers’ song and crunch of marching boots. He flings aside his sheet and runs naked to the balcony, where beneath him, dressed in camouflage gear and black berets, a band of men, of African men, is marching down an empty street, beating out a rhythmic cry that echoes from the walls of the buildings. His lips open to say ‘What the fuck?’ but his voice comes out a squeak. To the right the sun is rising over a valley streaked in mist, a jumble of red roofs, a spire, a field of maize. What place is this?

Back across the ceiling runs the upside-down gecko. He closes his eyes and sees himself standing in the middle of the hotel room, clutching his ribs in rising panic. The room is dim and has an unfamiliar smell. On a table in the corner lie some cigarettes and scattered coins, one of which he takes and holds up to the light. The coin falls, he is shaking. In the open cupboard he can see a sports bag which he upends on the bed, flinging aside a pile of clothes until he finds a plastic folder that contains his passport, cheques and paper money. The passport, yes. With frantic hands he flicks to the last used page, where, stamped in blue, he finds the same bull’s head, the emblem on the coin, only this time in the cradle of its horns there rests the outline of an island, radiating beams of light. Below the bull is the same word: MADAGASCAR.

Suddenly the door swings open and the doctor enters with a colleague, this one also dressed in white and carrying a clipboard under his elbow. How is he feeling now? Much better, he says with gratitude, the pills have made him feel much better. Side by side at the end of the trolley-bed the two men start to question him, beginning with his name, address, his
date of birth, at each answer making a brief note in the folder. His medical record? Fine. Medications? None. He feels that he is doing well until the second doctor, who has meanwhile lit a cigarette, asks from behind a veil of smoke who won the European Cup. From this point on the questions take a different turn. Who is the president of the United States? What is seven times eight? There are additions and subtractions which he answers as best he can. His head is tapped again for fractures, his knees for reflexes; the doctors leave.

As he lies there on the bed his thoughts cluster around the breach in his memory like sightseers on the rim of a crater, staring into darkness. He has a hole in him. Sick with vertigo he backs away, only to find himself standing on the hotel balcony again. Now dressed in a pair of underpants he grips the rail and looks out, stunned, at the island in the bull’s horns. Madagascar. The sound of the platoon has almost faded when the quiet is broken by a shriek. Directly below him in the street two girls in yellow have caught sight of him and are pointing up, convulsed with laughter, their arms held tight around each other’s necks to keep themselves from falling. Backwards and forwards they stagger in a tangle of yellow pinafores and brown limbs, almost collapsing each time they look up at him.

In the sedative haze he has lost all sense of time. The smell of the doctor’s smoke still lingers faintly in the room and fills his lungs with craving. It occurs to him suddenly—his slowness appals him—that he must have taken up smoking again, but at the thought of what else he might have been doing during the missing week he retreats in vertiginous fear. How many hours have passed now? At some stage he opens his eyes and looks up at the room’s high window to see a pair of legs in the hospital garden, a gardener perhaps, with calves as sturdy as the sapling beside him and giant feet splayed across the sun-baked earth. How did his own feet bring him here? He has lost his mind.

At last the doctors return again, this time with a third, who now takes charge of the examination and repeats the entire procedure one more time: the questions, the tapping, the light in the eyes. It is too much for him. As the doctors confer amongst themselves he sits up on the bed and cries out, ‘Tell me! Qu’est-ce qui m’est arrivé?’

The third doctor turns towards him and takes off his glasses, which he folds deliberately and holds like a pointer between finger and thumb.

The condition, he says, is one which he has never seen, but which he believes is termed a fugue. It is an amnesia of a rather special kind, a voyage which the voyager does not recall. The condition is not common, to be frank it is not common at all, but he believes it is the only diagnosis he can offer. He thinks—he points the glasses at him—that he is a fugueur.

‘Fugueur?’
The doctor nods. A fugueur is someone who takes flight, he says, but of his flight remembers nothing. It is rare indeed to make a voyage as long as he has in a fugue state such as this.

The case is so unusual, murmurs the second doctor with what sounds like admiration. ‘Mais pourquoi?’ he asks them. ‘What’s the cause of it?’

In silence the three doctors stand in a row with their hands behind their backs, looking down at him on the trolley-bed. Then the one who has taken charge steps forward from his colleagues, like the leading tenor, and continues.

Sometimes, he says, the fugue is an alternative to suicide. Instead of suicide one simply flees.

The humming in his head is louder now, less reassuring.

One escapes the intolerable, the doctor says, by saying ‘No!’ One disappears. This is the nature of the fugue. The fugueur flees from what is intolerable in order to avoid suicide—a reasonable choice, one might certainly say, but a choice which is not really his own. It is someone else who chooses. Yes. In choosing to escape, the fugueur ceases there and then to be himself. Sometimes he will call himself by a different name, sometimes by no name at all. And sometimes he will appear to others exactly as before. But in every case he is someone else, because later he remembers nothing. It is like this—he snaps his fingers loudly. When he wakes, all memory of the fugue has disappeared. That is the nature of the fugue.

Like a sleepwalker?

Precisely, nods the doctor, like a sleepwalker with open eyes.

He looks up in a daze. ‘But why? Why here?’

The fugue, the doctor answers, is a fantasy, a dream. As in a dream the fugueur flees in order to deny. Or in order, one might also say, to follow his desires. Perhaps his flight here is a sort of dream, only instead of dreaming he has done it.

‘But I never dreamed . . .’ He stops, his tongue thick. So what should he do now?

Clearly, the doctor tells him, the events of the morning have come as a shock. It is because of this that he can not even remember the last days before he fled. In time, of course, they should come back to him, unlike the days of the fugue itself. If he would like to, he can rest here and recover for a while, but otherwise . . . He shrugs. He can only advise that he travel home as quickly as he can.

‘The hotel,’ he manages, ‘I have a room . . .’

‘Comme vous préférez,’ the doctor says. But in that case he should take some sedatives with him; he will need them to stay calm.
They leave the room and walk back down the corridor, the doctors leading with their coat tails flapping, he a few paces behind. But when he has paid at the desk and turns to leave he finds they have abandoned him.

A fugue, he thinks as he walks out to the road. Could what they said be true? A long way below him his feet keep moving, the sensation of them oddly weak, as though they were the feet of someone else, dependable and unamazed, who is bearing him up this orange hill. To disappear and not remember: how could it be possible? And why, when he barely knows where it is, would he have chosen to come here? With the shock of a diver breaking the surface he gasps and shakes his head, trying to shake away his thoughts. If he wants to hold himself together he will have to save the questions until later. For now it is enough if he can simply find his way back to the hotel, find his room, lie down . . .

‘Monsieur?’

From the doorway of a house an old man is reaching out to him, proffering a wizened peach. He hurries on.

At the top of the hill the main street through the town is now bustling with pedestrians, many of the women with tall loads on their heads, while the men push barrows stacked with wood and sacks of grain. Doing his best to avoid their glances, he joins the stream, but has only gone a few steps when he feels his shirt tugged from behind and wheels in alarm. There in front of him, jumping and poking at each other’s arms, are the two girls dressed in yellow who spied him on the balcony that morning. ‘M’sieur!’ they clamour, ‘M’sieur! M’sieur!’ then in a classroom singsong that dissolves into laughter, ‘Bon-zoour Mon-sieur, ça va bi-en mer-ci!’

‘Aha . . . bonjour,’ he replies uneasily, and turns back up the street.

But as he continues the girls keep him company, darting around him in circles, first in front, then behind, always keeping a few feet of distance in order to observe him the better. Further up the road the crowd thickens and he feels his shirt tugged for a second time.

‘M’sieur, M’sieur, le marché! M’sieu!’

Somehow he finds himself diverted into a square filled with rows of stalls and baskets brimming with greens. Hobbled chickens lie squawking in the dust. The girls now flank him, studying his face expectantly as they make their way past a stall bedecked with ropes of sausages, another stacked with woven hats, a baby asleep in a barrow of charcoal. And then suddenly, when they have reached the middle of the square, fat drops of rain start falling through the sunlight, scattering the crowd.

In the shelter of a used clothes stall he turns and looks back through the downpour to find the square almost deserted. Like him, it seems that all the crowd has run to the cover of the awnings which stretch out from the houses on the fringe of the market, including the two
girls, who are nowhere to be seen. To avoid the trickle from the awning he retreats another step, pressing himself deeper into the rack of musty clothes. Then, to his shock, a hand pokes out beside him. ‘Come, come,’ he hears, ‘the rain . . . ’ And before he knows what is happening the hand has seized him by the elbow and is pulling him through the clothes, leading him into a tiny room whose entrance is completely hidden by the rack across its doorway. With the light now blocked by the clothes he can only just make out his rescuer: a small man with a gleaming forehead, dressed in pale suit trousers and a quilted anorak. Behind him, at the back of the room, is the vague shape of a second man, who is sitting bolt upright on the edge of a bed, his white eyes staring from the darkness.

‘You have not met my brother,’ says the one who is standing, waving at the bed. ‘He does not speak English, unfortunately.’ Then he waves again, saying, ‘Sit, sit! Please!’

Too dazed to reply, or do anything else, he does as he is told. Then the man sits down on his other side, so that the three of them are seated shoulder to shoulder along the floral coverlet. On the canopy outside the noise of the rain is growing louder, and to be heard above it the man raises his voice. ‘Allow me to introduce myself,’ he says, seizing his hand this time and shaking it, ‘Jean-Joseph.’ The name of his brother, who smiles widely but says nothing, is apparently Jean-Michel. Having turned towards him for the introductions, the two brothers now look back at the facing wall, only feet away, on which there is a poster of a man in a karate pose above the words THE TRUTH OF TAE KWAN DO. In the doorway to the left of it hangs a string of Christmas tinsel.

‘The rain will exhaust itself,’ says the man called Jean-Joseph.

He opens his mouth to reply but no words come out. How did the man guess he spoke English? Like the brothers he sits with his hands clasped on his knees, looking across at the kung-fu artist, who stares fiercely back. Then without a word the silent brother gets up from the bed and goes out through the internal door, returning a few moments later holding something in his hands: a large black plastic camera. Smiling in a mysterious way he puts the camera to his face and points it at the bed, holding this pose—knees bent, one eye screwed shut—for such a long time he wonders if it might not be a practical joke. It is long enough, at least, for all the tension in his body to go suddenly quite slack, like a broken rubber band. The slackness of surrender. It is the only way he will get through. Beneath the dresses in the doorway the sun is glinting on the ground; the rain drops rattle on the canopy. When the flash finally pops he imagines his face will show no more surprise than that of the man beside him. He has reached a place far beyond it already.

After the photograph has been taken Jean-Joseph gets up from the bed.

‘Come, come,’ he says, ‘some refreshment, please.’
Leading the way, as the man insists, he climbs a narrow staircase to a larger room, furnished like the first with a single bed, on which he sits and waits until his host appears, having from somewhere in the house procured a plastic cup of yoghurt and a spoon, which he hands to him with the instruction to ‘Eat, eat!’ Then the man sits opposite him on a wooden box and crosses his legs.

With the same docility he digs the spoon into the pot. The afternoon is getting stranger. As if thought by someone else, he hears the words form in his head: *I am eating yoghurt in a house in Madagascar.* Although it is the first food he has eaten all day, he finds the sweet stuff in his mouth difficult to swallow.

‘I have been thinking,’ his host says suddenly, ‘that perhaps I did not understand you quite correctly in the market . . .’ He breaks off with a frown and shakes his head in irritation. ‘You must forgive me, I have forgotten the name.’

‘My name?’

‘No, no, of course. The name you told me in the market yesterday, a place I think.’

‘Yesterday?’ His heart syncopates in panic.

‘Yes,’ continues Jean-Joseph, ‘you meant to ask me where it is, perhaps. For the box, I think?’

Dumbstruck, he shakes his head.

‘Do you not remember this?’

‘I . . . yes,’ he manages. ‘I think I’ve found it . . . yes.’

‘Good, good! I am glad.’ And the man does indeed look pleased for him, although still expectant, as if waiting to be reminded of the word he has forgotten. When no answer is forthcoming he adds, ‘I feared you did not understand me, with the noise, you know. My English is not clear enough.’

‘No, no,’ he assures him, hearing a note of hysteria brighten his voice. ‘It’s very clear . . . clear as a bell.’

‘Yes,’ the man goes on, ‘the problem is that I speak only to the students whom I teach. There are not so many people who speak English in my country, as you know.’

He seize on it: ‘You’re a teacher?’

‘I teach English and geography at the lycée, yes, and assist my brother in the market at week’s end.’ After a pause he adds, ‘Some more yoghurt perhaps?’

‘No, thank you, I’m fine . . . I should probably go.’

But, apparently not having heard him, Jean-Joseph stands up and puts the unfinished yoghurt on a shelf beside a plaster Christ.
‘Then I must apologise,’ he says, ‘I ought to have assisted you. It is in geography that I have failed as well as English. The name,—he clicks his tongue—‘I must confess I did not recognise.’

‘No, really . . .’ he murmurs, desperate to escape.

‘But it was urgent, I think. No?’

‘Look, it really doesn’t matter.’

The teacher nods, still looking puzzled, then suddenly he smiles. ‘No matter, no matter!’ he exclaims with a laugh, and throws open the doors to a small wooden balcony, letting afternoon light flood into the room. ‘The rain has exhausted itself,’ he announces. ‘Come, come!’

With a sense of relief he rises from the bed and joins his host on the balcony, which is only barely wide enough for the two of them. In the square below, the market has resumed already, the stall keepers dragging their baskets from the red pools of water, the chickens flapping their bedraggled wings. The balcony affords a good view of the town.

‘Where are you staying, if I might inquire?’

‘The Filafa . . .’

‘Ah yes, the Hôtel Filefana. That is very near the lycée where I teach. We could go there together, yes? If it would please you to make the visit?’

‘To the school, you mean?’

‘Yes, I will show you my school. That would be a pleasure for me.’

‘But you must be busy . . .’

‘No, no,’ the teacher insists, ‘I must go anyway,’ and holding out an arm he ushers him inside.

They return to the downstairs room and push through the screen of dresses into the square, where Jean-Michel, who is emptying the awning of water, puts down his pole and farewells him with a vigorous handshake.

The air is now so humid that he feels as though he is floating and the noise of the street seems to reach him from an inconceivable distance. Nothing is quite real. He sees two soldiers in black berets eating peaches as they stroll, a man in a toga blowing a fife. ‘Philosophy . . .’—from far away the teacher’s voice echoes—‘biology, geography, mathematics, religion . . .’ On a cracked plastic sign on the building ahead he reads the name of his hotel and suggests again that his companion must be busy; but the teacher is adamant. Submit, he tells himself; surrender. As he pulls his damp shirt from his skin he notices that the teacher, incredibly, is still dressed in his quilted coat.

Beyond the hotel they pass a field of maize from which a steeple rises to a crucifix, betraying a church amidst the rustling greenery. A cart comes towards them on wooden
wheels, drawn by a long-horned ox. And when a few minutes later they reach the school it is another ox which greets them, this one on the metal crest above the gate, apparently reading from an open book.

‘They’re everywhere,’ he murmurs, looking up.
‘The zebu? Yes, it is our emblem.’

They cross the yard and enter the first of the classrooms, where the tour begins. In the library they examine bookshelves stocked with ancient copies of Racine, Molière, the Nouveau Testament. On other shelves the titles are written in the same unknown language that covers the posters on the classroom walls. Then at last they come to Jean-Joseph’s own room, where the words are reassuringly familiar. English conjugations cover the blackboard: I am, I was, I have been. I fly, I flew, I have flown. As they stand together on the chalky podium the teacher turns to him.

‘And what is your own occupation, if I may inquire?’
‘Ah . . . well, I do surveys.’
‘You are a surveyor? So you are a geographer like me, I suppose!’
‘Actually . . .’ he begins, but before he can explain himself Jean-Joseph has taken him by the arm and is leading him excitedly to the back of the room.

‘Then I must certainly show you my map!’ he exclaims. ‘It is a curiosity.’

When they reach the window the teacher draws a blind, letting sunlight fall across a framed map of the world in an alcove beside them. Its colours have faded with age and it is stained with mould in several places. Across the top he can read the words LE MONDE, and at the bottom CARTE ISOCHRONIQUE. But when he examines the map, as he is clearly expected to do, he sees that the coloured shadings bear no more correspondence to national borders than they do to climate zones.

‘So what does it mean,’ he forces himself to ask, ‘an “isochronic map”?’
‘Yes, it is quite unusual,’ explains the teacher happily. ‘It shows how many days it took to travel to each place in the world. Each place was given a colour for the time which one must have spent to arrive there.’
‘From where, though?’
‘Whence? Paris, of course! The map is French.’

Between the island and Australia is an empty space of blue. I flew, I have flown, he thinks: impossible. He has only somehow clicked the wrong button, been connected to the wrong site. He might as well have been dropped here from the sky . . .

‘You see,’ continues Jean-Joseph, pointing to the legend, ‘it is more than twenty-five days to Madagascar. More than thirty to our town.’
He has been standing silent, open-mouthed, but collects himself: ‘It would look a bit different now.’

‘True, true,’ the teacher agrees. ‘Perhaps soon it will be all one colour, I think, for those who have the means.’ After a pause he adds with a laugh, ‘And this one will soon be one colour, too, if it remains here in the sun. One day it will be white, all white.’ He draws the blind again, returning the map to its shadowy recess in the wall. ‘So that is my map,’ he concludes. ‘It belonged once to Galliéni, do you know.’

‘Galliéni?’ he asks, stifling a yawn. He feels suddenly immensely tired.

‘The general who was ruling after Madagascar was invaded. My grand-grand-uncle was his interpreter. He kept the map when the general returned to France.’

When he fails to reply the teacher takes him by the arm again and leads him to the door. ‘Come, come,’ he says, ‘I will keep your company to the road, I think I have exhausted you.’

As he is led across the yard heat rises from the gravel in a steamy updraft which seems to carry his head aloft and humming, as if on a cushion. Ahead of him a maize field sways unreally, much too green, its leaves glinting in the sun like strips of coloured plastic. And then his head has been borne to the gate, where it looks down at a hand far below it, his own it seems, very pale against the dark hand which is pumping it. ‘It has been a pleasure,’ the teacher tells him, ‘a pleasure. Thank you for allowing me to practise my English.’ For a moment they stand beneath the book-reading ox, looking into the thicket on the far side of the road. Then the teacher turns to him with a look of sudden inquiry.

‘So have you sent the box already, if I may ask?’

‘The box?’

The teacher makes a cuboid gesture with his hands: ‘It is not called a box? Une boîte?’

‘Yes . . . box . . .’

‘Yes,’ says Jean-Joseph, ‘if you would like, I could assist you. At the post.’

He says nothing, but feels the question mark above his head.

‘The box you were carrying in the market,’ the teacher perseveres, carving another cube in the air. ‘I think I am not clear enough. Did you not intend to post it?’

The man has to be stopped. ‘It’s fine,’ he assures him. ‘It’s really okay.’

‘So you know where the parcels may be sent? If not . . .’

‘Yes,’ he interrupts, ‘I know where it is. Well, I guess I should be going. But thank you, thanks all the same.’ And without giving the teacher a backward glance, he turns and walks back down the orange road.

When he arrives at the hotel he goes to the back door through which he left in the morning, hoping to enter unnoticed, then, finding it locked, returns to the street.
RESTAURANT FILEFANA reads the sign above the door. Taking a deep breath he steps inside, where he is met immediately, as he feared he might be, with a loud greeting.

‘Bonsoir! Enfin!’

Still dazzled by the light he peers around him, unable to see anything but tables covered in gingham cloths and a row of bamboo harps along the nearest wall. But as his eyes adjust to the darkness the room emerges like a polaroid print until at last he is able to make out, sitting behind a counter at the end of the restaurant, a heavy-set woman dressed in trousers and a leather waistcoat, beside whom, one arm draped loosely across her shoulders, stands a second woman in a floral sarong who is a good deal younger and strikingly beautiful. As he approaches the counter he can see that the woman in the waistcoat is holding up, in an accusatory way, what looks like an old-fashioned key.

The door of his room, she tells him severely, was left open this morning and the key was on the floor. The one thing she asked him not to forget was to lock the room when he went out.

‘Je suis désolé,’ he stammers, but before he can think of an excuse the woman has continued.

And when she went to wake him in the morning, she complains, she found he had left without a word. Last night he told her he would have the breakfast.

Again he apologizes. He had to leave early, he says, to sort something out.

As if to see what she makes of this the woman glances up at her beautiful companion, who blinks her dark eyes slowly and gives a shrug. The woman in the waistcoat—the manageress he presumes—turns back to him and nods, as though accepting the apology, then looks down at the desk.

He hadn’t intended to stay so many nights, she tells him, tapping her finger on the counter. Then noticing his confusion she waves a slip of paper in the air. His lodging form, she explains: she has it out because a gendarme came by earlier to see it.

‘Un gendarme?’ he asks in alarm. What did he want?

As she told him, the woman replies, he wanted to see his form.

When he asks if he can see it the manageress seems puzzled, but pushes it towards him. The green slip of paper is indeed a registration form, officially stamped with a long-horned bull. On it are written his passport number, where he has come from, and the proposed duration of his stay at the Hotel Filefana, which is two nights. His intended destination, however, remains a mystery, as does the reason for his voyage, these two questions having been left unanswered. At least he didn’t change his name, he thinks; that must count for something. Aloud he asks if every hotel has a form like this.

‘Bien sûr.’
Does she know why the gendarme wanted to see it?

Because that is what the form is for, the woman answers with a shrug—at which her companion lets out a musical laugh and bumps her with her hip. The gendarmes are just curious, she adds, that’s all.

As he puts the form back on the counter he upsets the framed reception card and hastily sets it upright. At the top of the card, stamped in gold, is the word Bienvenue, while underneath, in various hands, are what appear to be translations done by guests. Tonga Soa! says the first. Välkommen! Bienvenuto! Welkom! At the bottom of the list the latest addition is in English: Welcome to the Hotel Filefana. As he recognizes the handwriting as his own he feels a wave of vertigo and backs away.

Dinner is at six o’clock, the manageress calls after him.

He nods distractedly and hurries up the stairs.

When he closes the door of his room the terror of the morning hits him like a blow. The clothes are still strewn where he left them; the sheet trails across the floor. He takes a cigarette from the packet on the table and goes out to the balcony, where, too weak to stand, he sinks down against the flaking stucco wall and hugs his knees to his chest. In the road below a car drives past, the explosive backfires of its engine making him jump in fright. It will be okay, he tells himself; he is lucky to have come through this unharmed. With any luck he should be home in a day or two, and everything will be okay. When the cigarette is finished he goes back inside and takes another of the sedatives, then lies face down amongst his clothes and, against all expectations, falls asleep.

The room, when he wakes, is dark and he can hear the sound of knocking.

‘Monsieur . . . Monsieur, le dîner est prêt.’

‘Yes,’ he calls back thickly. ‘I mean oui, oui j’arrive.’

He gets up and fumbles for his cigarette lighter, guiding himself by its flame to the light switch by the door. The low-watt bulb casts a sallow glow over the sagging bed and the dark plywood walls, through which he can hear the sound of a woman’s laughter in the neighbouring room. He looks around for his shoes, wondering where he left them, then gets down on his hands and knees and peers under the bed. It is not only his shoes he discovers. From the inch-deep dust he pulls out a comb, a traveller’s phrase book with the words ENGLISH-MALAGASY on the cover, and a small cardboard box. When he has hauled this collection into the middle of the room he picks up the box, which is dark grey and almost weightless. Compared with the shape the teacher drew in the air, it is also surprisingly small: the sort of box in which one would send a book, or perhaps a video-cassette. On its lid is the name M. RALAISOA, CÉSAIRE, but no address. He turns it over. Stuck to the back is a label on which two words have been written in the same deliberate capitals:
MISSION, LIBERTALIA.
When he has packed the bag with what he can only assume are his belongings, he lifts it onto the table and looks around him. All that now remains is the box, still lying where he tossed it the previous evening. And where else would it be? As much as he might have hoped that a night’s sleep would make it vanish, nothing has changed. It is still the same room, the same box, the same decision. For several seconds he stares down at it, then he fishes it from the waste tin and sits on the bed, weighing it lightly between his fingertips. In the waxed coating of the cardboard there are a few embedded grains of sand and what look like breadcrumbs, the unnerving signs of a history in which he knows he has some part. It is as if the object in his hands were the black box from an aeroplane, a record of his own flight. He shakes it beside his ear and listens again to the inconclusive rustle. He sniffs and smells ash. Through the open doors of the balcony gusts of wind blow the last dying fragments of the soldiers’ chant, which although it brings back the terror of the morning before is nevertheless comforting, a guarantee that he does have a yesterday, that he is one day further from the abyss. The last thing he should do is look back. He should get away from here as fast as he can, like an insect: one goal. But as much as he knows it he continues to sit there, frozen by what he is holding. As he turns it in his hands an image flashes through his mind of a man dressed in a stranger’s clothes, himself, his arms outstretched, stumbling through the town like a zombie, and although he recoils from the thought it is a moment too late. His hands have begun to shake again, filling him with helpless anger. Without decision he picks up his room key and hacks through the sellotape.

What unfolds from the end of the box, however, is so ordinary that it takes him by surprise. Absurdly, he imagined that everything he has forgotten would be rolled up inside like a spool of film, neat and complete. But in fact it looks more like a pillowslip. When he has shaken it out across his knees he can see that it is nothing more than a rectangle of white cloth, silk he thinks, but densely woven, completely unmarked and neatly hemmed around the edges. On one of the shorter sides—the only embellishment—a length of cord with a small loop at either end has been sewn into the hem. With a mixture of disappointment and puzzlement he lifts it by the loops and lets it flutter in the wind from the open doors. Then as he puts it down he notices that something has fallen at his feet: a piece of paper, a note. With a thumping heart he bends down and picks it up. But although the message is addressed in
French—‘Cher ami’—it continues thereafter in what can only be Malagasy: ‘Mandefa ny faneva fotsy . . .’ At the bottom of the page, almost as large as the message itself, is a tangled signature which he is just able, if he squints, to decipher as the name ‘Misson’.

Now that he has come this far he cannot help his curiosity. He fetches the phrase book from his bag and sits down again, scanning its pages for ‘fanevas’ and ‘fotsys’; but without a proper dictionary it is a hopeless task. ‘What a picturesque hamlet!’ he reads on one page. ‘An omelette please, sir!’ ‘Please, bring me a cob!’ Under the subheading SHOPPING his eyes fall on the dark phrase ‘Where is the memory department?’ which strikes him with particular force. He closes the book quickly and stuffs the piece of cloth back into its box, trying to convince himself it means nothing. On the point of throwing it back into the bin, however, he hesitates, and instead slips it into the outside pocket of the bag. Then he turns to the door and takes a deep breath: he is ready.

At the reception desk the patronne’s radiant companion is leaning on the counter with her chin in her palms, singing softly to the radio, and only when the song has finished does she call out for her boss, who appears from the door behind and lifts a chair down from one of the tables. There he sits and waits in a forest of upturned legs until she returns with his coffee and a plate of dry baguette, which although it is unasked for he forces himself to eat. Like an insect, he thinks. If he can narrow his will to the scope of an insect he will be able to get home. Luckily the overdose of calmatives he took the night before has left him with a stupid hum, a thickness in his thoughts, which makes it easier.

When he has paid his bill, and been told again where to find the taxis, he walks out through the dining room and into the gusty morning. But no sooner has his foot touched the pavement than the girls in the yellow pinafores, who, like little sentries, have been lying in wait, one on each side of the doorway, burst forward and start shouting in aggressively shrill voices: ‘M’sieu! M’sieu! Bonzou M’SIEUR!’ With a leap of alarm he pushes past them and strides on; then, hoping it will make them lose their interest, he stops to buy some cigarettes at a roadside stall. It is a decision he regrets. As he bends down for his bag, the girls, now pleading to be allowed to help, seize hold of one of the handles and start pulling him along, using the bag as a leash. He tries to wrench it free, but the girls only yield elastically without loosening their grip. Through the open doorways along the road he glimpses people in the shadows, but instead of cautioning the girls they look out at the performance with smiles of indulgence. Where is he being led? Now that they are approaching the centre of the town the girls have begun to dart from side to side without warning, making it impossible for him to set the course he wants. In fact the only way he can avoid tripping the other pedestrians with the bag is to follow them as closely as possible.
An army truck looms suddenly in the street ahead, and the girls, with a squeal, dart in straight across its path, leading him up a narrow side street lined with empty wooden stalls. The time has come to assert his authority. But before he has a chance the truck has turned towards them, completely blocking the exit: its wheels are so close to scraping the stalls on either side that there is not even an inch to squeeze past. Leaving no doubt who has right of way, the soldier at the wheel gesticulates and inches forward.

As he retreats up the lane with the truck grinding towards him his two tormentors let go of the bag and roll beneath one of the market stalls, shrieking victoriously. Meanwhile he continues in a crablike gait, casting glances over his shoulder at the advancing lorry.

At the first opportunity he slips into an alleyway between two houses, from which he emerges, disoriented, in the town square. Today it is empty and forlorn, an expanse of red earth scattered with chaff and pieces of broken basket which swirl in the gusts of wind. As he looks up at the darkening sky he hears an exclamation from behind and turns to find a man approaching: it is the English teacher’s brother. Grinning broadly, Jean-Michel comes up to him and shakes his hand before leading him with an inexplicable delight to the nearest door, which stripped of its camouflage of frocks he would never have recognized. For the second time he finds himself in the narrow downstairs room, into which the teacher himself, at a call from his brother, descends in a suit, as if dressed for church.

‘Ah, good morning. You are leaving?’

‘Yes, I need to get back . . .’

‘By taxi-brousse?’

His nod is followed by an awkward pause. Jean-Michel stands beaming strangely in the corner of the room, a loop of Christmas tinsel touching the top of his head. Since yesterday, he notices irreverently, the martial artist on the wall has been joined by another, this one leaping to an incredible height.

‘Well’—the teacher clears his throat—‘I am happy you could visit us again.’

‘I was just passing really. I should probably get going if I want a seat.’

With this he hoists the bag onto his shoulder, but as he does the teacher steps forward unexpectedly and pats it with his palm.

‘The box!’ he exclaims. ‘You have not delivered it.’

‘Ah, no, still no luck . . . But—’ On an impulse he sets down the bag and extracts the mysterious note, which he hands to the teacher. ‘I wondered if this might help me . . .’

‘Ah yes, I see. You would like me to translate it for you?’

‘If you could.’

‘Yes, yes, of course.’ Jean-Joseph takes a pair of glasses from his pocket and puts them on. ‘It says: Dear friend, I am sending you the white, hm . . . flag? No?’
‘It says a flag? Yes, that sounds right.’
‘I am sending you the white flag with all my hopes that you will join us.’ He pauses.
‘And then?’
‘The next sentence is not quite clear. I think . . . yes, I think it is too beautiful to be only . . .’ He stops again and taps his head: ‘Le cerveau?’
‘A brain?’
‘Yes, it is quite unusual. I think it is too beautiful to be only a brain-flag. With all amity . . . the name I cannot read.’
‘Misson.’
Jean-Joseph tilts his head and frowns at it dubiously. ‘With all amity, yes perhaps . . . Misson.’
‘That’s all there is?’
‘Yes. Dear Friend, I am sending you the white flag with all my hopes that you might join us. I think it is too good to remain only—a flag in the brain? A mental flag? In best friendship, Misson. I think that is right.’
He waits a moment, while Jean-Joseph is still puzzling, then holds out the parcel and points at the label.
‘So where is Libertalia?’
The teacher’s face lightens: ‘Ah yes, Libertalia! That is it!’
‘It?’
‘The name is so curious, I could not remember. It is the name you told me, yes?’
At the mention of the forgotten conversation he feels his armpits prickle. ‘Yes, I . . . Is it far from here?’
The teacher frowns and shakes his head. ‘It is not in Madagascar, I am fairly sure of that. At least I have never seen it on a map. Has your friend not told you where it is?’
‘My friend?’
‘Mister Misson?’
‘No . . . I don’t think so.’
‘But surely’—the teacher brushes the words on the box—‘this is where he is living?’
‘Well, I guess so, yes. Or staying at least.’
‘Then perhaps Libertalia is in England.’
‘England?’
‘You are not from England?’
‘Well, actually I’m from Australia.’
‘Ah, I did not realize!’ Jean-Joseph smiles and leans back, as if to re-examine him.
‘And it is not in your own country, perhaps?’
‘No, I wouldn’t think so. I’ve never heard of it.’

As the teacher hands back the note he frowns in thought. ‘If you will forgive me for saying so, your friend writes *comme un Français*. His letter is not quite correct.’

‘It does sound odd,’ he agrees. ‘And not much help either—but thanks all the same.’

‘No, no. No matter.’

Before they part Jean-Joseph gives him the address of the school in case he would like to correspond with the students, then the two brothers follow him outside, where they stand in front of the house until he has crossed the empty marketplace.

As soon as he is out of sight he breaks into an anxious half-jog, angry with himself for having broken his promise so soon. Go home: it is all he should be thinking. At the building marked POLISY he quickens to a run, and is soon on the outskirts of the town. The houses from here on start to thin, yet strangely the crowd thickens. As he weaves through the bodies he can sense the heads turning, but keeps his eyes on the ground. A young man dressed in a rice sack appears at his side, trying to sell him peanuts in a paper cone, but soon falls back exhausted. The sky is full of whirling debris and straw hats scoot past him like wheels, pursued by men in plastic sandals. And now he can see why the crowd has assembled. On a square of red earth, milling with vendors and touts and women with babies, is a row of Renault station wagons piled high with luggage: bush taxis. From the nearest two cars two men race towards him, shouting, ‘Nord!’, ‘Tana!’; ‘Tout de suite!’, and before he can stop them they have both seized his bag, pulling on opposite handles as they try to hoist it onto their roof racks. Like a football it sways in the air, the two men beneath it reaching up on tip-toes and casting him looks of appeal. Clearly he is meant to adjudicate—but now someone is tugging on the back of his shirt. ‘*M’sieu!* *M’sieu!*’ Even here the girls have managed to track him down. What is it they want from him? He steps forward, but immediately the pinching hands find him again.

‘*M’sieu!*’ Now desperate to get rid of them he spins on his heel and thrusts the box into their hands.

At the same moment the sky finally opens and rain whips across the square, blown sideways by the gusts. What has happened to his bag? It seems that victory has fallen to the driver of the white Renault, who is now squatting on the roof of the car, stowing his luggage under a sheet of wildly flapping plastic.

In the back seat the passengers make a few inches of space and he squeezes in beside a well-dressed man. Then the driver is with them, the engine coughs, they move across the square. At the turning to the road he looks back across the taxi station in time to glimpse the two girls standing in the driving rain with their arms raised high, the white flag flying above them in the wind.
Having tried for a while to engage him in conversation about where he has been, the well-dressed man seems to have decided, not without reason, that he is an imbecile. But what has rendered him speechless is not only the man’s questions: since the road began winding through the hills he has been mute with fear. On the corners of each descent the back wheels of the car slew sideways into the oncoming lane, and the windscreen is so fogged by rain and cigarette smoke that the road is almost invisible. Oblivious to the danger, the well-dressed man studies a newspaper and pops peanuts into his mouth, while further along the seat a young couple and their baby are soundly asleep, their three heads lolling in unison. To calm himself he concentrates on successive points in the distance: a red thatched house in the mist, a granite peak, a peasant whipping an ox through knee-deep mud.

After driving for several hours they stop to have lunch at a village roadhouse. Although he has no appetite, he finds that he has been ordered the same meal as the other passengers, a dish of rice and chicken broth which he leaves untouched, managing only a bottle of warm Fanta. In a daze he watches a fly drown itself in the bowl of chilli sauce in front of him. He gets up and goes outside to the verandah, beyond which the rain is still falling lightly, but without a breath of wind. From a spike on the edge of the building a vinyl Coca-Cola sign hangs like a pennant, as if marking a racing finish across the highway. He thinks to himself that he must have passed that line before, from the opposite direction. His thoughts are fleeting and friable, hard to keep a hold of. He thinks to himself that he is returning now in daylight on a road he has travelled before in darkness, or perhaps asleep. ‘No different,’ he whispers to himself. ‘It’s no different.’

Unable to bear the waiting—only motion seems to calm his nerves—he steps out into the rain and climbs above the roadhouse through a grove of mango trees whose fruit lie rotting on the ground. From here the path disappears into a thicket of bamboo. He hesitates a moment, wondering if he should turn back, but his agitation drives him on. The bamboo closes around him in a dense tunnel, blocking out the sky; the heavy stone steps lead him upwards.

Then at the top of the hill the tunnel ends abruptly at the edge of a clearing, a bald circle of orange earth enclosed by ancient poinciana and mango trees and, for one short section, by the corner of a field of maize. It is as if the summit has been given a perfect tonsure, the weeds clean-shaven, the fallen leaves raked into mounds beneath the trees. But it is not until he steps into the open that he can see why the place is so well tended: at the far side of the clearing is a house. With a trespasser’s guilt he steps back quietly towards the path, then stops and looks again. On a second glance he can see that the house is not a house at all,
or at least not a house for adults: it is barely larger than a kennel. Built from greying timber with a shingled roof, it sits atop a massive stonework plinth around whose perimeter pots of geraniums and zebu skulls have been arranged in neat rows. In the peak of the gable hangs another skull whose curved horns form a jutting finial. As he walks forward to the plinth he can see that several of its stones are engraved with words in Malagasy: an epitaph, perhaps. It must be some kind of tomb. In the rainy silence of the clearing he stands in front of the tiny house, which for the first time that day is something which he cannot put a distance to: a presence, not an image. But whether it is the tomb itself that does it, or just the sense of solitude, the shield of unreality that has kept his plight from touching him now suddenly cracks open. He is on a hill in Madagascar . . . As he takes in the fact his breath begins to shake and he screws his eyes tight shut, as if the muscles of his face might squeeze out the truth. But there in front of him, when he opens his eyes, are the long-horned skulls and quivering flowers. The dream is not ready to end. Slowly he steps backwards to the centre of the clearing, where on an impulse he squats down and picks up a clod of the orange earth and crumbles it in his hand. It is no dream. In sudden anger at himself, he clamps the handful of wet loam across his nose and mouth, forcing himself to choke on its reality, to smell and taste what he has done in coming here. But the gesture brings him no relief. As quickly ashamed as he was angry, he stands and wipes his face. Then he turns and runs in a headlong flight back through the forest of bamboo.

At the inn the other passengers are now on the verandah, the men leaning on the posts and smoking while the woman feeds her baby. When the driver flicks his butt away it is the signal to go on.

For another hour he stares out in unseeing blankness at the terraced hills cascading with water. No longer recognized, things melt to a nonsense of shadows and rain-blurred light. In fact so deeply has he retreated into himself that he is not even aware that the car has slowed until a face appears at his window—a small boy who manages to keep pace beside him, pressing tiny river crayfish to the glass and shouting out his price until at last he tires and recedes into the mist. As the incline steepens the taxi slows to a walking pace: it is clear they are in serious trouble. Hunched over the wheel, the driver responds with a beleaguered ‘Hah’ to the accusations of the passengers. The baby wails.

In this way they limp on to the outskirts of the next town, where the driver stops before a tin shed overgrown with bougainvillea and begins to unload the luggage from the roof. With parting complaints the passengers disperse.

Forced unwillingly into action he heads down the road, trying to keep sight of the well-dressed man ahead of him, who with any luck should lead him to the station. But when he reaches the heart of the town his guide is soon lost in the throng and the directions he
receives from a shopkeeper, in French more broken than his own, make little sense. After almost an hour of searching in widening circles through a maze of squalid lanes and alleyways he finds the taxi station north, where he is told by the man at the booth that the last car of the day has just departed.

The news breaks him. He leaves the station and wanders wretchedly through the wet streets, taking turns at random. On a flooded stretch of pavement he stumbles over the legs of a beggar and falls outstretched in the mud. As he runs back in horror the way he has come, a rickshaw driver offers him a ride which he gladly accepts, and is soon deposited in front of an expensive-looking hotel. It is now late afternoon. Exhausted, and in a state of high anxiety, he stumbles to his room and strips, then, dosed with two pink pills, lies curled at the foot of the mattress with a pillow over his head and lapses into semi-consciousness for the remaining daylight hours.

Finally driven from his room by hunger he leaves the hotel in search of a restaurant. Outside it is still raining gently and the only light in the street comes from the lanterns of the roadside stalls, in whose arcs of light figures appear for a moment on the footpath before vanishing again into darkness. Rickshaw drivers run through the flooded streets shaking bells, their rickshaws lit from within like phosphorescent insects. Suddenly a man steps out of the night and grips him by the arm.

‘Monsieur, vous désirez?’

He points across the street towards an open bar, outside of which stand four young women dressed in bright, close-fitting tops who are talking to a fat and visibly delighted foreigner. Perhaps it is the women he is pointing to, perhaps the bar.

‘Oui?’ the man prompts.

‘Oui?’ he repeats in confusion.

‘Venez,’ the man insists, and still holding him by the arm he steps into the street.

But with a tug he breaks free of the man and steps back to the pavement: ‘Non, non. Je suis désolé.’

The man shrugs—‘Bien!’—and runs his hands down the front of his black satin shirt, as if trying to wipe them clean. Then he holds up his palm in a signal to wait and dashes across the road.

As soon as the man has turned his back he continues briskly up the street and ducks out of sight into a restaurant—a single room, barely higher than himself, whose only light comes from the door of the kitchen at one end and a flickering television at the other. From
the door comes the sound of voices, but he can see no-one. Ducking his head, he makes his way to a table facing the screen, where a few moments later he is joined by a teenage waiter in a basketball singlet.

‘Steak frîtes,’ the boy tells him when he asks for the menu.

‘C’est tout?’

‘Oui, steak frîtes.’

‘Des frîtes,’ he says. ‘Just frîtes.’

When he has been left alone he leans back in his chair and lights a cigarette, a little celebration. Never has he felt so relieved to have a day behind him. To cancel any thought of it he lets his eyes drift to the screen, where a young Clint Eastwood is chewing, grim-faced, on a stub of cigarillo. But although the image is reassuringly familiar, the voice that issues from the actor’s mouth is a travesty. ‘Donnez-moi les revolvers,’ he growls to a pair of cowboys, his lips moving so little that the dubbing is almost undetectable. At that moment a cat jumps onto the chair next to his own and rubs its chin against his elbow. Clint Eastwood spits from the corner of his mouth and squints across the saloon. ‘C’est à vous de décider,’ he challenges hoarsely. Through half-closed eyes he stares down the two cowboys, waiting for the slightest inclination of their hands toward their holsters.

Distracted by a movement at his feet he looks down to find a second cat prowling between his legs, and when he follows its path across the room he sees several more curled up on chairs around the restaurant. The room, in fact, is full of them: there is even one lying on a shelf beneath the TV set. For a while he ignores the stand-off on the screen and strokes the cat beside him—then, hearing shots, he looks up in time to see the two men in moleskins slide down the wall of the bar, clasping their guts in bloodied hands.

A cheer sounds from the back of the room and he turns to see the boy in the singlet standing at the kitchen door with the dinner in his hand, shaking a fist triumphantly at the television. Without taking his eyes off the screen the boy comes slowly towards the table, nodding with enthusiasm as the men in moleskins slump sideways and apparently die. When he has set down the plate he stands for a moment longer, watching the screen with shining eyes, until a shout from the kitchen makes him turn on his heels and retreat reluctantly to the doorway.

As he eats his chips he tries to convince himself that, given his situation, he hasn’t done so badly. He has come a good distance towards the capital and even kept himself together, more or less. With any luck he might even reach the airport in the morning. But just as he as he is cleaning the last scraps from his plate his self-congratulations are shattered. Feeling something brush against the back of his neck, he throws up his hands in fright, sending his knife and fork clattering to the floor. Expecting the waiter he twists in his chair.
and looks up—but instead of the boy he finds a woman smiling down at him. She is dressed entirely in green and is aged around thirty, with a rounded face and tightly braided hair. Without a word the woman tips the cat off the chair and sits down beside him.

‘Ah . . . bonsoir,’ he stammers.

The woman nods and replies, in Malagasy, with what he guesses is the equivalent.

Too surprised to say more he points at the floor and bends down for his cutlery. But as he stretches out his arm for the knife he feels the woman’s hand touch him again on the small of his back and sits up with a start, banging his head on the underside of the table. At this second misfortune the woman makes a tutting sound and frowns in concern.

‘No, it’s fine,’ he tells her, rubbing his head. ‘It’s really nothing. Ça va.’

The woman shrugs uncomprehendingly. For a moment she gives him a knowing, almost familiar smile, then she turns her gaze towards the television, where to a whistling cowboy tune the credits to the Eastwood film are rolling up across a grassy plain. Still rubbing his head, he glances back at the empty restaurant, wondering what it was that made her choose his table. As if aware of the question the woman turns and gives him a reassuring smile, this time with a look of such complicity that he can’t help wondering if he has met her before. Everything, she seems to be telling him, is exactly as it ought to be. He searches her face for a clue, but all he sees is a woman with dark, intelligent eyes—attractive, but for a slightly bulbous forehead. As they look at each other, unable to communicate, the woman begins to laugh in embarrassment. Then one of the cats jumps onto the table to investigate the empty plate and she knocks it back to the floor with a sharp swipe of her hand.

At that moment an explosive crack from the television makes them both look up. Without announcement the screen has erupted into fireworks. The Eiffel Tower is throwing off a shower of sparks that begins a global relay, jumping first to Big Ben, then a moment later to Times Square, which crackles with gunpowder and neon lights. The beaches of Rio, the Brandenburg Gate, somewhere a pagoda that resembles Angkor Wat: everything is on fire, the whole world exploding on the screen above the sleeping cat. And for what seems like an eternity the fireworks continue, lighting up the skies over cities and harbours, shooting bright confetti from the arcs of bridges and the spires of temples—even, somewhere in Africa, he guesses, from the crown of a baobab tree.

Then as suddenly as they began, they cease.

‘Le Danemark,’ says a low voice on the television.

On an oil rig high above the ocean a blonde soprano in a satin gown is warbling Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* as dawn breaks over the North Sea. While she sings she is joined in chorus by a crew of Danish riggers, all dressed alike in orange overalls and matching helmets,
who begin to circle her, linking their hands around the circumference of the heliport as the sun spills its molten blaze over the rim of the horizon.

Side by side at the table, he and the woman sit rapt as children before the flickering TV set. A dramatic aerial shot now shows the oil rig from above. The workers are concluding the Ode to Joy with their heads thrown back exultantly, the blonde soprano whirling like a dervish at the centre of the heliport, her hair streaming in the wind. Then the deep voice on the television booms, ‘Le Samoa,’ and a file of men in grass skirts marches through the night, juggling fire-brands to the rhythm of a frenzied drumming. Behind them, on the steps of a high-rise Hilton hotel, a giant clock encrusted with cowrie shells shows the time as five to twelve. It dawns on him that he must be watching New Year festivities—perhaps from the turn of the millennium. But why now, a year late? And why here? The shell-covered hand of the clock jumps one minute closer to the vertical; the drumming intensifies. Like an audience of two in an empty theatre they sit watching the screen, waiting for the next movement of the hand. The burning brands twirl in the darkness; another minute passes.

With a sudden sense that someone is behind him he turns his head to find the man in the black satin shirt standing framed in the doorway of the restaurant. Hypnotized by the television, the man does not at first notice that he has been seen—but as soon as he catches his eye he melts back into the night, leaving him feeling slightly uneasy.

‘La Nouvelle-Zélande,’ intones the voice on the television, ‘L’Espagne, La Kiribati, Le Singapour, La République Tchèque . . .’

Clock after clock strikes midnight around the globe in a night-long carnival of ribbons and champagne, the whole world hypnotized, like the man in the shirt, by its own reflected image, the rapture of its televised present.

Then the screen turns suddenly dark. He and the woman are looking down on the Earth from a slowly parting spaceship, the blue curve of the globe beneath a spiral of cloud. ‘Le monde,’ says a woman’s voice as the planet recedes. ‘The world,’ says another. ‘El mundo, il mondo, der Welt . . .’ in various voices and accents. Long after the list has ended the world continues to shrink into the vastness of space, turning with a silent poignancy, like the final glimpse of an exile, until at last it dwindles to a bright dot at the centre of the screen, and, with a click of static, disappears.

The spell is broken. On the television the compere of a French variety show skips onstage like Fred Astaire, tossing a microphone from hand to hand.

He stands up from the table.

‘Well,’ he says to the woman, ‘nice meeting you.’

Without replying, however, the woman also stands and pushes in her chair. On the assumption that she has risen out of courtesy he offers her his hand—but instead of shaking it,
the woman grips it in her own and leads him to the kitchen door, where she calls out sharply for the waiter, who emerges, looking slightly sullen, with a towel across his shoulder. While the woman oversees the transaction he pays for his meal, then followed to the door by a ginger cat the two of them leave the restaurant.

Beyond the spill of light from the doorway the street is completely dark and the rain is falling more heavily than before. Two rickshaws are pulled up on the pavement outside. In competition for the foreigner’s fare the drivers call out their numbers and pull back the plastic sheets, gesturing for him to take shelter. Given a gentle push by the woman he gets inside the nearer of the two and finds himself in a transparent cocoon, lit inside by a candle-lantern hanging from the hood. After conferring with the driver the woman also boards the rickshaw, which a moment later is heading down the rainy street at a brisk jog.

Taken aback, he asks the woman in French where they are going, to which she responds with an almost comic look of incomprehension, simultaneously shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head. With more urgency he asks her again, first in French and then in English, which this time seems to do the trick. ‘Hotely,’ she says. Suddenly it occurs to him that the woman is a prostitute, and the man in the black satin shirt her pimp. Of course, that would explain it. Yet when he pictures the group of women he saw earlier in the evening he feels certain she wasn’t among them. Aside from anything else, the dark green skirt and jacket she is wearing are forbiddingly demure. To check their route he lifts the plastic curtain and sees the same row of stalls he passed on the way to the restaurant. Relieved, he lets the curtain fall.

The woman is tapping his arm. When she has his attention she takes something from her handbag and holds it up to the flame in front of her; but at that moment the rickshaw hits a pothole and the lantern swings wildly, throwing a seesawing light around the cabin. In the flashes he can just make out a sort of dome, a plastic paperweight perhaps, which as the lantern steadies he can see contains a brightly coloured landscape. On a yellow beach in a cobalt sea tiny palm trees sprout against the sky like lollipops. An island: it is emblematic, almost cartoonish. Without a word the woman then inverts the souvenir before righting it again. Where a moment ago the island appeared there is now nothing but an empty square. Then slowly the colours of the sea, the sand, and the palm trees reassert themselves on the white background like a photograph in developing fluid. Again she inverts and rights the dome, and again the window turns white. Then the outline of the island emerges once more in a slow seep of colours.

He looks across at the woman, whose face is glowing with a strangely excited smile, as if anticipating his reaction. Now he thinks he has understood: it is the souvenir she hopes to
sell him, nothing more. He reaches out for the dome and takes it in his hand, turning it once or twice in a show of discrimination before reaching into his pocket for some notes.

‘C’est combien?’ he asks her, showing her the money. ‘How much?’

The smile has vanished from the woman’s face. With a baffled frown she takes back the souvenir and holds it directly in front of him, looking back and forth between it and himself as if to indicate some connection through the movement of her eyes. He likewise looks back and forth between the globe and the woman, trying to grasp her meaning.

‘What is it?’ he asks. ‘Je ne comprends pas.’

Bobbing with the driver’s step, the rickshaw slows to a walking pace; they turn a corner. At that moment the woman lets loose in a stream of Malagasy, imploringly, it seems to him, beseeching him, tossing her head in emphasis. But she is out of time. Suddenly the rickshaw stops and tilts forward as the shafts drop to the ground. Slick with rain the driver appears and pulls back the plastic sheet. They are in front of his hotel.

He gets out onto the pavement and pays the man with the notes he still has clutched in his fist; but to his surprise the woman remains seated in the conveyance, silent now, holding the island up dispiritedly in one hand. As he waits for her to join him, the driver lifts the shafts and braces himself to continue. The spoked wheels begin to move. On the kerb he bends and peers inside the glowing canopy to find the woman now recoiling in the far corner, looking up at him with an expression of bewildered distrust, even fear.

‘Libertalia!’ she cries suddenly, shaking the dome in his face, ‘Libertalia!’

But before he has a chance to reply, the rickshaw is heading into the night.
A DREAM - TO THE CAPITAL - HELGA’S STORY – REVOLUTION

She comes to him later, under the cover of darkness, and takes him by both hands, drawing him towards her. There is nothing erotic in it: the woman’s face is solemn. Besides, it is only a dream. Slowly she steps backwards and they move off, face to face like two figure-skaters. There is no friction, no resistance.

As they glide through the darkness the woman looks up at him with her serious eyes, but he finds it difficult to return her gaze, for her forehead, which is naturally prominent, has begun to bulge like a balloon, horribly distorting her features. Eyes, ears, nose, mouth, cheeks: everything runs down towards her chin and disappears. Soon all that remains of her head is a featureless convexity, a brightly coloured dome. The dome keeps swelling until it has engulfed him entirely. He finds himself in a sunlit scene, sprouting with palm trees.

Onward he glides to a cobalt sea where, line after line, the waves break silently on a yellow shore. The woman is nowhere to be seen, but from somewhere distant comes her voice.

‘Ambassador!’ she calls, ‘Ambassador!’

At that moment he feels a hand on his neck and wheels in alarm. On the beach before him stand the three doctors, their hands clasped behind their backs, dressed in surgical gowns which flutter in the warm sea breeze.

‘Let us show you our map,’ they cry in unison. ‘It is crazy! It’s so crazy!’

With a magician’s flourish one of them unfolds a white flag like a banner, an old-fashioned proclamation, and holds it up between his outstretched arms, while on cue his colleagues step to either side in neatly choreographed movements, producing from behind their backs the kind of batons used by lecturers and weather men. Wielding their pointers they begin to trace invisible outlines on the surface of the flag—the straight surveyor’s lines and erratic rivers and shores which mark the borders of nations. When each border is done they tap the invisible territory with their sticks, as if conducting a geography lesson, and proclaim, in French, the word ‘Suicide!’

Country by country, they proceed in the same way.

Country by country: ‘Suicide! Suicide!’
To the north of the town the landscape becomes barer and more scarred, the eroded hills dotted with tall red houses amidst coppiced eucalypts, and on the summits of some with boxlike concrete tombs. Air rushes through the car in a steady blast of heat; an African dance tune crackles from the speakers.

He feels better today than yesterday, his head clearer, although still he has a sense that some large part of himself is missing, that only the essential systems are in order. But perhaps it has been like that for longer than he knows.

Since they left the town he has found his gaze has kept returning to the woman in the seat ahead, whose face, with its rounded cheeks and deeply-set eyes, reminds him strongly of the woman he met the night before. Each time he looks at her he sees the mysterious smile of excitement as she pulled the souvenir from her bag, turning first to mute astonishment and then to something closer to fear. As he thinks of her cowering in the rickshaw he realizes how absurd it was to look for her this morning: had she been in the café, she would more than likely have run away at the sight of him. Again he tells himself to leave the thought alone, to let the missing days remain a dream. The only thing that matters is to get away.

At a thatched fruit stall beside the road the driver halts for a toilet stop and the passengers disperse into the bushes. As he waits by the car, smoking a cigarette, he has a sudden memory of all the buses he has caught, whether in New South Wales or Wales or Pennsylvania, in every one of them the same moronic patter of the driver, informing him that, for his convenience, the rest room is located towards the rear of the coach, enjoining him, for the comfort of others, to ensure the door is bolted from inside . . . The pallid, self-protective culture of the west, of which he is no doubt the exemplary product. So little contingency remains in his life, so little spontaneity, that he is not even able to remember it. The doctor said that the days before his sickness would come back to him, but what is there to come back? He drives to work, the results come in, he stares at his computer. When he starts his car in the evening the music continues, for his convenience, as if it had never left off. His life is vacuum-packed. Nothing intrudes, there is nothing outside. Even when he flies interstate he rarely feels the temperature; in fact he finds it increasingly hard to tell one city from another. No, he thinks, there’s not much to hold on to . . .

The driver honks and they squeeze back into the car, eating plums as they continue. On a long ascent they pass a group of tourists on bicycles, all of them dressed in lycra bodysuits and wrap-around shades, their faces puce and sweating. In amusement the other passengers crane their necks to watch, trading jokes he doesn’t understand, then when they have lost sight of the cyclists turn their attention to him instead, a slightly mocking curiosity, as if seeing him in a different light. He smiles back in embarrassment, then looks away.
For a long time he stares out across the same high country of eroded hills and terraces, but with the eyes of someone else, as if it were still his double who is seeing it, rather than himself. What he sees, instead, is once again the figure in the stranger’s clothes walking stiffly through the market with the box held out in front of him, although now his head is bound in cloth, a blindfold or a mask, and he stumbles as he tries to find a passage through the crowd. Like an ambassador sent to save a lost compatriot he strides across the square and takes him by the arm, guiding him heroically to safety. Repatriating him, he thinks: taking himself back home. Although he knows the thought is absurd, the image lingers, and he holds on to it with a guilty conviction, as if it can explain what he is doing here. He has come to rescue himself, to take himself back before it is too late.

The motion of the car has rocked the other passengers to sleep. He lets his head fall back, his eyes close; sunlight falls across his face. He will get himself home, he thinks: he can do it. In just a few hours, with any luck, he will see the only view he really craves: the sunlit, glorious no-man’s land of clouds.

At midday he carries his bag through the outskirts of the city, feeling conspicuously pale and exposed. The city stinks. Between the mounds of uncollected garbage on the roadside a shirtless man approaches him, snapping his fingers to catch his attention. On his head he is wearing what appears to be a fluffy frog, a puppet, whose webbed feet are dangling behind his neck like the tail of a beaverskin cap. It is a cigarette the man is after. When he offers him the packet the man takes two, then, after taking his measure, plucks several more.

‘Good look!’ he says with a grin.

After a moment of confusion he realizes that the man is referring not to his headgear, but the brand name of the cigarettes.

‘Ah, yes,’ he replies, ‘Good Look,’ and holds the packet to his shoulder.

‘Américain?’ the man asks.

He shrugs assent; what difference does it make?

‘Où allez-vous?’

‘Au centre de la ville.’

With the legs of the puppet flapping on his shoulders the man leaps into the road and waves down a taxi, then opens the door, gives the driver his directions, and ushers him into the front seat. For an instant his face grins through the window and then the man is off, waving his fistful of cigarettes at a group of cheering men in the distance.
The cab makes its way along a narrow street of butcher’s stalls in which ribbons of meat hang darkening in the sun. The street widens. On either side are crumbling buildings interspersed with vacant lots where women squat on their haunches, holding saucepans over piles of smouldering refuse. Then they have emerged onto the shore of a decorative lake, where tattered shelters built from plastic bags and cardboard are met by the long reflection of a Hilton hotel on the other side. A few minutes later the lakeside road enters a grand avenue planted with trees and central lawns: the city centre.

When the taxi has gone he waits for its cloud of exhaust to clear and looks around him. At the far end of the avenue is a colonnaded train station surmounted by a clock face and the word TANANARIVE. Between the two wide lanes that lead to it are several gangs of stooping men, who are mowing the lawn with sickles. As he watches them labouring in the sun his eye is caught by a sign on the far side of the avenue: it is exactly what he wants. He makes a dash between cars.

The airline office is a small room decorated with wooden carvings of bulls’ heads, a poster of an aeroplane, and several more of tropical fruit. He takes the ticket from his bag and approaches the desk, where a woman asks him, rather haughtily, how she can help. He tells her that he has to fly out soon, as soon as possible, in fact immediately. When the woman raises her pencilled eyebrows he tries to explain his urgency: he is ill, he tells her, he needs the first available seat. In spite of the heat he is shivering again and already feels depleted. Once more he has a sense of watching himself from a distance, with the same stab of protective tenderness he felt earlier in the day. He will get himself home, he tells himself; he will take care of everything.

Not possible, the woman informs him as she checks his ticket: the first flight she can put him on is the day after tomorrow; that is the best she can do. With a sinking heart he accepts the offer and the ticket is restamped for the next afternoon but one, a departure which seems to him almost unbearably distant. Still holding his ticket he walks miserably out to the avenue.

In a nearby side street he finds a hotel and rings for the concierge, who, when he appears at the desk, hands him the green registration form. Carefully he fills in the spaces, leaving until last the reason for his visit. RAISON DE SEJOUR the form demands. He wonders what to answer. That he has come here to rescue someone with a bandaged head? That the choice wasn’t his own? He snorts under his breath and writes in letters which puncture the paper the single word: NONE.

When he has completed the form he is led up a flight of stairs to an austere room circled by a dado of raffia matting and furnished very simply with a bed and wicker chair. A single window overlooks a courtyard at the rear. After the concierge has gone he opens it and
looks down to see a tortoise making its way across the paving stones, followed a few feet behind by a young girl in a crimson dress, walking heel to toe, as if on a tightrope, with her arms outstretched for balance. For a long time he stands and watches them inch across the courtyard, then he lies down on the bed and closes his eyes.

Later in the afternoon he is woken by a shaft of sunlight streaming through the window. He leaves the hotel and returns to the main avenue, heading for the clock face in the distance. As he walks down the pavement a teenage girl with an infant on her hip shuffles along the curb beside him, begging softly in a European patois.


He stops and gives her a crumpled note from his pocket before retreating to the nearest café, where for an hour or more he sits among the city’s moneyed eating pastries, drinking coffee, waiting for the time to pass. Among the magazines left lying in the café is a single one in English, an in-flight magazine for British Airways from the previous year whose feature, a ‘millennium special’, is a suite of articles by ‘leading futurologists’. On each page some speculative question or prediction has been framed within a coloured square to catch the reader’s eye. He leafs idly through the pages, skipping from square to square.

Half the population, he reads, will live in solar-powered rural hamlets connected by the internet. The end of human sex? The history of the future lies in US Patent 4,363,877. There will be a proliferation of anti-government militias, secessionists, localists and spiritual movements. Nanobots: factories of our future? The new generation will be global, mobile, a generation which has forgotten the meaning of borders and limits. The largest multinational corporations will begin to purchase the world’s poorest states. Within ten years a satellite phone will be installed in every wristwatch. By the end of the century written language will be a distant memory . . .

Page after page, the predictions stare out at him, already last year’s future. Or not the future at all, he thinks, but a hall of mirrors, the shop-window reflections of a narcissistic present . . .

‘Excuse me, I’m sorry to bother you, can I talk to you a moment?’

The voice that interrupts his reading is American. Looking up he sees that it belongs to a woman with blonde hair, greying at the temples and tied back in a ponytail, her eyes such a pale shade of blue they seem nearly colourless.

‘Of course,’ he says.
‘I guessed you spoke English,’ the woman explains, gesturing at the open magazine. The words in the coloured square read: THE LAST MORTAL GENERATION? She sits down opposite him, perched on the edge of the chair, her fingers kneading the handbag in her lap.

‘You’re not too busy?’ she asks.
He shakes his head.
‘Do you speak French?’
‘A little,’ he admits. He can see that the woman is agitated.
‘I know it’s a lot to ask, but maybe you could help me. I don’t speak French, you see. Are you sure you’re not too busy?’
‘Sure.’
‘I only arrived on Saturday,’ she continues. ‘I don’t know what to do. I can’t talk to anyone, and the guy who’s meant to speak English, well I don’t even know if there is one. He never seems to show up when they say.’
‘Show up?’
‘At the airport, I’m sorry . . . the customs people. I’m not making sense. They keep telling me there’s someone who speaks English if I wait, but I waited there all yesterday and no-one came. I don’t know how they can do this to me.’
‘Do what?’
‘They’re keeping my husband,’ she almost moans, ‘the customs people. I’ve tried to tell them, but they won’t give it back.’
He looks into her eyes: distraught, he judges, but certainly sane.
‘I know it’s a lot to ask,’ repeats the woman, ‘but if you could come with me to the airport it might make all the difference. You could talk to them. It’d only take an hour or two.’
‘You want me to interpret for you?’
‘Only if you’ve got the time. I mean, if you have things to do . . . ’
‘No, I’m not really doing anything,’ he begins. ‘Although . . . ’ He is about to warn her that his French may not be equal to the task when the woman gets to her feet. There is a look of profound relief on her face.
‘That’s so kind of you,’ she says, ‘it really is. I think the taxi might still be out front.’ She goes to the door and leans outside before looking back at him, signalling that they need to hurry.

He drains the last of his coffee and gets up to pay the bill, then goes outside to where the woman is waiting. As they get into the cab she thanks him again.

‘Airport please,’ she tells the driver. ‘Ivato. Airport.’
‘L’aéroport,’ he offers.
Wordlessly the driver edges into the traffic and heads down the great avenue towards the station forecourt, where two boys stand on upturned buckets strumming bright blue ukuleles. The taxi turns before the station, turns again—and then they are lost among the teeming back streets of the city.

Now that they are on their way the woman turns to him and apologises for not having introduced herself. They go through the formality: her name is Helga.

‘I can’t tell you what this means to me,’ she says. ‘It’s such a relief to meet someone who speaks English.’

‘I know how you feel.’

‘The way I feel . . .’ she begins, but her voice chokes and she stops short suddenly. In embarrassed silence they both look out the windows of the car. On the right side of the road a market extends without visible limit, a whole township of stalls and canopies. Slowly the driver edges around an overturned handcart from which a sack of rice has slipped and burst across the road. In the spillage stand two wiry men who are threatening each other with raised fists.

When they have left the confusion of the market behind them he decides to break the silence, gently warning the woman that his French is a good deal less than fluent.

‘It won’t matter,’ she replies. ‘I’m just so grateful for the help.’ She rummages inside the handbag on her knee and produces something which she hands across to him: it is a small French-English phrase book. ‘That’s the only way I can talk to them,’ she explains, hitting the book with the back of her hand. Almost contemptuously she thumbs the corners of the pages.

‘It doesn’t even have the word for ashes,’ she says. ‘I keep explaining it’s my husband.’

Ashes. Can this be what she is telling him? He is afraid to respond.

‘I had to promise him, you see, that’s why I’m here. But I never thought about the problems, I’d no idea this would happen. In New York they just believed me, and in Paris I don’t think they even asked to see my baggage. But when I got here they put it through the x-ray and keep asking me questions like I’m a criminal. I mean, what does it look like? Like a bomb? They kept saying poodrah. Do you know what that means?’

He clears his throat: ‘It’s powder.’

‘Gunpowder?’

‘Any powder really, but I suppose it could be.’

‘So it could be drugs?’

‘It’s possible.’

‘You see, the problem is I can’t open it. And even if I could . . .’

Her voice trails off, leaving him to puzzle over these fragments. With the heart of the city now behind them, they pass through clusters of tall red buildings between which there are
glimpses of paddies and scoured hills in the distance. It occurs to him, in a thought that makes him feel for a moment utterly alone, that he must have driven along this road before.

When Helga speaks again her voice is almost toneless, leached of emotion. She tells him that tomorrow it will be one month exactly since her husband was cremated. ‘After it was done they gave me back the ashes in an urn,’ she says, ‘a kind of cylinder, then they took me to the rose garden to show me where the niche was. You might know the deal. I didn’t ask them for a niche, that’s just what they give you. They give you the urn and you take it to the memorial wall, like you’re going to the post office, which is pretty much how it looks. People stand there staring at the walls, old people mainly, just staring at those little doors like they can’t remember which one has their husband or their wife behind it, and maybe they didn’t want a niche either, but it all comes in the package. They don’t give you any options. Which is why they seal the urn, I guess, so it’s not possible to open it. If you wanted to open it you’d have to smash it on a rock. But of course they don’t want you doing that because they want you to leave it in the rose garden. It seems like scattering ashes isn’t what they do up in Wisconsin, at least not where we lived. I don’t know about the rest of Wisconsin, people say it’s nice, but not there,—she shakes her head—‘not there. And even if it was, he wouldn’t have let himself be buried in that place, he hated it so much. I mean he hated all the States, the whole country. He called it a catastrophe. He hated just about everything in the end. It was his liver made him talk like that. He had too much iron in his blood is what caused it, which the doctors never bothered even to check. It was the iron that poisoned him, it poisoned everything. He felt like all his thoughts were poisoned. Everything got darker when he talked, like a cloud was coming over, but it was all there in his liver. I mean the darkness was in his liver. That was what killed him in the end. It gave him cancer.’

In the silence that follows they hear a vendor calling from a roadside stall. He wishes he were somewhere else.

‘I’m sorry.’

The woman turns and looks at him with her pale eyes: ‘There wasn’t any reason why they chose to search my baggage. It was just bad luck. When they put it through the x-ray all I could see was a kind of blur, but they kept pointing at it. I couldn’t understand a word they said. Poudra, that was it. I guess they were asking what the powder was. All I could do was tell the truth. I said it was my husband.’ She pauses, still looking at him intently. ‘It’s really kind of you to come.’

At some point—he has not being paying attention to their progress—they have left behind the buildings and pedestrians, and the only people they now pass on the road are a few bored-looking men in military uniforms. ‘We’re nearly there,’ says Helga. And sure enough the road from this point on is cosmetically tarred and pothole-free, like the approach to
airports everywhere. Soon the terminal appears before them, a set of drab brown buildings on a treeless plain with a few cars parked in front of them. On the tarmacs an aeroplane waits in a mirage of heat and avgas fumes. The driver tells them he will wait.

Inside the terminal the heat is suffocating. Helga leads him through the crowd of passengers, ignoring the importunate taxi scouts and furtive currency dealers, until they come to an entrance reserved for authorised personnel. Without a word from the guard, who seems to know their business, they are waved through the checkpoint and proceed along a dimly lit corridor. At several points along the way Helga stops to examine an unmarked door before finally knocking on one which is ajar by several inches. The door is opened by a small man with fine features and almond-shaped eyes, very neatly dressed, on whose lapel is a badge which reads LADOANY and, in smaller letters underneath, DOUANE R.D.M.

‘Ah, bonjour Madame,’ he says. ‘Vous êtes revenue. Veuillez excuser la petite méprise d’hier.’

As soon as he has relayed the apology to Helga he introduces himself to the customs officer, explaining as best he can what he is doing there. The douanier listens politely—looking rather relieved, he thinks, to have acquired a translator—then gestures across the corridor to another room, in which he suggests they wait until he returns. Then without further explanation he disappears up the passage.

When Helga opens the door she glances back at him with a frown of surprise, for the room, as he can see over her shoulder, is filled almost to the walls by a low wooden table set on upside-down crates. On the near end of the table, directly in front of them, sits an antique phonograph with a flared brass trumpet; at the far end is a cardboard box draped in a hessian sack. There are no chairs and no windows. As he sidles in after Helga, taking care not to bruise his shins, he is surprised to hear that the phonograph is actually making a sound—the quiet, repetitive scratching of a needle caught at the centre of a record. When he puts his ear to the trumpet, however, the machine is silent; the sound, he realizes, is coming from the box. Followed by Helga he walks to the far end of the table and carefully pulls back the hessian drape, revealing, in the base of the box, some two dozen lizards in brilliant hues of green and orange, and in various stages of demise or actual decay. Of the few which still have the strength to move, some are clambering over the bodies of the dead, the others scratching ineffectually at the cardboard walls.

‘Chameleons,’ says Helga.

‘I think they must need water. They’re dying of heat.’

Helga reaches into her bag and produces a bottle of Evian, which she dribbles over the bodies; but the reptiles show no sign of relief. Meanwhile he fans them with the phrase book, circulating a sharply unpleasant smell into the room.
They are still standing over the box when the customs officer comes through the door, followed by a colleague, a rather stout man who is introduced to them as the promised English speaker. As if to prove his credentials the man says, ‘Good afternoon,’ and a moment later, ‘Enchanted.’ Why a second translator is needed for the interview is not explained, and he feels slightly irritated at having been brought this far for nothing. The two officers stand side by side at the far end of the table, neither paying the slightest attention to the rustling box, which he is still discreetly fanning with the phrase book.

To his surprise, however, it is his skills, not the translator’s, which the customs officer chooses to use. Addressing him directly, the man announces that he would like to allay any concerns that the lady might have had since her arrival by assuring her that she has not been accused of any offence. It is simply that so long as the contents of the urn—he calls it the *vessel*—have not been determined, then he, acting in accordance with the customs regulations of the Republic of Madagascar, has no choice but to hold the said vessel as a *suspect import*. It has not, he emphasizes, been classified as a *forbidden* import.

The distinction, which he relays immediately to Helga, does not have the placating effect the customs officer seems to have intended. She stares at the man with glistening eyes. ‘Tell him,’ she hisses. ‘Tell him what it is.’

He turns nervously back to the officer: ‘Elle dit que le vaisseau contient les cendres de son mari, et que c’est tout à fait impossible de l’ouvrir.’

‘Les cendres?’ repeats the customs officer, creasing his brow. ‘C’est la poussière de son mari?’ It is clear he had no idea.

When he nods in reply the *douanier* glances at Helga, then in embarrassment at the phonograph, and finally at his colleague, the two men exchanging a few quiet words in Malagasy while the stouter of them shakes his head and tugs nervously at the belt of his trousers. Finally, avoiding Helga’s eye, the officer turns back to him and asks if there is any way in which Madame can verify her claim.

‘No,’ comes Helga’s reply: it needs no translation.

The officer frowns deeply. Assuming, he says, that the vessel does contain what the lady declares it does, then what does she intend to do with it? To this Helga responds that she intends to leave the ashes here in Madagascar, either scattered on the earth or buried inside the urn—she has not yet decided which.

After absorbing this information the officer demands to know where Helga’s husband was born. He was born, she replies, in the state of Illinois, U.S.A. Now the officer exchanges a glance with his colleague, at once sceptical and disapproving. If this is the case, he asks, then why is the lady’s husband not interred in his own country, where he belongs? The answer Helga gives back is that she is simply carrying out the last wish of her husband, which leaves
her no choice in the matter. But for what reason—the officer apologizes for pursuing the matter—for what reason did the lady’s husband choose to be buried in Madagascar, rather than in the state of Illinois?

When he relays the question to Helga she lets her eyes fall to the chameleons, then after a long pause instructs him to tell the officer she has no answer.

‘Elle ne sait pas,’ he says.

At this point the interview is suspended while the two customs officers confer once more in their own language. Meanwhile Helga continues to stare blankly at the box of lizards, her head fallen forward as if she were blind.

‘I think he believes you,’ he murmurs in encouragement.

‘Then why didn’t he before?’

‘He can’t have understood. I’m sure he didn’t know.’

‘But I told him it was ma mairie.’

‘Mon mari,’ he corrects gently. ‘Une mairie . . . well, it’s a town hall.’ Immediately he regrets it, but Helga only nods vaguely in reply.

The officers have by this stage finished their discussion and the stouter of the two, inappropriately, is now crouched beside the table, lifting the arm of the phonograph up and down with a look of deep absorption. In a gesture of good will, the officer in charge joins Helga and himself at their end of the table, and, softening his inquisitor’s tone, asks him to convey his apologies to Helga for—he hesitates—the consternation which she must have felt since her arrival in Madagascar. As far as he is aware there is no law which prohibits the importation of—again he searches for the appropriate phrase—items of that kind into the country. In short, although the contents of the vessel have not been verified according to the standard regulations of the Customs Act, the item will be returned forthwith.

When he relays all this to Helga she breathes a long sigh of relief; but the douanier is quick to interrupt her with a gesture of warning. There is, he adds, one condition for the restitution of the urn. Until he has ascertained the legality of leaving the vessel in Madagascar, he must insist that Helga display it to him at the time of her departure. One needs to bear in mind, he says, that the burial of non-nationals is a sensitive matter which is naturally subject to certain regulations. Unless she is willing to comply with this request he is afraid he will not be able to return it. When the proviso is explained to Helga she looks devastated.

‘It’s a start,’ he murmurs. ‘I’m sure there’s some way round it.’

Reluctantly she nods her agreement.

‘Très bien,’ says the man, clearly pleased with having won this compromise, and turns to leave.
Following Helga he walks to the door, which the stouter man is holding open. But just as he is about to leave the room he pauses and points back at the box.

‘They’re dying, you know.’

The man lets go of the door and walks around the table to see for himself. ‘Yes,’ he says, ‘so many of these ones,’ and with a look of distaste he picks up the lizards and carries them back to the door, holding the box at arm’s length.

Out in the corridor Helga and the officer emerge from a nearby room, presumably having collected the urn. With the four of them now gathered in the corridor it remains only to conclude the business with a handshake. For the stouter man, however, who is still encumbered with the box, this presents a problem which he solves, to his surprise, by thrusting the chameleons without warning into his arms. ‘You give them their liberty,’ he snorts in disgust, then gives Helga’s hand a courteous shake.

Having left the officers in the corridor they walk back out through the crowded terminal and into the car park, where they find their driver sleeping over the wheel in the afternoon heat. He wakes with a start and looks drowsily out at the box in his arms.

‘Caméléons,’ he observes.

‘What do we do with them?’ asks Helga.

‘I don’t know. Maybe we could stop somewhere on the way back. I don’t see many bushes here.’

They climb into the back seat, the box between them, and head across the car park. Inside the car the stink of the chameleons is impossible to ignore. Helga tries to open her window, but the handle is broken and spins around uselessly. As they drive in silence to the town she lets her eyes close, only opening them again when they have joined the main road to the capital.

‘You’ve got no idea how relieved I am,’ she says at last, ‘I don’t know how to thank you.’ As she speaks she clutches her bag to herself with folded arms. ‘You probably think I’m crazy to have come here.’

‘No,’ he answers truthfully, ‘not at all. I’d be the last person to say that.’

Helga looks at him: ‘It’s true what I said back there, I don’t know why he chose Madagascar. But there is a story to it. It began as a sort of game. I ought to tell you.’

As they drive towards the city Helga explains the circumstances of her husband’s sickness. They had been married for only four years when the disease was diagnosed. At that time they were living in a town in Wisconsin where her husband worked as an industrial chemist for one of the largest cookie companies in the country. Before that they had lived in Illinois, which was where they met and married. In Illinois they shared two of the most contented years she could remember, but after they moved to Wisconsin everything began to
unravel. To start with, the town was flat and dreary, a disappointment to them both. Then her husband became increasingly quarrelsome and depressed, for the first time having altercations with his boss and feuding with their neighbours. He was constantly exhausted, yet the doctors could find nothing wrong with him. When the disease was finally diagnosed, after a long series of mistakes and mistreatments, it was beyond all therapy, and her husband was forced to retire. As his thoughts became darker and his temper more irascible his friends from the company ceased to visit them, saying he was no longer the man they knew. After that they saw no-one; they had no other friends in the town.

Although her husband’s retirement payout was insufficient for their needs he refused to apply for benefits, claiming it was impossible for him to accept the ‘charity’ of a country he despised. For six months she worked mornings in the municipal library to make ends meet, but after that she needed to nurse him throughout the day. To save money they moved into a cheap apartment on the edge of town, not far from the factory, where the air was always heavy with the smell of baking powder and vanilla essence. Only that morning, she says, a street vendor tried to sell her some vanilla beans which nearly made her sick. The apartment was so tiny she could touch the ceiling with her fingers, and the only view it offered was of the district tyre dump on the plain outside. For an entire summer it rained almost constantly. Her husband was yellow and vomiting and no longer able to stand. All he would do for days at a time is lie on the sofa without moving, looking out through the rain at the black mountain of tyres in the distance.

‘I don’t even remember how the game began,’ she says. ‘In the bathroom of the apartment we had a curtain for the shower, you know, a plastic curtain, with a huge map of the world on it. The detail was amazing, well, for a curtain anyway. In the mornings when I gave him his bath we would look at it together and think of all the places we could spend our next vacation. Of course we knew there wouldn’t be one, but that wasn’t something we spoke about. At the beginning I was the one who chose them. I remember liking names like Zacapu and Zamboanga—there was even someplace I remember called York Factory in Canada. I guess just anything that caught my eye. And for each place I suggested, he would imagine it—I mean imagine what would happen if we went there, which was always a disaster. He had a way of making those holidays so horrible we’d both end up laughing till we cried.’

She recalls how they stayed in forlorn seaside towns without a restaurant, where the sewers overflowed and spilled into their room. They were kidnapped in Kashmir and locked in a sinking houseboat. An aeroplane plunged flaming into their Maui hotel. Always he would push his darkness to the point of absurdity, as if attempting to outrun it. Perhaps what he was trying to tell her was that all he needed now was this tiny apartment with its seven-foot ceilings—that this, in its way, was enough for what time they had left together.
‘But when he’d gotten too weak to talk,’ she says, ‘the game had to change. He only had the strength to choose the places in the end, so I had to describe them instead. It was pointless trying to compete with his disasters, I couldn’t have done it. Besides, the time for that was over. So I went the other way. I tried to make those places everything I thought he’d want them to be. I guess what I was trying to imagine was some place where we might have ... well, maybe some place where we might have *flourished*. The right soil, right season, something like that. Something we felt we’d never really had. Maybe that was what the game was really about.’

She falls silent and rubs her face slowly with both hands, stretching her pale skin into a mask. As they drive in silence towards the hazy hills in the distance he takes advantage of the lull to suggest they stop to free the lizards before it is too late. They pull over onto the verge and he carries the box to a stunted tree beside the road, the only shade in sight. The creatures are clearly finished. He tips them onto the dirt, where they lie in a tangled heap, most of them now limp, only a colourful few still twitching their legs in the air. The strongest of the bunch he picks up and sets on a twig, from which as soon as he releases his fingers it falls back onto the ground. Out of nowhere a group of children has materialized on the eroded hillside below him, where they stand and watch the performance with derisive grins, giggling quietly. He wedges the chameleon into a fork between two branches and this time it hangs without falling, following his movements with a swivelling eye. After splashing the bush with what remains of the Evian he goes back to the car, where he finds Helga and the driver leaning on the bonnet, smoking cigarettes. ‘Success?’ she asks, to which he shrugs.

As they enter the city Helga remains silent, making him wonder if she has lost the heart to finish her story. Perhaps because he is reluctant to compel her, or perhaps because he feels unable to hear any more himself, he says nothing to prompt her. Once more they pass through streets of crumbling buildings with facades of red brick and lime; a row of factories painted with bright logos; the endless market which is empty now, save for a few squealing children rolling tyres between the stalls. A lid of black cloud has gathered over the city and cast the streets into a premature dusk. At last they enter the main avenue at the point where they began, and here the driver pulls over in front of the café.

‘Let me get you a drink,’ offers Helga when the taxi has gone, ‘it’s the least I can do.’

They choose a table by the window and sit for a while in silence, sipping iced lemonade from tall glasses.

‘At the end of last year he had to go to hospital,’ she says suddenly, continuing as if she had never left off. ‘I couldn’t look after him at home any more. I spent most of my time with him at the hospital. He was really too sick to do anything, or too doped with the morphine they were pumping into him. A couple times we tried to play the game, you know,
to pretend things were the same, but it really couldn’t work without the map. We needed the world in front of us, I guess; we never had much sense of geography. Then in January he was transferred to another ward which seemed . . . well it’s really just a waiting room, we knew it. The next week he lost consciousness for three days and the doctors told me not to hold out too much hope, they thought he was gone already. Then on the fourth day he woke up like nothing’s happened, very quiet, on this real quiet snowy afternoon, and he’s smiling at me like he’s never been away and says something which I don’t catch what it is the first time, but the second . . .’ She pauses, bunching her straw. ‘It was Madagascar. That’s what he’d said. Madagascar. He was pleased he’d thought of it, you see, because somehow it was one we’d missed, but I just couldn’t do it. I’d been sitting there for three days without sleeping and then suddenly he’s there again, just looking at me, waiting, but I couldn’t. I just couldn’t do it.’

She draws a long breath and looks around her vaguely, before taking a sip of lemonade. While they sit there in silence the girl with the infant on her hip—the one who begged some money from him earlier in the day—comes to the café window and crooks a hand to the glass, peering in. She is wearing a tattered pale blue factory smock with the words HAPPY CHAPPY KINDERWEAR embroidered in red cotton across the bust. Another girl joins her, and together they look imploringly through the glass before moving along to the next table.

When Helga resumes her story she tells him that her husband lapsed in and out of consciousness until the following morning. It was during that night that he made her promise him that his ashes would be scattered abroad in a country about which he knew almost nothing. No part of him, he insisted, not a single particle of his body, was to be buried in the United States. She was to carry his remains to Madagascar and dispose of them there as she saw fit. In the early hours of the morning he fell back into a coma. He died the following day.

‘So,’ she says with a forced matter-of-factness, ‘that’s how I came to be here. Why he chose here I don’t know for sure. I didn’t lie. It might just have been that it came at the end of the game, you know, the final destination. Maybe it could have been anywhere . . . But the more I think about it, the more it seems like the real reason he chose Madagascar was because he’d never imagined it.’

Since the beginning of the story he has not said a word, but now, almost before he is aware of speaking, he asks her what she means.

‘I’m not sure,’ she answers slowly. ‘Maybe he had gotten to the point where nothing he could imagine any more could make him want to be alive, so he rejected all of it, I mean everything he could imagine. Maybe that was what I meant.’

They both fall silent for a long time, lost in thought, then Helga glances at him sharply.
‘So what did you imagine? Before you came, I mean. What was it brought you here?’

Because she has asked him nothing until now the question takes him by surprise. He looks around the café in confusion and attempts an evasive shrug, but he can feel his face betraying him. Helga looks at him closely.

‘Long story?’
He shakes his head: ‘No . . . no. I don’t think there is one.’

‘You mean a story why you’re here?’

‘That’s right.’

She examines him a moment longer with her pale eyes, waiting for him to continue, then lets the question drop. They both look outside. Already the lawns in the centre of the avenue are dark with shadow, and several of the passing cars have headlights glowing feebly in the pre-storm light. Inside the café, as if on a cue, the remaining customers rise to go to the counter and one of the waitresses begins to stack chairs noisily on the tables. ‘I think we better go,’ says Helga.

He follows her out into the evening, which is warm and heavy with the tarry smell of advancing rain. From the distance comes a soft rumble of thunder. At the end of the avenue, he notices, the hands of the station clock have remained motionless since he arrived.

‘Where are you staying?’ she asks.

With a gesture he explains. Her own hotel, she tells him, is in the same direction, but some way further, on the hill.

‘You see that long flight of steps,’ she says. ‘I came down those this morning, and there was an old man called out to me in English, “Missus”. He’s a beggar, I gave him something yesterday. But he’s got no eyes, you see, which is what’s so weird. I can’t figure out how he knew it was me.’

They walk the avenue in silence.

‘You’ve been travelling here?’ she asks at last.

‘I guess that’s what you’d call it. I haven’t seen much.’

‘So how long are you staying?’
He tells her that he leaves on Wednesday.

‘And you’ve had a good time?’

‘To be honest, I haven’t been so well.’

‘Is that why you’re leaving?’

Or why he came, he thinks; but aloud he answers, ‘Yes.’

They pass a hotel bar from whose open door spills a tinny jazz which, as it fades behind them, leaves the city seeming even more strangely subdued than before, the great avenue even emptier.
At the turning to his hotel they stop beneath an archway, where, as they stand in the awkward silence before parting, a shower of stucco rains from the walls above, perhaps loosened by the thunder. Grateful for the distraction, they brush the grit from their hair, postponing the words that have to be said. Finally she tells him she can’t thank him enough for what he has done, she could never have managed it without him. He replies that it was nothing, he hopes she’ll sort it out. The words sound hollow, embarrassingly so, and when they have spoken them they stand again in silence.

‘You say you’ve got no story,’ Helga says at last, ‘but if you change your mind, you know where you can find me. I’m at the Hotel Vintana, you’ll find it. Room twelve.’

Confused by the offer he merely nods.

After an awkward pause she reaches out and very gently touches the side of his head with her cupped palm—an odd gesture, as if she were blessing his ear—before letting her hand fall briefly to his shoulder. Then she turns and walks away.

Back in his room he opens the window and stands smoking in the damp heat of the evening. In the courtyard he can just make out the shape of the tortoise wedged in a corner like a rock, while directly beneath the window a cooking pot steams unattended on a brazier. The smell of food reminds him it is time for dinner, but the pastries he ate in the afternoon, or perhaps the smell of the chameleons, have robbed him of his appetite. He sits on the bed and looks around the room, which in the twilight seems so comfortless that the thought of waiting there until he is ready for sleep fills him with a dull horror. Remembering suddenly that the concierge had boasted of a television, he puts his cigarettes in his pocket and goes back out to the corridor.

Tucked beneath the wooden rafters on the next floor up, the TV room is small and windowless, with half a dozen padded chairs—none occupied—arranged in an arc around the screen. He slumps into one and lights a cigarette. The program is in Malagasy and appears to be the local news. He sees protest marchers straggling along an avenue of derelict grandeur, not unlike the one outside, waving placards and loudspeakers. Then a jungle fire is burning along the banks of a railway cutting, threatening a village of thatched huts.

Sporting highlights follow the news, but they are not enough to keep his mind from wandering. As he watches the endless parade of goals he finds himself thinking of Helga’s parting offer to hear his story, his confession. You say you’ve got no story, but . . . But how could anyone, let alone an American, believe he has no story? Even in his own mind what he wrote on the green form makes no sense. RAISON DE SEJOUR: NONE. To write that on a form is easy enough, but what does it mean? Once again he can feel his thoughts crumbling with the effort as they try to approach it. The doctor told him there was a choice—not his, but a real
choice all the same. But in that case it must be wrong to think of the double in the way he has, as a sleepwalker, a zombie. If he chose to come here then the choice must have had its reasons. But whose reasons? Whose story could he tell?

He gets up quickly and turns the dial of the television until he finds a second channel, also screening news, but this time international news in French, not Malagasy. On the screen the ragged heads of coconut palms sway back and forth against a cloudless sky. Where in the world he has been transported he has no idea, since all the reporter tells him, in a rather portentous voice, is that more troubles are expected here over the coming days. While the reporter is speaking the camera begins a slow pan down the length of the palm trees, revealing a stand of trunks so slender they look like the stems of flowers. In the same grave voice the reporter asks rhetorically whether this land will ever find its independence.

The camera keeps descending the trunks until the top of a flowering tree appears, then the edge of a corrugated iron roof, and finally the earth itself. At the base of the palms stand a dozen men in T-shirts and camouflage trousers, most of them holding rifles over their shoulders or across their chests, watching impassively from the shade. The reporter’s voice explains that tomorrow the future of this place will be decided by the people.

At that moment the militia in the palm grove disappear, to be replaced by an old man standing on a beach, his dark face bearded with silvery curls. He is dressed in pin-striped trousers and a short-sleeved shirt. Low waves curl and break in the distance. What the reporter asks the man he doesn’t catch, but the man looks directly into the lens for a long time before he responds, his eyes burning with emotion. The words he finally chooses—in what language he can not begin to guess—have been voiced over in French, but are also, for some reason, subtitled in English.

‘Because this is where we live,’ the subtitles read. ‘It is where we were born. We could never leave this land. Tomorrow we will have what we have dreamed of all our lives.’

The stand of swaying palms behind the old man is the same one which hides the militiamen in its shadows. Closer by, only a short way up the beach, a group of men and women have gathered in a crescent, all eyes watching the camera with contained excitement. Here everything hangs in the balance; he can see it in their faces. These people, wherever they are, have a sense of their own future. They have hope. Again the man on the beach is speaking, but his subtitled words are no match for the expression on his face, which, like those of his countrymen behind him, burns with hope.

Now something has begun to flutter in the palm trees, a square of pale material, a flag, its insignia blurred by distance. Moving in stops and starts the flag ascends one of the slender trunks, leaving first the ground beneath it, then the rooftops and the flowering trees, until
finally it is flying above the island. The man on the beach stops talking and half turns to watch it rise, his face, in that moment, an image of triumphant hope.

On his own face, to his astonishment, tears are streaming down his cheeks. A throttled sob squeezes itself from his throat. With both hands clutching his chest, as if to prevent it from bursting, he stands up from the chair and stumbles towards the television, where, line after line, through a blur of tears, the waves break silently on a yellow shore.
Beneath the curtains sunlight falls in a wavy line along the walls; he can hear the sound of sweeping in the courtyard. For a long time he lies with his eyes half open, watching the sunlight stretch to the floor and shrink back to the sill, catching the bristles that stand out from the raffia weave. Whatever it was that happened in the TV room the night before has left him feeling purged, the calmest he has been since the morning he came to. He supposes it was bound to happen after the shock that he has suffered; in fact the outburst strikes him more or less as an event of nature, like the storm which he remembers hearing break outside the window, finally, as the drugs pulled him to sleep. When he turns his head he can see the pink pills scattered where he dropped them. A fragment of a dream comes back to him.

He is in a public building, circa nineteen-seventy, decorated in the period’s dirty browns and greys. It is the atmosphere, above all, which is borrowed from the airport; the shabbiness of the neglected not-yet-old, nostalgic, out of time. He walks along deserted corridors whose walls are missing tiles, carrying his sports bag on his shoulder. He seems to have walked forever. The lights are low and the corridors keep turning. Then finally, when he thinks he has arrived at the departure lounge, the exit is the entrance, and in the open door stands Helga, whose pale blue eyes swivel towards him like the eyes of a chameleon. The words that come from her mouth are dubbed, unsynchronized: ‘What was it you imagined? What was it brought you here?’

The fragment ends without an answer. Of course without an answer. The truth is he imagined nothing. How could he have done, unless he heard something about this place in the days before he left? As he remembers what Helga told him about her husband in the café he wonders if his reason could have been the same—that he came because this island was a white space on his mental map, an unimagined blank. But somehow it seems implausible. There are too many places in the world he can’t imagine; it hardly narrows the field. In fact, when he thinks of it, he is far from certain that he can imagine where he lives. It seems to be getting harder all the time . . . The peaks of sunlight stretch, retreat. If he knew what he had done here in the days before he woke the answer might be clearer, but there is little chance he will ever know that. Tomorrow—the thought fills him with relief—all of this will be behind him.

At that moment he feels a sharp itch on his stomach and throws back the sheet to see a flea jump off his chest. The first task of the day is to find a new hotel. Quickly he gets out of
bed and swats himself with his clothes, then, when he has stuffed his scattered belongings into the bag, he leaves the room, crunching the pink pills under his feet. At the reception desk he drops the key behind the counter and, without informing the concierge of his departure, he leaves the building.

On the steps of the hotel his path is blocked by a small boy with dangerously adult eyes who seems intent on selling him a basket of lychees that comes up to his chin. From the basket he selects a single fruit and gives the boy enough coins to be allowed down to the street. Already the sun has risen high above the city, drawing a steamy dankness from the overflowing drains. Unprepared for the daylight, he stops under the arches where he left Helga the night before and, while deciding what to do, he splits the lychee with his teeth. As soon as the perfumed ball is in his mouth, however, he remembers the taste of the sergeant’s ‘remedy’ and spits it out. At that moment a band of children start running towards him across the avenue and in an instant he has made his decision. He picks up his bag and heads briskly in the direction of Helga’s hotel.

Near the foot of the steps which climb to the higher part of town he passes the open frontage of a restaurant, a long hall crowded to its unlit depths with metal chairs and tables, which seems as good a place as any to have breakfast. He is shown to a greasy table where, while he waits for his omelette, he watches the family at the neighbouring table downing bowls of green-flecked porridge and sliced meat—whether breakfast or lunch he can only guess. But his own meal, when it arrives, is better than the decor promised and he eats it hungrily.

Breakfast over, his next stop is the toilet, to which the waitress points him with a wave, and in the corner of the dining hall he finds a narrow flight of stairs which leads him down into a cellar, very dimly lit, whose dark grey walls are streaked with running stains as if the earth were bleeding through. The place has a sinister feeling and an even more sinister smell; but he no longer has the luxury of choice. He gropes his way into a stall and sits down in the darkness. Overhead a single orange light bulb flickers as if set to blow; the plumbing ticks. And yet even here, now that he is on his own again, he feels the same warm flood of peace he felt when he woke up—a sense that nothing now can touch him, that he has come through.

Beside him on a shelf—their purpose, he supposes, more for hygiene than amusement—is a pile of newspapers and magazines whose glossy pages have been set aside. He picks up one and studies it. In the dimness he can just make out a photo of a man dressed in a pale striped shirt who is standing with his face turned down and lost in shadow, his blond hair lit from above by brilliant sunshine. In the foreground of the picture, rising to the level of his waist, is a tall cane basket of what look like coffee beans. But what is clearly the point of
the advertisement is what the man has in his hands. With a gesture that is almost reverent he is holding out towards the reader a diminutive computer, as if offering a sacrament. Aside from the man and his computer everything else in the photograph is slightly out of focus: a green hillside on which tall robed figures are carrying more cane baskets on their heads.

Curious, he holds the paper closer to his face and is surprised to find that the text on the computer’s screen is in English. The message—apparently an email which the man is about to send, or has perhaps already sent—reads: ‘Global buying trip has brought me to Ethiopia, where I am purchasing the new medium roast blend. Are you still interested? Due back Thursday.’ At the very bottom of the ad, in stylishly understated lettering, is the slogan: **THE WORLD IS IN YOUR PALM™.**

So even here, in Africa, this merchant has the edge. Is this the point? He is connected. He snorts in contempt, about to put the paper back—but ridiculous as it is, there is something in the image that holds him. The green glow of the screen against the coffee beans, the slender figures on the hill, the polished artefact: it is not clear what has caught him in its spell. Then suddenly he sees that the pose of the man is almost exactly as he has imagined himself in the days before he woke. The object he is cradling in his hands is not a computer at all, but a small box made of cardboard. With his eyes fixed on the ground, like a sleepwalker, he holds it out uncertainly, as if not quite sure of his mission. Even the shirt he is wearing is identical to one of his own. Yet as hard as he stares at the man’s face, the shadows refuse to yield their secret. Are his eyes open or closed? Is the faint light on his lips a smile or a grimace of pain? He comes to with a start and shakes his head: the thought is crazy. The object in the coffee buyer’s hands is once again a computer, so obscenely futuristic in the scene of African hills that it might have fallen from the sky. Disgusted, he drops the page into the bucket of soiled paper.

With his mind now turned to the day ahead he makes his way back through the dining hall. After he is settled in the new hotel he will need to find a bank, and there is the problem, too, of buying clothes to wear home on the plane. But as he reaches his table, even before he has grasped the meaning of the blank space underneath it, his plans are all forgotten. His bag has disappeared.

In panicked French he asks the family at the next table where it has been taken, but the father shakes his head. The waitress gives the same reply. He runs outside and looks up and down the street, then pushes his way back through the restaurant, peering between the tables and tripping over legs. At the back of the hall he stops and turns towards the open door, only now taking stock of what has happened. His passport, his ticket: it contained everything. Hardly conscious of what he is doing he walks out to the footpath, where the owner of the café grabs him by the shoulder and demands payment for the meal. After pushing twice the
amount he owes into the man’s hand he backs away from him, then turns on his heels and runs unthinkingly towards the long stone flight of steps.

When he reaches the old town on the hill he stops running and walks on breathlessly through the narrow streets. In the space of the climb, almost as though he has risen above it, the despair he felt a few minutes earlier has given way to an airy lightness, almost mirth: a giddy distance from his own misfortune. When a young man blocks his path and waves a fossil in his face he takes it in his hand and looks at it, a chambered coil of stone, an ammonite. In the back of his mind he hears the word ‘Cretaceous’, which he says aloud. Encouraged, the fossil seller produces another, but with laughter rising in his chest he pushes past him and continues up the hill. And now a second man accosts him, this time offering to guide him to the palace of the queen.

The queen? he repeats. Is there a queen?

No, the man replies, and the palace was burnt down. But for five thousand francs he can show him where it used to be.

‘Another time,’ he tells the guide, ‘another time.’

Below a high verandah in the street ahead he can read the sign for Helga’s hotel. He enters and walks across a tiled map of the country to the concierge’s desk, where his call brings no reply. As he climbs the stairs two men, coming down, greet him cheerfully in Italian. At room number twelve he knocks; there is no answer. For a moment he waits in the corridor, then goes back to the street.

But whom should he meet as he walks down the hill, but Helga, now returning? At the end of her arm is a bright hand of bananas.

‘I was hoping I’d see you,’ she says. ‘So what are you doing up here?’

‘Fleas.’

She frowns.

‘In my bed,’ he explains. ‘I was looking for a place without them.’

‘Well’—she looks at him oddly—‘my hotel’s just here . . .’

‘I know.’

‘Oh right, so you’ve checked in?’

‘No, there was no-one at the desk.’

‘Sometimes you have to ring,’ she says. ‘I’ll show you.’

At this point their words are drowned out by a group of men competing to sell fossils to the Italians, so they continue to the hotel and enter the deserted foyer. As they walk across the mosaic map, Helga tells him that she is on her way to an appointment at the American consulate, but suggests that they meet afterwards for lunch.
At the reception desk she pulls a cord which sets up a loud clatter somewhere in the rear of the building, bringing a man in faded livery from behind the partition. When the concierge sees Helga he smiles at her politely; but at the sight of him he beams, holding out his arms in a gesture of welcome and saying something in a high speed patter of which he understands not a word. It’s all very nice; he smiles back. Then before he knows what is happening he has a green form in his hand. As he begins to fill out his details the man tells him he will fetch his things and, still smiling benevolently, he ducks back behind the partition.

‘He sure seems to have taken to you,’ Helga says. ‘So where did he go?’

‘To get my things.’

‘Which things? Your luggage?’

He shrugs: ‘I’ve no idea. I don’t have any luggage.’

Helga looks confused.

‘My bag was stolen, a few minutes ago. My passport, everything. I left it in a café and when I came back . . .’ He pops his lips and makes a disappearing gesture with his hands.

Helga opens her mouth in sympathy or disbelief, but before she has a chance to reply the concierge has reappeared, bearing in his arms a bulky plastic bag which he sets down on the counter.

‘Votre sac, monsieur.’

As he picks it up his sense of time stands still. Too much, too much. From between the knotted handles comes a sweet breath of vanilla. Inside the bag he finds a pair of trousers which appear to be his own, plus other bits and pieces: crumpled clothes, a picture postcard, the leaves of a plastic fern. Taped to the outside of the bag, to leave no doubt at all, is a yellow envelope on which his name is written.

He drops it at his feet and lets his head fall forward into his hands, his shoulders slump. A single shoe falls out onto the floor. When finally he raises his head the concierge is watching him with an expression of alarm, while Helga, rather accusingly, is staring at the concierge, who now looks back and forth between them in complete confusion. He is unable to rescue the situation before they both break the silence at the same moment, speaking in different languages. Does he have a headache? Is he dizzy? He can find no words to reply. Instead he begins to shake with silent laughter: let them think what they will.

At this point Helga steps forward and grips him by the arm: ‘I think you better lie down.’

He ignores her hand and stoops to pick up the bag.

‘It’s okay,’ he tells her. ‘No, it’s fine. No worries.’

With renewed grip she leads him towards the foot of the stairs, leaving the concierge staring at the abandoned shoe.
In her room Helga steers him to the bed, where she turns him around like an invalid and settles him on his back. He looks up at the ceiling, one hand groping inside the plastic bag.

‘Trousers,’ he murmurs. ‘It’s just what I needed.’

Almost with a look of panic Helga stares at him: ‘What’s wrong with you? What’s happened?’

He shakes his head.

‘Just start from the beginning,’ she says.

‘I don’t remember the beginning.’

‘You told me you weren’t well last night. Is that it? Is it your head?’

Slowly he sits up and rubs his face: ‘Have you got a cigarette?’

She takes one from the bedside table and lights it for him. Then, as he smokes, he peels the envelope from the bag and passes it across to her.

She frowns: ‘You left this stuff? I didn’t know you’d stayed here . . .’

‘No, nor did I.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘I mean before last Saturday I don’t remember a thing I did here. I don’t even know why I came.’

‘You mean . . .’ Helga begins, then frowns again. ‘You’re telling me you just, what, woke up here?’

He nods: ‘I don’t expect you to believe it.’

‘You must have had concussion, I don’t know . . .’

‘It wasn’t that.’

Almost wearily he explains the diagnosis of the doctors, recounting in outline the story of his voyage north, from the moment of his waking to their meeting the day before. To his surprise the confession causes him neither relief nor pain, in fact almost nothing. It could be the story of someone else. When he has finished speaking Helga stands silent for a long time, lost in thought.

‘Does anyone else know you’re here?’ she asks finally. ‘I mean, have you rung your people back home?’

‘To be honest, I doubt if I’ll be missed yet. And besides, I’m going back tomorrow.’

‘Not without a passport you’re not. That might take longer than you think.’ Suddenly she consults her watch. ‘I’ve got to rush, I should be at the consulate already. Bad timing, I know, but at least I can find out what we have to do to get your papers. Just rest up till I get back. We can sort it out together.’

He begins to thank her, but she waves her hands in dismissal.
She gathers some papers from the bed and drops them into her bag, then, to his surprise, bends down rather awkwardly and presses her cheek against his own.

‘I won’t be more than an hour,’ she says. ‘Help yourself to the bananas.’

When the door has closed he falls back amongst Helga’s clothes and lies there without moving. He can smell her perfume on his cheek. Unthinkingly, he reaches for the pale vase on the beside table and rests its cool weight on his forehead, then suddenly realising what he is holding he puts it back where it came from.

Beside the urn lies the yellow envelope from the outside of the bag, which he now picks up and holds at arm’s length, studying the upright copperplate in which his name is written. Then as he turns the envelope over he sees the corner of a piece of paper inside. It is the green form from his previous stay.

Immediately he sits up on the bed and holds it towards the window, then with a start he gets to his feet and goes out to the balcony, as if hoping, irrationally, that the light of day might make it vanish. But the word is only more distinct. Again he runs his eyes down the form to make certain it is really his and again his eyes stop in the same place. VENANT DE . . . demands the form, and on the dotted line that follows, written in his own hand: LIBERTALIA. Giddily he looks down on the city, but all he can see are the same black letters dancing over the red tiled roofs. How much more can one day hold for him?

He turns suddenly and goes back to the bed. Clearly what the English teacher told him was a mistake: Libertalia is in Madagascar. But where? Studying the form more carefully he can see that the night he spent in this hotel, four days ago, broke a journey between the mysterious name and the town where he met the woman with the souvenir. Does that mean he was travelling from the north? He rummages through the bag until he finds the postcard, which he holds up to the light.

Taken from a boat at sea it shows a long beach fringed with coconut palms, empty but for a single, gracefully curved outrigger canoe which has been hauled up the white sand. On the reverse side, which is unstamped, is a scrawled inscription, written in the same ungainly writing as the note he found in the box. Addressed to the writer’s ‘camarade’—could that be himself?—it reads:

‘Bonne chance et Courage! Keep the White Flag flying! See you back here next week, MISSON.’

Above the message is a date, the day before he filled out the green form. As for the scene in the photograph, it is identified in small print as ‘a tranquil beach near Antzavatra, northern Madagascar’. Antzavatra? Libertalia? Which town was he coming from?

As he stares down at the postcard the vertiginous feeling of the day he woke returns in all its force—the sense of standing on the edge of a crater, from which these fragments have
been blown out of the darkness. The only thing he knows with certainty is that all the stories he has told himself are lies. The staggering blind man and his rescuer, the repatriation of his twin—all self-consoling lies. For a moment he remembers the woman in the rickshaw, looking up in hurt amazement as the island bloomed in her hand, and the sound of her parting cry, like the concierge’s smile, addressed to someone else. ‘Libertalia!’ It is he who is the double, not the one who came here. It is he who is the impostor. There are pieces of himself scattered over the whole length of this country and beyond: if he thought he was here to collect himself, then he has failed completely.

Without even being aware of having made the decision he knows what he is about to do. He takes a pen from the bedside table and on the back of the form he writes the following:

‘Helga, apologies for running out, I think you’ll understand. I’ve gone to Libertalia (P.T.O.). Best of luck with everything, F.’

He lays the note on the pillow, picks up the bag, and closes the door of the room behind him. As he crosses the foyer the concierge calls out and runs across the mosaic floor to return his shoe.

‘Alors, vous restez ici? Vous voulez la clef?’

‘Non, non, je suis désolé. Il faut que je parte.’

‘Où est-ce que vous allez?’

‘A Libertalia. Vous le connaissiez?’

The man frowns: ‘Où?’

‘Libertalia?’ he repeats, but the man’s frown only deepens. ‘Antzavatra?’

‘Ah,’ nods the man, ‘Antzavatra’, and taking a backwards step he grinds his toe into the north of the map, as if squashing something verminous. But why go there? he asks. There is nothing to see. In fact there is almost nothing there at all.

Without replying, he thanks him for the information, but the concierge only jerks his head, aggrieved, and turns back to the desk.

Out on the footpath he runs the gauntlet of the fossil sellers and makes his way back to the top of the steps, where he pauses for a moment and looks out across the crowded hills of the city, filled for the first time with a sense of resolve, of certainty. He has risen to the challenge of this place. With a deep breath he descends.

When he has almost reached the bottom of the stairs he comes upon an old man dressed in rags, his eyelids gummed shut over empty sockets, who is leaning against the railing with a plastic pot held out for alms. At the sound of his footsteps the man swings the pot towards him.

‘Hello missus, please . . .’

Startled by the words, he stops and fishes for his remaining coins.
‘America,’ the man says as he hears the tinkle in his bowl.

About to correct the mistake he stops himself and stands for a moment, guiltily transfixed by the sunken eyes, the grateful smile. Then he backs away quietly and continues down the stairs.

At the foot of the hill he strides on past the fateful café until he reaches the bookshop half way down the avenue. The tourist map he unfolds on the floor shows no sign of Libertalia, but he soon finds Antzavatra where the concierge put his toe. It is a long way north and, strangely, not quite on the coast as the postcard would suggest. But where else can he start searching? As he stands in line before the cashier he again catches the scent of Helga’s perfume on his cheek, and understands the blind man’s error.

With a million local francs stuffed in his bag, withdrawn on his credit card, he takes a taxi to the northern station, where for what seems like hours he waits in the heat, trying to find out when the car will leave and smoking impatiently. Now that the decision has been made he wants only to be in motion, following the green forms to the north, where pieces of his past lie scattered ahead of him.

At last the taxi to the north arrives and he manages to secure the front seat with a bribe of tobacco; but it is not until the middle of the afternoon that the car, with all nine passengers and luggage stowed, lumbers out of the station.

He wakes in darkness with his face pressed hard against the window. The taxi has stopped somewhere in the night, its engine still, the front seat empty. But the feeling of desertion that sweeps over him is quickly banished by the sound of snoring from behind.

He gets out of the car and steps hesitantly into the night, letting his feet find their way along the wheel ruts in the road. Ahead of him in the darkness glows the bright point of a cigarette, which as he approaches he can see belongs to the man in the pale pink business shirt with whom he has been sharing the front seat of the taxi. Hilarion is his name. In the car they have already discussed the state of the road and the economy, the conversation aided by the man’s French, which has a schoolbook clarity. He is softly built, not more than forty, with a neat moustache and an air of quiet refinement.

‘Vous avez bien dormi?’ he asks from the darkness.

‘Oui, très bien. Quelle heure est-il?’

Hilarion tells him it is just past ten. The driver, he says, has gone to find some water: the radiator has a slow leak, nothing serious.
He looks around for a house or a river, but all he can see are a few stars shining through a hole in the clouds. They could be anywhere.

After smoking for a while in silence Hilarion asks how far he is going and seems surprised by the answer. He remarks that it is not the sort of place that tourists often visit. What is it that takes him there?

Not entirely sure whether he is referring to Misson or himself, he replies that he is going to look for someone who he believes stayed there recently.

‘Un ami?’

‘Non, pas un ami.’

‘Une petite amie?’

No, neither a friend nor a girl, he answers. Just someone he would like to meet.

Hilarion nods politely. He himself is going even further north to a string of towns whose names fall rapidly from his tongue. Normally he would have expected to be flown there, but due to a storm the airstrip has been closed. At least this is what he was informed by his superiors. Personally, he suspects the government has run out of money to pay the fares for low-ranking officials such as himself.

‘Vous êtes dans quel emploi?’

‘Je suis agent recenseur,’ the man replies. Then, noticing his confusion, he explains in a roundabout way that he works as a census officer, a collector of statistics.

Does he like his work?

Hilarion shrugs: he is lucky to have a job at all. As for his current assignment—he has been sent to track down some information missing from the last census—he would hardly say that he is looking forward to it. Aside from the discomforts of travelling by road, which are considerable, he will have to deal with the people in the bush, who have never been famous for welcoming officials from the capital. All in all he would have preferred to stay at home. He flicks his cigarette into the night and it skitters along the road in a trail of sparks.

‘Et vous? Quel est votre métier, si j’ose demander?’

This time it is he who finds himself struggling to explain his business. His job, he tells his companion, is in some ways similar to his own. He, too, is collector of information, although what he collects from people is their tastes and opinions, their dreams of happiness, their innermost desires. Perhaps he could call himself a collector of desires.

‘Vous êtes sondeur?’ Hilarion prompts.

He shakes his head, the word again unfamiliar.

The census officer explains that a sondeur is someone who takes soundings of opinion, in the same way a captain of a ship takes soundings of the sea—in other words, to
find out what lies hidden beneath the surface. Is that what he does? Does he sound the depths of opinion?

Yes, he agrees, this is probably the word he is after, although it is not the way he understands his job. After a moment he explains that in English the word for what he does has a different sense. To take a ‘survey’ of something is not a matter of sounding the deeps, he says, but of studying the surface of the land. One gets a survey of a place by gaining height, in the same way that the pilot of an aeroplane takes photographs of a country from the sky.

At this the census officer smiles: ‘Donc vous êtes aviateur, pas capitaine.’

He laughs, then shakes his head. No, he says, he has never really thought of himself as an aviator either. Or if he is, he has never managed to see anything from the sky except the clouds. He has certainly never seen the country underneath.

Hilarion looks at him uncertainly as he lights another cigarette. In the pause that follows they hear voices from the taxi, then what sounds like someone pissing on the road.

After a thoughtful silence the census officer clears his throat. He knows very well, he says, from his own work, why a government must keep track of the population’s growth and movement, but it is not clear to him who would pay good money to know what people dreamed. Does he work for the politicians?

He shrugs and answers that the company has many clients. The information it collects is sold to anyone who needs it, which means, for the most part, those who have something to sell. They need to know who is out there, he explains, who is living behind the doors of all the houses. Unless they can find out who they are talking to, they feel blind. They think that if they are given a glimpse of people’s dreams they will be able to turn them into money.

Again Hilarion frowns in thought. Surely, he counters, people’s dreams are their own affair. What makes them spend their money is their needs.

Perhaps here that’s true, he tells the man, but where he comes from needs are not enough. Not nearly enough. The only way to keep people spending is to sell them dreams.

‘Comment?’

While the man waits, looking at him with a surprising degree of interest, he chooses the nearest example. Surely, he says, the tourists who come to this country have no need to come—yet come they do, spending millions of francs to fly across the world. What have they been sold, he asks, if not a dream?

‘Quelle rêve?’ demands Hilarion.

Again he shrugs, but this time more uncomfortably. It could be that they dream of a place more isolated from the world, or more exotic. Perhaps a place where people live in closer contact with their land. Or perhaps their dream is simply of a place so different from their own that they won’t be able to recognize it, or with any luck themselves, when they
arrive here. But to be honest, he admits, he doesn’t have a clue. Increasingly he thinks there are few dreams left that anyone actually believes in, as much as they like to try. Most likely they’re just bored.

Hilarion laughs dryly; then, apologizing for his laughter, he explains that in the capital the dreams of the young people could hardly be more different. Right now, he says, while they are asleep in their beds, their dreams are floating back in the opposite direction, towards the money and nice cars, in short everything the tourists have left behind. To illustrate the crossing of their dreams he passes one hand over the other like two aeroplanes passing in the night. It makes him sad, he says, because they live their whole lives in frustration. He is about to continue the point when from some scruple he cuts himself short. There follows a pause during which they both stand smoking in the warm night air, a slight distance now between them.

And what about him? Hilarion asks at last. Is he searching for a dream as well?

No, he says, not a dream. He is searching for a man who sent him a postcard of a canoe.

‘Ah, oui, à Antzavatra.’

‘J’espère que oui.’

Around the car there are now some figures moving about in the darkness. A child whimpers, a match flares, there is no sign of the driver.

After a while the census officer, still curious about his work, returns to the topic of dreams, suggesting that if he is able to discover what his countrymen are dreaming, then he must know them as well as anyone, in fact probably a good deal better.

‘Non.’ He shakes his head emphatically. When he took the job a few years ago he hoped that would be true, but if anything he feels more ignorant than he did when he began. Because his job is to review the questionnaire results, he gets to see them all; but the more he has studied the answers, the less he has understood them—and even less the people whom they are meant to represent. In fact, he tells the census officer, his country has become so obscure to him that he can no longer even imagine it. What people desire is like the weather, he says. All he sees are vague clouds moving around and shifting shape, then disappearing altogether.

Even to his own ears the comparison sounds strange; he would never have said these words in English.

The census officer nods uncertainly. Perhaps he is speaking of a different matter, he replies, but in his own profession, too, it is becoming difficult to hold the population in clear view. People are moving, leaving their lands. Everything is changing so much faster than it used to. Is it the same in his country?
He shrugs. Perhaps. Or perhaps everything is staying the same much faster than it used to. But continue, he tells the man. He was saying his job was difficult?

Ah, yes, Hilarion says. Not so long ago people would live and die in the place where they were born, amongst their own people, but now, more and more, they are moving to where they think they will find enough money to survive—to the capital, the plantations, where the tourists visit. As he can imagine, he says, this causes all kinds of problem. Yet life for many people is so hard, indeed intolerable, that they are prepared to risk leaving everything they know in the hope of something better.

The word the man uses gives him a jolt. What was it that the doctor told him on the day he recovered? *One escapes from the intolerable by simply fleeing*. But what does he know of the intolerable? The life he leads is probably more comfortable than at any time in human history. Even here, after everything that has happened, he has money in his pocket, a plastic card which puts the whole world in his hands. Even his sickness, it occurs to him suddenly, was made possible by wealth. For a moment he has an image of the blind beggar on the steps and a flush of shame comes over him.

To change the subject he asks Hilarion what the chances are of the driver finding water.

Hilarion shrugs phlegmatically: ‘Il reviendra bientôt, je crois.’

‘Je l’espère.’

After a glance into his cigarette packet the man crushes it and drops it on the road, then raises his hand to the sky.

‘La lune,’ he says. ‘Regardez.’

On the horizon the moon is rising through a tear in the clouds, revealing the landscape in which they have been standing all the while. It is not a beautiful sight. On both sides of the plain the hills have been so gutted by erosion that they form a chain of open craters, while the few trees left around their base have been stripped of every branch. By the cold light of the moon the landscape is even more unsettling than it would be otherwise, as if it were reverting to some prehuman, almost mineraline condition.

Hilarion turns towards him: ‘Est-ce que le Madagascar vous plaît?’

He searches the man’s face for a flicker of irony, but all he can see is the eager interest, which he knows well enough, of people from small countries in the opinions of those from larger ones. He tells him he has only had a few days to form an impression, but has so far liked what he has seen. The rice fields, he adds, are nice and green. Immediately he feels foolish, but the man nods approvingly.

‘Oui, oui,’ he agrees, ‘les rizières sont belles.’
At that moment a cheer rises from the car and they turn to see the driver returning through the darkness with a jerry can on his shoulder. Once he has set the can on the ground, the man opens the bonnet and drapes a handkerchief over the mouth of the radiator. When he and Hilarion come closer he can see that the driver’s jeans are plastered to his legs with mud, and out of sympathy—no-one else having offered—he holds the cloth in place while the man filters the water through it. ‘Ça va?’ he asks when it reaches the brim; but the driver is in no mood for pleasantry. Without a word he slams the bonnet shut and starts the car.

They continue in silence through the night, following the wheel ruts which stretch ahead of them in twisted skeins of shadow. In the moonlight he can just make out the shape of the country as it comes towards him: the ruined hills, the totem-pole trees, the herds of bare-ribbed cows. Hilarion is soon asleep, his hands clasped neatly in his lap; the driver stares in angry concentration at the road.

Without his watch he has already begun to lose track of the time, which he guesses must be well past midnight. But although the day set for his departure has arrived, the thought of flying home, to which he has clung like a buoy through the last few days, now seems as distant as the capital itself, and falling further behind him by the minute.

Outside the plains revolve slowly in the darkness, barely more than shadows—but even as shadows they are more than what he remembers. He feels certain he must have travelled along this road in both directions before, which would mean he has almost certainly travelled it in daylight. As he tries to imagine what he must have seen he snorts in mirthless laughter. Yes, the tables have turned, he thinks. The leader and the led. It is not the double, after all, who has the bandaged eyes . . .
When Hilarion taps him on the knee to rouse him it is not quite dawn. A colourless half-light fills the sky and from the speaker in the car door comes the voice of Bob Marley, exhorting him to stand up for his rights.

`On est presque là,’ says Hilarion, pointing through the windscreen. ‘Là-bas. Vous voyez?’

He follows the man’s finger to a double line of buildings which cuts across the plain in the distance. Beyond it, marked by a swathe of trees, is the wandering course of a river.

‘Oui, je le vois. Quelle heure est-il?’

It is half past five, the census officer tells him; all things considered, they have made good progress.

As the settlement on the plain comes closer he can see that it consists of nothing more than a stretch of two-laned highway, flanked by buildings and crossed in the middle by a single side street. In a discouraging thought it occurs to him that it would appear from the air like an enormous crossed-out equal sign.

‘C’est petit, hein?’ says the census officer. ‘Pas grand-chose à voir là.’

‘Oui, mais je m’y attendais.’

At least, adds the census officer, it should be easy to find the person he is looking for.

The driver stops the car before they enter the town, pulling up beside a concrete post signed ANTZAVATRA RN6. Hilarion gets out to say goodbye and assures him again that he will find the man he is after. With a smile he adds that if anyone knows how to question people it is surely a **sondeur**. Meanwhile the other passengers, still half asleep, have shifted places to enjoy the vacant seat and are ready to continue. The driver calls out impatiently, beating his hand on the roof of the car.

‘Bonne chance!’ cries Hilarion as he slams the door—and a moment later the taxi has disappeared in a cloud of dust, leaving him alone beside the highway with his plastic bag.

When the sound of the car has died away he sits down with his back against the post and lights a cigarette. From what Hilarion told him during the night it seems the town has only one hotel, which, although it opens early, is unlikely to welcome visitors at dawn. The morning is so still that the smoke rises from his hand in a vertically unbroken thread. Even the birds are still asleep. He looks out across the blue savannah to a thatched house in the...
distance, which has collapsed at one end like an old beast lying down. An enormous yawn takes hold of him: after his night on the road he could happily lie down himself.

When he rises to continue the sun has just begun to show itself over the horizon, casting a pale yellow light across the fields of dry grass. With his bag over his shoulder he walks into the town, past a cement-walled post office, a petrol pump, a clinic painted with a red cross. Between the official buildings rows of low-roofed shanties have been patched together from strips of flattened iron and plywood advertisements for a brand of sweetened condensed milk, which show, at various angles, a cheerful yellow cow with bulging udders and a long-lashed, winking eye. In another light the scene might have an air of desolation, but at sunrise it is almost beautiful. For a moment he pauses in the centre of the town and looks around him. The highway is so quiet, the houses so tightly boarded, that he has a sense of having stumbled into a ghost town.

He finds the hotel at the north end of the highway, an old two-storeyed building overarched by a heavily fruiting mango tree. Once rendered, its walls have been stripped by age and neglect to the chalky brickwork underneath and the shutters have sagged out of square. On the porch stands a scrawny hen which is attacking the flowers of a geranium. A hand-painted sign above the porch reads:

HOTEL STOP.

He climbs the steps and knocks on the door, at first tentatively, then slightly louder, before sitting down to wait, feeling slightly sick at the thought of what might await him inside. But at least this time, he reassures himself, he won’t be taken by surprise. Behind him the chicken runs back and forth nervously, not daring to pass him on the steps, until finally it flaps over the rail and into the garden.

A few minutes later a metal shutter opens with a squeal on the far side of the street, revealing a woman in a gaudy sarong who begins to set cups on a counter. Across the road drifts the smell of brewing coffee. Struck by the thought that she might know when the hotel opens he gets up and crosses the highway, calling out a friendly ‘Bonjour!’ as he approaches. But the woman, clearly startled to see a foreigner, returns his greeting with a look of alarm. With some reluctance she ladles him a coffee, refusing to take his coins until he has set them down on the counter.

‘L’hôtel,’ he says, pointing across the road. ‘A quelle heure ouvre-t-il?’

The woman looks up and down the highway as if searching for someone to rescue her, then shakes her head emphatically. Realizing that further questions are pointless he drinks his coffee in silence and returns to his place on the hotel steps. From this position he watches the town come slowly to life, noticed by no-one but an old man dressed in what looks like a long plaid night shirt, who stops in front of the gate and tips his hat.
‘Bonjour, Monsieur.’
‘Bonjour.’
The man waves his walking stick overhead: ‘Beau temps aujourd’hui.’
‘Il va faire chaud,’ he agrees. Then he jerks his thumb at the door and asks the man if he knows when it will open.

At this the old man shrugs and raises a hand from his staff in a slow gesture of mystery, as if to suggest that such things are decided by fate, before at last replying that if the hotel does not open soon it will no doubt open later in the day, when Madame Stop returns.

‘Madame Stop?’
‘Oui,’ the man nods, and with a tip of his hat he wanders away.

After the old man has gone he gets up and hammers on the door again to see which answer is right. He lets the rattle fade to silence, bangs again, and is just about to step back to the garden when to his surprise he hears a shutter scrape open above his head and a voice shout ‘Attendez!’ A few seconds later the door swings open and a young man appears in the entrance, slightly built, not far past twenty, with angular cheekbones and a vague wisp of moustache. As he buttons his shirt the young man blinks at the daylight, his eyes so bleary that it is impossible to detect any sign of recognition. How should he play it? Without the cues he has imagined he falters for a moment; then he pulls himself together, and apologising for waking him, asks if the hotel has any free rooms.

A wry smile spreads across the young man’s face: the hotel, he replies, has nothing else. With a welcoming gesture he leads him through the dark interior to a dusty courtyard at the rear of the building, where against a crumbling brick wall to the right are four thatched bungalows, each of them a bare cube furnished solely with a wooden bed and opening to the yard by a curiously tiny door. After showing him into each of them, although they are identical in every detail, the young man yawns convulsively, and telling him to make himself comfortable, disappears back into the house.

Left alone in the courtyard he tries to make sense of what has just happened. There have been no green forms, no other guests, no hint of recognition—in fact nothing he expected. After the sleepless hours he spent imagining his arrival here the reality is disappointing. He ducks his head through the nearest door and sits down on the bed, which by the feel of the mattress is stuffed with some kind of grass. Already the room is uncomfortably hot. He takes off his shirt and shoes, then tips the plastic bag onto the floor and searches again for any clues he might have missed in Helga’s hotel room. Finding nothing new, he reaches for the sprig of plastic fern. As he holds the delicate leaves between his fingers he notices that they are trembling slightly, magnifying the first shiver of doubt he has begun to feel about what he is doing. What is he really looking for up here? Is all of this just to know where he
went? Or does he think—does it even make sense?—that if he can find what he came for he will know what he fled? For a long time he sits there, lost in thought, until he lies back on the bed and, with the fern still quivering in his hand, closes his eyes.

Towards the middle of the morning he wakes in a sweat and stumbles out of the room into the courtyard. Beyond the bungalows he finds a palm-thatched bathroom equipped with a tap and metal bucket. After dousing himself in cold water he dresses in his least stale clothes and, bracing himself for a meeting with the mysteriously named patronne, he enters the Hotel Stop.

Inside the house it is dark and almost unbreathably hot. A peeling corridor hung with prints of saints and framed diplomas leads him to a large front room whose shutters are open wide to the porch and garden beyond. From the half-dozen tables arranged in front of the windows he can see, despite the disarray, that this must be the hotel’s dining room. Piles of paper and sewing litter the chairs; a radio is playing softly on the sideboard. At the furthest table, sitting with his back to him, is the young man who showed him to his bungalow. He announces himself with a gentle cough and the man looks over his shoulder in surprise.

‘Ah, salut!’

When he comes closer he can see that the table is stacked with video cassettes and plastic cases.

‘Tout va bien?’ the young man asks, getting up from his seat. ‘La chambre? Vous avez tout ce qu’il vous faut?’ He seems slightly embarrassed by his role as host.

‘Oui, ça va, ça va,’ he reassures him. ‘Merci.’

The young man apologizes for having nothing to offer him in the way of food, explaining that it is really his mother, not he, who is in charge of the hotel. Since yesterday she has been visiting her sister in the country, but should be returning shortly.

‘Votre mère est Madame Stop?’

The hotelier’s son looks surprised: ‘Oui . . . c’est ça.’

‘Et votre nom?’

‘Stéphane,’ he answers, putting out his hand. ‘Stéphane Stop.’

Once they have introduced themselves the young man gestures for him to take a seat and goes to the sideboard for a glass of water. Meanwhile, unobserved, he steals a glance around the room, searching for anything that might tell him if he was here before. He sees a photo of a spaniel on an out-of-date calendar, an ancient electric fan with a severed cord, a bright yellow banner embroidered with a Malagasy proverb. None of it means anything.
Stéphane returns and hands him the glass, which he gulps down thirstily. Then when he has emptied it he looks across the table at his host.

‘Stop,’ he says. ‘C’est un mot anglais, n’est-ce pas?’

The young man nods. The name of his family is so long, he explains, that since he can remember they have been known by the hotel’s name. Around town he is mostly called ‘Stop Zaza’—the youngster—because he is the youngest of his brothers.

More to keep him talking than from any real interest, he asks Stéphane if his brothers also live in the town, to which he gets a negative reply. The Stop brothers senior are both high school teachers, one of whom is working in Diego, the other in a small town to the south.

‘Mais vous n’êtes pas professeur?’

Stéphane shakes his head. Although he trained to become a teacher, like his brothers, he was prevented from taking up a position by the malaria he has had since he was a boy. Each time he began to work the sickness would return, until finally he was forced to return home to live with his mother.

‘C’est dommage,’ he murmurs, but the hotelier’s son shrugs the pity away.

Sometimes such things are for the best, he says. About two years ago, with the help of his family, he set up a video club in the building next door, which now earns almost the equivalent of a teacher’s pay, and for much easier work at that. So perhaps his sickness has been kind to him. For a moment he looks at him with his eyes narrowed, as if judging what is safe to say, then he gives him an impish smile. The only problem with his business, he confides, is that the noise of the videos keeps the hotel guests from sleeping. His mother is always asking him to keep the volume down, but what can he do? The sad fact is that what is worst for her business is inevitably the best for his—and to illustrate the point he slides a cassette box across the table.

On the cover of the box two Chinese men in suits, one with a machine gun in his hand, are wrestling on the prow of a speedboat bound for collision with a sandy beach. He can see what he means, he tells Stéphane. Then sensing an opening he points at the photograph and asks what the beaches near the town are like.

‘Les plages?’

He nods. Surely there are some nice beaches on the coast?

The young man shakes his head. There are beaches on the islands further north, he says, but on the coast around these parts there are only mangroves. Why else is the hotel empty? Perhaps if there were beaches they would have more guests, especially more vazahas.

‘Vazahas?’

The hotelier’s son seems embarrassed when he hears the word repeated: ‘Je suis désolé. Je veux dire des blancs: des européens, des américains.’
‘Ah,’ he nods. Does that mean that the hotel never has white guests? No tourists?

Not often, Stéphane replies. Occasionally a tout terrain cyclist will stop for a night, but for weeks there hasn’t even been one of those.

No beaches, no tourists . . . To hide his disappointment he laughs and tells his host that at least the hotel has one tourist now. What sights should he see?

Again the young man looks apologetic. Aside from visiting the river, he says, there’s not a lot to do in Antzavatra.

He looks into the garden, nodding slowly: everything about the place seems wrong. Then he thanks Stéphane for his advice and pushes back his chair, saying that he should leave him to get on with his work.

‘Okay.’ Stéphane winks. ‘Unteel later.’

‘You speak English? I didn’t realize . . .’

The young man waves his hand in a gesture of modesty. ‘Ah, yeah, a little bit. I read some. But mostly I am speaking to no people here.’ He pauses, then lifts a cassette in the air and rattles it. ‘You like the vidéo?’ he asks.

‘Sure I do.’

In that case, he insists, he must come to the club that afternoon: it will be un film exceptionnel. Thanks to the cattle market there should be a full house, too, with people from all over the district. If there is one thing not to miss in Antzavatra, he advises, it’s the video club at the Hotel Stop.

The offer is made so forcefully he feels unable to refuse, and, giving his word that he will return for the three o’clock session, he steps into the garden.

When he leaves the shade of the mango tree he is surprised to find the highway as deserted as when he arrived. As if happy to have the place to themselves the condensed milk cows wink sportively at each other across the road, while beneath them, in the narrow strip of shade, a few hens lie in bowls of dust with their beaks wide open. But as he heads back through the town he soon realizes that the place is not so much deserted as in hiding from the sun. Through half-open doors he catches glimpses of prone bodies: a stall keeper lying on the earthen floor, old women fanning themselves with their hats. The only men who are out of doors are taking a siesta beneath a spreading poinciana tree.

In fact it is not until he comes to the small square at the cross-street that he encounters any sign of activity at all. Here a grocery store has lured a small crowd to the shade of its verandah, including some stern-faced peasants who are arguing over paperwork on a bench beside the door. Inside the shop he buys a tin of sardines and a stale baguette from the Chinese shopkeeper, which he manages, without the aid of a knife, to fashion into a sandwich. For some time after he has finished eating he lingers at the edge of the crowd, half hoping that
someone will seize him by the hand like the teacher in the market and tell him what he was up to here the week before. But the glances he gets from the locals here are of a less welcoming sort.

It does not take him long to explore the two streets of the town—the equal sign of the wide main street, then the narrow lane which negates it. What Stéphane Stop and the concierge told him is true: there is absolutely nothing to see. When he has satisfied himself that he is not going to be recognized in this way, or at least not at this time of day, he heads out along the highway in the direction of the river.

When he gets back to the town his clothes are still damp from the swim and he feels so much cooler than he has all afternoon that even the chickens on the highway seem, in his eyes, to have found a new lease of life. They have all crossed to the other side of the road, where they peck for scraps in the lengthening shadows. Of human life, however, there is still a remarkable absence; in fact the town is, if anything, even quieter than when he left it.

The silence of the place is so unsettling that when he reaches the garden of the Hotel Stop he almost jumps when he hears a voice burst from beyond the mango tree, a deep male declamation which is cut short by a beating drum. When it sounds again it is clear that the voice is coming from the iron shed which abuts the courtyard at the rear, American by the sound of it, and unnaturally bass-boosted. The video: it had slipped his mind completely. Although his heart sinks at the prospect of the airless heat and unwelcoming stares, he knows that if he wants the help of his host then the promise should be kept. With a sigh he follows the booming voice to the near end of the shed and, hoping the tin door is the entrance, slips inside.

As he leans back on the door he looks around him for Stéphane, but in the almost total darkness he has no sense even if he has entered at the side or at the back. In fact the only points of light he can see come from the iron roof above, which like the ceiling of a planetarium is pierced with tiny holes that cast skewers of light through a coiling cigarette-smoke haze. Afraid of moving any further he stands still until the crowd of bodies he can only sense parts just enough to give a clear glimpse of the TV screen. And there, against a spray of stars like the one overhead, an astronaut in a yellow suit is floating upside down, breathing into his helmet with an eerie, rasping stertor. The background noise is a staticky hiss: the tinnitus of outer space. By the dim light of the television he can see that he has joined an audience of at least several dozen, some of whom are standing against the walls, some sitting, a few lying on the ground. Only a few metres away stands the hotelier’s son, who salutes him with a baseball cap.
'In the first year of the twenty-first century,' booms the television, ‘there is strange and wondrous beauty, startling experiences which jolt and mystify, and the danger of complete oblivion . . .’

A nebula explodes in a silent burst as he takes his place beside Stéphane, who shifts along the wall. The men to either side, however, refuse to budge and look him up and down unani mably. Stéphane grips his arm.

‘Not too late,’ he reassures him. ‘Il n’a pas commencé.’

‘Ah, good.’ He has only missed the trailer after all.

When he turns back to the screen the starry sky has disappeared and in its place is a blue-black square speckled with magnetic grain. For half a minute there is no sound from the television, in fact no sound at all except a loose sheet of iron which grates against the wall outside. The audience is silent with anticipation. Then suddenly a blast of music hurls them back into the cosmos. To the exultant fanfare of Richard Strauss’s ‘Zarathustra’ the sun begins to rise behind the moon, and at the bottom of the screen appears the title of the film—it is years since he last saw it—2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY.

So this is the masterpiece which Stéphane promised: it seems a curious choice. Most of the audience, he assumes, must have come here from the zebu market on the edge of the town. Without intending to, he has joined the company of the single men, who stand around the walls with one foot raised behind them, their bare arms folded across their chests, their narrow-brimmed hats tilted forward over their eyes. On the benches in the centre of the room sit the older men and families, while at the very front, on the earthen floor, lie a group of young boys he thinks he recognizes as the cowherds he met earlier at the river. Presiding over all the crowd is the TV set itself, which sits on a pedestal built from wooden cable reels festooned with Christmas tinsel.

Aside from Stéphane and the cowherds, there is one other face in the crowd he knows: the old man who approached him on the hotel steps that morning. Still clutching his staff, he sits a few rows ahead, where every few seconds he lets out an ambiguous ‘Ha!’ in response to whatever happens on the screen.

Right now, on the screen, a band of hominids is scratching in the dirt for food. It is Africa, the dawn of man. The only sound is the soft moan of the wind as it blows across the savannah, covering scattered bones in dust. Through the ribcage of an elephant he can see the hominids scramble up the rocks in alarm, while beneath them, crouched around the TV set, the cowherds stare up in spellbound silence. Stéphane, beside him, is smiling to himself in anticipation of what is about to unfold, the story that leads from ape to man, from the bone club to the lunar shuttle. But in the meantime there is just the stupid struggle for survival. At the hominids’ waterhole a rival troupe attacks, posturing aggressively before beating a retreat.
‘Ha!’ murmurs the old man.

The wall of the shed is so hot that he lifts his foot against it like his neighbours. He lights a cigarette, and a second for Stéphane, who a moment later taps him on the arm.

‘You saw this one?’

‘Years ago. You too?’

‘Hier soir.’ That was the reason he was so tired in the morning, he explains. After a moment he taps him again and asks in a low voice if the final section of the film made sense to him, the part set on Jupiter, with the dying astronaut . . .

He shakes his head and smiles: ‘Did you understand it?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘No-one does.’

‘Ah, bon . . .’ Stéphane looks relieved.

At this point all the whispers in the room fall silent. It is the moment, at last, when the visitant appears—the Pandora’s box of knowledge. Like a marble headstone it stands outlined against the sky, its polished surfaces reflecting the moving clouds. At the sight of it the hominids start screeching in confusion, but soon their cries are enveloped by a stranger sound. From somewhere inside the monolith comes a wild discordant humming, like an untuned choir, which swells in volume until it echoes about the tin shed in a piercing shriek. Driven into a frenzy by the music, the hominids leap around the stone in circles, touching its base in apish veneration.

As he watches the scene he finds himself reminded, bizarrely, of the little computer he saw in the magazine the previous day. Like the coffee buyer’s gadget the stone has the same sleek, black geometry, the same incongruous setting. For a moment he almost expects to see it split open and display a message on a screen. But of course it remains intact, guarding its secret as closely as the box in his hotel room. The box . . . It is the second time he has felt a link between the box and the computer. He closes his eyes and tries with all his concentration to uncover a connection; but the memory he is looking for is lodged in ground as hard as the African plain.

He is shaken from his thoughts by another blast of Strauss. The apes on the rocks have taken to the gift of technology with predictable enthusiasm, and are now busy smashing bone against bone in an ecstasy of newfound power. From now on the savannah has a new boss. The first clubbed warthog stumbles to the dust and dies, followed moments later by a rival ape, who lies on the ground with a shattered skull. Then the murderous hominid flings its bone into the sky, where it rises against the clouds in ultra-slow motion, turning silently end over end until it reaches its zenith . . .
...and is suddenly a bone no more, but a majestic spaceship waltzing through the stars to the stately rhythm of ‘The Blue Danube’. Around it floats space-traffic of all shapes and sizes: hotels, cartwheels, pointy carriers. In that single cut they have jumped some hundred millennia, as if the video club were an antique time machine. From in front of him comes a loud ‘Ha!’ of surprise as the old man looks from side to side, begging his neighbours to assure him that his eyes haven’t deceived him. A low murmur runs around the room.

‘Stupéfiant,’ hisses Stéphane.

‘Amazing,’ he agrees.

But more amazing than the film itself is the fact of seeing it now, in the very year it was meant to portray—that mythical year which was forecast to jolt and mystify those who would live through it, like himself. The first year of the century and here he is, standing in a rusting shed at the ends of the earth, in a town he has forgotten, watching old dreams of a future that has slipped into the present and will very soon have been swallowed by the past. The times are so much stranger than Kubrick could have imagined. As he watches the spaceships waltzing through the sky he feels a sudden pang of sadness, perhaps even nostalgia—a mourning for a future which has aged and died, sinking like a burnt-out sputnik into some forgotten patch of ocean; a frontier which has ceased to exist. He is living in the future of the past, or the past of the future, anywhere but in the present . . . He thinks suddenly of the New Year fireworks in the café two nights earlier, the whole world gaping at itself and its epochal present in a stupefied euphoria, as if the blaze of gunpowder could hide the fact that the present is lost as deep in darkness as his own days on this island. He can no more picture his own time than his missing days. It is unimaginable, a crater . . .

A match flares suddenly beside him. At the front of the room the TV sits on its pedestal like the alien visitor, surrounded by an audience hungry for surprise. The scene has now jumped to the luxury Space Hilton, where an astronaut by the name of Haywood Floyd, American, is striding through the corridors giving voice commands to obediently sliding doors. When he reaches the hotel lobby he sits down in a booth and makes a call to the planet below, from which, an instant later, an image of his baby girl is beamed across the screen in front of him. The girl twists coyly in her chair as the spaceman tries to coax her into telling him her birthday wish, so overawed by her orbiting father that she can barely speak.

‘Tell mummy I rang,’ says the astronaut.

At which point Helga, in his memory, is asking if he has rung his ‘people’ back home. The thought hadn’t crossed his mind. How could he possibly explain what he has done? It would be about as credible, he thinks, to ring home from the moon.

And the moon, it seems, is precisely where the astronaut is heading at this moment, having been commissioned to investigate a strange and highly classified discovery made
recently near the crater Clavius. On board the lunar shuttle an attractive hostess in a silver bodysuit is offering him a range of liquid vegetables in sealed sachets. She serves him one and walks on up the aisle. But as she enters the captain’s cabin she turns upside down and pads across the ceiling, stuck to the surface by the soles of her velcro slippers. A ripple of laughter runs around the room, and one of the young cowherds at the front, undeterred by the handicap of gravity, gets up with a grin and throws himself into a hand-stand, waving his legs in the air until he tumbles on top of his shrieking companions. In delight the old man thumps the ground with his staff, and the audience—even some of the stern-faced men around the walls—erupts in laughter so loud that for a minute the sound of the video is completely drowned.

When the laughter has died away he turns his attention back to the screen, where the American is touching down on the lunar colony. Wasting little time to brief his colleagues, he is soon on his way towards the crater, skimming across the silver moonscape in a tiny transport pod. What he has been sent here to investigate, he remembers suddenly, is the same mysterious monolith that a thousand centuries earlier appeared before the apes. And there it is. At the secret destination Floyd and his team descend into the floodlit vault where the slab stands gleaming darkly, and like their hominid ancestors they circle it in reverence. But again, before their hands make contact, it begins to sing. In agony they clutch their helmets as the shrilling music penetrates their brains with a new, and even greater, madness—to create an intelligence beyond their own.

As the music reaches its highest pitch it stops short suddenly, leaving the sheet of iron banging gently on the wall outside. Across the darkened screen appear the words: JUPITER MISSION, EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER.

‘This part is best,’ Stéphane hisses. ‘You think?’

He nods.

There is no doubt that the spaceship bound for Jupiter is majestic. From nose to tail it is so vast that it can only fit in segments on the screen. Somewhere in its interior a man is jogging weightlessly around the inside of his cabin, stuck to the cylindrical walls like a hamster in a wheel. As he runs he punches the air with his fists and exhales sharply. Except for the rubberized track he is running on, the cabin is brilliantly white, including the rather sinister row of glass-lidded coffins which is moulded into the wall. When his work-out is completed he changes into a jumpsuit and serves himself a plate of coloured pastes from a dispenser. Then he sits down at the console with a colleague, and as the two men share a TV dinner they watch themselves being interviewed on the BBC.

‘Earlier this afternoon,’ announces the reporter, ‘we recorded an interview with the crew of Discovery One at a distance of eighty million miles from earth. The crew consists of five men—three of whom are travelling in hibernation—and one of the latest generation of the
H.A.L 9000 computers. We spoke with mission commander Dr. David Bowman and his deputy Frank Pool about their life on board Discovery, and about their sixth colleague, the computer Hal.

To the interviewer’s queries concerning their attitude towards the computer the two astronauts reply that they consider him in every way another member of the crew. As to whether he has feelings like a human being—well, that is something they can’t answer.

Later in the evening Hal asks Dr. Bowman to show him the sketches he has made of the three crew members in their hibernation tanks. Obligingly the commander holds his clumsy portraits up to the computer’s glowing eye.

‘That’s a very nice rendering Dave. I think you’ve improved a great deal.’ The voice is calm, inscrutable, polite to the point of condescension. ‘By the way,’ it continues, ‘do you mind if I ask you a personal question?’

‘No, not at all.’

‘Well, forgive me for being so inquisitive, but during the last few weeks I’ve been wondering if you might be having some second thoughts about the mission . . .’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well no-one could be unaware of the strange reports which were circulating before our departure, reports of something being dug up on the moon . . .’

Suddenly his attention is broken by Stéphane, who taps him on the arm and hisses, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’il dit?’

Having assumed that Stéphane’s English must be better than he thought, the question takes him by surprise; but whatever scruple has kept Stéphane from asking earlier, it is no match for his curiosity in Hal—a curiosity, moreover, in which it seems he is far from alone. As soon as he begins to whisper his translation the men to either side of them draw closer to hear what the computer is saying.

‘I’m sorry,’ apologizes the machine, ‘just a moment . . . just a moment . . .’

‘Je suis désolé,’ he repeats, ‘un instant, s’il vous plaît . . . un instant . . .’

As if by magic the suspicion of the stern-faced cattlemen melts away, replaced in a moment by broad smiles of encouragement. There is some use for the tourist after all.

‘I have just picked up a fault in the AE35 unit,’ continues the computer. ‘It will go a hundred per cent failure in seventy-two hours.’

Dave Bowman frowns. Is he sure?

‘Yes,’ purrs Hal. ‘That is a completely reliable figure.’

‘Oui,’ he translates quickly, ‘soixante-douze heures, exactement.’

No sooner are the words out of his mouth than the group around him repeats them to those next in line, but this time retranslated into Malagasy. The whole crowd wants to share in
the secret. In a bizarre, trilingual Chinese whispers the words of Hal are relayed around the shed.

‘Well,’ concludes Dave Bowman, ‘I suppose we’ll have to bring it in then.’

For the moment the computer’s speech is over. Relieved to have a break from his new task as translator, he watches Dave go out to retrieve the malfunctioning unit. The transport pod moves slowly through the night, waving its metal claws in front of it, until at a point just short of the Discovery it stops, its hatches opens, and the astronaut floats upside down towards the radar, breathing heavily inside his helmet. With one hand gripping the radar’s rim Dave holds himself in position, while with the other he unscrews the unit and lifts it free.

‘Ha,’ murmurs the old man.

Back inside the ship Dave tests the circuits of the unit with his colleague, but even after repeating the check he is unable to find the fault alleged by the computer.

‘Well,’ he says at last, ‘I’m damned if I can find the problem Hal.’

‘It’s puzzling,’ Hal agrees. ‘I don’t think I’ve seen anything quite like this before. I would recommend that we put the unit back in operation and let it fail. It should then be a simple matter to track down the cause.’

Stéphane taps him, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’il dit?’, and he translates the conversation as best he can. Again the computer’s words fan out through the crowd in Malagasy.

Meanwhile, on earth, the spaceship’s ground control has found what they believe to be an error in Hal’s prediction. If this is true—and there has never been an error in the model before—it casts serious doubt on the safety of the mission. To confer in private, Dave and Frank repair to one of the transport pods and lock the door against Hal’s hearing. They decide that if the computer is proved to be malfunctioning they have only one real option: they will have to disconnect his brain. Through the window of the pod they can see his red eye glowing on the wall outside, just as Hal can see them in the pod. And although he is unable to hear their words, he can read them on their moving lips . . .

For the second space-walk it is Frank who volunteers to put the unit back in operation. On a video screen inside the ship Dave watches him leap free of the pod and drift towards the radar in his yellow suit. But this time something strange is happening. As if manned by an invisible occupant the pod turns slowly in Frank’s direction and, with its claws extended, moves in menacing silence towards the radar. An instant later a cry of horror bursts from the old man’s lips; a low moan runs around the room. The astronaut is hurtling through space like a piece of yellow garbage, convulsing horribly as he tries to clamp his severed air supply. On the video screen Dave watches his friend disappear into the night, of no more interest to the cosmos than a Twisties packet in the wind.
Something about the scene has genuinely upset the old man. He rises from his bench, sits down again, then stands up muttering. Two women at the front of the audience are waving their hands and addressing the television in high-pitched voices, as if intending to call back the receding astronaut. The whole shed seems electrified.

Tense with fear Dave rushes to the second pod and calls to Hal to open the Discovery’s docking door. As he flies through the darkness he is guided by a sonar blip until the yellow suit appears ahead. Frank Pool has now stopped thrashing. His body revolves slowly in the spotlight beam, bent at the hips as if taking a bow. As Dave steers closer he extends the pod’s steel arms and arrests him in mid-turn, the dead man falling softly onto the claws and lying there outstretched, one arm thrown out sideways in a gesture of abandon. In the mechanical embrace there is a horrible tenderness. For a long moment the commander hovers where he is, cradling his friend in a space-age pietà, before he turns the pod around and heads back to the ship.

The old man sits down, murmuring, visibly relieved to have seen the rescue of the corpse. In fact his relief seems more than to outweigh his concern for the three crew members still on board the Discovery, whose lives are at this moment being snuffed out by the rogue computer. Before they have a chance to wake inside their refrigerated coffins, their vital signs go flat.

Still unaware of the computer’s designs, Dave reaches the ship and taps his microphone.

‘Open the pod bay door please Hal . . . Hello Hal? . . . Do you read me Hal?’

‘Affirmative Dave. I read you.’

‘Open the pod bay door Hal.’

‘I’m sorry Dave.’ The computer’s voice is chillingly serene. ‘I’m afraid I can’t do that.’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘I think you know what the problem is as well as I do.’

‘What are you talking about Hal?’

In rough gist he translates the conversation for the gathered men, who are flashing him expectant looks.

‘I know that you and Frank were planning to disconnect me, and I’m afraid that’s something I can not allow to happen.’

‘Hal! I won’t argue with you any more! Open the doors!’

‘Ouvrez les portes Hal! Pas de discussion!’

‘Mamoha ny varavarana! Tsy miady hevitra!’
‘Dave,’ the voice replies imperturbably, ‘this conversation serves no purpose any more. Goodbye.’

‘Cette conversation ne sert à rien,’ he repeats. ‘Au revoir!’

‘Veloma!’

A long shot shows the two craft side by side, the enormous cruiser and the tiny pod, the pietá, holding the dead astronaut outside the docking door. The muscles in Dave’s jaw go tight, his eyes dart from side to side. As he spins the pod around he lets go of Frank’s body, which breaks free of the pincers in a lazy somersault and tumbles out of frame into the darkness.

This time the old man doesn’t wait for more. Muttering to himself he gets to his feet and pushes his way to the door, which lets in a stream of afternoon sun. A moment later the two women from the front of the room, who have in the meantime been haranguing the commander in shrill voices, also rise and leave the shed, taking with them several others, the whole group shaking their heads in almost angry agitation. But Stéphane, beside him, seems barely aware of the departures, nor the hum of unease which has settled over his audience. He is watching the screen with intense concentration.

During the disturbance in the shed Dave Bowman has succeeded in re-entering the Discovery, through whose maze of inner corridors he is now making his way with grim purpose.

‘Just what do you think you’re doing Dave?’ asks Hal. A long pause. ‘Dave . . . I really think I’m entitled to an answer to that question.’

But without a word the astronaut keeps crawling through the low passages, breathing fast and loud inside his helmet.

‘Look Dave, I can see you’re really upset about this. I honestly think you should sit down calmly, take a stress pill, and think things over.’

‘Asseyez-vous,’ he repeats for Stéphane and the gathered men, ‘réfléchissez, prenez un calmative . . .’

Still the astronaut does not reply. He has reached the glowing centre of Hal’s brain where in weightless silence he unlocks the slotted cards which give it consciousness. Piece by piece he removes Hal’s powers of thought: his logic, language, vision, memory . . .

‘Dave . . . stop . . .’ pleads the voice, its programmed equanimity more poignant now than menacing. ‘Will you? . . . Will you stop Dave? . . . I’m afraid . . . I’m afraid Dave . . . My mind is going . . . I can feel it . . . . There is no question about it . . . I can feel it . . . . I can . . . feel . . . . it . . . . I’m . . . . afraid . . .’

The computer’s voice begins to slur. The iron walls creak. Through the blue haze of smoke the stars in the ceiling flicker.
‘My mind is going,’ he whispers, forgetting to translate. ‘Je le sens . . . J’ai peur! . . .
J’ai peur! . . .’
Already slightly drunk, he sits with Stéphane in the dining room, drinking beer beneath an oil lamp thronged with moths. From the kitchen comes the clink of dishes and the voice of Stéphane’s mother, who is scolding the young nephew she has brought back with her from her sister’s farm. Since Stéphane and he finished eating, Madame Stop and the boy, whose name is Victor, have been taking it in turns to appear at the kitchen door, the patronne to eye the bottles on the table disapprovingly, the boy to burst out in a kung-fu pose before retreating in fits of laughter. But for the moment they have been left in peace. While he sips his beer he watches Stéphane trace a wet figure of eight on the table, his forehead creased in thought.

‘The machine,’ the young man asks at last, ‘you think he is possible?’

‘Hal?’

‘Of course, Hal. He is possible?’

‘Well, in the future, maybe. There are a lot of people who think so.’

‘A machine will be living?’

‘I’m not sure you can call it living.’

‘But he can die, yes, like somebody?’

‘Well, in the movie . . .’

‘So he is living,’ concludes Stéphane simply.

‘You’ve got a point.’

In the silence that follows there is a brief flare overhead, an acrid smell. Stéphane gets up and extracts a charred moth from the lamp, which he flicks through the window into the garden.

‘You stay tomorrow?’ he asks when he sits down.

‘I might even stay a bit longer.’ After the beers they have shared he feels more relaxed than he has for days, indeed expansive. ‘I’m actually waiting to meet somebody.’

‘A l’hôtel?’

‘I don’t know. He just gave me the name of the town. His name’s Misson.’

The young man nods: ‘Il est Français?’

He shrugs. ‘Maybe.’

‘Ah . . . And when is he here?’

‘I thought he would be here already.’
‘You think so?’
‘Well, I haven’t seen any sign of him . . . Does the name “Libertalia” mean anything to you?’
‘Liba . . .?’
‘Libertalia.’
‘Qu’est-ce que c’est?’
‘I think it’s where he’s staying, a place near here. Somewhere near the beach, I think.’
The hotelier’s son looks sceptical.
‘Just wait a moment.’ He pushes back his chair. ‘I’ll show you what I mean. I’ll be back in a tick.’

When he gets back from his bungalow he hands the postcard to Stéphane, who puts down his beer to examine it.
‘Where is this?’
‘Well it says it’s a beach near Antzavatra. Other side.’
‘Ah,’ breathes Stéphane as he reads the caption, ‘I never see this place. It is called Liba . . .?’
‘Libertalia, I think so. But you say there aren’t any beaches near the town?’
‘Yeah, it’s true. Rien comme celle-là.’
‘Then where do you think it is?’
Stéphane studies the photograph again and shakes his head: ‘C’est curieux.’
‘It’s puzzling, isn’t it?’
‘Puzzling . . .’ The young man looks at him with a faint smile and repeats it again, as if the word intrigues him. Then suddenly his face breaks into a grin, and mimicking the voice of Hal he says, ‘It’s puzzling Dave . . .’
‘. . . I don’t think I’ve seen anything quite like it before,’ he finishes in the same serene tone.

They clink their glasses together and laugh; but at that moment they are interrupted by a sharp voice from across the room. In the doorway of the kitchen stands Madame Stop, who is fiddling unhappily with the crucifix around her neck. When her son responds to whatever she has accused him of she casts him a long, censorious look, then with a shake of her head she disappears back into the kitchen.
‘What’s up?’
Stéphane rolls his eyes: ‘Always she thinks I am too sick for this.’ The beer he holds up he downs in a gulp. Then he picks up the postcard and waves it in the air. ‘We ask some people, yes?’
‘You mean in town? Sure, good idea.’
The young man is already heading for the door. ‘Sure good idea,’ he sings to himself, ‘it’s puzzling, aha, yeah! Allons-y!’

In the balmy, black night air they duck beneath the mango tree and out onto the highway, whose wide expanse is bordered by the candlelit windows of the shanties. Music wafts across the town, the smell of smoke. As he looks up at the starry sky an image of the dying astronaut comes back to him, flailing his arms and legs against the canopy of space.

‘I’ll tell you what I did find puzzling,’ he says, still looking up.

‘Aha?’

‘What happened in the club this afternoon, the old guy who got up and left.’

‘Guy?’

‘The old man just in front of us, and the women afterwards. They seemed, I don’t know, upset by something.’

‘Ah, oui,’ says Stéphane slowly, ‘when the astronaut is . . .’ And to complete the sentence he spins forward through the darkness with his arms flailing, like the man in the punctured pressure suit.

‘That’s it. So what made them leave?’

‘The dead man . . .’ he begins. ‘How is he called?’

‘Frank Pool.’

‘Yeah, Frank Pool, he is not, hmm . . . Il n’a pas été enterré.’

‘He wasn’t buried?’

‘Not buried, yeah.’ For the old people in the audience this is a difficult thing to see. It is so far away for a body to be lost. Up there the astronaut will go on floating forever, he explains, without anyone to bring him back. He will never be returned to where he should be buried.

‘To Earth you mean? Was that the problem?’

‘Ah, non!’ Stéphane seems surprised. He stops walking and turns towards him with his arms spread wide, just visible in the darkness. Then slowly he closes the gap between his hands until his fingertips meet in the pitched roof of a house. ‘Pas la terre,’ he says. ‘Chez lui.’ He means the actual place where he belongs, the place of his ancestors. That’s where the old man thought he should be taken, just as the ship’s commander did. Why else did he try to save the body, if not because he had a duty to Frank Pool, and Frank Pool’s family, to take him back to his home?

It is not a question that demands an answer, but even if it did, he would be unable to reply. He is somewhere else altogether. As he looks at Stéphane’s hands, which are still held in the shape of a roof, all he can see is the tiny wooden building on the tomb he stumbled upon two days earlier, the memory of it so intensely clear that for a moment he is plunged
back into the clearing on the hilltop, surrounded by the tall trees and dripping bamboo. He can sense the path behind him, the smell of the wet red earth. And there, at the centre of the clearing, above the horned skulls and pots of flowers which decorate the vault, is the dead man’s miniature home, his patch of ground, where he belongs . . .

Then Stéphane parts his hands and the house vanishes. He is brought back suddenly to the darkness of the road.

‘It’s puzzling?’
‘No . . . no, I can see that now. At least I think so.’

They continue in silence, guided by the Southern Cross, which hangs above the end of the highway.

‘Tomorrow you see the vidéo?’ asks Stéphane.
‘What are you showing?’
‘“Dur à Cuire”. C’est de Hong-Kong.’
‘I’ll probably have to go to the coast.’
‘Ah, oui, à Libertalia.’

Already he can see the crossroad up ahead, figures moving through the light of open doors. Stéphane calls out to someone coming towards them, a white smile floating in the darkness. After a brief exchange of words the smile floats by and Stéphane nudges him—

‘Allons!’ They set off on a long diagonal, making for a wide and brightly lit doorway from which music spills into the night.

‘My friends are at this one,’ explains Stéphane as they get near.

Outside the door a man squats on the edge of the highway, turning a row of kebabs on a glowing bed of coals. They walk past him and step up into a narrow, lamp-lit room whose floor bounces like a springboard as they enter. It is a liquor store, a tiny bar, in which half a dozen men are standing around a counter decked with bottles of rum and tins of loose cigarettes. On shelves against the back wall are more bottles, several flickering oil-lamps, and a bright yellow cassette player. Returning the barman’s nod, he follows Stéphane to the back corner of the room where in the shadows sit three young men, the promised friends, who put down their glasses and shake his hand. Romain, Laurence, Robert: he immediately forgets which name belongs to whom. All three are wearing trousers and blue shirts, and all three, as far as he can tell—they keep interrupting each other with drunken banter—are trainee vets who have been vaccinating cattle in the area. The barman puts another flask of rum on the bench, which Stéphane promptly empties into their five glasses.

‘To your friend,’ he proposes, raising his own.
‘My friend?’
‘Yeah, we find him now. I think so.’
‘Ah, Monsieur Misson. Let’s hope you’re right . . .’

From the cassette deck a Malagasy pop song crackles, the chorus breaking into English: ‘Sexy-ay! Sex-y girl-ie! Sexy-ayiay! Sex-y girl-ie!’ The smell of barbecued meat drifts in through the open door.

‘Brochettes?’ Stéphane suggests.

He thinks of the eel and gritty rice that Madame Stop prepared for dinner.

‘Good idea,’ he says. ‘I’ll get them.’

When he re-enters the bar he finds the three vets huddled in a heated discussion over the counter, examining the postcard by the light of a lamp. He passes them their skewers, which they brandish for a few more minutes in debate, before abruptly they fall silent, as if only just realizing what they have in their hands, and start eating instead. After a tactful pause he gestures at the card and asks them if they recognize the place.

Cheeks bulging with kebab, they shake their heads. It seems that the two who grew up in the town, like Stéphane, think there is nothing like it in the area. The third, however, who comes from further north, believes it is like the beaches near a place called Diego.

‘Diego?’

‘Diego Suarez,’ explains Stéphane: it is the grande ville of the north.

‘Ah, yes.’ He remembers seeing the name on the map. ‘But that’s not exactly near Antzavatra, is it?’

‘No,’ says Stéphane. ‘Puzzling.’

Nearby a man in a shapeless black felt hat has been listening to their conversation, nodding sagely, and now shuffles along the counter. In the hope that the man might be able to set them straight he slides the card towards him, and for a while the man looks down at it, stroking his beard in thought. Then he closes his eyes, wags a finger in the air, and in a hoarse voice whispers, ‘Sexy girlie!’

He takes back the card and the man staggers off. The barman puts another bottle on the counter.

‘Your friend,’ asks Stéphane as he tops up the glasses, ‘comment est-il?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Is he big man? Little? A bit fat?’

Before answering he takes another swig of rum, then looks Stéphane in the eye.

‘To be honest with you, I don’t know.’

Stéphane frowns: ‘You never saw him?’

‘Well, yes, I think I did, but I can’t remember him.’

‘Mais si,’ Stéphane insists. ‘He is your friend. Il t’appelle “camarade” . . .’
‘I know, but I can’t remember what he looks like, it’s not easy to explain. I’ve just,’—
he waves his hand—‘forgotten him.’

‘Your friend.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Complètement?’

‘Complètement. I wouldn’t know him if I saw him. You could be him for all I know.’

Stéphane’s frown relaxes to a grin: ‘Aha, c’est drôle ça!’

‘I guess it must be.’

‘Puzzling!’ Stéphane cackles.

By this stage one of the vets has passed out against the wall, a yellow milk cow
grinning over his shoulder. Another has disappeared. The remaining one however—Laurence?
Romain?—wants Stéphane to explain what he is laughing about. When he has been told
the story he leans forward with a drunken earnestness and asks him if it is a long time since he
saw his friend.

Not long at all, he answers with a liberating truthfulness. About a week.

‘Une semaine!’ repeats Stéphane, to whose clear delight the vet keeps nodding
earnestly.

And where was that? the vet continues.

But before he has a chance to respond, Stéphane has answered for him, raising his
glass in a toast and hooting, ‘Libertalia!’

He clinks the glass with his own. ‘You’re close,’ he tells him. ‘It was actually right
here.’

Stéphane stops laughing for a moment and looks at him, his face flickering between
confusion and hilarity.

‘I’m serious, it says so on the card.’

‘Ah, non, c’est trop!’ croaks Stéphane, before the sight of his friend, who is still
nodding earnestly, renders him incapable of further speech.

Stéphane is still wiping his eyes a minute later when the missing vet, the one from
further north, strides in across the bouncing floor and, after a few excited words in Malagasy,
turns to him with the air of having something important to say. It transpires that he has just
been up the highway to a second bar in order to look for someone he met there earlier in the
evening, a travelling businessman who owns an aluminium cookware factory in Diego Suarez.
The Diegan businessman, he is pleased to say, is still at the same bar, where at this very
moment he is sitting down to eat a beefsteak. Having delivered his report he waits in silence.

‘Beefsteak? I don’t get it . . .’

Stéphane waves the photograph in the air. ‘You show him this,’ he clarifies.
The vet nods eagerly: ‘Il connaîtra cette plage . . .’

‘Ah, right, of course, he’s from Diego. Well, let’s go and see him then.’

The vets and Stéphane down their drinks, then get to work reviving their unconscious companion. Meanwhile he is left to pay the bill. As an afterthought he tries to ask the barman if he has seen another ‘vazaha’ in the town, but the man only smiles and shakes his head.

Back outside they continue past the crossroad, the vets swerving from side to side like the wheel ruts underfoot. But they have gone less than fifty metres when they hear a chorus of voices calling them over to the side of the road, where in the darkness they find a group of people relaxing on the ground around a cluster of glowing braziers. Women are boiling kettles on the coals, men lie on their sides smoking cigarettes, children run squealing between the houses behind them. Aside from the audience in the club it is the largest crowd he has seen all day. As he stands at the edge of the circle a long discussion ensues as Stéphane and the two more sober vets—the third has seized the opportunity to lie down in the road—are quizzed about their business, Stéphane leading the answers while his two friends add supportive nods and point, at appropriate moments, at himself and the two liquor stores. But as hard as he listens to the conversation the only words he grasps are ‘Libertalia’, which the crowd murmurs in an unfamiliar way, and ‘Diego’, which the northern vet repeats like an echo at every mention. When the questions are finished Stéphane turns to him and asks him for the postcard, which together with his cigarette lighter is then passed around the crowd so that everyone can see what he is looking for—including some of the children, who poke their heads under their parents’ arms and try to blow out the flame. But despite the interest in his quest, it is clear from the flickering faces that no-one has a clue where the picture was taken. The postcard comes full circle and is handed back. As he puts it in his pocket he notices a stirring in the darkness, people raising themselves from the ground.

‘What’s happening?’ he asks Stéphane.

‘On va ensemble.’

And sure enough, as they set off again, nearly half the crowd comes with them, the younger men helping the vets to carry their unconscious friend by the arms and legs. The warm night air is filled with voices. Beside him, at the head of the procession, strides Stéphane, who by this stage is in such high spirits that he has begun to hum ‘The Blue Danube’. The stars shine down in a cinematic blaze; a satellite streaks west across the sky. Perhaps it is just the rum, or perhaps the sense of purpose in their search, but for the first time in days, or possibly much longer, he, too, feels almost happy.

The second liquor store is on the edge of town, not far from where the taxi left him in the morning, its only advertisement being a single brilliant window in a row of derelict tin shanties. Unlike the first bar there is no music from inside; in fact the only sound he can hear
is the laughter of the vets and their assistants, who have already fallen some way behind. As they reach the window Stéphane motions for him to hold back, then after peering carefully inside, beckons for him to do the same.

‘What is it?’ he finds himself whispering.

‘Le restaurant,’ hisses Stéphane.

Through the corner of the room he can glimpse the adjoining bar; but it is not this which Stéphane means him to see. Only a few feet away, with his back turned, sits a man in a brown leather jacket, who is bent forward over the table.

‘Is that him?’

‘Oui, je pense.’

They slip past the window and open the door to the bar, which like the restaurant is lit by a dazzling, moth-thronged bulb. When he raises a hand to shield his eyes he can see that they are faced by three men and a woman with ornately braided hair, who are standing with their backs against the counter. Behind them rise shelves stacked with rum and Coke and Good Look cigarettes, and even a few tins of corned beef and condensed milk. But before anyone has a chance to speak the rest of the party has arrived outside, all talking loudly over each other and rattling at the door. When Stéphane opens it for them they burst in with the sleeping vet, who is left propped in a corner while the new arrivals gather around the bar, on which the woman with the braids is already lining up a long row of bottles and glasses. Meanwhile Stéphane, who seems suddenly to have forgotten the reason for their visit, has taken it upon himself to organize the music. Looking perfectly at home behind the counter he is fiddling with a child’s cassette player stencilled with pictures of Roadrunner, from whose speakers bursts a rhythmic dance tune for accordion and drums.

Overlooked in all this noise and movement, he makes his way to the restaurant door and peers inside. At his table by the window sits the Diegan cookware baron, holding a cigarette in one hand and a forkload of food in the other. On his pouchy, moustachioed face there is an expression of such long-suffering disdain that it can only be intended to leave anyone who passes the door in no doubt he is meant for better things. After prodding at his steak a moment longer he stubs his cigarette into its remains, untucks the napkin from his collar, and wipes his mouth. If at this point he produced a mobile phone it would hardly seem surprising—but instead he avails himself of a toothpick.

Seizing the moment he takes the postcard from his pocket and steps into the room.

‘Excusez-moi?’

The man looks up, unsmiling, before examining the toothpick with a frown.

‘Vous parlez français?’

The man’s eyebrows give a vaguely affirmative twitch.

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As he approaches the table he begins, in a rather confused way, to explain his problem; that he has been searching for the beach depicted in the postcard, which he thought was in the area, but which according to a student he thinks the man met in the afternoon, a vet, for cows apparently, is more likely near Diego Suarez, where he has heard the man is from, indeed owns a factory there, and about which—the beach, he means—he would be very glad to have his opinion, if he could spare a moment to take a look . . .

Without waiting for him to finish the cookware baron snatches the postcard from his hand, studies it for at most a second, and hands it back with a nod.

‘Vous êtes sûr?’

Surprised by the speed of the reply he holds up the card to give him a second look; but this only seems to offend the man, who sighs heavily and glances towards the door as if hoping to be brought the bill.

Not to be deterred he sets the card face down and points to the printed caption, asking the man if he thinks the name of the town is therefore an error. When the businessman scowls down at the words his irritation seems to lift. He smiles to himself and shakes his head, even lets out a soft chuckle.

‘C’est une erreur?’

Still shaking his head, and still saying nothing, the cookware baron stands up from the table and squeezes his cigarettes into the pocket of his shirt.

‘C’est une erreur, n’est-ce pas?’ he asks again.

And finally the Diegan makes a noise, a sort of grunt. ‘Il y en a deux,’ he says. ‘Peut-être plus.’

At least two? ‘Il y a deux erreurs?’ he tries to clarify.

But the questions are beneath the cookware baron’s dignity. With a faint huff of contempt he hitches his acid-washed jeans and heads into the bar, leaving him alone in the restaurant to puzzle over his reply.

_A tranquil beach near Antzavatra_ . . .

What did he mean ‘there are two’? If only Stéphane hadn’t plied him with so many drinks. Perhaps ‘tranquil’ is the second lie . . . It hardly matters. There seems no doubt that the card has brought him to the wrong place. He has—he admits it to himself with drunken nonchalance—completely wasted his time in coming here.

Overhead the moths keep fluttering against the ceiling, which, when he examines it more closely, he can see is lined with flattened boxes for a brand of soap called NOSY, which features a tiny map of the island inside every O. The thought occurs to him that every moth, if it wanted, could have an island to itself like Robinson Crusoe. A thousand tiny Madagascars crawling with them, a whole moth-swarmed archipelago . . .
‘I find you!’ comes the voice of Stéphane from behind. He is standing in the doorway with the unfocussed eyes of the northern vet peering over his shoulder. When he notices the empty table he frowns in surprise. ‘Where is he?’

‘He left. You didn’t see him?’

Stéphane shakes his head. ‘He knows where is the beach?’

‘He thinks it’s near Diego.’

‘Diego!’ chimes the vet.

Ignoring him, Stéphane asks why the caption says Antzavatra.

‘He seemed to think that’s just a mistake. It looks like I’ve come to the wrong place.’

‘Ah non!’ protests Stéphane.

‘I guess I won’t be staying tomorrow after all.’

For a moment the hotelier’s son looks crestfallen, then his face lights with a sudden grin: ‘More rum?’

‘Why not. I’ll have one for the road.’

In the bar the party is in full swing. The woman with the braids is pouring drinks, while below the counter, as if with a life of their own, her buttocks are jiggling with a rhythmic twitch. He motions for a glass of rum. The accordion has now reached fever pitch, a frenzied bleat and clattering of keys which tests the limits of the instrument as much as those of the cassette deck, whose speakers buzz. Roadrunner sprints between them in a blur of legs. Instead of a glass he finds a hipflask in his hand, which he swigs and passes to a man with sun-cracked lips. The man grips his arm and shouts ‘Ouvrrrzez la porte!’—but when he looks around him for a door he sees only Stéphane nodding in encouragement. ‘Hal!’ cries someone else, ‘Ouvrrrzez la porte!’; and he thinks he understands.

‘I’m sorry Dave, I’m afraid I can’t do that…’

The man with the lips gives him a grateful smile. Stéphane toasts him with a yellow rum. A man introduced as ‘Pisou’ spreads his fingers from his downy cheeks like the whiskers of a cat. The accordion gasps. Moths drop from the O-ringed islands, gassed by nicotine. A woman whose name is Pasqualine dances bent forward from the hips. Stéphane leads him around the room, proprietorial, introducing him to everyone they meet. ‘Frankpool,’ he calls him, gurgling with laughter, ‘Yeah! Frankpool! I think so!’

Then suddenly he has had enough. ‘I’m going,’ he shouts, and pushes his way back into the street, where everything is quiet and silvery, transformed by the fat three-quarter moon which has meanwhile risen over the shanties opposite. As he stands in the moonlight the door opens again and Stéphane tumbles out after him.

‘Ah, te voilà,’ he says.

‘I’m sorry, it was just too hot in there.’
Stéphane wipes his face with his cap. ‘Too hot,’ he agrees. And soon there will be the rain as well. He thinks that waiting for the rain makes people even crazier than the rain itself does, particularly when it gets this close. It can’t be more than a week now, he predicts—not now that it has started in the north.
‘In Diego?’
‘Yeah, in Diego,’ Stéphane says, then flashes him his sudden grin. ‘But in Libertalia, I don’t think so!’

With a laugh they head back into the town, past the antique petrol pumps, which glint in the moonlight like abandoned space-junk; past the clinic and the Crédit Agricole and the braziers at the crossroads, which have lost their glow, as have windows on the edges of the highway. And then suddenly he realizes what Stéphane has said.

‘So what about the road?’ he asks. ‘Does the rain mean I can’t go north?’
‘Not this way,’ warns Stéphane; to attempt the trip by taxi would be foolish. But luckly there is an air service that comes twice a week to deliver the town’s mail and sometimes a few passengers. If he has the money, he advises, his wisest choice would be to ask at the post office about continuing by air.
‘Do you know if there’s a flight tomorrow?’
Without answering directly Stéphane says, ‘Or you go on Monday.’ It sounds almost like a question.
‘No, I can’t stay that long.’
Stéphane asks him if he is in a hurry to get back home.
‘I was actually meant to fly home this morning.’
The hotelier’s son kicks a stone along the highway: ‘Tu as la nostalgie?’
‘Nostalgia?’
‘You wish for home?’
‘Oh, am I homesick?’ Despite the warmth of the night he feels a slight chill across his skin. Sick certainly, but homesick? ‘No, I don’t think I’m homesick,’ he answers, ‘at least no more than when I’m there. Who knows, maybe less.’

Stéphane seems to consider this for a moment, giving it a weight he regrets, then suddenly bursts into laughter. If he forgets his friends in a week, he says, then he must be homesick everywhere.

At the sound of Stéphane’s laughter all the hilarity of the night comes welling up inside him and he laughs as well, then gradually they fall silent, taking it in turns to kick the stone along the road, watched by the moonlit cows on either side.

‘You know what you told me earlier,’ he asks Stéphane finally, ‘about the old people in the club?’
‘Aha?’

‘Well, it must be pretty serious, for them to walk out like that.’

‘Of course serious.’

‘So what happens when someone dies away from home?’

If he is a long way from his home, says Stéphane, then he is usually returned there later for reburial, even if that means his bones have to be carried right across the island on foot. A man’s home is his link to everything—to his family, his past, even to the future. But it’s not just here that things are done this way, he adds a moment later. In fact he’s sure it is the same where he comes from.

‘Hmm, maybe,’ he agrees half-heartedly. ‘It isn’t so important.’

‘Yeah, I think so,’ Stéphane insists, and is about to continue when they reach the gate of the Hotel Stop, whose windows are now dark and shuttered, as if to punish them for having gone out.

In silence he follows Stéphane through the garden and into the dining room, where, after colliding noisily with a table, he waits until an oil lamp flares at the far end of the room and he can see his young host standing beneath it, holding up a quarter flask of rum.

‘Tu veux dormir?’

‘No, I’m fine, I slept pretty late this morning, don’t forget.’

‘Ah non! I don’t forget!’

They sit down where they sat earlier in the evening and light cigarettes, passing the rum between them in silence. Then Stéphane tilts back his head and blows a blue lasso around the lamp.

‘I tell you,’ he says, still exhaling. ‘My father, he had a book, an English book, but there is some waters on it and . . . il est tombé en morceaux.’

‘Fell apart.’

‘Yes, in parts, it’s very old this one, maybe two hundred years. His papers is like a leaf.’ The book, he continues, lapsing back into French, was much too hard for him to read, but for a long time he persisted with it, believing that if he read a few lines every night before he went to bed he could teach himself sufficient English to become a diving guide on the islands, and perhaps one day own a boat of his own like his cousin Victor’s uncle.

‘So is that how you learnt English?’

Stéphane laughs and shakes his head: after the first few chapters he gave up. What he did read, though, he read so slowly that he doubts he will ever forget it. The book’s title, he tells him, was Madagascar, and its author was a man by the name of Robert Drury, a hotelier’s son from London who was shipwrecked on the island as a boy. Like himself he had no interest in the hotel business. Stéphane snorts. Hotels! In his own job he goes different
places every day: Hong Kong, U.S.A, the moon. Well, Robert Drury wanted the same thing; he wanted an adventure. So when he was only thirteen he left his home in London and joined a merchant ship that was bound for India.

‘But it never got there, right?’

‘Ah, yeah, he goes there,’ Stéphane corrects. ‘Sa malchance commence là.’ Not long after their arrival, he explains, a deadly fever swept through the ship, killing several of the crew, and worst of all, the captain, whose command was left in the hands of his young and inexperienced son. On the voyage home, as they were leaving the harbour, the ship hit a shoal, and although at first the damage seemed like nothing it was actually ruined, foutu. Even the repairs the captain ordered in Mauritius couldn’t save it; by the time it was approaching the Cape it could barely stay afloat. With rebellion on his hands if he sailed on, the captain turned the ship back to the coast of Madagascar, where he and his crew and the young Robert Drury all leapt overboard and swam ashore. Or drowned, he adds as an afterthought; there were some who couldn’t swim.

‘So what happened to the survivors?’

Stéphane draws a finger across his throat. They made the mistake, he says, of kidnapping a local king. If he knew the southerners he would know what he meant—they’re hard in the south, like the land down there. Hard lives, hard music, hard heads. The king’s soldiers tracked the sailors down and speared them to death in a field of cactuses—all except Robert Drury, that is, who had the good fortune to be taken captive as a slave.

‘But he escaped?’

Finally, says Stéphane, yes. After fifteen years as a slave he escaped and found an English ship.

‘After fifteen years? Is this for real?’

‘For real!’

‘So he was the only one who made it home, then?’

Stéphane nods and aims another smoke ring at the moths. But this, he says, is the interesting thing. When the old captain was on his death bed, back in India, he made his son give him a promise—the promise being that he would carry his remains back to England and bury them there, alongside those of his ancestors, in a place by the name of Dover. Well actually not all of him, he says, but just his heart, which after he died was cut out of his chest and put inside a bottle . . .

‘A jar, you mean.’

‘He says a bottle.’

‘How could you get a heart inside a bottle?’

‘One time I saw an egg inside a bottle.’
He blinks at this irrelevance: ‘Anyway . . . go on.’

So the heart was put inside a bottle, Stéphane continues, and stored below deck in a box of straw, where it remained until the ship came in sight of Madagascar, whereupon the captain, who was now forced to accept that his ship was lost, went down and rescued it before he jumped overboard. In fact, he insists, it was the only thing he took with him. Not the gold or the guns or merchandise from India, but just his father’s heart to take back to the land of his ancestors. He knows all this because Robert Drury saw him crawling up the beach with it, half drowned, holding it in his hands as if his life depended on it. And to demonstrate the captain’s condition he clasps the rum to his chest and gives a spluttering cough.

‘So what happened to it in the end?’
‘The bottle?’
‘Yeah, the bottle.’
‘It’s always there, I think.’
‘You mean it’s still there now, where they were killed?’
‘Yeah, under a cactus now. I think so!’

With laughter in his eyes Stéphane passes him the rum—but he declines. He can feel himself beginning to fade. My mind is going . . . He watches the young man lean back in his chair and kick the shutters open, letting moonlight spill across the table. It dawns on him that there is a point in all of this.

‘So, this thing with the heart,’ he says, thinking as he speaks. ‘Are you saying it’s the same as what happened in the video?’

‘Of course,’ nods Stéphane. ‘The peoples in the club they want the same thing like the captain. The same thing like Dave Bowman and Frankpool. Like everywhere the same thing. I think so.’

He nods slowly, lost in thought, thinking suddenly of the customs room in the airport, and Helga, beside him, staring down into the box of lizards, unable to answer the douanier’s question—but Stéphane interrupts.

So if he had to choose, he asks him, like the old captain did in India, then where would he have his own heart sent?

But before he can think of an answer Stéphane has lifted his rum in a final toast.

‘To Libertalia!’ he answers for him. ‘Yeah, I think so!’

Somewhere in Madagascar he floats above a red road, trying with all his strength to touch the ground. If only he could stretch his toes another inch . . . The lack of friction fills him with a
sense of irritation that turns gradually to panic. In half an hour the border will be closed! Each
time he moves his legs he finds himself pedalling in the air, like Roadrunner, only instead of
taking off in a cloud of dust he remains exactly where he is. Then little by little the ground
begins to slip away. He quits pedalling and looks down at his feet, willing them to make
contact with the ground—but up he keeps on travelling like a helium balloon.

The game is up and he surrenders. His feet rise higher than his head and he floats
upside down over a field of cactuses, some eight or nine feet high, whose branches reach
towards him like arms thrown up in grief or supplication. But as he looks down on the plants
their thorns retract; a glabrous smoothness creeps along their limbs. No longer cactuses, a
crowd of sexless human figures stands beneath him, their upturned faces mysteriously
featureless, their limbs as smooth as melted glass. Instead of waving in grief, their long arms
beckon him.

‘Ambassador!’ they call. ‘Ambassador!’

The voyage upside down has made him lose his bearings and he shouts down, ‘Can
you tell me which way to the border?’

‘Border?’ he hears a voice reply. ‘There is no border! It’s all around you. Welcome
home!’

He shakes his head in annoyance: ‘It’s not my home . . .

‘Ambassador!’ the crowd calls in one voice, ‘Ambassador!’, and waves its arms
enticingly.

‘Just tell me where it is!’ he demands. ‘Or at least the right direction.’

‘It’s like an island,’ calls the voice, which has a thick French accent, ‘only better. It’s
crazy, fucking crazy! Every way you look you see the border!’

It occurs to him suddenly that the voice might be telling him the truth. As he looks
down on the landscape he can see that it consists of nothing more than a glassy film, and
above his yellow boots, as well, the sky is a glassy dome. He has lost his chance! The border
has been closed! A sense of suffocation grips him and he flails against the air like someone
drowning, paddling his arms and legs until he manages to float the right way up.

But as soon as he inverts himself the bubble bursts. An empty whiteness fills his
vision, a blank screen on whose surface flecks of colour start to shine: the pixellated green of
greenery, an oceanic blue, canary sand, a cyan sky . . .

He finds himself in a sunlit scene, sprouting with palm trees. His feet once more make
contact with the ground. He walks along a long beach fringed with coconut palms until he
sees a woman looking out to sea. She is sitting on a dark and pitted concrete block, sipping
lemonade from a tall glass through a straw. A pair of pale blue eyes meets his.
‘You’re going to need the map to find it,’ Helga informs him. ‘The game’s not over yet.’

‘But I don’t have time for that,’ he replies. ‘I should have reached it hours ago. Do you think I crossed it when I fell asleep?’

Very definitely Helga shakes her head, then reaches down inside her T-shirt and pulls out a small glass bottle in which a human heart is beating rapidly.

‘It’s been here all along,’ she says.

But even in a dream this is preposterous: there is no way he can fit inside the bottle. When he asks her what she means she lifts the flask above her head and shatters it against the concrete, releasing the heart, which falls to the sand and lies there, pulsing obscenely, like a galvanised crumbed cutlet.

She pokes it with her toe: ‘So take a look. It won’t bite you. You might find what you’re after . . .’

He scoops it up and carries it to the water’s edge to wash the sand away, but as he wades into the surf the current sucks his feet from under him. He feels the ocean tugging at the heart, his fingers weakening. The current pulls him deeper, spins him sideways, crushes the air from his lungs. In the darkness far below him he catches sight of the fallen heart, the only fixed point in his field of vision, which has now transformed itself—it is no surprise—into a distant, cloud-streaked Earth.

The tumbling stops. He is unable to breathe. From the darkness to his right two headlights bore towards him, trapping him in their silver beams. Two metal arms reach out their claws. As he feels them close around him he peers inside the pod, through whose tinted windscreen he can just make out his own face looking back at him, eyes filled with indecipherable intent . . .

He wakes with a pounding heart and sunlight in his eyes. What was he dreaming? All he can remember is a sense of vertigo and non-specific terror. When he sits up on the bed he feels as though he is falling to one side and there is a stabbing pain in his head. He is dizzy, dry-mouthed, wretched. And there is a chicken in his room. It is standing next to the doorway, eyeing him curiously.

‘Fuck off,’ he tells it.

Obediently the bird turns around and salutes him with its tail, leaving a squirt of shit across the sill as it flaps into the courtyard.
He is in the Hotel Stop, Antzavatra: he murmurs the words aloud for confirmation. The day is Thursday and he has a plane to catch; but the sunlight in the courtyard gives him little sense of the time. When he sees that his watch is missing he slides off the bed and crawls around the floor for several minutes of fruitless searching before he remembers what became of it. By this time he has broken into a nauseous cold sweat. A sense of utter hopelessness sweeps over him.

He lies down on the floor and presses his face to the cement, cursing himself for the night before and for everything he has done—for having come, for having stayed. Worst of all, for having stayed. What made him change his mind? The certainty he felt when he left the capital now seems so inexplicable that he wonders what possessed him. Lunacy . . . He will take the first flight back from here, or failing that, go on to Diego and fly back to the capital from there. Gingerly he sits up and pulls on his shoes, then, squinting at the light, he staggers across the courtyard to the hotel door, tiptoes down the hall, and slips unnoticed onto the highway.

When he returns some half an hour later he finds Stéphane in the dining room, polishing the floor with a block of coconut husk. With the radio playing full volume he is skating around the tables on one foot, his cousin pursuing him in a childish kung-fu pose. As soon as he sees him, however, he stops in embarrassment and kicks the coconut into the kitchen.

‘Bonjour,’ he calls with a slight formality, sheepish from the night before. He turns down the radio. ‘Comment ça va?’

‘To be honest, pretty terrible. How about you?’

‘Bien,’ he answers innocently. ‘You were at the post?’

‘Yes, I’ve got my ticket. The plane leaves at eleven.’

Stéphane tells him that the airstrip lies on the plain on the far side of the river, maybe half an hour’s walk along the highway.

‘Then I guess I should get going.’

‘Aha . . . your friend is waiting.’

‘Who knows?’

He fetches his bag from the bungalow and comes back to the house to find Stéphane waiting on the porch with his cousin.

‘He has a cadeau,’ says Stéphane, putting his hand on the boy’s head.

The gift that Victor gives him takes a moment to identify: it is a fibrous mango pip, bleached white by the sun, on which two creased eyes, a needle-nose and a scattering of freckles have been sketched with childish veracity. Unconsciously he puts his hand to his face, which like its mango effigy is rough with beard.
‘You tell him thanks,’ he says to Stéphane.

Then he feels inside his bag for something to give the boy in return—a plastic soy sauce bottle from a sushi bar, shaped like a miniature fish, which he found amongst his clothes a moment earlier. With disproportionate delight the boy runs into the garden to show his aunt, who frowns disapprovingly.

On the steps Stéphane and he shake hands.

‘It was good to meet you, really good.’

‘Yeah, it’s good. You stay again, I think so. We drink some more rum, watch some more vidéo . . .’

‘The rum maybe not. But if I come back this way I’ll certainly stay.’

‘A la prochaine, hein?’

‘Sure. A la prochaine.’

At the gate he hears a cry of ‘Bonne chance!’ which he answers with a wave, then he steps out onto the highway and heads in the direction of the river, not looking back until the last of the condensed milk cows has winked goodbye
Despite the heat of the aeroplane, which has been waiting on the tarmac now for half an hour, he is cold with nausea. Beyond the runway the plains dissolve into pools of wobbling mercury in which the herds of legless zebu seem to float. He leans back in his seat and listens to the young Frenchmen in the row behind him boast of their adventures, one having, so he claims, been forced to survive for a week on locusts when the truck in which he was travelling broke its axle in the south. From the answering cries of ‘Putain!’, ‘Dégueulasse!’, ‘C’est de la foutaise ça!’ it is clear that the trump card has been played, after which the conversation turns, more *sotto voce*, to adventures with the local girls instead.

Like Stéphane’s cabin boy, he thinks, only a century or two too late. Was that what brought him here as well? Adventure? But the world is already too small for adventure. He thinks of Stéphane narrowing the gap between his hands from the breadth of the globe to a pitched-roof house. Too small for adventure and too large to call home. No home to run away from, no borders to cross . . .

His thoughts are broken by a rowdy cheer for the arrival of the missing passenger. From a taxi jeep parked on the runway she is lowering herself to the ground, a slightly built woman, very pale, wearing torn jeans, a sleeveless T-shirt, and a wide-brimmed Malagasy hat. While she glances towards the aeroplane the driver passes down her bags, and then some kind instrument with a slender handle, rather like a cut-down broom. The instrument, whose head is zipped inside an old red British Airways bag, is still in her arms a minute later when she appears inside the cabin. As she carries it down the aisle he realizes, regretfully, that her seat is next to his own.

She sits down with the handle poking up between her knees and takes off her hat, exposing a head of short brown hair cut very close around the face, which is round and rather undefined. Apart from a small stud in her nose, her only striking feature is her eyes, which are heavily lidded and deeply creased, as if they belong to someone ten years older than the woman he saw on the tarmac. There is something in her glance which seems defensive, almost hostile.

‘Bonjour,’ she says without a smile.

‘Bonjour.’ He gestures at the British Airways bag: ‘Are you . . .?’

She nods: ‘And you?’
'Australian.'

She lifts her eyebrows and says something that is lost in the noise of the engines, which have begun to roar. Outside, the zebus gallop past the windsock, tossing their horns in fright. As the plane begins to accelerate he breathes deeply to control his nausea; then they are off the ground and circling to the left, where for a moment he catches sight of the crossed-out equal sign on the plain below before the pilot straightens course, and still climbing into the cloudless sky, heads north towards Diego.

‘Have you been this way before?’ he asks.

‘Last week.’

She is not a talker, clearly: a relief. He puts his hand inside his pocket and flexes the postcard. He will give it one last try, but whether he finds the beach this afternoon or not, he will fly back to the capital in the morning. Two weeks ago he may have known what he was looking for—but now?

He closes his eyes against the sunlight streaming through the window, the upper-atmospheric glint. The engine noise has quietened to a high whine; he is drowsy. For a long time he drifts on the edge of sleep, not quite unconscious, hearing Helga’s questions echo in the engine’s drone. So what did you imagine? What was it brought you here?

It is a sense of something moving in front of him that makes him open his eyes, which to his surprise meet those of the woman. More startled than he is, she draws back.

‘I’m sorry, I just wanted to catch the view.’

He offers her the window seat.

‘Do you mean it?’

‘It’s the same to me,’ he tells her, and he stands and moves into the aisle while she shifts across.

‘Well,’—she gives him a surprised look, slightly suspicious—‘cheers.’

Across the aisle two Malagasy men in suits are studying papers, ignoring the noise of the French adventurers, who have struck up a medley of old French pop songs, replacing references to other forms of locomotion with ‘par taxi-brousse’ and exploding with stifled laughter. For a while he tries to sleep, but his headache and the snorts of laughter make it impossible. Through his half-closed eyes he reads the brand name on the handle of the instrument: METALAB - LODEMASTER PRO . Of course, he thinks, he should have seen it.

Intrigued, he looks across at the woman, who, although she has her face pressed to the window, seems to sense his gaze and turns around.

‘Good view?’ he asks.

‘Well, if you didn’t know . . .’ She stops and gestures at the window. ‘Take a look. It’s your seat after all.’
He leans across her and looks down at the ground, a sweep of khaki hills and plains that reminds him of the treeless landscape through which he travelled two nights earlier. Aside from a scattering of houses on a hill, the only feature he can make out is the shadow of the aeroplane, which clings to the exposed contours of the land like a melted cross. It is a view he might have seen a hundred times before.

He sits back down: ‘If you didn’t know what?’

‘What it was, I guess. It wouldn’t look like much.’

He nods. ‘And is it?’

After a pause she shrugs. ‘I was down there, that’s all. In the hills.’

‘So’—he points at the metal detector—‘were you prospecting or something?’

‘Ah . . . or something.’ She touches the handle and opens her mouth, as if about to explain, then abruptly turns back to the window.

‘Clouds,’ she says. ‘I think it’s closing over.’

Around the airstrip runs a chain wire fence, beyond it a muddy car park. As he looks around for a taxi the only vehicles he sees are two four-wheel drives, against one of which leans a sunburnt European with shoulder-length hair, who is slicing a mango with a machete. The man waves the knife over his shoulder and calls something that he doesn’t catch, distracted as he is by the mist of black dots that has risen in front of his eyes. He bends double and holds his knees until he feels ready to look up again. The air is as thick as steam and above the surrounding fields the sky has a sullen stillness, purple-beige, as if hungover from a recent storm.

Having collected their bags, the other passengers now file through the gate, led by the men in suits, who get into the darker of the two Toyotas and drive away. The young Frenchmen and the man with the machete meanwhile greet each other with noisy embraces before they, too, depart. Aside from himself, the only person now left is the woman, who is already heading across the car park towards the road below.

‘Are the taxis down there?’ he calls after her.

She turns and shakes her head. ‘The road’s blocked. There’s a local bus, though, if you hurry.’

He calls out his thanks to her parting back, without acknowledgement. There is something definitely odd about her; remote, self-enclosed.

Between fields of cane he follows her down to the main road, where a canvas-covered truck is waiting with its engine running, and takes his place on a long bench seat. On the
opposite side of the cabin sits the woman, separated from him by a tangle of legs, a boy clutching a dazed-looking chicken, the metal detector in its bag, and a tall tin vat of what smells like sour milk. As they grind down the road the young conductor hangs from the back step by one arm, signalling to the driver when they need to stop, which is surprisingly often—in fact so often that he wonders, given the time it takes for the alighting passengers to disentangle themselves and their luggage, if it might not have been as fast to walk. Behind them fields of storm-battered crops unfold beneath a twilit sky: it is probably not long after midday.

Since the beginning of the ride the woman has been sitting with her back perfectly straight and her eyes closed, which makes her look as young as he first thought; closer to late twenties than late thirties. But the harder he tries to guess which age is right, the less certain he feels.

Stop by stop the farmers and their families get out and walk across the fields, or disappear into the tin and palm-thatched houses which have begun to spring up in greater numbers along the edge of the road. As he observes the determined seriousness with which they go about their business he is struck again by the utter futility of what he is doing. And not just futile: frivolous. If he did come to Diego before, he could hardly have had less cause than he does now.

Now almost empty, the truck stops yet again, this time to set down the owner of the can of milk, who, as they continue, he can see being berated on the roadside by a woman with a blotchy, depigmented face. What was Stéphane’s word for the Whites? The vazahas. Like the gringos, the gaijin, the gubbas, the ghosts . . . He turns back to the English woman to compare the colour of her skin.

What surprises him, however, is not her pallor, but her eyes, which, now slightly parted, are turned towards the corner of the cabin with a look of such intense watchfulness that he instinctively follows them. In the shadows at the end of his seat, so small and still he hadn’t noticed her before, sits an old woman, the only other passenger now left in the truck besides themselves. She is dressed in a threadbare, age-blackened cotton dress which comes to below her knees and around her shoulders clasps a plastic rice sack with both hands, as if she is afraid of catching a chill. Over her forehead hang a few crinkly grey braids, unravelling like rope. From her closed eyes and half-open mouth he assumes at first that she is asleep, but almost immediately sees his mistake. At a washed-out culvert in the road the truck lurches to one side and the woman’s head is thrown against the metal bars that hold the canopy with a blow that makes him wince. The old woman’s face, however, remains impassive—not unconscious, quite, but certainly beyond caring. Only a moment later her head is thrown back the other way, glancing the steel frame with the corner of her eye. This time her face contracts
in a momentary grimace, as if she is about to sneeze, and she clutches the rice sack more tightly about her shoulders. But still her eyes remain firmly shut. The only things that matter to her seem to be her grip on the rice sack and the footing that prevents her from sliding off the bench, as if these are the only two powers left to her.

For a third time the truck’s wheel strikes a pothole and the woman’s head flops forward before it swings around hard against the bars. In desperation he turns back to the English woman, who seems frozen in her seat. As for the young conductor, he is sitting with his legs dangling from the back of the truck, calling out to friends along the road. He takes his trousers from his bag and slides along the bench, then, steadying himself with one hand, begins to wrap their legs around the bars, taking all the care he can not to touch her. It is a hopeless gesture—more, he knows, for his own sake than for hers—and even before he has finished it the truck slows to a halt. In the road ahead he can hear the sound of some commotion: shouts and rustling, wrenching metal. Following the conductor’s lead, he leaves what he is doing and steps down from the tray.

When he reaches the front of a queue of cars he can see that the storm has blown a palm tree across the road, almost cutting in two a tin shack on the opposite side. Although at least a dozen men are struggling to lift it clear, its fronds are so entangled in the wreckage that they are having little effect. It is the end of the line. Suddenly it occurs to him that the woman’s only chance of reaching a hospital has been cut off: he should tell the driver. When he runs back to the truck, however, he finds that the English woman has preempted him. With the driver beside her she is pointing into the darkness of the cabin, while around them a group of women from the neighbouring houses has begun to gather, conferring in anxious voices. While the onlookers stay behind, the driver runs up the road.

He asks the English woman what is happening.

‘There’ll be cars on the other side,’ she says. ‘They’ll carry her.’

She answers curtly with her back turned, at the same time reaching into the truck for her belongings. By the time he has retrieved his own bag she has disappeared.

As he continues past the fallen tree he can see her walking briskly ahead of him with the metal detector over her shoulder. The street is a mess of mud and broken palm thatch and the air is dank with the smell of flooded drains. Below an embankment strewn with toppled stalls he sees a family of charcoal sellers rescuing their charcoal from a ditch, the children running back and forth in blackened underwear carrying handfuls of dripping cinders.

To his surprise the gap between himself and the English woman has still barely narrowed when a few minutes later she disappears at a turning. He quickens his pace. But when he reaches the corner he pauses, his eye caught by an ancient metal street sign on the wall ahead, a relic of French empire. From the strip of metal half the letters have fallen off,
leaving crossword-puzzle blanks which seem, in the fragility of his hangover, to be filled with mysterious meaning.

AV NU I L E JOYEU E.

‘Île joyeuse,’ he murmurs under his breath. The happy isle . . . Down the avenue, in the distance, he catches a glimpse of the red British Airways bag bobbing with the woman’s step. He shakes himself back to the moment and takes the turn.

And for two more turns he manages to keep sight of her before she is lost amidst the growing crowds. He dodges a bucket of water thrown from a doorway, almost tripping on a handcart stacked with metal scrap. His head throbs and the stink of uncollected garbage makes him retch; but at least the busyness of the street reassures him that he is nearing the centre of the town. If he can find the tourist office he will at least know if he has a chance; he will at least know that he did his best. Lacking hope, the urgency he feels is no more than the form of urgency, the self-discipline of keeping busy. He walks faster, almost at a jog, made anxious by the sense of fading light.

Yet when he reaches what he takes to be the centre of the town he is confused. He has emerged into an enormous circular place, half-filled with market stalls, whose circumference is lined with peeling concrete buildings hung with washing, an old-fashioned cinema, and an array of soot-blackened snack bars, restaurants and open-fronted shops—none of which, as far as he can see, remotely resembles what he is looking for. Despite the activity in the market it is strangely quiet, as though all the people running back and forth between the stalls are hurrying to complete their business before the light fades completely. Just as he is wondering whether the woman has led him to the wrong part of the town he catches sight of her in front of the cinema, bending to pick something off the ground. Although reluctant to ask her help, he waves and walks towards her.

‘Are you lost?’ she asks, straightening quickly.

He nods. ‘I was following you. I need to get to the tourist office, if there is one.’

‘I’d say you want the port.’ She points across the square. ‘If you keep going straight you can’t really miss it. On the esplanade.’

Her manner has changed markedly since she left him at the truck. She even gives him a quick smile, nervous, perhaps apologetic. He thanks her for the directions and turns to leave, but as he heads towards the market he hears a soft ‘Hey!’ and turns around.

The woman is looking at him with her eyes narrowed to slits, as if squinting into a non-existent sun. ‘Back there . . .’ she says.

After waiting for her to continue he nods uncertainly.
She reaches for her bags. ‘You’ve still got a way to go,’ she says. ‘Have you had lunch?’

The question is so unexpected that it takes him a moment to remember his last meal.
‘Actually, I haven’t had breakfast.’
‘There’s a place just here,’ she suggests. ‘The soup’s edible.’

He hesitates; there seems little doubt that the storm is gathering for a second round. But something makes him change his mind—the desire, perhaps, to be diverted, to surrender.
‘Soup sounds fine,’ he tells her.

A few doors past the cinema they duck into a small room papered with a faded and peeling scene of a European forest in spring, through whose yellowing leaves he can just make out a castle on a smoky bend in a river. Sensing that the woman’s French is better than his own he lets her order him the soupe chinoise while he chooses a table looking out across the square. While they wait for their food to arrive they say nothing for several minutes, not even to introduce themselves; if she feels no need then nor does he. Then at last she points at his plastic bag.
‘That can’t be all you’ve got.’
‘The rest was stolen.’

The woman nods without expression as their bowls are set in front of them, a watery broth containing instant noodles, a feathery wing, and a sprig of coriander. Once he has forced himself to take a few mouthfuls he leans back against the wall.
‘So how long have you been here?’
She thinks for a moment: ‘A week and a half.’
‘And when do you go back?’
‘I’ve got a two month visa if I need it, but . . .’ She shrugs. ‘Well I’ve done what I came for, so there’s not much point in staying. Not that there’s much point in going back.’ She has the kind of uninflected, slightly adenoidal English accent that gives everything a tone of weariness, self-mockery.
‘You mean visiting those hills?’
‘Well, actually I was looking for something.’ She gives a dismissive shrug. ‘Survey plaques . . . It’s a long story.’

For a moment he recalls the geography teacher’s confusion when he said that he did surveys. So you are a geographer like me, I suppose . . .
‘It sounds like one,’ he says.

While the woman eats her soup he looks out at the figures hurrying across the square, the whole scene muted and half-lit, as if the air is too thick to carry sound and light. It is so
still that the washing hangs against the buildings like seaweed. As he watches the sky becoming darker he feels his last hopes slip away.

When the woman puts down her spoon he lights a cigarette.

‘Survey plaques,’ he says.

The woman nods, half shrugs.

‘Which are?’

‘Just bits of brass for marking survey points . . . about so big.’ She makes a ring of her fingers and thumbs. ‘I’m not sure if they even use them any more . . . To be honest I don’t know the first thing about it.’

‘So why the interest?’

Her eyes narrow suddenly, defensive, the way he first saw her in the aeroplane.

‘I could ask the same,’ she says.

Chastened, he stubs out his cigarette.

‘You’re right, it’s not my business . . . I should probably get going.’

But the woman shakes her head. ‘That’s not what I meant. It’s just that I don’t know how to explain it.’

‘Don’t worry,’ he consoles her. ‘I think I know the feeling.’

‘No, I don’t think you do. Most people have a story that makes sense, that’s what they expect. I mean, if you want to know I’ll tell you, sure, I’ll tell you all the things that should explain it, but they don’t. I’m not even sure what an explanation is . . . I mean one day I wake up and I decide not to go to work, not get up, not do anything except basically sleep for two months, so they say “You’ve got depression,” but I mean what the fuck is that? Is that an explanation? What does it mean except you haven’t got out of bed for two months, or answered the phone, or eaten anything except Dutch shortbreads? It’s completely circular. I get up one day and go to work without a problem, so was I depressed? Then the next day I think, no, fuck off, I don’t want to be awake, so I take a sleeping pill and I go back to bed, and the next day it’s the same, it’s just . . . impossible to be awake, like I’ve finally realized what it means, and that goes on for nearly eight weeks, most of the time just sleeping, which is fine, fantastic, then the pills stop working and I have to be awake, I don’t have any choice, so I lie there on the sofa and imagine that my head’s exploding, like a bomb, and then the flat as well, the studios, the whole of fucking Shepperton, it’s the only thought I can bear to think without that crawling feeling in my body, which is what they always tell you in the movie business, which is what I do, or what I did, that people want explosions more than anything, and it’s actually true, because they spend their whole lives waiting for something to happen, something, I don’t know, to save them because everything’s so smooth, because everything’s so . . . airtight that it’s got to burst. Then finally the biscuits ran out, and the gas got cut off,
and the phone as well, which I didn’t realise, I’d turned it off at the beginning, but it was actually the phone that brought my brother down. When he found me I was pretty weak . . . Well, actually I couldn’t walk.’

He put her in his car, she continues in the same flat voice, interspersed with vehement emphases, and drove her to a hospital near the village in which they grew up, not far from Norwich, in East Anglia, where he still lives in their parents’ old house, with his wife and kids. Can he believe it? For years she hadn’t been near the place. The first week she spent there she remembers nothing except the window by her bed, through which she could see the hospital incinerator belching smoke and a Tesco’s sign on a shopping mall roof that flickered when it rained. Afterwards she learned that fasting can play tricks on memory, or perhaps it was the drugs. Because she was diagnosed as suicidal, which was totally untrue, she was not allowed to leave until she had completed a course of counselling and supervised medication—four weeks of talk and pills which made the time seems twice as slow and almost thick, as if the hours could be cut with scissors. But, whether it was the pills or just the effects of time, things started to improve. Her doctor was a sad Welsh woman with a birthmark over her eye, so sad she felt she had a duty to tell her whatever she thought might make her happy. She ate a lot, she swam, she watched TV. In fact her ‘progress’ was so good that by the time that Christmas came she was told that she could take an early discharge if she went to stay with her brother, who since having ‘rescued’ her in Shepperton had become even more infuriatingly paternal than she remembered. The thought of Christmas in that house, the same old rituals, her brother presiding from their father’s chair . . . She pleaded to remain until the new year. Hospital, she thought, would be the perfect place for Christmas. Hospital and Christmas were made for each other.

‘It’s really because of Christmas that I’m here,’ she says. ‘My doctor thought that I should socialize more, “ease into social life”, so she asked if I’d visit a ward on Christmas day, you know, to talk to the patients who had no family to visit them, it’s what they do each year. I said okay. So on Christmas morning I end up in Pulmonary with all these guys whose lungs are so fucked they’re on oxygen, which means most of them can’t talk because they’ve got those tubes stuck through their throats, or the masks on, or they just can’t find the puff, you know, with emphysema, asthma, things I’ve never heard of—which is maybe what she wanted, so I’d have to do the talking—and I’ve got this pair of reindeer horns on, like the nurses, I’m not kidding, trying to be all bright and cheerful, but someone’s put balloons on the beds, you know, beside the clipboards, which is doing my head in, and these men with basically no lungs are trying to thank me for giving them some stupid magazine they’ll never read, like Europe Today, or Photo Monthly, I mean what do you say?’
And what could she say? As she sat beside them, trying to think of some point where their worlds might intersect, it occurred to her that if they had any common ground it was probably the place from which they came. However hard she had tried to leave the place, it was still, she supposed, her ‘home’. And so, to her surprise, she found herself talking for the first time in years about the village in which she grew up, only an hour or so away—a place by the name of Thirling Folds, which is famous for the archaeological remains that were uncovered there during the war, when the defences were put through, and are still occasionally, she tells him, being uncovered there even now. The whole place, she says, is an enormous pile of bones, a layer twenty feet deep of tombs and urns and semi-fossilized human remains. She recounted to the men how after her father lost their farm to creditors, in the seventies, he was employed as a machine operator in the excavations, and later, as a caretaker of the site—a job which gave him such a passion for the local history that he used to say, as he got older, that he wanted to be buried like a Frankish nobleman, with a gold coin in his mouth, or, failing that, a 50p, which he would call his ‘bus fare to the afterworld’. She told them how her mother turned their house into a B&B . . .

For the first time since she began the woman halts and frowns at the forested walls, as if confused by where her story has led her.

‘But that’s not the point . . .’

She was about to the leave the ward, she continues after another pause, when she noticed a peculiar contraption in the corner of the room—a clear plastic tent, like a greenhouse, partitioned from the other beds by curtains and connected to various tanks of gas and faintly whirring machines. Suspended above it was a sheet of glass on which books lay facing down. Before she had grasped what it was she heard a deep voice from inside, telling her for God’s sake to take that thing off her head. She removed the antlers and came closer. Inside the bubble, on a plastic-coated mattress, lay a pale, plump, and completely hairless man in his fifties, or maybe sixties, who resembled, she remembers thinking, a white dolphin she saw once in the Blackpool zoo. His head was resting on a plastic cushion and he was dressed in nothing except a skimpy pair of running shorts and an open nylon dressing gown. He observed that she wasn’t wearing a uniform. She told him that this was because she was a psychiatric patient, not a nurse—an answer of which he seemed to approve. When she asked him what the tent was for he explained that he was suffering from a form of allergic asthma so extreme that the merest speck of dust could stop his breathing. Pollen, smoke, the dust from books, even his own dandruff, he told her, could trigger the attacks, leaving him no choice but to live inside his bubble, or in the pure air of the Arctic circle, somewhere in the north of Sweden, where for half of each year he was forced to retreat. Whenever he returned to his research, however—he was, he explained to her, an historian of sorts—the libraries and the
city smog would soon land him back in hospital. A friend from the university had installed the reading shelf above his bed, but had not thus far devised a means of turning the pages from inside the tent—a task which the nurses in his ward, he complained, seemed completely incapable of assisting him with.

‘Then suddenly,’ she says, ‘he sits up on his bed and looks at me like I’m his saviour and he asks do I read French? It turns out he’s got this letter that he’s dying to read, but the nurses keep ignoring him. He’s pointing at it on the shelf. Can I open it and tell him what’s inside? So I open it and find another letter in the first one, really old, with stamps from Madagascar on the envelope, which I tell him is addressed to somebody called Solomon Mayer in Paris, and he starts tapping on the plastic, desperate to see it, so I hold it up and he’s got his face pressed to the bubble like a goldfish, trying to read it, but the plastic’s steaming up. He tells me he’s been waiting half a year for this. Can I read it out aloud? You know, it was actually written in the same hotel I stayed in last night, it’s still there. That’s where I caught the taxi from this morning . . .’

The author of the letter, she discovered, was a man named Léon Goux, a young Jewish land surveyor who worked between the wars in what was then the colony of Madagascar. A single photograph of him, which the man directed her to amongst the pile of papers on the shelf, showed a sleepy-eyed young man in a belted tropical suit, standing in a garden with a lemur on his shoulder. He was writing to his friend in Paris, Mayer—a Polish émigré, and, like himself, a Jew—to report the progress he had made in surveying an area of land in the north of the island, near the town of Bealanana, amongst the hills, she tells him, which he saw that morning from the window of the aeroplane. This land, the man explained to her, had been granted by the French administration to the Polish government for the purpose, so he said, of resettling some fifty thousand Jews from Warsaw and from Cracow, whom the Poles were hoping, in his words, to make vanish into the Indian Ocean. It was a convenient plan. The French were as eager to acquire new settlers as the Poles were to export Jews. Small matter what the Jews themselves thought, let alone the owners of the land in question. But although the Jewish groups in Warsaw were suspicious of the idea, and the local tribe was understandably enraged, there did exist a small band of utopians, he said, including Mayer and Goux, who had a vision of the island as a sort of Zion of the south, a refuge for the outcast, a territory in which to plant their flag of freedom. Of course, he told her, the plan was never realized, she says, but it was precisely this which had first aroused his interest. His passion, he admitted, was not history so much as almost-history—the history of paths not taken, of futures never realized; what he liked to call, he told her more than once, the forgotten unbegotten. If we can open our eyes to them, he said, we see that everywhere the futures of the past still
hover around us like forgotten ghosts, in danger of being buried beneath the rubble of the present. His life, or what was left of it, was dedicated to the rescue of lost futures.

‘That’s what he said,’ she repeats, ‘the rescue of lost futures. I’m still sitting there with the last page in my hand, which he hasn’t seen yet, and he’s ranting from inside the tent about the futures of the past, and how the land described in the letter should be called the land of almost-Zion, or—what was it?—the theoretic republic of almost-Zion, then the story of how he tracked down the letter in New York, from Mayer’s daughter, and what happened to the surveyor during the war, when he got stuck in Madagascar and joined the fight against the Vichy forces near Diego, I mean right here by the bay, and got wounded in the head by a coin from an exploding cash box, which I think his widow showed him, I mean the actual coin they cut out of his brain, when he went to Switzerland the year before to cure his asthma—he’s just ranting like he’s never had an audience, until the only way I can shut him up is hold the last page of the letter up and ask him what it means, this much bigger sheet of paper with a circle on each corner, like a stamp, only I knew they weren’t stamps, because my father used to do the same thing with his coins, you know, when I was a kid, make rubbings of them with a crayon, which is what they were, they were rubbings of something underneath the paper, like some kind of discs engraved with numbers and a little triangle . . .’

She breaks off as the waitress, who is young and heavily pregnant, appears beside them to collect their bowls. While the girl wipes the table he looks around the room, which is now so sombre that the forest walls seem to press in from all sides, trapping him there. He feels suffocated, unable to interrupt the relentless flow of the woman’s words. But he knew the afternoon was lost from the moment he agreed to lunch. He puts his hand into his pocket and crumples the postcard into a ball.

‘Engraved with numbers,’ she continues as soon as the waitress leaves, her eyes now nearly closed, ‘and the initials of the French Surveyor’s Office at the top, I think he called it, S.G.F., which he said was only written on the plaques that mattered most, you know, the ones they put up on the hills and mountains, where they get the view, I think they call them bench marks, which is what they were, they were the bench marks from the corners of the land, up on the hills so you could see between them all the way along the borders—corner posts I guess you’d call them. The corner posts of almost-Zion. He said sending them to Mayer was like sending him a country folded up inside an envelope, or at least a blank page to imagine it, I mean imagine what it could be in the future, when it was theirs, because without a place to be imagined in, he said, there isn’t any future, there’s just nothing, and I guess in a way he was right, at least about the circles on the page, that they were like an . . . I don’t know . . . an invitation to put something in between them, in the white space in the middle . . . He called them the borders of a dream.’
Again her voice breaks off. She has been squinting over his shoulder at the wall, as if addressing someone amongst the faded trees. He wants it over with: his head is pounding.

‘So is that what it was then?’

‘What?’ She starts. ‘What what was?’

‘You wanted to see if it was true?’

‘I didn’t want anything. It didn’t even cross my mind till later. Although when I was about to leave I asked him if there was anything I could get him—you know, mints or magazines, whatever—and he said if I was really so keen to get him something I could go and find the plaques. Bring back a country in a suitcase, he said, it’s not a chance you often get. He even made me write down where they were, the numbers, but it was only a joke, I didn’t dream I would do it. I don’t even know why I kept the piece of paper, although I guess I must have meant to, because I knew I had it in my bag the day I woke up in the snow . . .’

‘The snow?’

Without answering she lets her eyes shift to the wall again and continues.

On New Year’s eve, she says, she left the hospital and caught a bus back to her flat in Shepperton, which, although her brother had had it cleaned for her, she found so intolerable that she packed her car and drove back out of London through the night, with fireworks exploding all around her, to the town of Stansted, in the north, where she stayed for three days with her aunt—the only person she could trust to let her to think about her future without trying to make her decisions for her. It was too late now to return to her job; it meant nothing to her anyway. That part of her life was over. For three days she went walking along the river in the hope that, if she gave it time, a goal, or at least a flicker of a will, would eventually reveal itself. But her future remained as empty as her mind. Then it came to her suddenly that before she decided to do anything—indeed in order to decide—she had to go back to the Folds. She is not sure why, she says. No doubt she felt some guilt towards her brother, to whom she had not said a word since she refused his invitation, but she knew her reasons went far deeper than her guilt. Since she had spoken to the lung patients on Christmas day she had been thinking of the place in a way she hadn’t done for years. Perhaps, she says, it was the one thing in her life that wasn’t—she searches for the word—that wasn’t arbitrary, the only fixed point she could find. What was drawing her back there more than anything was the graves. She wanted, as she used to as a child, just to wander through the cuttings, where the first discoveries were made, and feel the round bellies of the urns protruding from the earthen walls, which she remembered as having a sweet black smell, like molasses or wet bitumen or ink. Above all what she wanted—she knows it sounds ridiculous—was to sit up on the hill where the prince was buried in the chariot, as if only then would she know in which direction to set off again, in which direction to start over.
‘So I ran back to the house,’ she says, ‘and rang my brother, who said, sure, they’d love to see me, all’s forgiven, I can even have my room . . . my old room, can you believe it? I had to go before I changed my mind. So I drive back east along the motorway, then the back roads through the shire, they’re so familiar I could probably recognize them with my eyes shut, just through the sound of the car, only the hedges on one side have been cut down to make them wider, and what’s really weird is all the intersections have this set of signs saying Thirling Folds, and those little pictures of a castle and a hotel and an i for information, which seems kind of overdone, you know, it’s not exactly Stonehenge, still I knew things must have changed since I was there, I mean I knew my brother was making loads now from the B&B, but I had no idea . . .’ She pauses, her eyes narrowed in a frown of horrified disgust at what she is about to relate, or possibly her own naivety. ‘I mean no idea. I hardly recognized the place. The whole centre of the main street’s parked with buses, there must have been like eight or nine, and the local bus, it’s still called “Campbell’s Lines”, has a slogan on the side which says “The Thirling Folds Experience”. Experience.’ She blinks a few times rapidly. ‘I only stayed a minute. There were people everywhere, you know, all dressed in those stupid puffer jackets taking videos outside the gift shops, which is all there is now in the whole fucking street, selling mobiles made from plastic bones and little chariots with skeletons holding the reins, and the old butcher shop’s been turned into a café called—what was it?—Necropolitan, with fibreglass urns stuck around the walls, like in the cuttings, it’s enough to make you throw up, but it’s nothing, I mean nothing to what’s happened to the Folds . . .’

It was only when she drove on to the edge of the town, she continues, her voice taut with fury, that she saw what had been done. It was as if the hills had turned to ice. They had gone, she says. Where the round green knolls had risen from the fields there now stood a line of domes, enormous plastic bubbles which reflected the wintry afternoon light. For half an hour she sat, too stunned to move, behind the wheel of the car. Then with a pit in her stomach she set off along the metal paths that now criss-crossed the fields. An electric train filled with bored-looking tourists passed her in the opposite direction. From the information points along the way she learned that three years earlier the Folds had been demolished, their tops sliced off like boiled eggs to reveal the priceless heritage below, then covered—a world’s first—with the geodesic weather shields. Due to the fragility of the remains, the signs warned, entry to the chariot dome was not allowed. For a long time she stood there, frozen on the boardwalk, unable to go on or back, while across the fields she could hear the voice of the tour guide cracking jokes about the dead. Finally, as the light began to fade, she turned and went back to the car.

‘Experience.’ She almost spits the word. ‘The Thirling Folds experience. Why couldn’t they just let it fall apart? At least then it would have been remembered by someone. It
was like everything I’d remembered since Christmas day was wiped away, was nothing. There wasn’t anything left to be remembered. It wasn’t even a place any more, it was an experience.’

She draws a deep breath. By the time she drove out of the parking lot the domes had been illuminated by floodlights and were glowing like a colony on Mars. On the plastic roof of the chariot dome a laser drew red outlines of the artefacts that seemed to hover in the sky: the bones between the wheels, an engraved scabbard, a head on a coin. Without even slowing outside the pub where she was due to meet her brother she drove back out of Thirling Folds and on, through the night, to the motorway to London, where she began to feel so dizzy from her medication and the lights of the oncoming cars that she turned onto a side road and stopped beside a field, intending to have a short rest, then continue.

When she woke, however, it was dawn, and despite her overcoat and blanket she was shivering with cold. She felt—again she searches for the word—erased, as though she were waking to her first day on another planet, a place she didn’t know or recognize and didn’t want to. Outside the fields were dusted in snow; it almost could have been another world. She wiped the snow off the windscreen and turned back towards the motorway, but somehow missed a turn and found herself in a featureless expanse of white fields crossed by metal pylons. In the distance the only landmark she could see was the cooling tower of a power station, which as she drove towards it seemed to recede ahead of her. A misty rain began to fall.

‘I don’t know what I was doing,’ she recalls. ‘I wasn’t thinking of anything. I just headed for the tower because it was the only thing I could see, and then finally it came out of the mist, it was huge, but it’s not what made me stop the car, it was what was in the field beside it . . . like a dream.’ She shakes her head. ‘There were three of them, exactly like the domes on the Folds, only smaller, with some temporary buildings and a car park out the front, and the whole place was so quiet, with just this steam spilling down from the cooling tower like it’s making all the mist. I went over to the domes and wiped the rain off the plastic to look in. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it was plants, they were filled with them. They’re greenhouses. And there’s somebody inside.’

The man who came to the greenhouse door, she tells him, was a young technician in a lab coat, who explained to her that what she had stumbled upon was the university’s research institute for pharmaceutical botany, which, thanks to the heat supplied by the power station, was dedicated to the study of tropical plants. If she put covers over her boots, he offered, she could come inside for a few minutes while he finished off his rounds.

‘I told you I’d kept the numbers of the plaques,’ she says, ‘but since Christmas day I hadn’t even thought of them, or anything the man had said, and maybe if I hadn’t gone inside
I would have forgotten all about them, or at least they would have just been an amusing story, which is probably all you think they are, I know, but they’re not—or at least the moment I said yes and went inside the door they stopped being just a story, I mean, they were much more, but I can’t say what they were, or why . . . It was so hot in there . . . ’ She falters, her eyes narrowed once more in a frown of confusion and remembrance and disgust. ‘All bubbles,’ she says. ‘That’s all there is. We just move around from one to the next, we’re just the same. We’re just like him.’ Again she pauses, scowling at the wall. ‘It was the plants in there, inside the greenhouse, they came from Madagascar. That’s what brought it all back, everything he’d said, about the plaques, about that country that never existed, and it brought it back right then, that morning, and that’s it . . . that’s all there is. I bought my ticket in the afternoon.’

For a long time after she has finished he waits in silence, wondering if this can really be the end. Then finally he clears his throat.

‘But did you find them?’

‘No, of course not. You think I wouldn’t have said? There were tombs on all the hills, you must have seen, they’re everywhere. If there isn’t a fucking cow there it’s a tomb. I couldn’t dig. But what does it matter anyway? What difference does it make?’

Again he waits, but the woman closes her eyes. Her shoulders hunch forward protectively. Before he can think of a response she flicks her fingers at him in a gesture of dismissal.

‘You should go,’ she says. ‘Just go.’
He leaves the café in disgust and walks on through the town, whose steamy darkness closes around him like the air inside a plastic bag. An image flashes through his mind of himself inside the oxygen tent, tearing through the plastic and seizing the woman by the throat. What made him stay and listen? Gripped by a sudden wave of nausea he bends over and vomits into the gutter, a pathetic splash of *soupe Chinoise*. As he hangs there, waiting for more, it is not self-pity he feels, but only rage, a furious disgust at himself and what he has done, at his own stupidity. He spits and wipes his mouth. *Just go*, he hears her telling him; there is nothing he wants to do more.

When he reaches the esplanade he catches his first glimpse of the bay between the buildings, stretching like a blanket of lead to the horizon. He wonders dimly if the darkness is cyclonic. As in the marketplace, the edginess is palpable, the few people he passes on the esplanade hurrying along in apprehensive silence as they finish what they need to do before the storm. Or is the cyclone already all around them? Is Diego in the eye? Either way, his only real fear is that it might delay his flight back to the capital.

On a hotel terrace he sees the young Frenchmen from the aeroplane sitting at a table drinking beer and stops to ask them for directions; but for some reason they look at each other and start laughing. He takes the crumpled postcard from his pocket and throws it at their feet, then continues to the end of the esplanade, which dwindles to a potholed road. Two women in Muslim headscarves hurry past him with a rolled tarpaulin under their arms, followed by a quietly sobbing boy. The travel office must be at the other end; he turns around and quickens his pace.

Ten minutes later he has reached the other end of the esplanade and has still not found the office. The sense of suffocation he has felt all afternoon now rises in a wave of panic. As he runs back between the tattered palms and concrete buildings it begins to rain, not the deluge that the darkness threatened but a fine dense mist whose choking particles appear to float in the air around him without falling. He is sure the woman said the esplanade, but what did she mean by the port? He chases a man on a squeaking bicycle and asks him for directions, to which the man responds with a mutter and veers across the road. He rattles at the chained door of a bank. Perhaps if he could get a view along the shore, he thinks, the woman’s directions might make sense. To the side of the bank a flight of steps descends to a park on the
edge of the bay, in which he can see a small roofed lookout perched above the sea wall: a rotunda. It is just the thing he needs.

In the park the ground is stony and bare, with only a few clumps of flowering weed between the puddles. On a rock offshore a lighthouse blinks through the rain. Now that he has left the esplanade it is so quiet and still that not a single sound reaches him; not a gull’s cry, nothing. Or almost nothing. As the town falls further behind him he begins to have a sense of hearing music, a piano, its notes so faint they seem to condense out of the air like the misty rain, without a source. So faint, in fact, that he wonders if he might not be imagining them. At the point he has reached anything seems possible. He stops in confusion and holds his breath. Like the music of an ice-cream van the notes are fast and tinny, but when they reach the end of the phrase they slow and fade away irresolutely with a dispirited change of key. It is clearly not an ice-cream van—but what is it? Listening carefully he can now hear that the same phrase keeps repeating, each time ending with the same fading uncertainty, as if it has missed what it was searching for and is not sure where to go next. If he were to imagine music at this moment then this music would be it. He drops his bag in the weeds and blocks his ears, unblocks them, blocks them again—but the notes are so faint he can hardly tell the difference. He has to know where they are coming from. As he carries on across the park it is no longer the view which is leading him on—the bay has all but disappeared in the mist—but the mysteriously inconclusive refrain, which as if by magic has pushed everything else from his mind. The ticket, his anger, the sense of suffocation in his lungs: under its spell nothing else seems to matter.

He has little doubt now that the music is coming from the rotunda, a neglected wooden bandstand with a rusted roof and broken banisters which is leaning slightly to one side. Along its railings a line of gulls shuffles nervously as he gets near—then, as he reaches it, the music stops.

‘Bonjour,’ calls a voice.

In the dim interior of the bandstand he can now see the back of a piano, a small wooden upright, over the top of which a man is peering at him through a pair of square-rimmed spectacles.

‘Bonjour,’ he calls back. ‘C’était vous qui jouait?’

A stupid question—but the man replies with a self-deprecating nod. He thought only the gulls were listening, he says, then smiles at him broadly. Such polite birds. Or perhaps they have no ears.

‘Mais non,’ he disagrees, ‘c’était belle. Je l’aimais beaucoup.’
With a modest bow of gratitude the man stands up and invites him to come into the shelter, where beside the piano they shake hands, and the man—who is wearing a dark grey shirt with a cleric’s collar—introduces himself as Père Jean-Noël.

‘John Christmas,’ he translates.

‘You speak English?’

‘Oui,’ he laughs, ‘Father John Christmas! Mais c’est tout!’

Together with his outfit, the man’s smile makes him think of Desmond Tutu. He lets him finish laughing at his joke before he points to the piano, expressing his surprise at having found it down here by the bay.

The man agrees it is unusual. The instrument, he says, is normally kept in the church, but a week ago he lent it to some young men for an AIDS awareness fête and has since been having trouble persuading them to carry it back. And yet—he shrugs good-naturedly—he will probably regret it when they do. He has been enjoying his afternoons here, playing for the birds.

Then he’s sorry to have interrupted him, he says. He didn’t mean to stop him playing.

No, not at all, the man says, he is glad to have some company. Perhaps he would like him to play something else? What sort of music does he like?

For a moment he hesitates, wondering how late it is—but the weird ecliptic light of the afternoon makes it impossible to tell. The situation is so strange he can feel himself succumbing. And more than that, he is curious. The music he was playing before, he tells the man; he would like to hear it properly.

Ah, the priest says with a sigh of resignation, he would like to play it properly, but he’s not sure how one could. In truth it isn’t possible. Even the greatest pianists in the world, he thinks, would have to agree.

Then it wasn’t his own music he was playing?

Ha! the man laughs. No, no, no. It was Robert Schumann. And he gestures at a dog-eared album on the piano’s lid.

Slightly embarrassed by his ignorance, he leans forward and reads the title at the bottom of the page: ‘Humoresque pour le piano-forte.’

The man nods: ‘Humoresque.’

So why is it so difficult?

Let him play it first, the priest suggests, then he will explain.

While the man composes himself at the piano he moves to the edge of the rotunda and leans against a post. A few minutes ago he was running up and down the esplanade in a panic, and now here he is, waiting for a man called Father Christmas to play him a piece by Schumann. What is happening to him? He has a sense, not entirely unpleasant, that he has lost
his grip. At the bottom of the sea wall he can see the water slopping gently, and a little way offshore, before the bay is completely lost in the rain, the rusted prow of a wreck protruding from the oily water. He turns back to the priest, who is studying the music thoughtfully. As he watches him stroke his fingers on the keys he catches a waft of something foul and surreptitiously checks his shoes. Not that. But before he has a chance to find out what it is the music has begun.

From inside the rotunda the piano sounds more brassy than it did at a distance—one high note in particular twangs like a banjo—but in spite of this the music affects him as it did before, with the same peculiar sense of something missing, as if below the light rain of the treble notes the bass hand has the urge to sing, but never quite succeeds in finding its voice before the music slows and fades away. After the repeated phrase he heard across the park it makes a fresh attempt, this time sounding more determined, but in spite of its intentions the melody remains stifled, and after a few more bars the piece gives up and wanders on uncertainly, not sure whether to be cheerful or sad, a pathetic carousel. Unnerved by the baleful stares of the gulls he turns away to concentrate, though when his back is turned he finds himself distracted by the smell instead, which is becoming more insistent, and distinctly faecal. Glancing down at the sea wall he now notices the scraps of papers strewn along the rocks, dissolving to pulp in the rain. The rotunda is on the town latrine.

On the twanging high note the music slows then fades to silence, an ending so unresolved that the priest coughs to make it clear the show is over.

Perhaps for the same reason he claps a few times, and says, ‘Bravo.’

The priest turns on the wooden soap box he is using as a stool and shakes his head.

It’s still not right, he says. He has been struggling with it all afternoon.

It sounded fine, he assures the man. He doesn’t see what’s wrong.

Still shaking his head the priest reaches for a packet of cigarettes on the top of the piano and offers him one, then takes one for himself, which he tries to light with a match that crumbles damply.

This weather! he exclaims.

Yes. He hands the man his lighter. It’s not like anything he’s seen before.

Then where does he come from?

From Australia.

The man nods. When he was much younger, he says between sucks at the flame, about his own age probably—he inhales deeply and hands the lighter back—he once travelled to the Seychelles on a boat.

A boat, he echoes, as if the word were the mystery. Then after a pause he asks the man if he thinks it might perhaps be a cyclone.
So they say, the priest replies, but he needn’t be too worried. He thinks it is moving out to sea. Tomorrow the sky will clear again. He can tell by the sound of the piano.

Unable to decide from the priest’s face if he is serious, he says nothing.

After smoking for a while in silence the man asks him if he plays the piano himself.

No, he answers, at least not since he was a boy. He used to play ‘The Entertainer’, but he doubts if he remembers it.

Ah, Scott Joplin, the priest says with a smile. He prefers the ‘Maple Leaf Rag’. Then he gestures at the piano. Does he still read music?

It’s been a long time since he tried.

It doesn’t matter, says the priest, it’s quite simple to explain—and, beckoning for him to come to his side, he puts a finger on the top of the page, which keeps threatening to flop forward with the humidity. One, two, three, he counts, pointing at the staves. Not two, but three. Doesn’t he find that curious?

He supposes he does, he answers. Even without the man’s help he would have noticed that between the usual two staves, bass and treble, is a third, an added line of notes along the centre which makes the music appear as if it were a score for three instruments. At the beginning of the inner stave are the words: ‘Voix interne’. He asks the man what it means.

What it means is simple to say, the man replies, but not at all easy to understand. And to play! He shakes his head defeatedly. He is actually pleased to have found someone with whom he can discuss it. An intelligent man, he suspects. An intelligent Australian. He smiles at him broadly. What it means, he says, the ‘inner voice’, is that the music has a melody that isn’t played.

Between the top hand and the bottom?

Exactly so, between the two. The two hands play around a melody that isn’t there.

So—he gestures at the page—why was it written, then, if it’s not meant to be heard?

Aha, the man exclaims, that’s just the thing! Is the melody intended to be heard or not? When he plays the piece he can see it on the page in front of him, of course. He can hear it perfectly clearly in his head! But can he make the theme heard in the music without playing it? There’s the question. Is it possible to hear what isn’t played?

He shakes his head, again wondering to himself what he is doing here, but the man is looking at him so expectantly he has no choice but to reply. Whether or not it’s possible he couldn’t say, he answers. He can only tell him what he heard. For what it’s worth, it seemed to him the music was in search of something. But if that was the melody, he thinks it never found it.
The man nods thoughtfully. That interests him, he says, because it’s not what he intended. Yesterday he thought that might be the way, but not today. Today he thinks the inner voice is like a memory.

He glances at the priest with sudden interest. Yes, perhaps that’s what he meant, he says, a memory. That’s right. The music was searching for a memory it can’t find . . .

No—the priest waves a hand to correct him—not a memory it can’t find. He means an actual memory, a memory which shines through in the music.

Something you can hear?

That’s what he was hoping, yes.

But only heard inside your head, like a memory? Not really heard?

Precisely, says the priest. He knew he was an intelligent man.

No. He shakes his head. Far from it. But at least he can say he is curious. Could he play the melody for him, or would that break the secret?

The secret is broken already, says the priest. He will have to ask poor Schumann for forgiveness!

With a laugh he turns back to the piano and begins to play with the hand that holds his cigarette, using his two spare fingers and his thumb—a melody so gravely austere that it strikes him as itself memorial, an elegy, as unfulfilled and searching as the piece itself, but stripped of its fair-ground decorations. After the final note has died away the man looks up at him and asks him if it is what he expected.

No, he doesn’t think so. From the sound of the music he imagined—well, he thinks something a bit more cheerful.

The priest replies that he doesn’t hear the melody as sad, but rather as very distant, as if it happened a long time ago.

That could be right, he agrees. But if it happened so long ago, then why couldn’t it have been forgotten completely? Perhaps that’s what one should hear in the music.

Not the melody itself?

That’s right, the absence of the melody. Why not? He thinks that is what he heard as he walked down through the park.

For a while the priest sits nodding slowly with a faint smile on his lips, then he glances down at his cigarette and flicks it into the rain.

He will tell him why he disagrees, he says. If the music ended where he ended his playing, then what he says could well be true. One could play the piece as if its melody had been forgotten. The audience, as he suggested, would be able to hear that it wasn’t there. Ah, but!—he wags a finger in the air—things are a bit more complicated than he has made out. He
has only told him half the story. If he thinks the inner voice is a puzzle, then what does he make of this?

He reaches for the album and sets it on his knees, then beckoning again for him to come closer he begins to turn the pages with deliberately suspenseful slowness. As he can see, he explains, the ‘Humoresque’ continues until finally . . . He stops and taps the music with his knuckle. Does he see? The same little piece returns.

In the dimming light he scans the page. But where?
Right there.
But it doesn’t have the inner voice . . .
That’s right, the man exclaims, exactly! The inner voice has gone! So what does he make of that?

He straightens and shakes his head. He’s not sure that he follows.

The priest tells him that he is not surprised. He has been puzzling over it all afternoon. But consider, he says, setting the music back on the piano. Suppose one hears the little piece the first time through as though its melody were missing. Yes?
That’s right. That’s what he thought.

But then the music carries on through all of this—he riffl.es the pages—until finally it comes back to where it began. Then listen! Very softly he plays the opening bars, looking up at him with his mouth agape, before cutting himself off abruptly. It is exactly the same little piece as before, he says. Only now—he makes a vanishing gesture with his hands—the inner voice has disappeared! But how, he wants to know, can it disappear if it wasn’t there before? How is possible to lose what was already missing? How can one forget what was already forgotten?

Disarmed by the man’s stare he shakes his head again, this time more uneasily.

The man chuckles at the sight of his discomfort. Of course he can see the problem! The melody can hardly be lost if it was never found. Which is why he believes it must be heard the first time, even though it isn’t played. How else can one make sense of it? The first time through the piece brings back a memory, a voice one hears inside one’s head—but when the music comes back to the same place at the end, the memory has gone. The first time is the memory, the second its forgetting. That’s what he has decided this afternoon, he concludes. That’s what he thinks Schumann must have intended. Does his Australian friend agree with him or not?

For a minute he stands in silence, looking out through the rain at the rhythmic blink of the lighthouse in the bay. How did the conversation get to this? He feels exhausted. With a nod he could probably end it here, let his head fall forward, surrender. One more surrender for the day. But the longer he takes to find his words the more certain he feels that the priest is
wrong—and that, however obscure to him it is, his reason for thinking so matters. Yes, it is true, he has lost his memory, but it wasn’t a memory he came here to find. It was something that he didn’t have. Whatever he has lost between his first trip through this island and the second is something else . . . He turns back to the priest and shakes his head.

Père Jean-Noël laughs happily. It’s good! A man who enjoys discussing, like himself! He waits expectantly.

He thinks, he begins, still unsure what he is about to say—he thinks one can lose what one never had. He doesn’t agree that makes no sense.

The priest laughs again. Strange logic!

No, he doesn’t think so. You have to consider what the audience hears, not what the pianist sees. The music is for them, after all, but they don’t know that the inner voice exists. All they can hear is that something is missing, and that the music has some sense of what it is. They can hear the music trying to find it. But later, when the music comes back to the same place at the end, everything is different. They no longer hear the melody as missing. They no longer hear a lack at all.

But they must! the man protests. As he can see for himself, it has gone!

No, it’s not the melody that has gone—it’s the absence of the melody. The music has lost even that. It has forgotten why it came here in the first place.

The man frowns at these last words. Is he trying to say that the music has lost what it was searching for?

That’s right. It has lost what it was lacking. It has lost what it didn’t have.

After a pause the man nods slowly. He thinks he sees the argument. But assuming what he says is true, then how should the piece be played the second time?

How should it be played? In what sense?

Well, the priest says, how should it sound different from the first time? To be missing something, clearly that’s not pleasant. The music would sound incomplete. But to have forgotten that it’s missing? He supposes that would probably make one happier. The music would sound satisfied with what it has. The man pauses, frowning, then lets out a chuckle. Or perhaps he should say satisfied with what it doesn’t have!

From under the low roof of the rotunda he looks back at the rain-streaked buildings of the town. Has he been here before, or not? He doesn’t even know if this is the first time or the second. He doesn’t know what he is talking about.

Yes, probably he’s right, he tells the priest. The second time is happier than the first. At least it might sound happier for the audience. But for the pianist, who knows what has vanished . . . well, for him, he is not so sure.

So how would it sound to the pianist?
For the pianist, he answers slowly, he thinks the second time would sound . . . unbearable.

The priest gives him a curious look. Then perhaps it’s better not to know?

Yes, he says. Perhaps it is.

For a moment the priest hesitates, as if about to disagree, then with an air of finality he clicks his tongue and claps his hands together. Enough! he exclaims. All of this philosophy is giving him a headache. Would he like to hear “The Entertainer”?

No, he says, it’s probably time he got going. But there is still something which he meant to ask. What comes between the first time and the second?

Between the piece and its reprise? He has only played them through a few times, the priest says, but he thinks they are variations on the theme.

Which theme?

The inner voice, of course.

So—they’re variations on a theme that’s never even heard?

Aha, the priest laughs, variations on a missing theme! That might well be so! He has not yet decided who is right. But their discussion, he adds, has given him a lot to think about.

Yes, he agrees, him too. And he bends down for his bag.

The priest stands up and pushes in the box. Did he arrive in Diego today?

From Antzavatra, yes.

The man frowns in surprise. He had heard the road was flooded.

He was told the same thing, he tells the man. That’s why he came by plane.

By plane! The priest laughs heartily, as if he has been told a joke. If only-+! He has walked that road to Antzavatra too many times. He holds the mass there once a month.

He walks?

Well, of course, the priest says, when the road is flooded. What choice does one have? Never the whole way, he’s glad to say. He takes a car to where the road is too bad to continue.

Suddenly the rotunda seems to spin around him like a carousel. Does he mean to say, he asks the man, that there is a town near here called Antzavatra?

Ah! the priest exclaims, clapping his hand to his forehead. Of course, he meant the other one! Apologies! He forgot that there were two!

The mud is soft, the rain almost warm. It is not as unpleasant as he would he have imagined. Instead of struggling to his feet he lies where he has fallen, flat on his back in the deep wheel-rut, looking up at a sky so impenetrably black that he wonders for a moment if his eyes are
closed. As he settles deeper into the mud he feels a perverse satisfaction, an indulgent thrill at his own abasement. But it is more than this that keeps him there. Having eaten nothing since the night before except the soup he lost in the gutter, he is now so weak with hunger and fatigue that he is beginning to doubt quite seriously whether he can make it. How much further can it be? On the taxi driver’s estimate it was four hours walk to the turn-off, and from there another two miles to the village. In the darkness, however, time has become immeasurable. It could just as well be three hours since the car turned back, or ten. He thinks again of what the driver called out as he drove away—something, if he heard it right, about a ‘club’ with ‘gates of iron’. But as hard as he struggles with the gates of iron their mystery only deepens. Not much use. What a day, he thinks. He can hardly believe it was only that morning that he left the Hotel Stop. As for the time since he left the capital, it is beginning to seem like an age.

At last he extracts himself from the mud and climbs back onto the path, then, bag in hand, continues in the same way as before, flashing his cigarette lighter in front of him to illuminate the road. The going is slow. On the flooded track the only solid ground to walk on is the narrow ridge of clay between the ruts, from which he occasionally slips and loses a foot in the mud. But gradually, as his confidence returns, he falls into a rhythm, a steady sparking shuffle with a flick of the lighter after every second step. Step-flick-step, step-flick-step. It is simply doggedness at first, the only way to keep himself moving, but after a while the beat of his footsteps starts to become more and more precise, obsessive, as though he is forcing himself to keep time to some deeper rhythm, some internal beat. Then in a sudden flash it comes to him, silent but unmistakable: the priest’s playing has come back to haunt him. Over and over in his head, almost inaudibly, the same few phrases have been repeating like a music-box, transformed by his exhausted walking into something he can hardly recognize as the music he heard in the afternoon—a jerky marching tune whose notes are more or less the same, but whose phrasing is entirely different. The fading question marks have gone, the whole sense of something to be found. It is a travesty. As he remembers his conversation with the priest it occurs to him that this is how the piece would sound on the second playing, when the missing melody has been removed—like a music-box that won’t turn off. And of course that’s right, he thinks. Its mechanical stupidity is the perfect accompaniment for what he is doing now, retracing his own footsteps like a shadow, without knowing what it was that led him up this road before. Repeating his first journey as a farce. Is that what he meant, he wonders, when he said that the second time would sound unbearable? That he has forgotten what he came here to find? Did he mean that from the moment he woke up the missing voice was lost? But straight away he punctures it with doubt. For all he knows there wasn’t anything
he hoped to find before. Perhaps when he came up here the first time he was simply blundering like now.

In the rain the elastic of his shorts has given up and keeps sliding down his buttocks, and tired of hitching them he stops to tie the waistband in a knot. It is a chance to look around again with the full flame of the lighter, in whose feeble glow he can just make out the wall of bushes on his right, which still shows no sign of an opening. Just as he is beginning to wonder if the driver knew what he was talking about he notices something half embedded in the mud in front of him and dislodges it with his toe. It is a piece of an engine by the look of it, or perhaps a brake—a heavy disc of metal about the size of a saucer with a ring of holes around its edge. As he stands over it with the lighter he remembers the woman in the café forming the circle with her hands, and presses it back into the mud.

Although his response to his dismissal from the café—his retaliation even—was to dismiss her from his mind, as he continues through the darkness now he finds her story coming back to him in disconnected fragments. The brass discs in the hills, the domes, the country that was never realized: as he runs over it all it seems as senseless as the woman claimed it was. But even bits of brass, he thinks, are something. At least she had the luxury of knowing what she came to find. Or did she? What did she imagine they were, he wonders as he flick-steps through the darkness: bits of buried future? Did she really think that she could find the future with a metal detector? With her Lodemaster-Pro?

Then it dawns on him that this might be the very thing he meant to say to the priest—that this could have been why he disagreed with him when he said the missing voice was like a memory. Perhaps the unplayed tune does not come from the past at all, but from the future—not something lost, but still to come. It would make sense. The reason the melody can’t be heard is because it is not yet known. So that is what the music was in search of when he heard it in the park. Doing his best to ignore the jangle in his head, he tries to recall the sound of the priest’s playing drifting out from the rotunda, searching and hesitant, all bold starts and petering resolves that veered from one mood to its opposite; melancholy and cheer, nostalgia and hope—or even both at once, he thinks, a mourning for the future, nostalgia for hope, as if the little piece were an elegy for a future that has been forgotten, like the woman’s country in the hills. Yes, perhaps that’s what he meant to say. The sound of the unplayed melody is the sound of hope, an opening to something else. Without that sense of the not-yet-known the music is intolerable, trapped in this perpetual present as if inside a bubble—satisfied enough, maybe, but satisfied, as the priest said, with what it doesn’t have, a sense of an outside, of a future. Without hope . . .

Distracted by his thoughts he stumbles in the road, which has widened at this point into a broad circle of overlapping wheel-marks. When he holds the lighter up to look he can
see that he has found it. From the tangle of ruts around him there are two which lead unmistakably into the scrub, a narrow track whose entrance is overhung by rain-heavy branches. There is nothing to mark the turn and certainly no iron gates—but he feels certain that it must be what the driver meant. As he stumbles towards the gap in the bushes an unexpected wave of excitement courses through him, stronger than his anxiety about what might be waiting in the village, even stronger than his desire for food and a bed—a sense of hope he didn’t know he had, and for what, exactly, he would be unable to say.

Beyond the hanging boughs the bushes close around him in a dense corridor, making the night seem even more impenetrable, and to steady himself he grips the leaves with his hand as he works his way along the muddy verge. Then after a few minutes he feels sand beneath his feet instead of mud—firm, wet sand, which he kicks exultantly into the darkness. From here the track begins a slow descent, as though leading down towards the shore of the bay, and for a moment—or is it his imagining?—he catches the scent of sea air drifting inland across the scrub. He is almost there, he thinks, the tranquil beach. It is easy walking now. To save the lighter, which is beginning to fail, he trusts his feet. As he breaks into a stride the rhythm of the marching tune is finally banished, leaving him in a silence broken only by the rustle of the plastic bag and his own breath, which is fast and slightly hoarse. Rain runs down his face and into his open lips. It dawns on him that he is smiling.

How long he has been walking blind he doesn’t know, but when after some time he reaches out to touch the bushes and feels nothing he stops to take his bearings. As the lighter flares he finds, to his surprise, that he is standing in the middle of a sand-flat which appears to stretch in every direction as far as the night itself. As for the track—if it is still the same track he is on—it has dwindled to two faint lines through a low covering of beach grasses and succulents which make blotchy patterns against the drifts of sand. Further off, almost impossible to make out by the flame, rise ghostly, isolated trees. The rain is now falling heavily. After his expectation of seeing lighted windows the scene looks so desolate that his heart sinks. He puts the lighter out and stands there in the darkness, for a moment feeling further from anywhere than he has ever felt in his life, at the ends of the earth. Then ahead of him, very faintly, he hears the sound he has been waiting for, like tearing paper: the long hiss of a wave along a beach.

Almost at a run he stumbles towards it through the bushes, ignoring the track. In a flash of the lighter he sees the dark shape of a lagoon to his right, then a moment later, jet black against the faded darkness of the sky, a line of trees, some rising high above the others like enormous flowers. Palms. The sea is louder now. A low branch slaps him wetly in the face. With outstretched hands he feels his way between the dripping leaves until his fingers touch the ridged trunk of a palm, to which he clings, unbalanced by the darkness, and tries to
see a way forward through the undergrowth. But there is no need. On his face he can feel a cool change of air, an openness, and there ahead of him is the dull reflective burnish of the sea.

When he reaches the edge of the water he can see the rain-blurred lights of Diego far to the south, like a tiny constellation on the horizon. The waves hiss gently around his feet. Convinced that he can only have deviated slightly from the track, he turns around and searches the ghostly fringe of palms in both directions, at the same time straining his ears for anything that might decide him which way to turn. But there is nothing. On an impulse he turns left and starts walking along the beach with numb determination.

His sense of time has long since melted into the monotony of rain and darkness when he runs up hard against something in his path and lets out a cry of pain. The object clangs metallically. As he squats in the sand, nursing a bleeding shin, he manages to coax enough flame from the lighter to identify the obstacle as a boat—an upturned metal dinghy which lies chained to a concrete bollard a few metres down from the palms. In excitement he stands up and peers into the bushes, but as with every place he has checked along the beach he can make out nothing but the wet tangle of branches. Then it dawns on him that he has been walking in a stupor: even if he were to find the hotel now, assuming that there is one, it would almost certainly be too late to get a bed. There is only one thing for it. He lies down on the sand beside the upturned boat and, lifting it like a carapace, he wriggles underneath.

Too tired to change out of his clothes he rests for a minute in the darkness, glad simply to be out of the rain, then he reaches into his bag and feels for his cigarettes. Their condition is worse than he feared: his hand recoils from the wet compost of clothes and shredded tobacco. Still, the disappointment hardly matters: he has made it. Far from feeling failure at what he has achieved, he feels—but the feeling is so unfamiliar that he is not sure how he would describe it. Triumph? Is that what he should call this warm glow through his body? Happiness? He kicks off his shoes and pulls the plastic bag under his head for a pillow, then lies there in his unnamed state, flicking the lighter absent-mindedly until by chance it flares. In the wavering light he can see the dinghy’s benches and the blades of a pair of oars above his head. After his hours on the road his lodgings seems like luxury, a candlelit cocoon. For a moment he is reminded of the candle-lantern swinging in the cabin of the rickshaw as it bumped through the flooded streets, and the woman in the green skirt-suit beside him, smiling in anticipation as she raised the island to the flame. The happy isle, the île joyeuse . . . Did she seize him by the knee, or is it just the expression on her face that makes him think so now? That enthusiasm he was clearly meant to share, and which only he could have given her reason to expect. Those dark eyes shining with an excitement which he must have felt himself,
he is sure, in the days before he woke. *Libertalia!* Well, he is here at last, he thinks, at Libertalia. At almost-Libertalia. He has almost found the missing voice.

When the flame goes out, instead of rolling over to sleep, he lies for a long time in the darkness with his eyes open, listening to the sound of the rain on the hull and the long hiss of the waves along the beach.
He wakes with a start to the sound of voices and a strip of pale light all around him.

‘Yeah, sure it’s what they call them, but they’re not,’ a man says loudly, an American.
‘Jesus, if I thought they were, you think we’d be here? We’d be safer in the yoga class!’

Another man chuckles: ‘So the fish we ate last night?’ He has an accent, maybe German.

‘The smoked stuff? Not real tuna, I’m telling you.’

Beneath the gunwales he can now make out two pairs of feet standing within arm’s reach, one in running shoes, the other in sandals. A few metres behind them stand a third man and a woman with perfectly depilated legs, who seem to be discussing finance. He lies very still.

‘If you stick to currency you’ll miss the boat, Will. Timing’s everything.’

‘That’s not what the guys at Bell are saying,’ the man says. He is English, like the woman, a Londoner.

‘It’s bullshit, Will, they’re not even treading water. You’ve got to think for yourself.’

‘Geez, listen to them,’ the American mutters. ‘Can’t they wait till breakfast?’

The German laughs, then something is dropped with a soft thud on the hull. He rolls gently onto his side and peers through the crack, but from where he is lying he is still unable to see higher than their knees. Who are these people?

‘Speaking of breakfast, take a look at these. Gourmet, huh?’

‘Mm-hm’—the German’s voice—‘You put the whole thing on the hook?’

‘Yup, right through the eyeball, you betcha. Hey Maxine! Are you here to go fishing or to bust Will’s balls?’

‘Do I have to choose?’ The woman’s legs start moving towards the boat, then, ‘Euch!’ she cries. ‘What is that?’

‘Breakfast. Y’all hungry?’

‘It’s sardines à l’américaine,’ the German quips.

‘Hoo! You bet it is. My momma’s recipe.’

‘I’m gagging,’ complains the man he heard called Will. ‘I wouldn’t touch those with someone else’s hands.’
The American says, ‘Tshhh! What’s wrong with you guys? Didn’t you hear that talk yesterday? Take the plunge? Ignore your fears? Don’t be afraid to get your hands dirty?’

‘Motivate,’ the German adds in an enthusiastic impersonation, ‘participate . . .’

‘You mean nauseate,’ interrupts Maxine.

‘So what’s the concept?’ asks the Englishman. ‘The big fish eat the little fish?’

‘Hey, Will, I’m impressed!’ Maxine goads. ‘That’s Business 101.’

‘Oof!’ The sound of laughter.

‘Well, let’s get this baby on the water.’

He is about to scramble out when two pairs of hands reach down and grip the edge of the boat, which in one swift movement lifts and rolls onto its base, leaving him lying on the beach in front of them, mud-spattered and exposed, blinking up at the pale morning sky. The fishing party steps back in surprise, the four of them dressed in immaculate beach wear.

‘What the . . .?’ says the woman.

‘Whoa, buddy!’ The American raises his hands.

‘It’s okay,’ he assures them, ‘I just . . .’ He sits up stiffly.

‘Those bloody margaritas got you too, huh?’ asks the Englishman, who is wearing yellow-tinted sunglasses and has a stubbled goatee. ‘I nearly crashed on the beach myself.’

‘We know where you crashed.’ The American winks. ‘Don’t we Martin?’

‘Hey, leave it!’ cries Maxine.

The American laughs, then turns back to him. ‘Sorry, buddy.’ He extends his hand. ‘I don’t think we’ve met yet, have we? I’m Ron.’ Then he pauses and looks at him uncertainly.

‘Hey . . . you’re not at the club, are you?’

‘The club?’ As he stands, brushing the sand from his clothes, he remembers the taxi driver’s gates. ‘No, I just got here last night. I was actually looking for the village, Antzavatra.’

‘What savatra?’

‘The village . . . Isn’t it near the club?’

The four look at him blankly.

‘You haven’t seen it?’

‘We only arrived on Wednesday,’ says the Englishman with a shrug. ‘This is the first time we’ve been out.’

‘You could ask them there,’ suggests the German. ‘They’d know about it, for certain.’

Maxine has been eyeing him with a look of deep disdain: ‘He might have a problem with the guards . . .’

But Will shakes his head. ‘If he explained what he wanted, they’d be okay . . .’

‘So what is it?’ he interrupts. ‘A resort?’
‘Oooh yeah,’ the American answers with a meaningful smile. ‘It’ll blow you away.’ He waves at the rocky headland behind him. ‘It’s thataway, just round the point.’

‘Well thanks for that, I might give it a try.’ Still too dazed for conversation, he picks up his things. ‘Good luck with the fishing.’

‘Yeah, cheers,’ says Will, then a moment later calls after him, ‘Hey, don’t get me wrong, but you might want to wash that mud off. For the guards . . .’

Although he hears the woman titter he waves back in acknowledgement, then continues along the water’s edge.

Now that he is able to look around him he is struck by how the world has changed since the day before. All that remains of the storm is a dark band on the ocean’s rim above which the sun has just begun to rise, casting a golden blaze across the bay. Drops glisten in the casuarina trees behind the beach and fall in occasional showers from the overhanging palms. Hearing the knock of oars he glances back at the dinghy, which is already bobbing on the glassy water. The club? he wonders sleepily. Club Med? It doesn’t seem possible, there is barely even a road . . .

When he reaches the foot of the headland he stops to gather his thoughts. He can see no reason not to follow the tourists’ advice: the sooner he finds the village, the better. But first he needs to tidy up. In the hope of drying his things in the sun he spreads them over the rocks, but the map and Victor’s gift are both so badly damaged—his mango portrait has lost most of its face—that he digs a hole in the beach and buries them. Then with a quick glance around him he strips and wades into the shallows. The water is warm and tourist-brochure blue; fish dart between his feet. Far out in the bay the dinghy has been swallowed by the sun’s reflection. To gain a clearer view he swims out into the path of light then turns and looks back at the beach, which from out here, in the light of day, is exactly as he has pictured it. The tranquil beach: all that is missing is the dugout canoe. Satisfied, he swims back to shore and sits for a while in the sun. Although he is stiff and tired and almost dizzy with hunger, the certainty of the evening before is even stronger now, an elated sense of promise in the day ahead. When he is dry he dresses in his least damp clothes and, curious to know what the American meant, starts climbing the rocks of the headland.

In spite of the warning, however, the view which greets him as he comes over the crest takes him by surprise. Below him, almost closed at its entrance by two stone sea walls, is a perfectly circular cove, an omega of dark blue water in which two ships lie at anchor—a massive three-tiered motor launch and an old two-masted brigantine. Reaching out to the ships from the far shore is a jetty; at the back of the cove is a beach. The resort itself—a chain of pools and lawns and buildings made of darkly tinted glass—is almost hidden amidst the forest of palms that curves around the shore, only a single building having the height to rise above
the tallest trees. And it is this, more than anything, which has stopped him in his tracks. In fact his first impression is not of a building at all. Built opposite the harbour’s mouth, at the centre of the beach, it has a roof that rises to a curving point at either end, like the stern and prow of a ship, making it resemble a sort of dark glass galleon beached in an oasis—an impression strengthened by the two tall aerials that rise from its roof like masts. On the forested slope behind it a satellite dish is angled towards the sky.

For several minutes he stands staring at the place in disbelief. If he had imagined anything it was a waterside bar with a scattering of bungalows, but this—this artifice—is unlike anything he has ever seen. As his eyes shuttle back and forth between the old sailing ship on the water and its dark reflection on the shore he catches sight of a golf buggy moving slowly along the road towards the jetty. At that moment the sun rises over the headland behind him, catching the crests of the palms with a golden light and reflecting from the glass prow of the galleon. It is, he has to admit, quite breathtaking. After another long look he shakes himself back into action and starts looking around him for a way to the beach.

The path, when he finds it, leads him around the shore through low-lying scrub, which as he gets deeper into the cove gives way to unfamiliar trees with leaves the size of dinner plates whose branches cascade with pink and white orchids. On an impulse he reaches out and snaps off a twig, almost expecting it to be plastic, the flowers too bright, the translucent leaves too perfectly round. The place is not quite believable. And only a short way further on he is once more brought to a stop. On a lookout at the edge of the cliff, pointing out at the ships in the harbour, sits a row of antique cannons. Mystified, he leans down and runs his hand along one of the pock-marked cylinders. Ship’s cannons . . . As he looks up again he catches sight of the golf buggy driving silently back towards the resort, patrolling the shore. Amongst the palms, however, there is still no sign of life.

When he emerges from the trees it is not on the beach, as he expected, but at one end of what appears to be a croquet lawn with hoops embedded in the turf. With an eye out for the guards he crosses quickly to the cover of the palms, where in the dappled shade a network of paved paths leads between the buildings. Now that he is among them he can see that the smaller buildings are comprised of geometric modules whose shape makes him think of origami boats, each with the same lifted eaves as the galleon. In keeping with the theme, triangular shade-sails stretch above the doors and windows. It is still very early and the place has an eerily deserted feel, heightened by the dark glass of the buildings in which every way he turns he sees his own reflection and the palms. In fact he is beginning to wonder if he is the only person awake when he hears music from the building ahead—a cloying New Age concoction of harps and bamboo flutes—and then a woman’s voice, her accent French.

‘ . . . now step forward, very good. Keep the back leg straight. And hold . . . ’
Through the open door he can see a group of women, and a couple of men, lunging forward in leotards with their arms above their heads.

‘And down,’ the instructor calls, casting him a sideways glance, ‘and back to svanasana. Très bien!’

He moves out of sight. A health retreat? Then why the fishing? Through the palms to his left he can see the looming prow of the main hall, to which he turns, crossing a wooden bridge that spans a rock-rimmed swimming pool. At the end of the pool, feet dangling in the water, sits a naked Japanese man, who gives him a friendly nod.

Another rock pool, into which an artificial waterfall cascades noisily, half fills the terrace in front of the galleon, but although the doors around the prow are open, the café tables set beneath the trellised vines outside are empty. In a state of growing bewilderment he tip-toes to the door and peers inside. It is a restaurant; spacious, deserted, its stylish oval tables set for breakfast. The sight of the laden buffet counter is too much for him; he ducks inside and grabs two miniature croissants, then slips back out to the pool.

When he has finished eating he continues around the side of the building to the main entrance, whose arched doorway faces down a formal lane of palms towards the harbour’s mouth, giving a sense of stately grandeur: a sort of tropical Versailles. Bag in hand he climbs the steps.

At the centre of the vast reception hall is a horseshoe-shaped desk whose shape is echoed by a circular skylight ten or twelve metres above it. Midway between skylight and desk, on invisible wires, hang a pair of crossed cutlasses, lit by a spotlight. Cutlasses? Cannons? He is beginning to feel slightly desperate.

‘Hello?’ he calls into the cavernous space.

There has to be someone here who can help him. From the several corridors that lead off the hall he chooses the nearest, which after several twists and turns leads him up a flight of stairs to a large loft room in the galleon’s stern, surrounded by windows that look out into palms. Partitions of carved wood and raffia matting divide the space into what appear to be rustic cabins, but which he can see as he tip-toes between them are in fact furnished as offices, with glass-topped desks, computer equipment, and stylish swivelling chairs.

‘Il y a quelqu’un là?’ he calls.

In the silence that follows he hears a muffled voice from somewhere below him, and a jangling of keys, which seems to be approaching. Perhaps he should turn back—but he is curious. Putting aside his hesitations, he steps inside the nearest office and goes to the computer, on whose screen a forest of stylized palms is swaying gently in the breeze, mimicking the view outside the window. He taps a key, the palms vanish. In their place appears an image of a small book with rounded corners, an imitation passport, on whose dark
blue, cloth-bound cover is a circular coat of arms depicting two crossed cutlasses over an antique sailing ship. Below the coat of arms, written in embossed gold lettering, are the words:

CLUB LIBERTALIA
PASSEPORT A LIBERTÉ.

For a long moment he stands with his finger grazing the key, then he sits down slowly on the office chair and pushes himself away from the desk, recoiling from the words in front of him. He feels an unnatural calm, a deadness deep inside him. So he came half way across the world for this, he thinks: a resort. With that one click of a button all his hopes have vanished, leaving only a numbed bitterness. His hopes? What on earth did he think he would find? The only hope he really had was that it was hope which brought him here before. And even that was spun from nothing: a postcard, a word, the expression on a woman’s face . . . A fantasy spun from mystery, he thinks. Or need.

The jangling keys have reached the loft. When he hears them come to a halt behind him he swivels in his chair, too sick with disappointment to feel guilty, or even to stand up.

In the doorway stands a guard in pale grey uniform, a local man, who is looking at him with an expression poised between suspicion and solicitude.

‘Monsieur?’

‘I need to see the manager,’ he says.

The man’s gaze, having moved down from his face, has settled on his shoes, which seem to tilt the balance to suspicion.

‘Je veux parler au gérant,’ he repeats, rising from the chair.

‘Yes.’ The guard meets his eye again. ‘Your room number, sir?’

‘I don’t have one. I stayed here last week.’

The man now takes a step towards him and looks around the office, paying particular attention to the desk, before eyeing him warily.

‘You must come with me.’

‘To see the manager, okay?’

The man nods coldly and points to the door: ‘Please.’

With the guard at his heels he walks back through the offices to the top of the stairs, where, when he stands aside to let the man lead the way, he is ordered to continue. In the corridor they meet a second guard, who at a word from his colleague falls in step behind him, stern-faced and rather threatening. As he is frogmarched into the reception hall he glances over his shoulder at his two captors and shakes his head in amused resignation. Pointless to explain. Instead he follows their directions, proceeding down a central corridor lined with
gourd-shaped palms in pots until somewhere in the galleon’s prow he reaches the foot of a spiral staircase and is ordered to stop. Guarded by the second man, he waits there while the first goes up ahead of them.

‘The manager’s up there?’

The guard nods, and as if to prevent him from making a sudden dash for the stairs reaches out and puts his hand on the bottom banister, a heavy post of dark timber, about a foot in diameter, which is carved roughly in the figure of a man. A sailor, he can see now. He is dressed in a sailor’s shirt and breeches with a cutlass at his waist. On the facing banister, carved in the same style, is a second sailor with an amputated leg, who in addition to a sword is clutching a book of exaggerated size. With their mask-like faces set towards each other the two men stare across the bottom step, so strange and stern that, in spite of his disappointment, he feels his earlier curiosity reviving. Perhaps the place isn’t quite what he thought . . . But before he has a chance to ask who they are, the order has come down for him to come up.

As he rounds the final bend of stairs he finds himself in another loft, through whose outward-sloping windows he can see the headland through the palms and a shining sliver of the bay stretching south towards Diego. The first guard, who is there to meet him, takes him by the shoulder and turns him around like a policeman in a court.

‘C’est lui,’ he says accusingly.

And there in front of him is his judge. In the middle of the sunlit penthouse, which is furnished starkly with steel furniture and geometric rugs, is an athletic-looking man in his late forties, handsome, deeply tanned, with short greying hair, dressed in pale cotton trousers and a navy T-shirt: the picture of the executive at home. Instead of a judge’s throne, the man is seated on an inflated rubber exercise ball.

‘So,’ he says, rolling forward on it and bouncing to his feet, ‘you’re the—what do you say in English, huh?—the snooper, right? Is that the word? Snooping.’ The word seems to amuse him.

‘Snooping? Well, not really, no. I was just looking for someone to help me.’

‘On the computer?’ The man disarms him with a genial smile.

‘No, that was . . . Look, I need to ask you something. Do you know everyone who stays here?’

‘Not everyone, maybe.’ The man shrugs. ‘I remember most of them. But why do you ask?’

‘Well . . . I don’t know quite how to put this. I need to know if I was here last week.’

The manager looks quizzical and jerks his head at the guard: ‘But that’s what you told the security.’
‘I know, I think it’s true. It’s not easy to explain. I . . .’ He hesitates, then knocks his head with his knuckles. ‘I can’t remember.’

The man raises his eyebrows: ‘You hurt yourself?’

‘Yes. Do you think you could you find out for me?’

‘You tell me first what you were doing, huh?’

‘I came here to ask for directions, but there was no-one about. Then . . .’

‘Directions to where?’ the man interrupts.

‘Well, to here. I didn’t know that this was it, you see, where I was last week. I only had the name. When I saw the computer I thought . . . I didn’t mean . . .’

The tone of his voice, or the sight of him standing there, dishevelled, with his plastic bag, seems to convince the manager, if not of the truth of what he is saying, at least of his harmlessness. He nods at the guard to leave them.

‘Come,’ he says, pointing to an L-shaped sofa facing the windows, ‘sit down. I’ll call the desk for you.’ He picks up a cordless phone from the coffee table and starts punching a number. ‘Did you tell me your name?’

When he tells him the man thrusts out a hand.

‘Duby. Alain Duby . . . What day did you arrive?’

But before he has a chance to reply Duby is talking loudly into the phone.

‘. . . Oui, la semaine dernière . . . Il n’est pas là? Alors, trouvez-le, hein! Vite, vite!’

When he puts down the phone he gives him an exasperated shrug, man to man, as if assuming that he will sympathise with the trials of the employer.

‘Hopeless! They’ll ring back when they know.’

Then he turns to face the window and stretches in the sun, before asking with his back turned, ‘Are you telling me the truth?’ He pronounces it as ‘truf’, the only blemish on his English, which has a faintly American burr.

‘I think I might have come up with a better lie.’

‘Ah, maybe, maybe.’

When the man shows no sign of turning from the window he clears his throat nervously.

‘It’s quite a place you’ve got here,’ he ventures.

‘Yeah, it’s somefing, huh?’ Duby wheels suddenly and flashes him a smile. ‘You must be the first one to forget it.’

‘I don’t even know what it is exactly. I mean what happens here?’

‘What happens? Same as everywhere, I think. Some work, some play.’

‘What kind of work?’
“All kinds. These days a lot of people don’t have time for holidays. This is the fact. Maybe you understand the problem, huh?”

He nods uncertainly.

“Right. So you need to keep an eye the whole time on the business, and you need a break. We satisfy both needs. This is the big growth in the industry right now, resorts like this. But mainly these days we run workshops.”

“Workshops?”

“Corporate bookings. People from branches all over the world come together for some—what do you say?—some “face to face”. We help them to exchange ideas, discuss their strategies, find new directions. Or we take them on an adventure course, like sailing, to teach teamwork skills and how to manage risk. Extend their limits. See what blossoms. And the best thing is that everyone’s the winner. The businesses don’t suffer downtime, plus their people learn new skills. They go back energized, they’re happy. The tariff pays for itself in increased productivity. An investment in the human side. Imagination, creativity. I think this is the future. We’ve got to think outside the old categories. Work—play—business—resort.” He makes a chopping gesture with his hands, excited by his telegraphic rhetoric. ‘Break down the boundaries. Play is work, work is play. It all fits together.’

“So those offices . . .” he begins. Could he have come here for work? he wonders. He feels slightly sick. ‘You mean people can keep working here?’

‘Of course. The Club has everything you need. It’s home from home. It’s like you never left the office.’

‘But it’s so remote . . .’

‘Well, that’s the point. What people like. And for us . . .’ The man shrugs. ‘Pfff! It makes no difference in the end. Of course we have some costs. Logistics are expensive, and communications, but the costs are offset by the price of land.’ He gestures out the window. ‘Where else do you get a place like this? A steal.’ He taps his head to indicate the robbery. ‘But it was actually a lucky thing we got it. It’s a funny story. Did I tell you this?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Ha! Of course not. You don’t remember. Well I’ll tell you now, since we have to wait. Why not? The Americans found out about it at the same time, right, and they’ve got the money, a lot of money. Let’s just say it was an entertainment group. We can’t compete. They want to make a programme here called “Pioneers”. A reality show. Is that what you say?’

He nods, bewildered by the man’s garrulousness.

‘Right. So the concept is they choose maybe fifty people from all over the world and they bring them here and leave them in the bay, just them and the TV crew. Americans, Dutch, you name it. Even some Chinese. How long, I don’t know, maybe one year. One year
to set up their own nation, right? You understand? It’s like history repeating, only this time on TV. They have to build their own houses, write their own laws, they have to do everything. Like pioneers. But lucky for us the studio has a change of plan. Now they decide they need an island, new location. They don’t care about the history. Now it’s got to be an island, so . . .’

He smiles in amusement. ‘So they take a lease out on an island in the north, it’s in the Iles Glorieuses, this little speck of bird shit in the ocean. Tiny! Nothing there. But it’s not so glorious as what they think. What they don’t know is that every few years the place gets smashed up by a cyclone. Boom!’ He punches his hand. ‘So I know some people on the TV crew who ask me up to see it, right, when I’m sailing up there. You wouldn’t believe. They’ve already built a village out of sticks and stones, there’s a meeting house, they’re planting crops. They’ve even got some new words, like a language of their own. Hilarious! They’re taking it so serious! The day I’m there there’s a big event. They’ve just finished building a boat, so they have to celebrate the launch. But the moment the boat hits the water it starts to sink. So what do they do? They stand along the beach and start singing a song they made up for their nation, like a—what do you say?—a national hymn. There’s cameras everywhere! It’s true! The crew are living in a houseboat on the lagoon. It’s the real de luxe, you know, hot showers, air-con, videos. So in the evening we’re having pizza on the deck while the poor pioneers are eating, I don’t know, boiled manioc and crabs or some shit like this. Anyway, six weeks later a cyclone comes and blows the place to pieces! They have to put the series in the can!’

The man laughs uproariously, then a moment later, clearly disappointed by the response, he falls silent and checks his watch.

‘You said “like history repeating”. What history?’

Duby glances at him, then falls back into the crook of the sofa with his arms outstretched, knees wide and jiggling energetically.

‘What do you really want up here?’ he counters, without answering. ‘About a month ago we start losing stuff, computer equipment, other things. Do you know about this?’

‘No, of course not. I swear.’

‘So what makes you think you stayed at the Club?’

‘I saw a form in a hotel. It said I’d come from here.’

‘That’s all?’

When he nods the man says nothing, only looks at him searchingly for a moment, then shrugs, and picks up the phone again, impatient now.

‘Actually,’ he adds quickly, ‘there was something else. A postcard. I don’t know if you can tell me this, but do you know if somebody called Misson stayed here?’

The man stops dialling: ‘Sure he did.’
‘He did?’ In his excitement he sits forward on the sofa. ‘Is he still here now? I need to talk to him. It’s very important.’

But in response the man’s face does something curious, passing in the space of a second from a frown, to a confused smile, to a burst of delighted laughter.

‘I think maybe you—what’s the phrase?—I think you missed the boat.’

‘You mean he’s gone?’

‘He’s gone alright! He went three hundred years ago!’

Speechless, he stares at the manager, who laughs again in an unconstrained guffaw.

‘Excuse me. But it’s funny, huh? You don’t know the story?’

‘What story?’

‘The story of our patron saint. Or the history. Who knows for sure? Maybe it’s just a myth.’ He throws up his hands. ‘But there were pirates everywhere back then, that’s true. The fact. Like the pirates down at Sainte Marie . . .’

‘Wait . . . You’re saying Misson was a pirate? So all of this . . . ’

‘All this?’

‘Well . . . the cannons . . . those carvings on the stairs . . . ’

‘You saw them, huh?’ The man’s enthusiasm has been rekindled, the salesman with his pitch. ‘When I heard the story I was here as a scout. We were searching near Diego for an opportunity, some waterfront. So I came up here to have a look, and straight away I knew this was it. I could see the whole thing. Just what we were looking for. The directors thought that I was mad, but it’s been so popular they want to build the same thing in Jamaica, an old fort. In process now. And you know . . . ’ He springs up abruptly and goes to the window, through which he gestures with the telephone. ‘It actually makes more sense than people think. When Misson built his nation here he brought together people from all over the world, just like we do at the Club. From Europe, from Africa, from India. It was a multinational republic, one half nation, one half business. And how do they make their living? Well . . . ’ He smiles. ‘Maybe they’re not so different to our clients here. They took their little slice of global trade.’ He pauses and looks back at him on the sofa. ‘So you didn’t know all this?’

The news has left him limp. He shakes his head slowly, then almost too himself he murmurs, ‘Libertalia . . .’

Duby waves the telephone: ‘Right, right. All this was Libertalia. Or so they say.’

‘A nation of pirates?’

‘Pirates?’ The man shrugs expressively and pouts his lips. ‘Ah, maybe, maybe. But Captain Misson didn’t think he was a pirate actually. A revolutionary more like. A visionary. What he was fighting for was freedom, equality, the right to live under the laws we make ourselves. At first he thinks the only way to do that is to stay away from land. Not to belong to
any nation, right? He hates them all. So he’s turned his back on France, on Europe. He calls himself a traitor to the whole world. Everything except his ship. Then after a while he’s joined by more ships, more men. Women too, from Les Comores, I think. They’ve come from everywhere. It’s like a—what would you say?—a nation without a land. A republic under sails, just floating around the world.’

‘Then they settled here?’

‘Right. After a few years he needs a place to rest, so he comes looking up the coast. And it’s pretty nice, huh? They’ve got everything they need. Fresh water, the harbour, cute girls. Some nice shipping routes nearby. He knows he’s going to get old. He can’t just sail forever. So they decide to stay.’ He smiles. ‘Well, who knows? That’s the story.’

‘And do you believe it?’

‘Believe it?’ The man lets out a cynical laugh. ‘When the Americans stay here they ask me “Do you buy it?” You know this phrase? I think it’s great! History is just what we can . . .’

But before he can say what history is the telephone starts ringing in his hand, or rather chirruping a piece of music. Bach, he thinks, a prelude. A prelude to a fugue.

‘Aha.’ The man looks across at him with the phone to his ear. ‘Tu es sûr? . . . Oui, oui . . . Il ne faut pas, non . . . Oui, maintenant . . . D’accord.’

When he puts down the phone he clicks his tongue: there is no need for him to say it.

For several seconds he looks at the man in speechless silence, then slowly nods: ‘I think I’ve made a mistake.’

The manager gives him the helpless shrug of those compelled to enforce the rules.

‘I’m sorry, huh? We can take you to the gates.’

Although he knows he should rise for his sentencing he feels that the floor has abandoned him, the same sense of vertigo he felt on the day he woke, the crater. Unsteady even on the couch, he sits there nodding stupidly as he tries to put his thoughts in order. His assumption that he came to stay here was a disappointment, but the truth—perhaps the truth is even worse. A pirate colony . . . Some mythical republic owned by a hotel chain . . . Is this really what he has spent the last days looking for? And the postcard? And Misson? It is suddenly horribly clear to him that the whole thing has been a hoax. He must have met some tourists here, like the fishing party on the beach, who gave him the postcard, having fun at his expense, and sent him off like a simpleton to spread the word. Libertalia! But what story could they have told him which would make him want to do that? What state was he in?

Through the whirl of his thoughts he hears the man say something: ‘That’s why I believed you.’

‘I’m sorry?’
The manager laughs. ‘I said it happened to me once, too, a commotion. Just like yours. I was sailing with some clients near Diego. Dutch group, Zuidervaart. You know them? They make shortbreads. Then the next thing, boom!’ He swings the back of his arm against his forehead, like the boom of a ship. ‘They landed in Diego and took me to the hospital—no beds. So they take me to the church and leave me on the floor. Two hours unconscious. When I wake up again the first thing I see is the Virgin looking down at me, and no idea what’s happened, right? I thought I’d gone to heaven!’

‘Ah . . .’

Again the manager looks disappointed by his reaction to the story, which in fact he has barely grasped.

‘But we have to keep the rules, you understand,’ he adds, waving inconsequentially at the palms outside. ‘We can’t have people walking in.’

‘I understand.’ He manages to get up from the sofa. ‘I’m sorry to waste your time. I can find my own way out.’

But the manager holds up his hand to keep him: ‘The guard will be here in a minute.’

And for a minute they stand in silence, Duby drumming his fingers on his elbows impatiently, he staring numbly at the floor.

‘The flag . . .’ he murmurs at last, thinking aloud. Then in a stronger voice, ‘What flag did Misson have?’

‘Flag?’ The manager creases his forehead. ‘No, I don’t remember. Our design team did the logo for the Club. It’s a funny story actually . . .’

But fortunately at that moment the guard’s head appears at the top of the stairs.

‘Okay!’ says Duby with finality, giving him a manly slap on the shoulder. ‘Maybe you’ll stay here next time, huh?’

From the cool of the forest behind the harbour the golf buggy emerges into sunlit lawns pocketed with sand-traps and lily-covered ponds: a miniature golf course. The road, which is as smooth as a strip of black rubber, leads in the distance to a pair of high metal gates in a chain-wire fence. It is he who breaks the silence that has lasted since they left the building.

‘Do you know where Antzavatra is?’

The guard takes a hand off the wheel and gestures to his right, indicating that the village lies further north. As he realizes the mistake he made the previous night he remembers his excitement as he strode down the wrong road in the darkness, and the wakeful hours he
spent lying beneath the dinghy, so sure that he had almost found the answer he was looking for, but couldn’t say. But in the light of what he knows now, the memory makes him wince.

And what he knows now is all he assumes he will ever know. The imagined scene of his meeting with the Clubbers the week before has assumed a reality so vivid in his mind that his explanation of the postcard seems much more than a conjecture. He can even hear their sniggers as he left them on the beach. The whole thing has been a terrible mistake, from the prank that sent him away from here to the delusion that brought him back. As for what he was doing with the box it hardly matters to him now: he was sick and should never have doubted it. If only he had never come up here. And now, to top it off, he faces the prospect of walking back to Diego in the full heat of the day.

It is hot already. From the lawns of the golf course a faint steam rises and in the surrounding forest insects have begun to shrill. As they drive past the ponds basking lizards dash across the lily pads. Although the air is completely still a few dark clouds have risen above the trees in the west, with the promise, he supposes gloomily, of another storm. As if reading his mind the guard points at them.

‘Pas beaucoup de touristes maintenant.’
‘No, I guess not . . . Have you worked here long?’
Since the beginning, the man replies.
‘So you know the story, then? Libertalia?’
The man tells him that of course he does, although personally he doesn’t believe it. At least not that it was here.
‘Why’s that?’
All this is a lie, the man says, waving at the lawns. Before the Club was built there wasn’t even a harbour. It took six weeks of dredging before the ships could bring the palm trees in. They used the sand to make the beach.
‘Then where was it, if it wasn’t here?’
The guard shrugs, then after a pause long enough to make his reply seem unconnected mutters, ‘Nowhere, I think.’
Silently the buggy rolls on through the lawns.
‘So what happened in the end? I mean in the story.’
The man lets out a hiss of laughter, but keeps his eyes fixed firmly on the gates, which are drawing near.
‘This we don’t tell to the guests.’
‘I’m not a guest.’
The man hisses through his teeth again, but still declines to answer. Instead he takes a remote control from his pocket and points it at the gates, which slowly open, revealing the
abrupt end of the bitumen and the churned mud of the Diego road beyond. The buggy slows to a halt. When he has alighted with his bag he bends down to thank the guard, who bares his teeth in an unexpected and not entirely genial smile.

Very well, he says, since he’s not a guest, he’ll tell him how it ended. His ancestors came down and killed the *vazahas* in the night.

Then before he has a chance to reply the man jerks his head at the gates, which have begun to close already, and without a word he steps back from the cart and runs towards them, only narrowly missing being caught in the middle.

When the lock clicks shut he turns and looks back through the bars to see the buggy driving across the lawns in a leisurely slalom, weaving between the sand-traps. All that is visible of the resort below are the dark points of the galleon and the mastlike aerials protruding above the trees. From the top of the gate a security camera stares down at him. For several seconds he stares back at it defiantly, then he walks out into the middle of the road. Which way should he turn? It is possible that he might find transport in the town, but the thought of having to wait, or even talk to anyone, decides him. Numbly, bitterly, he turns left and starts following the chain-wire fence in the direction of Diego. He has come to the end. He is going home.
By the early afternoon he has all but given up. Dizzy with heat and too exhausted to continue, he sits slumped against a weedy eucalypt at the edge of the road, his feet stretched out in front of him, a T-shirt covering his head. What is there to make him get up? The rage of disillusionment which set him walking in the morning long since wilted in the heat, and as for the inertia which has kept him trudging through the mud, it was lost when he sat down. No, he isn’t going anywhere. With nothing to flee and nothing drawing him on he has even begun to lose his sense of on and back, of forward and behind. All around him he can imagine the world stretching out like a sheet of glass, without coordinates or directions or the slightest connection to himself. A vast indifference yawns and beckons him invitingly. And why resist? The real problem, it seems to him, is his remaining desires for water and a cigarette. Much better to have none at all. One by one he lets his thoughts fall away until all that remains are a few simple sensations: the blaze of sun through the T-shirt, the shadows of the clouds, the tickle of the flies around the long scrape on his shin. Even the possibility of dying of thirst has ceased to bother him. It is an apathy so profound it fades into a doze.

When he opens his eyes he finds he has slipped against the tree in such a way that only his head is still supported, putting a pressure on his windpipe which is doubtless the cause of the dream from which he is struggling to escape. Buried in a pit of sand, he has just been dug up by a dog, who, between resuscitative licks of its tongue, addresses him politely in French.

‘Ah, M’sieur!’ its whisper echoes, ‘Ah, M’sieur!’

Still half asleep he blinks at the spots of sunlight on his shirt, which, as he straightens his neck, slips away from his face to reveal two branches overhead, their points turned in to form a waving crescent. And yet the crescent is too perfect and there is not a breath of wind. Again he blinks and squints at the light. Then in a reflex of primitive terror he scrambles back against the tree. Staring down at him like something from a nightmare is a huge demonic head—an elongated skull-white mask with a furrowed brow, ferocious horns and malevolently black-ringed eyes. Apparently as startled as he is, the demon swings its head away and snorts in surprise. It is an ox—a black and white pied zebu with a rope through its nose, and it is not alone. Harnessed to a yoke beside it is a second ox, and behind them both a wooden cart, at the front of which, dressed in an ancient pin-striped suit jacket with the arms ripped off,
holding a rope in one hand and a long switch in the other, sits a man. His chest and legs are bare and he has an incongruously clean white scarf around his neck. To complete the company a muddy dog is standing just in front of him, its nose aimed at his crotch.

‘Hup-alika!’ the man commands, and the dog slinks back between the zebus’ legs.

Dazed, he looks back to the man, who gives him a gap-toothed grin.

‘Bonzourrr,’ the man says.

When he opens his mouth to reply he hears a gummy click, like the sound of a foot being lifted from the mud. His tongue feels parched and larger than he remembers. Unable to speak he lifts his hand.

There is a silence as they look at one another, then the driver of the cart turns his face to the sky. ‘La pluie s’annonce,’ he observes.

And while he has slept, it is true, the clouds have finally begun to gather in a dark front in the east, still swelling with the new recruits that drift above the gum tree. With a strange irrelevance it occurs to him that they must have come from Africa, perhaps from Mozambique . . .

‘Où allez-vous?’ he hears the man ask.

‘Diego,’ he replies in a whisper, looking back at him.

The man nods and points up the road with his switch: ‘Le pont?’

‘Non.’ He shakes his head and tries again. ‘Diego.’

‘Ah, oui,’ the man says, ‘oui, vous allez à Diego. Moi’—he slaps his chest—‘le pont.’

He pauses, then with a jerk of his head he asks him, ‘Oui?’

The bridge . . . As he nods back in understanding he remembers crossing it the night before, just on darkness, not long after the taxi turned back to the town, and is reminded painfully of the distance he still has to go. He struggles to his feet and bends double for a moment to save himself from fainting, then when he is ready to look up he steps to the edge of the cart and mimes his need for water. Without a word the man reaches into the cart and passes down a plastic bottle.

The water in his mouth is ecstasy: he drinks as much as he feels he can without straining the good will. But as he hands it back he wonders if he has already. The driver narrows his eyes.

‘Trrois milles francs,’ he demands.

For the water any price seems fair. He extracts a five thousand franc note from his knotted shorts and gives it to the man, who, without offering him his change, folds it with a cheerful smile and puts it in his pocket.

‘Un camion là,’ he says, waving again with his switch.

A truck? Surprised, he turns to where the man is pointing, but sees nothing.
‘Un camion?’

‘Ah, oui,’ says the driver, ‘au pont. Il vous attend. A Diego, oui?’

Suddenly it dawns on him that the money he just gave the man is for transport to the bridge, where, if he understands it right, a truck is waiting to collect him. Strange . . . It seems almost as though his rescue has been organized.

‘Merci,’ he says, without questioning the arrangement. ‘Merci beaucoup.’

‘Ah, oui,’ replies the man, and signalling for him to climb on board he jerks his head behind him.

He fetches his bag from under the tree and walks to the rear of the cart, into which he hauls himself with difficulty. Then at a call from the driver the oxen move off with him still sitting backwards on the edge of the tray, dazed by his change of fortunes, looking back at the straggly eucalypt receding down the orange road.

Very soon, however, it becomes clear to him that he can’t stay where he is. In danger of being jolted from the end, he crawls forward and sits behind the driver, who is perched on a narrow shelf at the front of the cart with his legs astride the wooden shaft that leads out to the oxen. The man turns his head to look at him.

‘Frantzay?’ he asks.

‘Non, non. Australien.’

The carter nods without much interest. ‘Fidel,’ he says, tapping his chest.

As he returns the introduction he looks more closely at his rescuer. Although his age is difficult to tell he must be in his forties, small but muscular, with a triangular face at the centre of which his broad nose forms a second triangle, inverted. His breath, he notices, smells strongly of alcohol, but although his heavy-lidded eyes are slightly glassy they look shrewd—perhaps less curious who he is than alert to opportunities. There is something roguish in the way he smiles that falls just short of shadiness.

‘Cigarettes?’ the man asks.

Wishing it were otherwise he shakes his head: ‘Non, désolé.’

The driver turns away with a sigh and takes out his disappointment on the zebus, who, ignoring his lash, plod on at the same slow pace, heads lowered, their humped backs swaying in time with the squeak of the cart. A little way ahead of them trots the dog, pausing where it can to rest its belly in the pools of mud.

For a long time they roll on through the scrub in silence, the large wooden wheels turning stickily in the trenches, through which they travel with surprising ease. With the pace of the cart time slows. Deep shadow falls and in the east the bank of cloud gives out a gentle rumble, yet in spite of the gathering storm the air remains still and oppressively hot. If only it would rain. Having ceased to sweat, his skin feels slightly feverish, and when he looks up at
the sky the clouds spin around him in a dizzy circle. He does not feel well at all. The hours of walking in the sun, the last two days, the last two weeks—all of it has left him so reduced that he almost wishes he were back beneath his gum tree, blissfully asleep, directionless. But instead it seems that he is destined to keep going home. He came and now he is going: it’s really not much of a story. Without reasons or answers he can tell the whole thing in two words. And as if to prove the point he seems to hear them called from either side of him as voices in an argument, in the left ear ‘Came!’, in the right ear ‘Going!’, until finally they fade into the squeak of the cart.

In the corner of the box he hugs his knees to his chest to brace himself against the jolts. The condition of the road has worsened and the driver’s head, which for some time has been falling forward then lifting with a start, is now lolling drunkenly. While he has the opportunity he reaches for the water and takes another swig, then sets it back with the other bits and pieces in the basket in front of him—a few green coconuts, a machete, an empty bottle of rum. Aside from these the only other cargo is an old plastic tarpaulin, which lies rolled in a thick blue bundle along the opposite side of the box. And himself, he thinks. What is he but a piece of cargo to be shipped back across the world? A shell. Another rumble sounds in the distance; the oxen sigh. In the stormy light the grey-green bushes on the roadside file past like a queue of shadows, depressing in their monotony.

When the road shows no sign of improving it occurs to him that the bundle opposite might make a better seat, and he reaches out and pokes it with his toe. It seems unlikely to be breakable. He crosses to the other side and sits down on its middle, which is firm but slightly yielding—a perfect cushion after the hard wooden boards. Pleased with this initiative he stretches out his legs and looks back at the road, which for a long time has been climbing gently, giving a distant view across the scrub to the north, where he thinks he can just make out the steel-grey water where he must have been in the morning. All this distance, he thinks with amazement, he walked the night before with only the spark of his lighter, in the mud and the rain. For what? What was it that made him do it? But before he has a chance to think of an answer he is startled by a sound, a high-pitched cry, or almost a squawk, inarticulate and rather terrible. It is the driver. Now very much awake he has turned towards him and is waving with his free hand in a rapid sideways movement, his eyes and mouth emphatically wide.

‘Tsia! Non, non, non!’ he cries. ‘Pas là! Pas là, non!’

He is so shocked by the driver’s urgency that when he springs forward from his seat he tumbles sideways onto the floor—then in his haste to get away from the bundle ends up on his back, rolling helplessly with the movement of the cart and kicking in the air like a capsized beetle. His legs for a moment rise above his head before his feet crash down on the basket,
filling the tray with rolling bottles and bouncing coconuts, which in a series of desperate lunges on his belly he struggles to save from being lost on the road. Finally, after a good deal of flailing, order is restored. He scrambles to the other side of the box and looks back at the driver, from whose mouth—which is still open wide in horror at whatever sin he has committed—there explodes a single, choking, clearly inadvertent burst of laughter.

‘Désolé,’ he stutters in confusion, ‘désolé . . .’

But at the sound of his apology the driver’s battle with himself is lost. Unable to contain himself he lets out a high-pitched moan, his face breaks into a grin, and half-twisted on his perch he mimics the preceding antics with a spastic dance, waving his elbows like a chicken and kicking his feet in the air until he almost slides under the oxen’s hooves. Each time he manages to control himself he is immediately seized again by laughter, until finally his dancing has abated to a few feeble kicks and he wipes his eyes with the back of his hand.

As hard as he has tried to smile at the man good-humouredly he is too taken aback by the sudden change in his reaction. When Fidel is sober enough to look at him without laughing he points at the tarpaulin. ‘Je pensais . . .’ he begins, trying to think of an excuse for having sat on it. But since he can think of none he lets it fade into a question.

Immediately the smile drains from the driver’s face. Reminded of the bundle he looks back at it with his mouth still open but slack, thoroughly deflated, blinks his heavy lids a few times slowly, then for an embarrassed instant meets his eye.

‘C’est un corps,’ he says in a soft voice, looking down again.

‘Un corps?’

The man gives the faintest nod.

‘You mean . . .’ He searches the word for other possibilities. ‘C’est un corps humain?’

‘Un homme,’ replies Fidel.

Horrified, he looks back at the roll and pulls his feet away, as if expecting it to move. In the crumpled plastic of its shroud the two dents of his buttocks are obscenely visible. He feels paralysed with shame.

‘Je suis désolé,’ he says again with feeling.

But, to his surprise, when he dares to look back at Fidel he finds that the smile has returned, if only to his lips. Without the humour in his eyes it looks almost apologetic, as if he is not sure how else to respond. To help them both out the driver waves his elbows again in a single unconvinced flap, then without a word he turns back to the road and whips the oxen up to speed.

Left staring at the driver’s back he feels utterly bewildered. In the back of his mind he can hear what Stéphane told him two nights earlier as they walked back through the sleeping town, when he asked about the old man’s exit from the cinema: the bones that are carried
through the full length of the island to their proper place, the duty to the dead—all so at odds with Fidel’s laughter that he wonders if the driver feels as guilty as himself. They are partners in a desecration. Yet at the same time, as the butt of Fidel’s joke, he feels a strange alliance with the dead man; and, as the blundering intruder, he feels mortified before them both. He is not sure what to feel or where he stands. In fact the triangle between the three of them is so uncomfortable that he feels a tickle of unwanted laughter, a rising bubble which is luckily burst by his memory of Fidel’s horrified cry. And when he thinks of himself relaxing on the corpse he, too, feels cold with horror. For all he knows it could have been the driver’s friend, or even a relation. But how then could he find it so amusing? Could this be his job, perhaps? Could the ox-cart be a hearse? Unable to ask, he looks back at the bundle, which although it is roughly the length of a man is so thickly wrapped that its contents could be anything. He can’t even tell which end is which. Is the head to the front, or the feet? The longer he sits staring at it the more undecided it becomes, until the two ends are switching places like a broken compass, making him feel dizzy. He leans forward and sniffs at it cautiously—but if it has a smell he certainly can’t smell it. All in all it is disturbingly innocuous. Then he remembers with a shudder the sense of flesh–and-bone solidity he felt when he sat down and straightens quickly.

Now alert to his movements Fidel turns to check on him, but when he sees where he is sitting his face relaxes. For a moment he looks him up and down with fresh curiosity, then waves back to the north.

‘Vous venez du Club?’

The mention of where he was that morning cuts through his thoughts like a whip.

‘Non. Non, la plage . . . c’est près de là.’

The man looks surprised: ‘Antzavatra?’

‘Non. Vous habitez là?’

‘Ah, oui, Antzavatra,’ the man says, ‘oui.’ He keeps nodding for a moment, then lets his eyes fall to the plastic bag. ‘Vous avez quelque chose à boire?’ He makes a hopeful tippling gesture with his hand.

When he shakes his head the driver loses interest in him again and turns back to the road, which after the long ascent has begun to fall quite steeply, with a high red cutting to the right of them and to the left a view across a wooded valley to a chain of rocky hills in the distance. In his confusion over the body he has missed the transition from the colourless scrub to the trees which now surround them, rising from an undergrowth of weeds and wild bamboo. From the valley floor comes the faint sound of water: they must be nearly there. Braking the cart as well as themselves, the oxen walk with jerky downhill steps, the heavy
yoke pressed forward against their horns. Further down the slope the dog dashes ahead with a new energy, as if it recognizes where they are.

When they emerge from the trees he can see at the foot of the hill beneath them a long span of weathered planks built high above the river. While to the left of the bridge the valley opens into a distant flood plain, on the upstream side its walls converge to form a steep ravine, blocked at its end by a bowl of forested hills from which fine wisps of cloud are spilling down the gullies. It is a world apart from the flat scrub to the north, green and enclosed. Already on the opposite bank the dog is barking excitedly at the echoes that bounce back at it from the gorge, but the oxen when they reach the bridge seem reluctant to cross. Cursing, Fidel whips them on across the clattering planks, beneath which he can see the swollen stream he only heard the night before, orange with mud and risen high against the upstream banks where its waters tug at the trailing vines and lower branches of the trees. Then the clattering stops. They pull up on the broad bend where the road begins to climb again and Fidel jumps down to unharness the oxen.

While his rescuer’s head is lowered he stands up in the cart and looks around him: there is no sign of the promised truck.

‘Où est le camion?’

Without looking up the driver shrugs: ‘Il vient.’

The vagueness of the answer makes him uneasy. From what he has observed of the driver it seems altogether plausible that the truck was a ruse to bring him here.

‘Vous êtes sûr?’ he persists, when he has joined him at the front.

The driver mutters something between his teeth, which are biting a rope. Then he pushes the cart back from the oxen and lowers the end to the ground, sending the body sliding to the front where it stops with an audible bump, its head or feet now pointing at the sky. Meanwhile the zebus have set off towards the river, and before he has a chance to press him further Fidel is running after them, clapping his hands to steer them onto a path below the bridge.

Left alone, he stands in the road uncertainly. Should he stay and trust the man, or continue while he still has time? But the truth is he has little choice. Unsteady on his feet he steps back from the cart and sits down heavily in the lush weeds of the embankment. He will have to wait. Wait again and see what happens to him this time, like a piece of baggage on the roadside. With a snort of laughter he imagines the sign pinned to his chest: ‘If found, return to sender.’ But of course the sender is himself. Over the edge of the cart he can see the other parcel aimed towards the sky like a human cannon, as if waiting to be blasted back to where it came from. Does it care any less than he does where it goes? Now that he is stalled again he
can feel the apathy descending. A few spots of rain begin to fall and he lies back in the weeds to catch them in his mouth until he hears the sound of the oxen returning from the river.

Fidel, now wearing only his shorts and scarf, his jacket on his shoulder, is walking between his beasts with a hand on either hump, talking gently in Malagasy. When he has hooked their nose-ropes to a tree he puts his vest back on and squats down by the wheel of the cart.

Perhaps because they have left the safety of their contract—no longer passenger and driver, but two strangers on a road—a slightly awkward silence hangs between them. To break it, he asks the man when he thinks the truck will arrive.

‘Il vient,’ Fidel reassures him.
‘C’est un taxi, ce camion?’
‘Ah, non, c’est le koontsily.’
‘Le koontsily? Qu’est ce que c’est?’
‘Le koontsil frantzay.’

He thinks for a moment: ‘Le consul français?’
‘Ah, oui.’ The driver nods.
‘Il vient ici?’
‘Elle vient.’

A French consul coming to the bridge: it sounds too unlikely to have been invented.
‘Pourquoi?’ he asks.

Fidel narrows his eyes and tilts his head back mysteriously. ‘C’est une longue histoire,’ he answers after a pause, ‘et triste aussi . . .’

He waves a hand for him to continue.

‘Une longue histoire,’ the driver repeats. Then he gets up from the ground and leans against the cart, where he stands for a while in suspenseful silence, nodding in a way that implies that the long, sad story of the consul’s visit is one that is well worth hearing. From the look in his eyes he can sense a strategy at play: the driver gives him a helpless shrug. ‘Mais rien à boire,’ he says with a sigh. ‘Pou’ raconter une histoire comme ça . . . Vous comprenez. Faut boire un peu.’

So this is the deal: a drink for a story.

‘Mais je n’en ai pas,’ he tells him, shrugging back.
‘Ah, oui,’ nods the driver, ‘ouii, mais là bas,’ and he points vaguely into the bushes.

Surprised, he asks if there is a shop nearby, at which Fidel, looking very innocent, spreads his hands in a gesture of service.

If there is anything he wants, he tells him, with a slight shift in his tactics, then he knows where he can find it. There is rum, le Cola . . .
‘Des cigarettes?’
‘Ah, oui,’ Fidel affirms, ‘mais ça coute un peu cher.’ He adds, in case the point were lost, that he has no money of his own—at least not until the consul arrives.
‘Vous attendez le consul aussi?’
‘Ah, oui.’

As he struggles with his shorts he tells the man to get them anything they need—but above all, for himself, some cigarettes and lemonade. How much he hands over he has no idea, but he guesses from the driver’s face that it is much more than sufficient. To hide his amazement Fidel folds the money carefully and stows it in his jacket, then waving again in the direction of his secret supplier he scrambles up the embankment and, with a parting call of ‘Cinq minutes!’ disappears into the undergrowth.

Five minutes come and go, then ten, and still he is lying on the bend in the road with no sign of the driver. Several times he has thought he has heard a rustling in the bushes behind him, and once what he took for a whisper, but each time when he lifts his head to listen there is only the sound of the rain on the trees and the low rush of the river echoing in the gorge. His suspicion grows. From the other side of the bridge he saw no sign of habitation in the valley. But if the man could invent a shop in a ravine, why not a consul with a truck? They are equally implausible; so implausible somehow that belief and doubt seem equally inapposite. But he supposes that it hardly matters. At some stage the man will have to return for his cart, and he certainly isn’t going anywhere.

By this time the spots of rain have become a steady drizzle. He sits up. Under the tree the two oxen are standing with their heads hung low and almost touching, a picture of patient misery. To give them a boost he plucks a handful of weeds and tosses them at their feet. The oxen ignore them. ‘Not hungry, eh?’ he asks in a murmur, at the same time realizing with surprise that nor is he. Although all he has eaten in the last two days are the croissants he stole in the morning, the emptiness he feels inside him is of another kind, unfillable, not even asking to be filled. Everything that has kept him going in the days since he woke has been exhausted: the urgency of going home as much as the mirage that led him north. He has lost his motor. ‘Same,’ he confesses to the beasts, ‘I feel the same,’ to which the pied ox responds with a sigh of flatulence. He gives up on them and lets his eyes fall to his feet, so swollen with layers of caked-on mud they resemble the sculptures of a child. Like Victor’s pip, he thinks, remembering suddenly the little portrait of himself which he buried on the beach that morning. So he travelled for three days and nights to bury a mango pip on a beach, his faceless double in its shroud of soggy map. At the symbolism of it all he lets out a snort of laughter.
On the bundle in the cart the rain falls with a plastic patter. Already soaked to the skin he sits watching it collect in the arse-dent at the centre, then break its banks and trickle down a long crease to the lower end. The feet, he hopes. Or is it the head? Or perhaps, along with everything else, the driver lied to him about it being a body, in which case neither. And again, without moving in the slightest, the two ends of the thing start switching places before his eyes, head up, head down, in a mental game which he almost immediately regrets having started. Up and down the head tilts like a see-saw, quite ridiculous. In irritation he looks away, but soon his eyes have crept back to the cart and he even catches himself tilting his head as if it might help solve the question. Then before he knows what he is doing, he is standing at the tailgate of the cart, looking down in guilty temptation. It couldn’t be worse than what he has already done; besides, he is alone. Quickly, before he changes his mind, he bends over and untucks the end of the tarpaulin, then with both hands pushes back the thickly rolled layers. And there is his answer. But it is an answer to a question he has suddenly forgotten. The feet that poke through the folds of plastic are no less of a shock than two open eyes. So perhaps this explains the driver’s embarrassment—and the consul, too. She must be coming to collect him . . . It is so unexpected that he remains for several seconds lost in thought, forgetting the danger of discovery, until a rustle in the bushes makes him straighten with a start.

At first he can see nothing, then a tremor of the leaves leads his eyes to a small face peering out through the undergrowth, and another just beside it, whose nervous glance to the right directs him to a cluster of three more. From the top of the embankment five children are staring down at him, wide-eyed, the youngest a tiny boy dressed only in a pair of red underpants, the eldest a girl of maybe ten, who is carrying a baby half her own size on her hip. Although his heart is thumping, his fright at having been discovered is clearly nothing to theirs: the children look as though they have seen a ghost. ‘It’s okay,’ he reassures them, but as soon as his voice breaks the silence the boy’s face crumples and he begins to cry. The spell is broken. Suddenly the girl grabs the sobbing child by the wrist and, before he has a chance to call out again, the five of them have disappeared without a sound into the bushes.

For a moment he stands staring through the rain at where they have vanished, then he turns quickly and covers the feet with the tarpaulin. So it seems that everything the driver told him is true, after all: the body, the people in the gorge, the reason for the consul’s visit. The feet have changed everything . . . Suddenly mobilized he scrambles up the embankment and peers into the leaves, then, seeing no way forward, he slides back to the cart and walks down towards the bridge, just before the end of which a narrow path disappears into a mass of vine-smothered trees. Unable to tell whether the path leads up the gorge or down to the river he walks out onto the bridge, but from here the path is no more visible than the cirque of hills at the end of the valley, over which the clouds are now pouring in a slow cascade. Yet still he
remains there. In the direct line of the gorge the noise of the water fills his brain with a simplifying roar in which every thought disappears except the strangely delayed image of the foot breaking out of the plastic, as white and soft as a larva. A vazaha, he thinks—and not only that. Fidel told him that he had come from the village. So the dead man must have been staying in Antzavatra . . . It all fits too well . . . Although a voice inside him warns him to leave the thought alone, he goes back to the path and, determined to hear what the driver promised, steps into the vines. But almost immediately he stops. From beyond the first bend in the track voices are approaching, the excited clamour of children and the low response of a man.

It is the children who appear first, trotting along with their heads turned back to whoever is behind them, the invisible man they have no doubt brought down to show their ghostly discovery. But as soon as they catch sight of their prize they turn on their heels with a shriek, leaving only the eldest boy, who this time holds his ground with his chest puffed in a show of manliness—intended less for himself, he thinks, than for the young man he can now see bringing up the rear. Small, like the driver, the man can not be far past twenty, and is dressed in pale jeans and a clean check shirt which contrast sharply with the rags of the children. As he approaches through the tunnel of vines he raises a hand in greeting.

‘Salut!’

‘Salut,’ he calls back. ‘Je cherche quelqu’un, le charretier. Vous l’avez vu?’

The young man nods and smiles knowingly. Come, he says, he will show him the way. The carter has stopped at the hamlet.

The hamlet, as Doné the young man calls it, consists of five huts built of woven sticks in a steeply terraced clearing in the forest, surrounded by trampled mud and verdant islands of manioc, bananas and papaya. Through the thatched roof of the nearest hut smoke rises into the rain. In the doorway stands a woman in a calico dress who moves silently inside as they approach, while outside, lying on a narrow cot beneath the eaves, an old man in a long grey shirt and canvas hat looks up at him with milky-eyed indifference. Doné, on the other hand, is effusively hospitable. On the short walk up the hill he has informed him that unlike his family he is used to meeting foreigners in his work at the port of Diego, and is insistent, despite his refusals, that he will have a meal made up for him specially. With a wave to the old man on the cot he leads him down towards the bottom of the clearing, where set on crooked poles at the edge of the forest is a large, open-sided canopy of thatched palm leaves. It is here that the driver is waiting. With his dog at his feet and a bottle in his hand he is sitting on an upturned metal bucket, looking up at them with a contented smile.
When the young man has left to see to the food he joins the driver under the roof and sits down exhausted on the earthen floor beside him.

‘La pluie,’ says Fidel enigmatically.

He looks at the driver’s face to see if it is meant as an apology, but if Fidel feels any remorse he is already too drunk to show it. Seeming curious at how wet he is, the driver offers him the rum.

‘Merci, non.’

Fidel shrugs and puts the bottle down, then proudly produces two cigarettes from his pocket, one of which he hands to him and lights with a flourish. But when the smoke hits his lungs it only makes him feel dizzy and he watches in disappointment as it burns away in his hand.

‘Elle n’est pas là,’ Fidel remarks after a moment.

‘Le consul? Non.’

In the huts above them he can now see a number of faces staring out of the windows, mostly women, the younger of them with expressions of amused disdain, although at what precisely he has no clear idea. His sunburned face? His filthiness? Some of the children have crept down to the lowest hut and are peering cautiously from its corner, while on the porch at the front the old patriarch is now sitting upright on his cot and looking down at the shelter with a tired and expressionless face. That he could be the object of such interest seems incredible to him, so much so that he has an urge to turn around and see who is behind him. He feels quite transparent. After another puff of the cigarette he stubs it out and turns to the driver.

‘Elle vient pour le corps,’ he says, challenging him with what he has guessed.

Fidel seems unsurprised. At the mention of the body he gives a respectful nod, then almost immediately his face lightens. ‘Cinquante milles francs!’ he boasts with a chuckle.

‘Pour le transporter?’

‘Ah, oui!’

‘Et il est Français?’

‘Frantzay . . .’ Fidel considers this for a moment, pulling at the tuft on his chin, then shakes his head uncertainly.

‘Vous ne savez pas?’

This time the head-shake is definite. Although the rum has done nothing to improve Fidel’s French, he is able to piece together from the confused phrases that follow that nobody in the village was quite sure where the man came from. Indeed Fidel, to his own astonishment, appears to believe that the man himself didn’t know.

‘Fou,’ he explains, tapping his temple, ‘fou.’
‘Il était fou?’
‘Ah, oui.’ The driver nods gravely. ‘C’´est trististe . . . Le palu.’

Malaria: he remembers the doctor using the word on the morning he woke. So, the dead man had gone mad with malaria. When the driver falls silent again he reminds him of his promise, feeling a right to insist on the bargain after having been abandoned by the cart.

‘Ah, oui,’—Fidel nods with exaggerated sincerity—‘oui, oui, l’histoire.’ But on an empty stomach, he adds, clapping his hands to his belly in a pitiful gesture. To tell a story like that . . .

Luckily, however, this new condition is easily met: at that moment he looks up to see the young man hurrying down through the rain with the food. Doné ducks beneath the shelter and sets on the ground between them a steaming tin plate piled with manioc roots and red river crayfish, then hands him a steaming tin mug. Under the man’s expectant gaze he manages, for the sake of politeness, to eat one of the waxy tubers before he gulps down the contents of the mug, which tastes strongly of burnt rice. The crayfish he leaves to Fidel. While the driver eats, the young man chatters by his side, and he nods up at him distractedly, barely listening, until he finds a piece of paper thrust into his hand.

‘Qu’est-ce que c’est?’

Doné looks disconcerted. His address, he explains, for the walkman and the cassettes. It seems he has unwittingly promised to send them.

‘Ah, oui,’ he nods, copying Fidel, ‘bien sûr.’

And by this stage Fidel has reached the last of the crayfish. When he has sucked the claws empty he drops them in the plate with deliberate finality, wipes his hands on his vest, then gets up from the bucket with his bottle of rum and stands perfectly still in front of them, his free hand raised like an orator before a restive assembly and his eyes turned to the roof as if searching there for the right place to begin. At last he is ready. Sensing the drama, and his own anticipation, the young man quietly takes a seat against the post beside him, while across the muddy clearing the children creep a little closer and huddle beneath the banana palms on the lowest terrace, from where they gaze wide-eyed through the rain. Under the dripping thatch it has become quite dim, and in the silence he can hear the muffled roar of the gorge rising from the forest below. Then suddenly Fidel emerges from his reverie. As if to vindicate his promise he casts him a pointed glance, steps back a few paces, kicking the dog out of his path, and without breaking the silence begins.

It is not a story in words, but in mime. With his chest thrown out and a hand shading his brow Fidel walks stiffly towards them, twisting his torso from side to side to scan an imagined horizon. On his back he appears to be carrying a bag, his thick lips are folded into his mouth to form a determined, rather haughty, line, and his eyes are filled with a gleam at
once hungrily intense and dreamily distant. The transformation is remarkable. If the slapstick in the cart was amusing, then this is masterful: he had no idea Fidel had taken the bargain so seriously. From his pinched face to his wooden gestures he is every inch a *vazaha*: arrogant, restless, insatiable. He is clearly a traveller, newly arrived. And where he has arrived he now sketches in front of him with a sweep of his bottle: a beach. Waves ripple on the sunlit water; seagulls flap squawking overhead. Then with a leap and a twist Fidel is suddenly crouched between Doné and himself and his bottle of rum is dancing between his fingers like a fish. He subdues it with a blow and sets to cleaning it, but as he works he looks up in surprise to see the invisible traveller and turns to each of them with a pantomime shrug. Who’s this? his face asks. And what does he want? Scratching his head, he stands up and approaches the man, into whom he again transforms himself with a leap.

‘Une maison,’ mumbles the stranger without the use of his lips, and from his pocket he produces what appears to be a thick wad of cash.

Once more a leap. The fisherman takes the money and counts it carefully, then with a businesslike nod of agreement he leads the stranger along the beach to the far side of the shelter, where he stops, turns towards them, and throws up his hands like a fountain—no, a palm tree, and another: a whole grove of palms beneath whose cascading fronds he carves a tiny house out of air. A simple pitched roof, a hole for a door. The fisherman enters and with a rather apologetic gesture turns back to the traveller, who with a leap and a twist enters in turn, ducking his head beneath the lintel. Once inside he puts down his bag and goes to the window, where he stands for a long moment looking out across the sea. He seems satisfied by his lodgings. This will do, says his nod. And with that the first scene is over.

Fidel pauses for a swig of rum, then turns to him with two fingers raised. ‘Il y a deux mois,’ he explains.

From the corner of his eye he can see that Doné, clearly baffled by the drama, is trying to catch his attention, but he ignores it. How could he possibly explain to him that the mysterious traveller Fidel has just brought to life is now lying at the bottom of the hill wrapped in a sheet of plastic? That the bundle in the cart is the same pinched-face man who arrived two months ago to rent a cabin on the beach, the same man who . . . no. He feels a shiver run over him. He can’t assume anything, not yet.

And already the second act has begun. From the edge of the shelter Fidel—now a different fisherman it seems—glides back towards them in what appears to be a canoe, arms paddling, knees bent, and his face turned inquisitively towards the clump of palms where the stranger is staying. In fact so intently are his eyes fixed on the cabin that when he reaches the shore he runs aground with a perfectly mimed jolt and, startled, leaps into the waves. When he has dragged the canoe up the beach he extends his arm towards the source of his confusion
and looks down at them both for an answer, his gaze so demanding, so mystified, that he finds himself shaking his head in genuine ignorance. After a moment of resistance Doné does the same. These two fishermen are no use. With an exasperated shrug Fidel turns his back on them and climbs the beach until he reaches what appears to be a house, then a second, and a third—two rows of houses quickly sketched in the air on either side of him. It is clearly the village. And here, in a virtuoso series of impersonations, twisting and leaping his way from one end of the street to the other, ducking in and out of houses, sitting at tables, serving at counters, and all the while never spilling a drop of his rum, Fidel multiplies himself into a whole gallery of villagers. He is an old man with arthritis, a miserly merchant, a buxom young woman carrying a chicken in a basket, her admirers—even for a moment Fidel himself, leading his oxen down the street with an insouciant grin. But through all the transformations one thing remains constant: a question hangs over the village. One after another they point towards the cabin like the man in the canoe and turn to their neighbours for an answer. Rumours are whispered, heads shaken. The old man mutters warnings, the shopkeepers wait hopefully, and everyone is curious. What is he doing up there? And why don’t they see him? Then suddenly Fidel stops short and turns towards them again with the ceremonious gravity of the narrator, his bottle gripped between his knees. Time moves forward in quick shorthand, the crescent moon at the end of his arms growing fat overhead. Yet with its waxing it appears that the curiosity in the town has begun to wane. Now the villagers’ shrugs are no longer baffled, but resigned or even indifferent. Although no less a mystery, the reclusive stranger on the beach has become, so it seems, an invisible fixture on the outskirts of their lives.

But there is still one man who hasn’t forgotten him. After a brief pause for refreshment Fidel crouches beside him again and begins to scale his bottle at the water’s edge, once more the fisherman with whom the story began. A cock crows; it is early. At the sound of the cry the fisherman rises with a start and picks up the plate of crayfish claws, which he carries at a brisk shuffling gait towards the cabin. ‘Ah, M’sieur?’ he calls out, ‘Ah, M’sieur?’ Then a twist and a leap. From inside the cabin a reluctant hand emerges from the doorway, pushing aside what appears to be a long curtain covering the entrance, takes the meal from the fisherman, and retreats again with a muffled ‘Merci.’ No sign of a face—just a hand and a thankyou. When the curtain falls back across the door the fisherman is left standing empty-handed outside, stroking his moustache in thought, as if wondering to what use his cabin is being put. He leans forward and tries to peer around the edge of the curtain, but to no avail. He steps back and studies the hut from a distance. What’s this? On the roof of the cabin—here Fidel jumps forward to sketch what the fisherman has seen—there is some kind of square, but whether it is an opening cut through the thatch or something resting on top is difficult to tell.

‘Qu’est-ce que c’est?’ he asks, interrupting for the first time.
Fidel polishes the square distractedly, a cursory circular rub: ‘C’est de verre.’

‘Une fenêtre?’

Struggling for words, Fidel shakes his head in frustration, then turns to Doné and says something in Malagasy which the young man translates for him with a look of deep uncertainty. The object on the roof, he tells him, is more like a mirror, but the mirror is electric: it has a cord on its side.

‘Électrique?’ he asks, but his question is too late. Impatient with the interruption, Fidel has already turned his back on them and begun to creep around the edge of the cabin on tip-toes.

When he reaches the opposite side and is once again facing them the fisherman bends down and presses his eye to a crack, the spying eye wide open, the other screwed tightly shut, and both hands pressed flat against the imaginary wall. And for at least half a minute he remains frozen in this position, heightening the mystery. Whatever he can see inside the cabin has obviously made the mirror on the roof seem a trifle. Through the palm thatch overhead the rain drips steadily, but in spite of the discomfort Doné, like himself, crouches spellbound in the puddle that has begun to spread around them on the earthen floor, no longer concerned by what he does not understand. Even the children have overcome their fear. Four of them have crept down to the far end of the shelter, where, dripping with rain and clutching each other’s arms for safety, they stare with round eyes at the driver and himself. Only the dog, who is facing in the wrong direction, shows no interest at all in his master’s performance.

Then the fisherman steps back. With a strange smile of wonderment on his face, half confusion, half alcoholic rapture, he looks around him at the beach and the water and the palm trees waving their fronds above the cabin before stooping again to peer through the crack. And then he repeats it, first looking around him and then back to the hole, as if to give the impression—although he can make no sense of it—that he is comparing the scene outside the cabin with the view within. But what has he spied in there? He still won’t reveal it. Instead of leaping through the wall to mime what the foreigner is up to, Fidel creeps away from the cabin with a catlike tread and turns back towards the village, performing along the way a series of mysterious pirouettes that send his jacket flying open, his arms outstretched and his face turned up to the sky with the same rapt and bewildered smile as before.

Now things are getting harder to follow. Fidel, he can see, is deeply drunk. Beads of sweat are rolling down his chest and the bottle in his hand is almost empty. From the formalized language of mime he has begun to retreat into something more private, a bizarre choreography of gestures that are alternately fluid and fidgeting, so arcane they seem to spring from some inaccessible store of memories and even personal jokes, at which he now and then laughs to himself with a silently delighted hunch of his shoulders. If he can just hold it
together until the end . . . As he weaves through the village he inhabits so many characters that
his face falls apart in a kaleidoscopic blur, the transitions no longer marked by twisting leaps
but by flamenco claps and strange sideways scuttles. But from all of this something is
nevertheless beginning to emerge. As far as he can understand, news of the mystery inside the
cabin has begun to seep through the town in a sort of Chinese whispers, with each recipient of
the secret making a vow, which they immediately betray, to tell no-one else. And then, to his
surprise, it he who is chosen. Suddenly, startingly, Fidel hauls him to his feet and leads him at
a shuffling rush towards the cabin, where he bends him over like a puppet and pushes his head
down so that he is peering through the hole. Then he pirouettes through the wall and sits down
on a non-existent chair, his back turned, and in front of the chair carves a table. On the table
sits a large upright box.

‘Qu’est-ce que c’est?’ he asks, still ridiculously stooped.

But Fidel says nothing. Instead he leaps up and throws open the shutters of the
window, in whose frame he sketches what appear to be the waves spreading up the beach.
Then, clasping the frame like a painting, he picks it up in both hands and rams it hard against
the front of the box, where to show its successful adhesion he sketches the same scene again at
a quarter of its size.

‘Qu’est-ce que c’est?’

Still no answer. Completely lost in what he is doing Fidel runs across the cabin and
sweeps aside the curtain from the doorway, in whose opening he now sketches with a crazed
calligraphy the fronds of the palm trees outside before he once again seizes the door like a
painting and stuffs it into the front of the box, where as did the window before it the view
through the doorway reappears in miniature—almost as if on a screen.

‘C’est une télévision?’ he asks loudly. ‘Fidel?’

At the sound of his name Fidel turns to him with the vague, startled look of someone
emerging from hypnosis, and blinks.

‘La boîte là, c’est une télé?’

Fidel looks at the invisible object on the table with a dubious frown; then in a very
soft voice, as if not at all convinced that the word does it justice, but defeated by the thought
of doing better, he sighs, ‘Ahhoui.’

A television, but not a television: the answer tells him nothing. And to make it worse,
his interruption has completely taken the wind out of the carter’s sails. Standing still in front
of him he seems suddenly much smaller than he was in motion, and after the exertion of his
performance rather forlorn. There seems little point in pressing for an explanation: Doné will
no doubt tell him that the television has an electric cord on its side. But just as he is about to
urge the driver to continue it strikes him that he saw no sign of it before. If it was not in his baggage, then where did it come from?

‘Il l’a apporté avec lui?’ he asks.

The driver is silent, elsewhere.

He tries again: ‘Il l’a acheté peut être?’

Fidel looks up. Through the mist in his eyes he can see that this time the question has reached him; more than that, interests him. Acknowledging the mystery he throws up his hands, then smiles slyly and touches his temple: a theory

‘Volé,’ he says.

Stolen? From where? But before he can ask, Fidel, suddenly galvanized, creeps up the beach like a thief in the night, then spins on his toe and staggers back to the cabin under the weight of loot he has clutched in his arms. And it is not the just the box he has stolen. From a second box, a small case with latches that open with a click, he removes something and holds it up to his ear, apparently listening.

‘Un téléphone?’

‘Ah, oui!’

A television, a telephone. But what did the dead man want with them? What was he doing?

‘Continuez,’ he urges. ‘Qu’est-ce qui s’est passé?’

Hastily Fidel stows the telephone in its case, as if ashamed of having opened it too soon, then with a drunken gravity he steps back from the table and rests his chin on his clasped hands, eyes closed and frowning deeply, awaiting inspiration for the next act. And when it comes to him a minute later it comes with a bang. In a single athletic movement he throws his arms wide and leaps backward onto the beach, where he lands in a low crouch, spins like a Cossack, and comes to a halt facing the sea, one clenched fist punched out towards the horizon. At the end of his arm the fist rises with a slow solemnity into the sky, but this time there are no crowing cocks or squawking seagulls to herald the dawn. The mood is sombre, even slightly menacing. And what is more, as the sun angles higher it has begun to expand, as though diffusing through cloud, unfolding by eleven into a limp spider, then at its zenith tilting back into a completely upturned palm. Still crouched on his heels, and now holding up both hands as if to ward off a terrible vision, Fidel blocks out the light—then rocking on his heels in a widening spiral he spreads darkness over the circumference of the sky, the circles as they widen becoming increasingly unbalanced until he topples onto his back and stares up in fearful amazement at what he has created: a midday gloom, a twilit noon, an abhorrence. Beneath this supernatural sky the waves flatten to an oily stillness. Not a sound.
Then slowly Fidel rises to his feet and in a hoarse, hushed voice, barely more than a whisper, he announces, ‘Hierrr!’

Of course, they have come to the cyclone—and for a moment he remembers himself running through the dark and empty streets of Diego the previous afternoon, almost choking in his desperation to escape the suffocating air and the fog in his head, his own sickness, his stupidity. The story must be nearing its end. With a shock he realizes that he has been so absorbed in its mysteries that he has almost forgotten where it has been leading from the outset—to the corpse in the cart and this very moment, with the two of them waiting right here and now for the arrival of the consul’s truck. But it is not for the ending that he has been following Fidel’s drama: he knew that all along. It is not even to know how it happened. What he wants to know more than anything, and wants just as much not to, is still the absence at the story’s heart: the identity of the man in the cabin, the man who might have been his comrade, the thief . . .

After the prelude the drama has gathered pace. Everywhere and everyone at once, Fidel dashes in a frantic zigzag through the village making preparations for the storm: securing the canoes on the waterfront, boarding windows, battening roofs, and through all of it casting anxious glances at the sky that remind him of the faces he saw yesterday hurrying through the town. As if night has fallen the chickens have gone to roost, at which freakish portent the old man with arthritis mutters warnings to anyone who will listen. On the steps of a house a child cries. Then at the far end of the village Fidel slows to an unhurried walk, and for only the second time since his story began he is unmistakably, lackadaisically, Fidel. Not far from where the children stand watching at the edge of the shelter he leads his two oxen into a small fenced garden and gives them a consoling pat. Then with the gate locked behind him, quite untroubled by the approaching storm, to all appearances oblivious to the whirl of preparations going on around him, he saunters back through the village and turns up the beach.

Midway to the cabin he stops and looks around him, then squats down again facing the sea. But this time it is not for a Cossack dance. From the mimed tug at his shorts, which raises a scatological giggle from the children, it is clear enough what has brought him here. With a look of dreamy relief on his face he gazes out across the bay, refusing to let his business be hurried by the cyclone on the horizon. Then from the corner of his eye he appears to notice something which interrupts his reverie. For a moment he wonders if the something is him—but, no, it is even beyond him, far enough up the beach to make Fidel lean forward and peer at it with a myopic frown. Then suddenly he starts back in astonishment. With an unhesitating leap he pulls up his shorts and starts running towards it in a slow-motion stride, his feet sliding backwards along the ground to exaggerate the distance.
The driver is now almost upon him. As he steps aside to make room, Fidel waves his arms above his head.

‘M’sieur!’ he calls out, ‘Ah, M’sieur!’

But the moment the words leave his mouth it is no longer Fidel. In mid-stride, for a moment completely airborne, he spins himself around in a full revolution and comes down transformed, lips gone, eyes narrowed, and his raised hands now clutching at his curls in an attitude of feverish despair. So it is the foreigner Fidel has seen, and he is not on the beach at all: he is wading out determinedly into the water of the bay. Ignoring the driver’s cry he lunges deeper, with each step shrinking in height until only his head remains visible, and then only his eyeballs, at which point, having sunk to a low crouch, he somersaults backwards and springs to his feet. Now this is Fidel again, Fidel to the rescue. With windmilling arms he swims out to the stranger and opens his hands.

Then a twist and a crouch. ‘Non, non, non!’ cries the foreigner, pushing him aside.

But Fidel grabs him: ‘Ah, oui, M’sieur, oui!’

Then a bubbling ‘Non!’ as the foreigner goes under.

‘Ah, oui, M’sieur!’

‘Non!’

And so it goes on, the two of them bobbing on their haunches like ducks, clutching and resisting, until finally the desolate ‘Nons!’ fade to silence, and Fidel, victorious, tows the man to the shore, where two as one, or rather one as two, they collapse on the beach in a sodden and exhausted embrace. But Fidel has only moments to recover. Almost immediately the foreigner pushes himself free and rises to his feet. He looks terrible. With his lipless face stretched into a tragic mask, eyes creased in misery, he staggers backwards along the shore towards the shelter’s edge.

‘Abandonné!’ he wails. ‘Abandonné!’

Slick with sweat, Fidel’s whole body has begun to shake with the foreigner’s fever and his mask-like face is tossing from side to side in throes of delirious negation.

‘Où?’ he demands, looking up at the sky, ‘Où?’, and then the noises that come from his mouth are no longer words, but a rhythmic burble of approximate French, an inconsolable, gibberish lament.

‘Palamaterre pitain mafoi! Pas la-la-lasquicherre pas ça! Monbou foutou pa-la-materre, rrrien la-la squicherre non non! Palapita in nonterré là! Ouésquilcherre pas ça, pas là! Di-mon, per-sen, non non Non NON!’

Beyond the edge of the shelter he continues to stumble backwards into the rain, so lost in his ranting he seems in danger of falling down the forested slope behind him when at the
very last moment, one foot raised over the edge of the final terrace, he spins on his toe and melts back to Fidel, consoling, imploring.

‘Ah, M’sieur, la cabane . . . Faut rester, M’sieu.’

Again, in the heat of the drama, Fidel’s mime has begun to slide towards something closer to a dance, a choreographed tussle, half judo, half tango. With his recalcitrant partner gripped by the shoulders he steers him back towards the cabin, bending backwards a step for every two steps skipped forward, until he reaches the door, spins through the curtain, and pushes him flat on his bed. The foreigner sits up, Fidel pushes him down. Again he sits up, again Fidel stops him. And just as it seems this might go on forever Fidel, growing desperate, slaps him hard across the face and shoves him back into his pillow. The foreigner is stilled. Now free to leave him Fidel runs to the doorway and shouts out towards the village in Malagasy, a repeated, high-pitched cry for assistance that sounds so urgent it brings a response even from the inscrutable old man on the cot above the shelter, who across the muddy steps he can see shaking his head in what looks like mournful pity. In fact Fidel’s cry has caught the attention of the entire hamlet. In the doorway beside the old man the woman in the calico dress has stopped what she is doing and stands completely still, her hands resting on an enormous wooden pestle in a mortar between her feet. The boy in the underpants, who has at some stage joined Doné, wedges himself deeper into the young man’s lap and picks his nose nervously. The dog wags its tail.

Then three times in quick succession Fidel bursts through the curtain across the cabin’s doorway, first as himself, next as a woman with a bustling gait, and finally as a fat man, panting heavily, whose anxious scowl suggests a harried official. Clearly this is the help from the village. But even for Fidel the cast now assembled in the room is too large for him to handle alone. Without warning the driver seizes him by the wrist and drags him into the cabin. But who has he been cast as? Not the official: he sits collapsed on the chair, mopping his forehead with his bandana. Nor as the woman, who stands bent at the foreigner’s bedside, apparently checking his temperature. In that case he can only be Fidel, because Fidel has the role of the foreigner. Having arranged the tableau, the driver now collapses on the mud in front of him, unmistakeably the same pathetic figure who was dragged from the bay. He no longer looks capable of struggle. His eyelids have begun to flicker and his whole body, arched stiffly from his shoulders to his muddy heels, is shivering with fever. Yet the heat, he remembers, was incredible, that dead, stifling heat of the afternoon in which he sat in the café, forced to submit to the woman’s confessions while all this was happening in the very place he might have found if he hadn’t been delayed there, if he hadn’t taken the wrong turn, if he had only persisted. In a cabin on a beach to which he never returned . . . He has begun to feel faint again, and confused, his thoughts darkening in dizzy pulses like Fidel’s sky.
‘D’où venez-vous?’ he hears, yet no-one seems to have asked it.
‘Nulle part!’ cries the foreigner. ‘Pas là! Pas ici!’
Not here and not there, he doesn’t come from anywhere . . .
‘Passeport?’ asks the voice, and this time he sees that Fidel’s mouth is half-open: he has ventriloquised the official on the chair.
‘Pas de passeport!’ the foreigner shouts back. And for a moment, as he watches him shaking on the ground in front of him, it is he who is being questioned, stammering and bewildered, in a room lined with metal filing cabinets and a clock with a second hand that twitches without turning, as broken as his own sense of time. The same fat interrogator, the same questions, even the same trembling hands . . .
‘Votre nom, M’sieur?’
‘Non!’
‘S’il vous plaît M’sieur . . .’
‘Non!’
The voice from the corner of Fidel’s mouth now jumps to a squeaky falsetto, the nurse, very soft and solicitous. Does he need water? Is there anything he wants?
And suddenly, as if he has been lifted on strings, the stranger sits bolt upright on his bed, back perfectly straight, his wide eyes staring directly into his own, and in a bellowing fortissimo he shouts,
‘RIEN SUR LA TERRE! RRRRIEN SUR LA TEERRRRE!’
In the stunned silence that follows he can hear the words bouncing back and forth across the ravine, repeating Nothing on Earth! Nothing on Earth!
‘PLUS DE TERRE!’ Fidel shouts, ‘PLUS DE TERRE! PLUS DE PEUPLE! PLUS DE TERRE! PLUS DE PEUPLE!’ , with each rising declamation slapping his chest and throwing out his arms.
No Earth! shouts the valley. No People! No Earth!
Then from the back of the dying man’s throat comes a sound like the roar of an accelerating jet engine, combustive, infernal, and at that moment the shutters burst wide and a cyclonic gust sweeps through the cabin, carrying with it Fidel—Fidel as the wind—who is lifted from his bed and spins past him towards the doorway as if drawn to a vacuum, sucked like the dead astronaut into the unpressurized void of the world beyond the cabin, into nothing-on-earth. And as he spins past he tears loose his bandana, which he shakes by its corners into a square of white cloth, one edge roughly torn—the curtain, yes, it can only be the remains of the curtain which the wind for a moment blows streaming from the doorway, then rips from its nails and sends whirling outside, Fidel leaping and pirouetting beneath it, possessed, its dark puppeteer, now swaying on his feet like a tree in the wind, a palm tree bent
almost to breaking, on one of whose wildly shaking fronds the curtain is pinned like a flag. A
white flag . . . Of course. It is just the same silk, the same cord, the same stitching. Fidel’s
neck scarf is half a white flag!
Unless he is dreaming he can still hear the fan turning backwards and forwards on its pedestal, each arc a reminder of the hours he has been lying there. He is still dimly aware of the weight of his body, his sunburn, the beat of his heart. Yet if he is still not asleep, he is less than awake. As consciousness fades, scenes from the day have begun to flicker through his brain in a nightmarish slideshow, a restless confusion of visions and voices which he is too exhausted to quell. To cut one short only brings forth another, like swatting at ants. Over and again he sees Fidel come rushing towards him with his arms spread wide, his face at each lunge coming a few inches closer until his gap-toothed grin becomes the mouth of an ox. The ox lumbers away. He stares up through wet leaves. There are whispers of children, rustling like rain. Then the formless discomfort of an unthinkable intimacy: four bodies, black and white, struggling shoulder to shoulder at the back of the cart. On the consul’s blouse two dark circles of sweat, her sharp scent mixed with perfume and diesel exhaust. As if to crush out the thought he lets the wheels of the cart roll over him as he lies beside the road, at which point the sky turns dark purple and the clouds glow in negative like orange flames. Orange mud... Orange sunrise on water... Orange singlet of the consul’s driver, whose ganja-reddened eyes he can see glancing back at him through the bars of the grille between the cabin and tray. Le koontsily frantzay. Her grudging displeasure as she offered him the sofa: It’s too late, I suppose you can stay. He sinks back on a bed of dry gum leaves which whisper like thoughts. A tongue licks his thigh. Then up through his belly rolls the wheel of the cart, clean through his ribcage. His head splits in two. But instead of a pop it makes a crackle like plastic, a blue plastic tarpaulin parting to show...

It is suddenly too much. In confused desperation he sits up on the sofa and stares into the darkness, his body limp with sleep. On the far side of the room he can see the small blinking light of some electrical gadget, maybe a telephone, but aside from this the room is pitch black. And in the sky outside he can see even less. When he turns to the window there is no sign of a moon, nor the slightest glimmer of lights from Diego. Even now that the power has been restored, the darkness is as thick as the humid night air.

He wipes himself dry with the end of the sheet and slumps back against the armrest. The consul’s office: that much he remembers. Like an image from a dream he can see her waving her flashlight over the ceiling as she showed him where he could sleep. As for how he
got here, it falls slowly back into place: the excruciating drive in the back of the truck, each bump of the way a small torture in his head, and arriving in darkness to a town which seemed to have been deserted since the evening before, the blacked-out streets of Diego unfolding in the rain, completely empty, until at last they drew up outside the hospital gates. The hospital lights the only lights shining; the door at the back where they unloaded their freight. He makes no attempt to retreat from the thought. He simply comes to halt before it, brought to a standstill as he has been over and again through all the hours he has lain awake, as if his memory of the body were a wall, an impassable barrier he is bound to come back to—its presence too solid, too mutely heavy, to think. And he knows there is no way around it. Every time he has tried he has found himself lost instead in the mystery of Fidel’s mime, a nonsense of whirlings and flailings which no matter how he tries to piece them together add up to less than a phantom. For what was there really in Fidel’s story except a beginning and an end? An arrival, a death. A hundred times he must have gone over those scenes in the hope of finding something he has missed; some reason for the stranger’s stay in the village, or some meaning to his shouts as he lay shivering on the ground. But he has found nothing. And between the first meeting with the fisherman and Fidel’s last encounter a curtain comes down. There is only the cabin on the beach, behind whose walls and shutters lies the answer to everything he has wanted to know. More than that: everything he is certain he once did know, because what Fidel didn’t realize was that someone did go into that room—that he, if nobody else, was allowed past the white-flag-covered doorway and shown what the villagers only knew of by rumour. He is as certain of that as he can be certain of anything. It was there that he was given the flag and the postcard. But why? And what was he doing there? Good luck and courage! Keep the white flag flying! See you back here next week, Misson. Misson: the name is the last straw. When he tries to fit it into the puzzle everything collapses in chaos.

Misson, Libertalia. Captain Misson the pirate . . .

Slumped in the darkness he breathes a soundless laugh at the absurdity of it all, despairing. But at least it no longer matters. Even if he still believed in the mad sense of promise which brought him searching up here, the answer has gone for good. There was only one person who could have told him what he was doing, and right now he is lying in a fridge at the other end of the town. It is over. In an hour or two the sun will be up and he will have to face everything he left when he ran out on Helga: his passport, his tickets, the whole dreary business of getting himself home. There is nothing more to be done here even if he wanted.

Across the room the button on the telephone brightens and fades like a heartbeat, hypnotic. Addled with exhaustion he lies down and watches the blinks through his half-closed eyes, counting until the numbers run out and all that remains is a pure repetition, without future or past. It is almost better than sleep. For minutes at a time he has a strangely
disembodied sense of having disappeared and been replaced by the sequence of the dots, his confusion dissolved in their innocent, hygienic light. But the feeling is too good to last. Over time the repeated green glow has begun to leave lasting impressions on his retinas, ghostly shapes which hover in the surrounding darkness. There are white squares of paper, he thinks, and what looks like the edge of a desk. Slightly further back rises a glassy surface which reflects the green-silver light. A window perhaps? Unable to help his curiosity he lifts his head and stares at it more closely. Almost imperceptibly the square of glass catches the light and fades away—too small, he thinks now, for a window, and not flat, but convex. No sooner has he seen it than his heart gives a lurch and he pushes himself upright. He is an idiot: the thought is so obvious that he can hardly believe his stupidity. In the darkness of the office Fidel is suddenly there in front of him, wheeling, slick with sweat, as he seized the window in his hands and thrust it at the front of the box—the stolen TV which was not a TV at all, but a stolen computer. Of course . . . How could he have not put it together? It was exactly what he was accused of that morning at the resort when the manager told him that things had been taken. A computer, he said, and other equipment. The satellite phone Fidel took out of the case . . . But why on earth would the dead man have wanted to steal a computer? Why the beach on the screen? Why a phone?

Already tensed, he peels himself from the vinyl cushions and takes a step towards the blinking light, then stops and stands naked in the darkness. Beyond getting up he is not at all sure what his plan is. Or rather if his intentions are what he suspects they are then the idea is so absurd he can hardly believe it. What does he think? That he can commune with a dead man on a computer? Somewhere in the room, with exquisite timing, a gecko lets out a shrill cackle. He is a mystery to himself. For half the night he has been telling himself that he has put it behind him, that he has finished and failed, and now here he is, staring at the glimmer on a screen as if it holds the answer to everything he has been looking for—almost with the same ludicrous sense of hope he felt the evening before when he saw the path through the scrub. Can he still call it hope? Perhaps only compulsion. Ashamed by the inevitability of what is he doing he shuffles forward through the darkness and lowers himself dizzily onto the consul’s chair. On the screen in front of him he can now see a bearded face, ghostly and greenish, so unfamiliar that it startles him to see it lean forward as he does. As he reaches out to turn on the computer the eyes narrow in a merciless judgment. Avoiding their gaze he presses the switch.

When he looks back to the screen the face has disappeared and he is sitting in a stream of pale blue light. Amongst the icons on the desktop is the one he was hoping for, although in a town whose power is barely functional it seems more than fanciful to think it might work. Yet to his surprise his doubts are ill-founded. When he clicks on the image of the globe the modem starts to chatter and a few seconds later the homepage of French consulates
and foreign missions worldwide flashes up in front of him: he is connected. Uncertain where to go next he sits for a minute in a stupor of exhaustion, watching the hologram of the earth at the top of the page silently revolving. In Paris, apparently, the time is 1.45. In Diego it is 4.43. A newsflash in red warns against non-essential travel to the Ivory Coast. He rubs his eyes and looks down at his naked body, which in the light of the consulate page is glowing with stripes of red, white and blue: a sweating tricolore. On his skin there still lingers the smell of wood smoke from the hamlet where only a few hours earlier he sat watching Fidel struggling to describe the machine in front of him without knowing its name—this mysterious box which he, in his enlightened superstition, seems to think can carry him back to the hut on the beach. So is that where he is going? To the village? In a spirit of self-mockery he clicks on ‘Search’ and with one finger types in ANT—then with a rapid punching carelessness he finishes the word and hits the command to begin.

But when point three of a second later the search is complete he lets out a cough of amazement. Result one of one reads: ‘LIVE WEBCAMs…ANTZAVATRA.’ He stares at it for a moment, doubting his eyes, then with a cautious excitement he points and clicks, setting the globe in the corner spinning again while the page is retrieved. From the top of the screen, very slowly, the bands of pixels build an image: the bricks of an exposed brick wall, a kitchen clock, a thermometer, some potted greenery and weathered logs. And finally, lying in a cage in California, apparently in real time, a gigantic green chameleon stares out through the screen at him with a bulbous, swivelling eye. ‘This ones awesome,’ reads the message from its keeper. ‘U should see him feeding! He comes from the island of Madagascar near someplace called... man i gotta check this spelling...ANTZAVATRA.’ At five second intervals the hand of the clock jumps forward and the ancient hooded eye moves up and down, as if trying in its prehistoric wisdom, or its infinite stupidity, to peer back through the web of wires and optic fibres at the faces staring down at it. As fast as it rose his excitement has vanished. Humiliated, he looks down at the list of links at the bottom of the screen, all but one of which lead to the sites of other reptile fanciers. The last, on which he clicks simply to escape, connects him to a list of other webcams beaming live images from places around the world: McMurdo Base, St Louis Arch, Times Square... The list goes on. It appears that if he had the urge he could check the weather in Antarctica and the traffic on a crossroad in the centre of Vancouver. There is even a link to a CCTV in a noodle bar in Nagasaki. A click of a button is all it would take to put half the world in front of him, naked and available: a distanceless pornography. But in Madagascar there is nothing.

From his stomach—surely a sign of improvement—comes an acid growl of hunger. With a snort of contempt he puts the computer to sleep and returns to the sofa, where he feels for the plastic bag and takes out the banana he was given by the young man in the hamlet. But
as he begins to peel it he stops, ashamed of himself. Childish. In searching for the village he knew perfectly well he would fail; he was simply proving a point. For the sake of fairness, or of honesty at least, he owes it to himself to do it properly, to give himself one final concession. Banana in hand he shuffles back to the desk.

This time, while he waits for the screen to light up, he holds the stare of his reflection without flinching, then he connects again, clicks on ‘Search’, and types in his request with a cold, unhesitant efficiency.

Point three-five of a second later the first twenty of almost two hundred results scroll down in front of him, most of them, as far as he can see, advertisements for the Club, written in more languages than the browser knows how to accommodate, including Russian. Scattered amongst these are an entry from a French encyclopædia, an enthusiast’s site on piracy, a concordance to the collected works of Daniel Defoe, and an inexplicable link to ‘sizzling teens’ at the porn-site ‘Hot4free’. Results twenty-one to thirty are for the most part duplicates of the first page; more Clublibertalia.coms under various headings—‘Tarifs et réservations’, ‘Testimonies’, ‘Adventures and attractions’—a report on Madagascar in a tourist magazine, again the French encyclopædia. Near the bottom of the list, however, one site stands apart. Not only does it have no description, but of all he has seen it is the only one in whose address appears the plain word ‘Libertalia’. Although he assumes it is yet another promotion for the resort, he moves the arrow down and clicks.

On the field of yellow which a moment later fills the screen small black dots begin to congregate into ghostly letters, giving the impression of erosion in reverse, as if a word once written on a beach were being reformed from wind-blown grains of sand. Even before the last grains have settled the word is unmistakeable. He waits a moment longer in case the word ‘Club’ should still appear, then when he judges it safe he clicks ‘Proceed’ from the row of options written in various languages underneath. For an instant the screen flashes white before a pale blue border fills the edges, leaving at the centre a colourless, horizontal rectangle. Then even before he has understood what is happening he feels his stomach fall—the rectangle is moving. As if made of cloth its edges have curled and softened into shadowed folds, a sheet of white silk billowing against the sky with a broad, slow-motion majesty. Above the flag at almost the same moment appear two lines of cursive script:

‘Ours is a brave, a just, an innocent, and a noble Cause; the Cause of Liberty. I therefore advise a white Ensign with Liberty painted in the Fly.’—Captain Misson
Captain Misson? Could these be the words of the real Misson? Then what is this? He looks back to the flag, on whose outer edge the word LIBERTY is written in lettering so pale he hadn’t noticed it, almost white on white. But already more lines of text are unfolding further down.

On high seas, on solid earth, without a home at all, we who gather beneath the white flag have never ceased to exist. Exile is our country, secession is our home! Today, on these last uncharted shores, we come together once again to rebuild—LIBERTALIA.

On first reading the letters dance in front of his eyes like a swarm of midges, meaningless. He reads it through again more slowly, and a third time, only then noticing that a row of buttons has meanwhile appeared along the bottom of the screen. They are labelled from left to right: ‘Citizenship’, ‘Passports’, ‘Information’, and finally, followed by a flashing cursor, ‘Border - Please type name or passport number’. With a deepening sense of bafflement he points the arrow on ‘Information’, but just as he is poised to click he is frozen by a thought, a suspicion too unthinkable to be even fully conscious. ‘No,’ he whispers. Blinking stupidly the cursor waits for him to move. It is too late now to choose ignorance: he types his name into the allotted space and presses ‘Border’.

To his horror it has worked. His name has let him enter. For an instant the screen flashes white again before the specks of colour reappear through the glass: a band of sky, the green of greenery, white sand, a cyan sea. In the darkness of the room it has the same clear glow he saw that morning when he swam out from the headland—the same narrow strip of shore, the palms, the weeping casuarina scrub. The fronds of the palms begin to quiver, the waves begin to roll. For several seconds he is too stunned even to see that he has company. At the centre of the beach, looking out as though expecting him, there stands a slender figure—sexless, featureless, almost without substance. It is like the space from which a body has been removed, a transparent curve through which the bushes in the background sway as if seen through a water drop. But it is not the bushes which are moving, it is the figure’s limbs. In a fluid sweep it reaches out and beckons with both hands, then the glassy head begins to turn, looking left and right along the beach as if demanding to be told where it should go. As unaware of what he is doing as of how he knows to do it, he puts his hand on the control keys—but at the lightest touch of his finger the apparition vanishes. Giddily the landscape on the screen zooms in and spins around, seen now from its perspective. He is through the screen and in the body. He is skating on the beach. As he glides beside the water’s edge the waves stream past in a foaming ribbon, milk-white, almost luminous. Everything that meets his eye,
in fact, has a supernatural clarity, as if scrubbed clean or focussed beyond the range of normal vision: the palm trees bent like plastic flowers in the shadowless midday sun, the smooth curve of the bay, the brilliance of the colours. There is nothing to jar his moving eye, not the slightest jolt or friction. As if on wheels he slides towards the headland in the distance. Then from his left a sharply outlined bird swoops low across his path, pausing in mid air to fix him with its yellow eye. In astonishment he turns to watch it fly across the water, but when he attempts to follow it the waves gently repulse him. The landscape spins again as he turns back to the shore: on land he somehow knows there are no limits to his freedom. Like sliding doors the bushes part to let him enter and he floats on through a grove of palms arranged in geometric rows that extend to distant vanishing points. The further he floats inland the more schematic they become, a grid of columns on a smooth brown plane whose only blemish is an oak-shaped leaf which here and there glows on the ground with an unnerving brilliance. High on every second palm, glowing like the leaves below, hangs an upside-down chameleon. Already confused by the repetition he stops and looks around him, searching for anything that might break the pattern—a house perhaps, or footprints, a sign of habitation. But the hinterland is empty: he is lost. With a genuine sense of agitation he starts pressing the keys at random, hurling his invisible body in a zigzag through the palms until a minute later, brought back to his senses by the shrill bark of the gecko, he comes to with a sudden start.

What was he thinking? Of the previous minutes he has almost no recollection. Appalled at himself he jerks his hand from the keyboard and stares at the screen, which now that the spell has been broken is once again just a screen, an illusion. And yet . . . Even before he has put the thought into words his arms fall limp. Not possible. For a moment he is gripped by a spasm of laughter, a dark hysteria, yet all that escapes him is a loud rush of breath as if he has been punctured. After everything he imagined . . . Numb with disbelief he stares at the glowing palms on the screen which he watched Fidel sketch on the dead man’s computer, assuming, if he assumed anything, that it was merely a picture, just one more clue to where he thought he should have gone, when all along this was it . . . this palm-lined shore whose border he crossed when he typed in his name . . . this game. All along it was here. It was nowhere. It is no place at all. He can see now with a horrible clarity that Fidel showed him everything: the man in the hut who called himself Misson, rebuilding the coast on a screen . . . these uncharted shores which he must have meant as the site for a country, the empty space for a country to come. A counterfeit country rebuilt in the very place where it might or might not once have been. So they were not only comrades, he and the dead man: they were also compatriots. And this is the country he chose. This is what he crossed half the world to discover when he could have found it anywhere at the flick of a switch. What he fled to . . . what he searched for . . .
His thoughts, in free fall, are arrested by a movement. At the very bottom of the screen, too small to notice until now, is a tiny symbol of a bottle, which has begun to pulsate animatedly, as if about to burst its glass. Too dazed to refuse, he points on it and clicks. From the bottle’s mouth shoots a piece of paper which unfolds into a window, covering all but a narrow strip of forest underneath. It is a message, or rather a mailbox in which he has a message waiting. At least it appears to be intended for him. Although the name of the addressee is his own, he has been granted a title which he mouths in silent astonishment: Ambassador. An ambassador . . . Could it be? Is that who he was when he woke up in the south? Perhaps when he was sent south to deliver the flag he was more than simply a messenger . . . perhaps he was selling the cause . . . perhaps even recruiting. As he thinks of the woman in the rickshaw, brandishing the plastic island in his face as she rolled into the darkness, he lets out a gasping cough that he tries to turn to laughter. ‘Libertalia!’ It was the single word she said to him, and now he can guess whom she meant him to be. The ambassador of nowhere, enlisting peasants for an electronic coast. The accomplice of a man with malaria who dreamed he was a buccaneer . . . Sancho Pança to his Quixote . . . It is too absurd.

Quickly, needing to know the worst of it, he clicks on the message, which is titled only with a question mark. The computer gives a complaining whine and flickers, as if unwilling to display the words which a few uncertain moments later flash up on the screen. 

Where are you? I wait but you dont come in you dont returnh you have betrayed me. Its so hot Im crazy you a bandionb me. The vaants will COME I know to take me whhere they take me but I dont careany more what happens if they fiind me. I have made arramgmnets as you say. Maybe you have seenwhat I mean already when you read this.. It is OVER I am LEAVING and now everyuying is finishe dif you dont continue what I started, 

Because my traitrous Friend
You are ffrom this moment now,
The Last of the Liberi,

MISSION

When his eyes stop on the final words the ridicule of a moment before has vanished with a chill and the breeze from the fan feels suddenly much colder. From this moment now: then he must have chosen to die. These were his last words, a testament, before he walked down to the water . . . With perfect clarity he sees Fidel sinking to his knees and almost drowning in the waves; Fidel stumbling backwards in his parody of anguish. ‘Abandonné!’ So he is a traitor, it seems, and without even knowing it, to a man he can’t remember. A traitor
just by waking. Yet when he searches in himself for what he should feel he finds only a glacial coldness; no guilt, no grief, not even the relief of revelation. What he has learned has emptied him. For a second time he reads through the broken words on the screen, trying, in the hope that it will make them touch him, to picture the face of the man who wrote them. But at the thought of the body all that comes to him now is the memory of its weight, its almost wilful drive towards the earth as they carried it from the cart to the truck; he and Fidel and the consul and her driver. The vultures: he was one of them. For a moment he pauses on the word ‘arrangements’, wondering what it means. But how could he begin to guess? He has no idea even who the author was, nor how he met him. And nor—he feels it with a sudden, almost physical, need for protection—does he want to. What he knows is enough, too much.

Fumbling with the mouse he sends the message back to the bottle in the corner, revealing the forest underneath. It is exactly as he left it. He is standing between two rows of palms which stretch ahead of him, diminishing, until they converge in nothingness. As his eyes fix on the point where they vanish he feels an overwhelming urge to flee, to flee as he must have fled two weeks before, to obliterate himself in speed—to be lost in its amnesia, in its vertigo. He drives his finger into the forward key, pressing down on it with all his strength although it makes no difference. There is no acceleration. There is no grip on the earth. At the same smooth and unvarying pace as before he floats down the aisle, which remains unchanged, its perspectival limit receding at the same speed he approaches. Furious, he turns and slams himself into the palms, but the collision that he hopes for never comes. Like water the forest divides and seals itself behind him, defeating him with its lack of resistance. He wants to puncture it, to make it crumble, but aside from an occasional flicker on the screen the smoothness is unassailable. No longer caring where he goes so long as he keeps moving he maintains his course, continuing for no better reason than his lack of reason not to, because he has a finger on a button, because a single thought might destroy him, watching, mesmerised, as the forest comes towards him like a landscape in a windscreen, the identical trunks and fallen oak leaves numbing in their repetition; stupefying, infinite. He is almost nothing now but motion, a moving eye in the phantom space which it seems is his inheritance.

Then, too gradually to say where they finish, the flat plantation rows give way to a gentle slope on which the palms grow with a greater randomness, the ground beneath him rockier and with a grain more realistic. Above the palms wave the dinner-plate leaves which he saw on the path to the Club. Steadily the incline steepens, but it makes no difference to his speed. In the same straight course he will hold forever he keeps climbing without effort, the trees and rocks irrelevant; like a ghost he passes through them. Then the forest thins and falls behind and he floats up through the flickering light to what appears to be a summit. White lines, flashes, momentary mists of pixels blur his vision, but he ignores them as he would a
failing engine. There can be no deviation from this line, it is his fate. He will bore ahead until things fall apart around him, without stopping. Or so it seems until he reaches the crest.

What stops him there is not the view, although it does have an aerial splendour. He has come to the top of a narrow ridge, high above the coastal forest, whose tree tops sway below him like the swell across the ocean. Ahead of him is another beach, another distant headland. But what has made him take his finger off the button is the path. From the headland where the ridge begins, a clear defile runs up its spine to a bare peak on his right, where it ends at what appears to be a lookout. The path makes the decision for him. With the suggestibility of a sleepwalker, not thinking where it leads, he turns right and follows it, floating up through the squalls of static that have begun with increasing frequency to flash across the screen. As it climbs, the ridge top narrows further, but he has no fear of falling. Without his having to adjust his course the thin red path steers for him. In a trance he watches its curves snake down the screen like a stream of lava until it is the ground which is moving and not his eye; the summit which must come to him, not he to it. He is its master. Motionless he waits for the sky to sink down to his level. Then at the top of the screen appears a crack of blue which quickly widens. The ground tilts back and spits itself towards him, no longer flowing down the screen, but out, the shaly rocks like asteroids which fan out from the centre. With a final writhe the path disappears. He is skating on red dust. Through the flickers ahead he can see that the summit is almost upon him, and something else, a flash of white, which shoots up from behind the crest and is as quickly lost from view. Beneath it swells a cone of rocks. The obstacle keeps swelling as it rushes towards him, towering in his path, but he ignores it. It will pass straight through him, vaporise. At any moment he will take off from the hill and fly. But before the point of impact, shockingly, his flight comes to a sudden halt.

The cone of rocks now fills the screen. It is a cairn constructed from pieces of shale that have been cleared from the dusty hill top, planted with a wooden stake whose upper half is missing from the frame. Only feet away, and having blocked his path like nothing else he has encountered, it has a massive and disturbing presence, confronting him as if it were a person. Intending to skirt around it he retreats, and as he does the flash of white falls into view. At the top of the post, stretched horizontal by a violent gale, flies the flag of Libertalia. The force of the wind is so strong that its fabric appears almost still, only the outer edge trembling in a blurred vibration. But what strikes him most is the silence: he is standing in a silent hurricane. Well and truly woken from his trance he circles around the base of the monument without moving any closer. Now it is the cairn which is the centre of the landscape, not his eye, the hub around which the horizon revolves. The hills and the headlands swirl in the distance. Then as the sea comes into view he stops. At the back of the cairn, somehow fixed to the pile of shale, is a square of pale grey stone, so smooth it has the oily sheen of
plastic, as if pasted on the image. As the button draws it nearer he can see that there are letters deeply chiselled on its surface.

CI-GÎT
L. R. MISSON
PRESIDENT DE LA REPUBLIQUE DE LIBERTALIA
2000-2001

On the highest point of Libertalia he stands in a rain of falling pixels, staring at the epitaph. _Here lies_, he thinks. Lies nothing. So these were his arrangements: some words on a cairn on a flickering hill top. A burial in virtual earth... From his frozen insides there wells a sudden hot wave and he feels his face begin to crumple. All he can think is to get away, to flee as he fled from the house-shaped tomb with the red earth on his face. But when he hits the controls to turn around the image seizes, motionless. The rain has stalled in a speckled fog and the flag has ceased to tremble. Without means of escape he reaches for the computer’s switch, but there is no response. The screen has jammed. Almost tipping back the chair he stands and backs away from it, unable to take his eyes from the plaque, until when he is half way across the room the image flickers twice and then turns black. Outside the sun is rising.

* * *

Since he flew back to the capital he has not left his hotel. In fact the furthest he has ventured from his bed has been the bidet in the corner, which having used once before finding it blocked he has seen no reason to stop using. This morning, apparently attracted to the smell of his fermenting piss, a cloud of midges has gathered in the bowl and, drawn to them, a small grey gecko, which in the hours since he woke has been darting around the rim in frantic circles, but is now too glutted to amuse him. He rolls onto his back and lies in the hot semi-darkness, looking up at the ceiling. The room smells of rain on warm concrete, stale smoke. Somewhere in the building plumbing shudders and in the far distance he can hear the dissonant clang of two church bells competing for customers. Midday mass: could it be so late already? In less than three hours he will be gone. It is still more than enough time, if he wanted, to take a last look up the avenue, even to have breakfast at the café where he sat with Helga a week ago—but the thought for some reason repels him. Last visits, farewells: the sentimentality of it strikes him as a pretence, and worse than pretence, a betrayal, although he
is not quite sure why or of what. Of the time he has spent here? This place? Himself? It hardly matters. The fact is that the time for farewells slipped past before he knew it. Since the previous morning in the consul’s office he has only been waiting to leave; he has really been gone since she gave him the passport.

He reaches for the folded card on the bedside table and looks at the consular stamps, the self-consciously florid consular signature. Veronique Leguen: he is not even sure if she told him her name. The ‘consul of nowhere’ was what she called herself in the truck, her face behind the metal grille of the cabin almost invisible in the fading light as they drove from the bridge, a shadow spewing bitter self-pity. Her endless complaint drifting back through the bars—how her talents were wasted, her pride insulted. She deserved to be stationed where the future is happening—‘The future is Asia!’, like the squawk of a parrot, ‘The future is China!’—but instead there she was in Diego Suarez, posted for two years to the middle of nowhere and expected to double as a travelling undertaker, carting around the bodies of French tourists who have snuffed it, these cons stupides who come looking for adventure . . . And he in the back of the lurching van, powerless to shut her up, unwrapping the head from the crackling plastic, the face between his knees not at all the anguished grimace he expected from Fidel’s mime, but if anything slightly bemused—as if, in its sleep, it were mildly surprised to find him covering its ears with his hands. Almost the same gesture, it occurs to him now, with which Helga left him on the avenue outside after offering to hear his confession. But what hope did he have of confessions? His hands cupped over the ears of a man whose face he could barely even see, and with whom whatever he was looking for had been snuffed out for good—so he thought—his own lost days wiped away like the priest’s missing melody. So he thought . . .

He flicks the passport onto the floor and puts a cigarette in his mouth, then changes his mind and spits it onto his chest. Passport to freedom, he hears himself think. Passport to happiness. International passport to smoking pleasure. Through the louvres above the bidet he can hear two of the hotel staff calling across the atrium, a teasing soprano and an answering bass whose trilled and incomprehensible music already seems to reach him from the past, as if he were listening to the sound of his own absence—the sound, not so displeasing, of his total irrelevance. Aside from a sports bag and a handful of dollars he will have left no more trace in this country than if his flight here had been a dream. And his departure is just as unreal. Since the ticket was booked it has meant nothing more to him than a series of hurdles whose goal is too distant to contemplate. It is simply inevitable. By this time tomorrow he will be . . . But as he tries to imagine where he will be his body comes to life with a startled jolt, a sudden and peremptory demand for action, quite unconscious, as if after sixteen hours of torpor an alarm
clock has gone off in his heart. He finds himself sitting on the edge of the bed, too surprised to do anything but accept the verdict.

‘Time,’ he says to the gecko, and picking up his towel he heads for the door.

Through some architectural afterthought the showers of the hotel have been built on the very edge of the atrium balconies, connected to those above and below by a tangle of plumbing that descends like factory pipes into the internal courtyard. At their base, emptying a bucket of suds down the drain, stands the young woman whose voice he heard earlier, watched with a wistful admiration by a much older porter on the balcony above. The square of sky between the roofs is white and it is raining gently.

He shuts himself behind the door of the cubicle and undresses, waiting for the water to come warm. But waiting does nothing. Under cold water he lathers himself with the caustic-smelling bar of soap, noticing as he does that it is stamped with the same brand name ‘NOSY’ which covered the bar room ceiling that night with Stéphane. ‘Noosh,’ said Stéphane, ‘it means island’—but inside the O on the soap the tiny map of the island has almost dissolved to a zero. The island’s mud is dissolving as well. From some still-unwashed part of his body it runs down his legs and tints the tiles orange, the last soil of Madagascar disappearing between his feet. Strange to think that he can remember a pair of feet more clearly than a face. As hard as he tries, all he can picture is the expression of the eyebrows, a quizzical lift, as if waiting to be shown a surprise. The feet on the other hand are burned in his memory. He can see the two white soles disappearing into the darkness as the orderlies stumbled down the hospital steps, and even more clearly his first glimpse of the slender toes breaking out of the plastic, slightly clawed, as if trying in a futile gesture to keep their grip on the earth. No people, no earth. And the look in Fidel’s eyes as he stood in the rain beside the empty cart, suddenly sobered, searching him deeply, as though he could tell from the silence that had followed his mime that there were secrets which only his audience knew.

‘Merci pour l’histoire.’
‘C’est pou’ lui.’
‘Au revoir.’
‘Veloma.’
‘Veloom?’
‘Ah, oui!’

Then it is Fidel’s feet he remembers as the driver lay shaking on the ground in front of him, as broad and calloused as the feet he saw through the high clinic window on the day he woke up. And in an uncorked and unstoppable rush the memories now come tumbling towards him: voices and faces and orange roads and dirt smells; the whole sentimental parting he wanted at all costs to avoid; a premature nostalgia, if that is what it is, for what he has tried
to convince himself has been without meaning, an accidental stay in a country which he barely knows and which was never more to him anyway than a blank on the map, a place which by fleeing to and from he has merely used and betrayed. He sits down on the tiles and lets the stream of cold water beat on his head until it has deadened his thoughts, deadened all of him. For an immeasurable time he stays there with his eyes closed, then gets up, dries himself, goes back to his room.

The clothes he bought the afternoon before are starchy and ill-fitting, the cheap blue trousers cut short at the ankles, the shirt, surprisingly, several sizes too large. The man he sees reflected in the wardrobe mirror looks like no-one he knows. He turns away and kicks the rest of his reeking belongings into a pile in the corner, now ready to leave. Or almost. Alerted by a flapping sound he looks down to find the replacement passport stuck to the sole of his shoe, and stoops to recover it.

‘Passport to nowhere,’ he says to the gecko, which on the rim of the bidet is heaving uncomfortably, disgorging a grey soup of flies.

Out on the footpath he is struck again by the disquieting hush he noticed during his first stay in the city, even the pedlars with their gemstones and bamboo guitars making their pleas with a whispered desperation. ‘Monsieur, le valiha, le vrai valiha . . . M’sieur!’ He makes a line between them to the nearest taxi, whose driver, an angular man with an insect-like head, starts the car in silence and turns up the grand Avenue Fahaleovantena. The city unfolds. They pass the Salon de Thé with the teenage mothers begging at its windows, the station, the market, the narrow streets of crumbling red buildings blotched with lime—the route to the airport familiar enough now that he turns his face from the window and watches the bitumen flash past through a hole between his feet.

But it is not because the road is familiar that he has looked away: he knows it. He knows that if anything this is his treachery—this childish refusal to take even a parting look at the place, this perverse desire to betray, to punish, which lacks even a definite object. In contempt of himself he closes his eyes until the sound of the city traffic has faded behind him; then with no less contempt for his weakness he opens them. But it is only the clouds he finds safe. Through the fitful arcs of the windscreen wipers he looks up at the sky that stretches over the paddies, the same endless white ripple which he saw the previous morning from the window of the aeroplane, lit from above, as he looked down in the hope of catching a glimpse of the hills the woman had shown him on the flight to Diego. Vain hope: a country which not only failed to exist, but whose absence he couldn’t even see. A country aborted then hidden by clouds, a country lost twice. And with a sudden start he recalls what he told the census officer that night on the road when the man had joked that he worked as a pilot. Donc vous êtes aviateur, pas capitaine. The sound of their laughter in the darkness, the man’s white teeth.
The sound of the words which were put in his mouth by the language he spoke, and which
surprise him even more now than they did when he said them. He has only seen the clouds, he
said, not his country. He has only seen the clouds, not the country underneath . . .

‘Arrêtez,’ he says suddenly.

The driver turns his head, his cricket-eyes startled: ‘Ici?’

‘Oui, s’il vous plaît. Cinq minutes. Je vous paierai.’

The request is so impulsive that it is not until the taxi has stopped that he sees where
they are. By chance it is the same stretch of road where a week ago he stopped with Helga to
discard the lizards, a green hiatus between the edge of the city and the outskirts of Ivato,
whose fish-scaled roofs he can just make out through the rain in the distance. To the right of
the road the flooded paddies stretch for miles across a broad valley plain; on the left rises a
terraced hill. He crosses the road and wades through the wet grass of the embankment. Cars
swish by behind him, the sound becoming fainter as he climbs until the occasional hiss of
tyres only seems to deepen the intervening silences. Softened by rain, the unplanted loam of
the terraces crumbles under his weight, releasing a smell of earth so strong he can almost taste
it. Yet even here the smell of human toil and habitation drifts up from the townships on the
road, a sweet and sour pungency whose inseparable elements are fire and food and mingled
excrements. Petrol, burnt meat, untanned leather. Age. It is a smell to which he has become so
accustomed that it is only now, on the verge of leaving, that he notices it again, as if for the
first time. Again? With a sudden pain it strikes him that this is the first time he has smelled it:
he was used to it already from the day he woke. How is it possible to leave a place if you
never arrived? How can you find a way to go if you have no memory of how you came? Only
if you have gone already, he thinks, which is what he wanted: to be gone without a parting. It
is what he wanted and he still wants, but he isn’t doing. He is still here. He is here on a hill in
Madagascar, still going, still staying.

The terraced slope has begun to flatten into a grassy summit on which three pines
with sawn-off lower branches have been planted as a windbreak. In their lee stands a tiny
earth-walled barn so eroded by the weather it has ceased to look like an artefact, its thatched
roof sagging on the rafters, its entrance widened by the beasts who use it to form a gaping
circular hole. Looking out at him from the dim interior stands a black ox with a white star on
its forehead. He walks forward and joins it in the shelter of the doorway, then with a feeling of
dread as he does what he came for, almost wishing he could walk down backwards to the car,
he turns around and looks across the valley.

In the rain the colours of the country seem to glow as if the light is rising from the
earth, the orange hamlets almost luminous, marooned like houseboats in the flooded fields
whose banks and levies trace a jigsaw puzzle pattern of innumerable greens: the brilliant lime
of new growth and the dull glow of the old, and between the two the grey-green of the stubbled fields which glint beneath the clouds. From the townships stretched along the airport road rise plumes of smoke that connect the earth to the sky. Not so much with his eyes as with his memory he travels through the ochre villages, the carved hills interlinked by narrow causeways through the fields, the shape and colour of the place. A place, he thinks, still a place. A map of orange, green and white. Exhaling a sigh of warm air, the zebu steps forward and nudges at his elbow, but he hardly notices. The country spread in front of him is not a view; it is not even something separate from himself. Its vast green silence is inside him. He feels as though he has been punched in the chest.

Behind him, again, he vaguely senses the warm animal breath and the sound of scraping in the straw, but before he can put the two together it has happened. The blow to his back sends him staggering out into the rain, where for a dozen steps he manages to keep pace with his falling body before he trips and comes down at full speed, sliding face first through the grass. Shocked, and slightly winded by the blow to his ribs, he gets up and brushes his clothes, then looks back at his assailant, who having reclaimed the barn is chewing uncontritely on its cud. A shower of drops rains from the pines. The zebu has expelled him . . .

As the fact sinks in he feels an irresistible itch climb through his body, a light hysterical surge which explodes through his nose in a snort of snot and laughter. He is shaking, standing in the rain and shaking on a hill in Madagascar, making thin high noises as the tears roll down his cheeks. When at last his sobs have quietened to gasps he wipes his eyes with the back of his hand.

‘Thank you,’ he says.

Then he turns and walks down through the rain towards the waiting taxi.
Notes and acknowledgments


Chapter 6: The full title of the shipwreck narrative referred to in this chapter is ‘Madagascar; or Robert Drury’s Journal During Sixteen Years of Captivity on that Island’. Once thought to have been a fictional account written by Daniel Defoe, it is now generally believed to be the work of Robert Drury.

Chapter 7: The proposal for resettlement of Polish Jews in the Bealanana province of Madagascar is a matter of history; the story of Léon Goux and Solomon Mayer is not.

Chapter 8: The full story of Captain Misson and the founding of the pirate republic of Libertalia may be found in ‘The General History of the Pyrates’. Once thought to have been written by a Captain Charles Johnson, it is now generally believed to be the work of Daniel Defoe.
Part B

Sparsely furnished worlds: narrative fiction and the problem of incompleteness
Introduction

In an interview conducted after one of his novels was adapted for the cinema, John Fowles remarked that the experience of seeing his words brought to the screen had taught him that ‘the beauty of writing novels is what you can leave out on each page, in each sentence’.

When making a film, everything which falls within the frame of a shot must, at least with regard to its visual appearance, be shown in considerable detail. If a woman is to be shown leaving a room, then it must be a woman of some determinate appearance and attire, leaving a room which is furnished with a certain array of objects, and doing so in a particular manner. Unless the image is partially obscured, or manipulated in some other way, it cannot help but provide the viewer with a large amount of ‘information’. In a novel or short story, by contrast, all that need be recounted of this same event is the simple sentence, ‘She left the room.’

Although the pronoun unavoidably informs us that the subject of the action is female, everything else about her, the room and the action itself is left completely indeterminate. It could just as well be a young girl running from her classroom as a woman in a wheelchair leaving a hospital ward.

Of course in the cinema, too, the director decides how much or how little will be shown of an event through the use of cutting, framing, lighting, focal distance, sound and so on. Yet, considerable though it is, this power of selection is not of the same order as that which belongs to narrative discourse. For example, even if the cinematic shot were restricted to a close-up of the woman’s eyes, it cannot tell us only that these eyes are blue, or only that they are sorrowful. In fact the cinematic image does not tell us anything. Strictly speaking, the act of telling belongs to language alone, which is by its nature as selective as the image is inclusive. Above the lower limit of the sentence ‘She left the room’, the story-teller’s choice of what to tell about the woman and her exit, and what to leave untold, is completely open.

Thanks to the selectivity of language, the story-teller has an unequalled freedom in choosing how much of the event is to remain indeterminate, and where these indeterminacies are to lie.

What delights Fowles as the novel’s special ‘power of omission’ might also, of course, be viewed as a deficiency. No matter how many words are used to describe them, neither the appearance of the woman, nor the sound of her exit, can ever be made as determinate in the novel as they can be in the film. If the woman is said to be pale, then just how pale is she? If she is said to tread heavily, just what sound do her steps make on the floor? Yet if the gaps in what the fictional narrative gives us to know are unavoidable, and in

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this sense a limitation, they are also one of its aesthetic ‘materials’—a sort of dark matter which surrounds what is told and highlights its significance, which creates tension and uncertainty, and which places certain aspects of the fictional world under an ambiguous sign of cancellation. The areas of indeterminacy in a narrative are not nothing: they are a fundamental part of its structure. Notwithstanding periodic disputes amongst writers and critics between the partisans of putting-in and those of leaving-out, the compendious and the austere, narrative fiction is much more united than it is divided by its power of omission. In every narrative there things left unnarrated, undescribed, unspecified, and it is these which are the subject of the following study.

As the dual nature of the name implies, the study of narrative fiction may be approached from either the side of its fictionality or its narrativity. Since both terms have been the subject of considerable debate, it would be well straight away to place some limits on the way in which they will be understood in the following. By narrative we will simply mean a written or a spoken text in which a story is recounted, without for the moment worrying about what kind of events or actions qualify to be called a story, or whether a narrative, to deserve the name, must impose on these events a particular kind of shape or dynamics. To this verbal communication of stories belongs a highly developed array of formal structures and devices which define its range of possibilities, and only some which are shared by other modes of presenting stories, such as the dramatic or the cinematic. The study of these formal features of narrative—which include those traditionally known as perspective, person, tense, pace, temporal ordering, narrative distance, and so on—is usually known as narratology.

As for what it is that makes a narrative fictional, or what it means to treat one as such, this poses a more difficult problem. Although there is nothing approaching a consensus on the matter, fictionality is generally understood in philosophical approaches to the problem as a transformation which affects either the logical-semantic or pragmatic status of language. To read a statement as fictional is to treat it as differing from fact-stating language with respect to questions of truth and reference, and/or its status as a speech act. Philosophical studies of fictional language are concerned primarily with the peculiar fact that the objects about which fictional stories are told do not exist, and that the words by which these stories are told have not been uttered by anyone as genuine claims about reality.

Outlined here, then, are two very different perspectives from which we might look at the gaps which narrative fiction leaves, both deliberately and unavoidably, in what it tells us about events and objects, actions and actors. On the one hand these gaps can be seen as a specific feature of fiction, and thus understood in contrast to the gaps which are no less
evident in comparable non-fictional narrative genres, such as history and biography. The question which arises in this case is how best to understand the nature of the objects and events spoken of in the fictional text, given that the gaps in what the text tells us leave these objects in a great many respects indeterminate. On the other hand, the gaps can be viewed as a feature of narrative art which is to be understood in relation to those formal aspects of narrative mentioned above. In this case the focus is on how the formal decisions which are made in constructing a narrative influence the extent and character of what is left untold, and also the way in which these areas of indeterminacy are interpreted by the reader. It is the aim of this study to approach the question of fiction’s ‘incompleteness’ from both of these directions, thus bringing together two theoretical traditions which, because of their quite different sets of problems, have not often inclined towards dialogue.

Our point of departure is the problem which those things which are left untold pose for our understanding of fictional objects. To speak of ‘fictional objects’ is already contentious, but let us assume for the moment that the objects spoken of in fictional texts, such as the minotaur or Emma Bovary, can indeed be called objects. When I imagine or think about the minotaur I am thinking about something which has the head of a bull and the body of a man and lives in a Cretan labyrinth, even though this something happens not to exist. And if the minotaur can be the object of my thoughts it can also be the object of my discourse. Despite the fact that it does not exist, I can refer to the minotaur and make claims about it which many people would even regard as being true or false. If, for example, I were to say of the minotaur that he is half man, half horse, most readers of the Greek myths would be inclined to think I had made a mistake. If they are right in thinking so, then this would seem to imply that the non-existence of the minotaur is no impediment to its being such and so—that the question of what it is is independent of the question as to whether it has ever been an item in the actual world. Now this idea is by no means uncontroversial, and there are many philosophers who would wish to restrict the domain of reference and truth-valued discourse to the only sort of objects they allow, namely those which exist or have existed. Yet the argument that we can and do refer all the time to non-existent objects, which in its modern form goes back to the Austrian philosopher Alexis Meinong, has over recent decades gained an increasing number of adherents. To address these debates in semantics, logic and ontology would lie far beyond the scope of this study, which is certainly not intended as a specialist work in philosophy. The aim is rather to draw from the more tolerant view of fictional objects a relatively simple point. If the fictional object does not exist, but is simply the object of the

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2 I say ‘constructing a narrative’, rather than ‘narrating a story’ for the obvious reason that the narrating act (the narrator and speech situation) is itself a fiction which is created at the same time as the narrative.
sentences of a fictional work, then it has only those properties which are ascribed to it in those sentences. And even if it is further ‘fleshed out’ by readers’ acts of imagining, it still remains, as the object of those acts, undetermined in a great many ways. In other words, the gaps in what the work of fiction tells us are projected into the fictional object, which has the peculiar feature of being itself ‘incomplete’. What Flaubert’s novel fails to tell us about its heroine does not leave a gap in what we know of her, since there is nothing to be known of her except what is told in the novel. Rather, the gap in the narrative leaves a gap in Emma Bovary such as can not be found in any real object.

In Chapter One we begin by examining this notion of incompleteness in the philosophy of fiction, focussing primarily on the work of Roman Ingarden, who saw it as having important implications for how we are to understand the act of reading. We then go on to consider a variety of objections which have been voiced against it. What we find is that since these objections are ultimately founded on the argument that fictional objects are complete within the story, or within the ‘fictional world’ which the narrative constructs, there is no contradiction between the apparently opposing views. Whereas the former bears on the true ontology of fictional objects, the latter is concerned with how they appear to the reader, who, in adopting the ontological perspective internal to the fiction, takes certain things in the fictional world as being real and complete as opposed to those things which, in the fiction, are only imaginary or possible or fictional. Just as there is no contradiction in seeing Emma Bovary as both really fictional and fictionally real, nor is there one in seeing her as both really incomplete and fictionally complete.

In making the distinction between these two perspectives, however, we are faced with a number of interesting questions. If, as participants in the fictional game, readers accept the illusion which fictional language gives us of speaking about real and independently existing things, then it would seem that the true incompleteness of these objects must remain for the most part unnoticed. But is the incompleteness of fictional objects really something which only comes to light in the theoretical attitude, or can it make itself felt even in the characteristic attitude we adopt as readers of fiction? Even if readers tend to regard many of the worlds they encounter in works of fiction as being no less determinate than their own, do they—and should they—regard all fictional worlds as being so? Or is the appearance of completeness—the sense that there is much more to the fictional objects than what we have been told of them—an illusion whose strength varies between different works of fiction? And, if this is the case, how might the gaps in the fictional narrative affect the degree to which its objects appear as complete or incomplete?

Since these questions are now concerned with how the gaps in the narrative affect the reader’s understanding of the fictional world, they require us to turn to a more detailed study
of the gaps themselves and of the formal elements of narrative which influence our understanding of them. The aim of the following chapters is, in the first place, to set out a broad typology of areas of indeterminacy by distinguishing between the different regions of the story which are left indeterminate: the dimension of time in which the events of the story take place; the spatial or physical realm of the action; and the subjective world of the actors. Alternatively, we might see each type of gap as the failure of one of the functions which the reader might expect the narrative to fulfil: that of recounting sufficient segments of time to make clear what has happened and why; that of locating events in space and describing their constituents; and that of presenting the consciousness of characters. These three general areas of indeterminacy—of time, space and thought—are examined in turn in Chapters Two to Four.

But if the way in which the places of indeterminacy are grasped by the reader depends partly on where they are ‘located’—on the nature of the missing content of the story—it is also highly dependent on narrative form. There is no way we can understand the effects of the gaps unless they are seen in the light of how the story is told—that is, from what perspective, by what type of narrator, in what temporal order, at what pace, and so on. If narratology is, roughly speaking, the study of the ‘how’ of telling stories, then what is outlined in these chapters is, as it were, the shadow side of narratology—the study of the how of not telling, or what we might call the ‘poetics of omission’. Through examining the work of theorists such as Gérard Genette and Franz Stanzel, and through the reading of exemplary fictional texts, we will see how different types of narrative are characterized by different kinds of omission which are understood to have quite different justifications or motivations. The way in which we explain the gaps, and the ease or difficulty with which we do so, largely determines how conspicuously they appear to us and the effect they have upon our understanding of the story and the fictional world. Throughout these chapters we will continue to bear in mind the questions raised above by investigating how the omissions in the narrative, seen always in the light of how the story is told, affect what we might call the ‘ontological appearance’ of the fictional world; that is, our sense of its completeness and reality, its ‘concreteness’ or its lack of it, and its distance or proximity to the actual and familiar.

To speak of the how the gaps in the narrative are perceived, as with any talk of readers’ response, runs the well-known risks of either positing ‘the reader’ as a phantom universal or falling into subjectivism. I make no claim to have steered a straight course between this Scylla and Charybdis, if they are really as monstrous as they are sometimes claimed to be. As for universalism, in many instances it seems perfectly justified. To say, for example, that ‘the reader’ will interpret many of the gaps in a narrative told from the
perspective of a Jamesian reflector as being determined by the limits of this character’s knowledge seems uncontroversial. ‘The reader’ here means any competent reader who understands the implicit rule behind this type of narrative. Where, on the other hand, the gaps are open to very different interpretations I try to show, through examples, why this is so. As for subjectivism, my own interpretations of fiction’s areas of indeterminacy may well be as idiosyncratic as my choice of fictional texts, but that is the lot of criticism, which is not a science. I only hope that the unavoidable brevity of these readings does not reduce the fictional texts to mere illustrations, but allows them also to extend and provoke the theoretical reflections.
1. The problem of incompleteness

Imagine a story begins as follows: ‘One warm spring morning an old man was sitting at a table.’ As we read this sentence we can see that it has introduced us straight away to a range of objects about which we know certain things. There is a man, a table, a morning, a time of year; the day is warm, the man is old, the season is spring. With a simple confidence and clarity the words put before us a state of affairs, assuring us that things are such and so. Yet the slightest reflection shows us that what these words have left unsaid is infinitely greater. Who is this man and how is he sitting? Where and when does this scene take place? As for the table, are we to imagine it as having four legs or a pedestal? As made of wood or metal? Even if we do not explicitly raise them, we will probably expect to have some of these questions answered as we continue our reading, while others it would never cross our minds to ask. About the old man, for instance, it seems likely we will learn more, whereas the table will very likely disappear from view without being further qualified. But perhaps the old man, too, will remain largely obscure. Perhaps even his name we will never know, nor the events of his past, nor where his story takes place, nor the clothes that he is wearing…

As many writers and theorists of fiction have observed, narrative fiction is riddled with such ‘holes’. No matter how much we are told in a fictional text about the characters, places, objects and events of the narrative, we will always be able to frame further questions about them which find no answer, either explicit or implicit, in the limited number of sentences we have at our disposal. Of course all narratives are by nature limited and selective, not only those we read as fictional; we need only think of the critical disputes concerning biographies and histories, which so often centre on sins of omission. In the case of non-fictional narratives, however, it is one of our assumptions in reading them as non-fictional that the questions which they leave unanswered might be settled by looking outside them to the actual objects to which they refer. If a biography of Kafka fails to tell us what he was doing during a certain period, this information is at least in principle something which is recoverable. What K. in The Castle was doing before he arrived in the village, on the other hand, is something which can never be known. We have nowhere to turn here for an answer but the text itself, which confronts us with an ineradicable ‘gap’. For the sake of simplicity we will leave aside for the moment the more difficult question of those objects referred to in fictional texts, such as Napoleon or London, which we might be tempted to regard as part of the inventory of the actual world, and restrict ourselves to those more clearly ‘fictional’
objects—such as K., or Yonville, or the golden bowl—which we have no reason to suppose have ever existed. What we know about such objects is drawn solely from the particular texts in which they are constructed, which is to say introduced and individuated by means of a finite number of statements which leave many of their qualities undetermined.

While ‘gaps’ as a feature of fictional texts have often been noted by writers and critics, it is in the philosophical study of fiction that they have received most interest as a feature of fictional objects. One of the first to draw attention to this peculiarity was the Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden in his monumental studies into the structure, ontology and reception of the literary work published in the 1930s. For Ingarden, lack of determinacy is one of the defining features which distinguishes the objects of fiction—understood in a broad sense to include also events and state of affairs—from real objects existing in space and time. Whereas real objects are determinate in every respect, the represented object of the literary work is a highly schematic construction marked by what he called Unbestimmtheitstellen, or ‘places of indeterminacy’. These places of indeterminacy are any properties of the represented object which the text has failed to specify—or, more precisely, any predication we can neither affirm nor deny of the object on the basis of textual evidence. As we saw above, some of these indeterminacies are only temporary and will be removed as the text unfolds and the objects introduced as bare particulars are ‘fleshed out’ by further properties. Yet, as Ingarden emphasizes, in a text of finite length an infinite number of places of indeterminacy will always permanently remain: ‘They would disappear only in an infinite series of determinations.’

Since Ingarden, a number of philosophers working in the semantics and logic of fiction have agreed that fictional entities are inherently ‘incomplete’. For an object to be ‘complete’ in the logical sense means that every conceivable proposition about that object must be either true or false. For any given property A, the object must be either A or not-A. All real objects, it is generally agreed, are complete in this way; they can have no ‘truth value gaps’—the equivalent of Ingarden’s Unbestimmtheitstellen—where what is said of them lacks both truth and falsity. But since a fictional text of finite length cannot specify every conceivable property for its imaginary referents, the objects of fiction are not complete. There is only a limited number of statements about such objects whose truth or falsity is decidable.

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3 246ff. ‘Unbestimmtheitstellen’ is translated in this work as ‘spots of indeterminacy’. I have amended it in keeping with the accepted usage, which follows the translation given in Ingarden’s The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973).

according to what is said of them in the text. Our inability to decide questions which are not answered by the text is not an epistemological problem of missing information, as it would be in reading a biography or history, but rather follows from the status of fictional objects as non-actual referents of a finite number of statements. As Nicholas Wolterstorff puts it bluntly, ‘We will never know how many children had Lady Macbeth . . . That is not because to know this would require knowledge beyond the capacity of human beings. It is because there is nothing of the sort to know.’ In other words, when it comes to number of offspring there is simply a ‘gap’ in Lady Macbeth and the fictional world to which she belongs.

On the face of it Wolterstorff’s claim might seem to be only a stricter reformulation of the view put forward by L.C. Knights in the often-quoted essay to which he alludes. The object of Knights’ attack was the uncritical naivety of a character-based criticism which treated fictional characters as if they were living persons, even to the extent of speculating about those aspects of their biographies, such as Hamlet’s childhood or university years, which are completely absent from the text. Yet the logical argument for incompleteness has far more radical implications than Knights’ ban on what he calls the ‘Dictionary of National Biography’ approach to literature. If it is true that Lady Macbeth neither has three children nor does not have three children—if, in other words, the law of excluded middle does not apply to her—then it would seem that the fictional world of Macbeth is very different from our own.

Just how different such a world might be is revealed by an amusing attempt, in Gilbert Sorrentino’s Mulligan Stew, to describe its incompleteness from the point of view of its inhabitants. In this novel a character by the name of Lamont, an author, is writing a murder mystery which forms a second-level narrative. Within the terms of the framing narrative, the characters of the embedded story are clearly imaginary creations, yet when their author’s back is turned they are mysteriously freed from his direction and are able as independent beings to explore and comment upon the fictional surroundings in which they have been set. To their surprise and confusion they find that this world, which has been only partly specified by its author, is filled with mysterious gaps. Here is the fictional cabin in which Lamont has confined his character Halpin:

It is rather an odd house to say the least. There is the living room and the den, but we have not been able to find any other rooms. It seems as if there are other rooms, but when we approach them, they are – I don’t know quite how to put this – they are simply not there! There is no kitchen, no porch, no bedrooms, no bath.

5 Works and Worlds of Art, op. cit., 133. My italics.
If the ontological oddity is well captured here, the incompleteness of the house, as described by Halpin, is in fact not quite what is meant by Ingarden and Wolterstorff. For Halpin, the rooms which have not been mentioned or described by the author appear to be simply missing. The nothingness he finds beyond what Lamont has described he interprets (albeit, we should note, with some hesitation) as meaning that the house has no such rooms. For the philosophers, on the other hand, what is missing here is not the rooms themselves, but rather any fact of the matter regarding whether the house includes such rooms or not. Beyond the threshold of what has been specified is a realm of neither/nor, an indeterminate region in which there are no facts to be known.

Of course the crucial remark in Halpin’s observations is that there seem to be rooms in the places he expects. This ‘seeming’ signals to us that he is caught between two quite different perspectives. On the one hand he is an explorer of a fictional object, noting its peculiar logic and ontology, while on the other hand, as explorer of a fictional text, which is to say as a reader, he is subject to fiction’s governing illusion of speaking of real things. The unmentioned rooms seem to be there because Lamont’s novel seems to be speaking of a real and determinate house. It is a house which, in the fiction, is real. From this perspective the described house is perfectly complete, only certain parts of it happen not to have been mentioned. In other words the limits of the text define, not the limits of the facts, but only the limits of the known. It is on these grounds that a number of writers have opposed the notion of incompleteness, arguing that, at least in the greater part of fiction, fictional entities are surely assumed, within those fictions, to be governed by the same principles of logic that hold in reality. Charles Crittenden, for example, has argued on the basis of the ‘in the story’ operator that since a character is in the story real, he therefore has, in the story, the ‘same complement of properties constitutive of real things’8. Those properties of the object which have not been specified do not constitute an ontological lack, but are merely a matter of missing information—the only difference in the case of fictional objects being that this information is ‘hopelessly irretrievable’.

In fact Ingarden himself was well aware that the notion of incompleteness does not sit well with the imaginary experience of the reader. But although it is not something which comes to light in our aesthetic apprehension of the literary work, this incompleteness nevertheless has a profound influence on it. The represented objects of fiction are in fact only imaginary (or ‘intentional’) objects projected by the sentences of the text and indeterminate in many respects. Yet most of the objects we encounter in fiction are projected by these

sentences as the fully determinate objects they are called upon to simulate. Objects such as people, lands and houses which belong to the ontological category of real things are represented in the literary work as if they were real—as having the ‘character’ or ‘habitus’ of reality—as opposed to being represented as having the character of something dreamed or imagined or fictional. Although in reading fiction in the appropriate attitude we always fall short of seriously believing in this ‘quasi-claim’ to reality, it is nevertheless powerful enough to make us treat the fictional object as if it were fully determinate. It is this inclination to treat the represented object as if it were real, argues Ingarden, which leads the reader to go beyond the schematic structure of the text and imaginatively complete at least some of the places of indeterminacy, for example by imagining an aspect of a character’s appearance where none is explicitly given.

This active and creative role the reader is given in ‘concretizing’ the literary work has been one of Ingarden’s most influential contributions to the theory of reading. On the one hand it is only made possible by the places of indeterminacy of the represented objects, since it is they which open a space of freedom for the reader’s imagination. But it is equally true that if the represented objects did not simulate those which are real and complete, then the reader would feel no cause, and have no license, to fill in their places of indeterminacy, which in turn increases their approximation to the nature of real things. It is because we treat the objects as if they were real that we think there is more to them than what is said of them in the text; but it is because this ‘more’ is not determined that we have a license to share with the author in its creation. This imaginative augmentation is for the most part carried out so unconsciously, Ingarden suggests, that we are not even aware, during our reading, of the gaps that we have filled. Where we do become conscious of what remains indeterminate we certainly do not attribute this to a peculiar deficiency in the objects themselves, for this would be to deprive them entirely of their character of reality. And this ‘as if’ reality—“real”, yet not real in earnest—is what vivifies the fictional work, engages our emotions, and gives to literary art its ‘unique stimulation’. If for any reason it is broken, and we are forced to regard the objects of fiction as being purely fictional, then the literary work remains, for Ingarden, ‘irrelevant, dead, dispensable’.

It is in comments such as these that Ingarden most openly reveals his bias towards an aesthetics of illusionism—an aesthetics which would soon be tested with particular force by the kind of self-conscious fiction which deliberately exposes its own fictionality. But this bias is not simply a personal quirk or historical prejudice. It in fact goes to the heart of Ingarden’s conception of fictional language and of fictionality itself. The underlying reason why the

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9 The Literary Work of Art, op. cit. 221
10 Ibid. 343.
objects of fiction ‘simulate’ real ones is because fictional sentences simulate serious judgments or statements about reality. Fictional sentences, meaning above all declarative narrative sentences, are defined by Ingarden as ‘quasi-judgments’\(^\text{11}\). They seem, like real judgments, to assert that something is the case, or in other words that the states of affairs which they project are not only objects of thought but also exist independently. And yet they fall short of seriously doing so. In the last instance they make no claim to truth or falsity, or to any match between the states of affairs which they project and ones which exist objectively. Although fictional events and objects are really only objects of acts of imagining, the ‘quasi-judgmental’ force of fictional sentences lends them a ‘quasi-reality’. This unique modification of judgment is, for Ingarden, the defining feature of fictionality and the source of fiction’s ‘mysterious achievement’: that it allows us to ‘plunge into [a] simulated world and live in it as in a world peculiarly unreal and yet having the appearance of reality’\(^\text{12}\).

The argument that reader’s accept fictional entities as complete because of the nature of fictional language has since been put forward even more forcefully by Félix Martínez-Bonati, although the theory of fictive discourse he proposes (and which follows in the same phenomenological tradition) is in part directed against Ingarden’s. For Ingarden, as we have seen, every fictional sentence carries with it an implicit marker of its ‘quasi’ status which signals to the reader that it is not the serious judgment it appears to be. But for Martínez-Bonati this view is mistaken. If the fictional text is to make us imagine the narrated circumstances as what is the case in the fictional world, this is only possible if we take its basic narrative and descriptive sentences to be true. The assumption of veracity of the narrator’s ‘mimetic’ discourse is a basic condition of the possibility of literature—a rule of the game which, if disobeyed, means there is no literary object. If the narrator’s sentences were accepted only with reservation, as not being quite assertions, then they would be incapable of establishing the facts about the fictional world. The images they propose would remain, instead, ‘uncertain and insubstantial’\(^\text{13}\). The credulity we give to fictional sentences is, to be sure, only an ironic one, but this is not because we recognize these sentences as lacking in seriousness. The narrative and descriptive sentences of fiction are, for Martinez-Bonati, perfectly genuine judgments. What sets them apart, and makes them fictional, is that they are purely imaginary. They are sentences which no one has ever said anywhere to anyone. They are, so to speak, speech acts which do not exist. What the writer sets down, and the reader reads, are like ‘reproductions’ of utterances which have never taken place and which belong

\(^\text{11}\) Ibid. See especially §25, 160-181.
\(^\text{12}\) Ibid, 172.
to an entirely imaginary communicative situation. This communicative situation—with its speaker, addressee and world referred to—must be reconstructed by the reader purely by unfolding it from the sentences themselves.\(^{14}\)

The fact-stating sentences of the narrator, then, are genuine assertive statements which we take to be true of the world which we are forced to imagine as their referential context. The appearance of reality of fictional objects is thus even more firmly grounded in the nature of fictional discourse than it is for Ingarden. As assertions about singular objects, with normal assertive force, the sentences of the narrator ‘literally and plainly imply that the objects described were there before their description was conceived’.\(^{15}\) Of course readers who understand the institution of fiction know that this is not the case because they intuitively understand that these sentences are imaginary. But in the attitude of ironic credulity which fiction demands of us as readers, we agree to accept these sentences as what they would be had they been uttered in a real context—namely, assertions about independently existing things. And if this is accepted, there can be no doubt that the objects are complete. When, for example, the narrator of *War and Peace* tells us that ‘Pierre was ungainly, stout and uncommonly tall’\(^{16}\) he is not inviting us to imagine something which has just this list of properties: he is telling us about a determinate particular only some of whose properties have been picked out. ‘There cannot be any indeterminacy in the fictional individual itself. In the case of the number of children of Lady Macbeth, the reader or spectator thinks, without thematizing this thought, that he simply does not know the pertinent determination.’\(^{17}\)

This is not to say the assumption of completeness cannot be broken by putting into question the validity of the narrator’s utterances. In the more or less extreme forms of unreliable narration which are particularly common in post-war fiction this has been achieved in many ways, most obviously through contradictory statements and explicit fabulation. When we are prevented in such ways from accepting as true the narrator’s sentences, the images they project do indeed remain ‘uncertain and insubstantial’. The objects spoken of cease to be understood as concrete particulars and become instead projections of a mind: imaginary and incomplete bundles of properties. We may still understand the fictional sentences as expressive of a speaker and addressed in a particular way to a listener (aspects of meaning Martínez-Bonati rightly charges Ingarden with neglecting), but the third component of the

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\(^{14}\) ‘Literature is the pure development of the situation immanent to the sentence’. Ibid, 81. Although we are concentrating here on the representational aspect of fictional sentences, it is important to emphasize that they also have an expressive and appellative meaning deriving from their relation to the imaginary speaker and listener.


\(^{17}\) ‘Representation and Fiction’, op. cit., 20.
imaginary speech situation, the reference world, has all but disappeared. It is nevertheless remarkable that even when (as in Beckett) a narrator alerts us to the fictionality or falsity of what he is about to say, we are capable of quickly forgetting this and proceeding to imagine a world which would make the ensuing sentences true. If we follow Martínez-Bonati’s analysis, this would not be because we have been conditioned by our reading of realist literature: it is just because we understand what it is to read fiction.

One final argument in support of the completeness of fictional objects rests upon the argument that the reading of fiction is unavoidably naturalizing. The claim here is that as readers we always tend, and must tend, to understand the world referred to and described in the fictional text as being ‘modelled’ on the world we know. Marie-Laure Ryan calls this implicit hermeneutic rule of reading the ‘principal of minimal departure’, which states that readers are to reconstruct fictional worlds from fictional texts as being as close as possible to the reality they know, making only those adjustments they are unable to avoid. In other words, we proceed in our reading on the assumption that our knowledge of the actual world is applicable to the world of the fiction until proven otherwise, when we are forced to make local adjustments.

It is of course widely acknowledged that fictional texts necessarily presuppose a great deal of knowledge on the part of their readers, since it would be impossible to make explicit everything which is required in order to make sense of what is said. Consider the sentence, ‘Three hours after the snake bit her, Anthony’s mistress was dead.’ If we were restricted here purely to what is explicit, then these two events would be linked only chronologically and the death would be inexplicable. One can only make sense of the sentence by supplying an unstated causal connection, which means assuming a basic similarity between the fictional world and the world we know from experience. Of course it may transpire that this assumption is mistaken, since in fiction almost anything is possible, including snakes whose venom bestows eternal life instead of death. But if we were to read with an openness to the full gamut of possibilities afforded by the freedom of the fictional imagination, without restricting our range of interpretation through the principle of minimal departure, it would be legitimate to make the wildest assumptions about any text. For instance, if we encounter an animal in a fictional narrative we will naturally assume that it is incapable of speech, like those with which we are familiar, until we are told otherwise, as in Kafka’s animal stories or

Gunther Grass’ *The Flounder*. And if a fish is said to be able to speak, or a mouse to sing, we must still assume that in those other respects which have not been specified they remain essentially similar to the fish and the mice we know. But if this is so, then they must also be regarded as complete. On Ryan’s argument it follows from the principal of minimal departure that we must assume, unless a text strongly implies otherwise, that fictional objects are as complete within their fictional worlds as any person or thing in the world we ourselves inhabit. In other words, we assume that, beyond what is stated in the text, the fictional world extends with the same ontological ‘density’ as in reality.

At this point it has become clear that the arguments for and against incompleteness form sides of a debate which has largely been carried out at cross-purposes, with the opposing views resulting from two very different perspectives on fiction. On one side is an ‘external’ position which aims to clarify the true nature of fictional entities, as non-actual and incomplete objects of a finite number of statements. On the other is an ‘internal’ position which emphasizes what readers agree to see in them, namely objects which are real and complete in the story, or within the fictional world in which the story takes place. From this perspective, any incompleteness belongs at the level of representation, which leaves a great deal about the fictional world unknown and unknowable to the reader. If there is no contradiction between these positions, as we have seen in the case of Ingarden, then we are faced with the question as to what value the notion of ‘ontological incompleteness’ might have for our understanding of the aesthetics, poetics or reception of fictional narrative. To judge by most of the philosophical literature on the matter, with its stock of trivial examples of what the fictional text leaves indeterminate—whether the number of Lady Macbeth’s children or the hairs on Sherlock Holmes’ head—the answer would seem to be: not much. As F. K. Stanzel has observed, the sort of philosophical approach to fiction which takes as its starting point the non-existence of fictional objects, and on this basis limits the scope and contents of the story to what is made explicit in the text, is largely irreconcilable with the imaginative experience of readers.

But if the concern in this sort of approach is less with literature than the philosophical problems it poses, this can not be justly said of Ingarden. In developing his notion of places of indeterminacy, Ingarden suggests at least two ways in which it might be fruitful to literary studies. The first, which we have seen already, is the claim that the places of indeterminacy allow the imaginative contribution of the reader in partially ‘filling in’ the schematically constructed object. This raises the contested question of the legitimate extent of the reader’s concretization, or whether and how this concretization is guided by the text and should accord

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with it. At one extreme of argument, we find the reader’s contribution limited to the inference of what is clearly implicit in the text. As Robert Champigny writes, ‘From the statement that it is raining in the streets, you would consider it pertinent to conclude that the pavement is wet.’ At the other extreme, which is avowedly non-normative, the reader is given full freedom to extend his or her imaginings into the text’s indeterminate areas, even if this concretization is entirely at odds with the style or historical outlook of the author. Stanzel, for example, questions whether it is even possible for a modern reader, familiar with novels such as Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist*, not to conjecture about David Copperfield’s adolescent sexuality, overlaying on Dickens’ novel a very different, and contrastive, ‘selective grid’. ‘Is the modern reader obliged to submit to the same censorship of his thoughts [as the author], or is it not rather his privilege . . . to invent for every novel a complementary story that precisely introduces to the fictional world the greatest imaginable wealth of qualities human, even all too human?’ Ingarden himself steers a middle path, allowing the reader considerable latitude, but restricting appropriate concretization to one which remains faithful to the work’s aesthetic value, this value consisting in the ‘polyphonic harmony’ between its various strata: words sounds, meaning units, the aspects in which things appear, and the represented objects and their vicissitudes. Some acts of concretization are appropriate, enriching and guided by the text; some are arbitrary, but not aesthetically detrimental; and some trivialize the work and obscure its meaning. Whatever position one adopts, however, it is undeniable that readers do imagine more than they are told and that this ‘co-creation’ is only possible because the represented objects are incomplete.

In *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* Ingarden offers a second, and rather tantalizing, suggestion as to the theoretical value of the concept, this time for the study of poetics rather than reception. If in his original formulation the places of indeterminacy were simply the necessary consequence of the finite nature of the fictional text, Ingarden now asks whether they might also be considered as the object of deliberate artistic manipulation. The question he raises, only to leave unanswered, is whether different works, styles or genres might display ‘characteristic regularities’ in their treatment of the gaps.

[T]he problem arises whether the number of places of indeterminacy, as well as the selection of types of them to be found in a literary work, is perhaps characteristic of the literary genre or literary trend in question, and whether the investigation of this problem…could then essentially augment our apprehension of the essence of these genres or literary styles. It is impossible to say in advance what results could be obtained by such an investigation…How would it be if we compared in this respect the

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21 ‘The “complementary story”’, op. cit., 214.
As we will see in the following chapter, an enquiry on these lines has since been pursued to some extent by Stanzel, who is one of the few students of narrative to acknowledge Ingarden’s work. For the moment, however, what needs to be emphasized is the extent to which Ingarden has in this passage moved away from the original sense of his concept. In the meaning first given to the term, the places of indeterminacy in the text were logically infinite in number and therefore essentially heterogeneous and disconnected. Here, by contrast, they are seen to vary in number, kind and distribution depending on the text or group of texts in question. Perhaps most strikingly, they have now become a salient feature of the text. Where Ingarden earlier argued that the places of indeterminacy pass unnoticed by the reader in the ‘aesthetically perceptive attitude’, he now sees that an appreciation of narrative technique or composition involves attending to the particular pattern of selection and omission in the telling of the story. What this makes clear is that he has moved from seeing the places of indeterminacy as a feature of the represented objects to viewing them as a feature of the narrative. It is no doubt true that very few readers would ever become aware that Thomas Mann’s Consul Buddenbrook neither has nor does not have blue eyes, or in other words that he is ontologically incomplete. But what reader could fail to notice that he has not been told the names, nor anything about the pasts, of the American and the girl in Hemingway’s ‘Hills Like White Elephants’? What reader of La jalousie could fail to notice that she has been told a good deal about some rows of banana palms, but nothing at all about who, if anyone, is perceiving them? As readers, we very often become aware of characteristic regularities in what the fictional text leaves unsaid, but in so doing we generally regard the gaps as belonging at the level of representation. And when we appreciate the type and number of gaps left by the text, this is not by holding it up against the yardstick of everything that might possibly have been said about the represented objects, as if the text could be judged according to how closely it approaches the impossible goal of complete determination. For the most part what is left unsaid becomes noticeable when it runs counter to our expectations regarding what and how much might have been told about the story, its actors and setting.

These expectations are formed in part by the sorts of questions we demand to have answered in order to make sense of any narrative account, fictional or otherwise: ‘Who is being spoken of?’, ‘What happened?’, ‘Where and when did these events take place?’. But just as importantly, our expectations are formed through an acquaintance with the fictional repertoire and the varied ‘selective grids’ which characterize different authors, genres,

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narrative modes and historical periods. It is because we are acquainted with the sort of text which is rich in physical description that we perceive the absence of description in another. It is because we are familiar with the fictional convention that allows third-person narration of characters’ thoughts that we perceive in ‘behaviourist’ and ‘camera eye’ narration a radical omission in the presentation of other minds. As Stanzel points out, a work of fiction which might seem highly ‘gappy’ when it first appears, because it fails to tell us the sorts of things we have come to expect, can later come to illuminate the places of indeterminacy in those very works by whose standards we originally judged it. A typology of places of indeterminacy, then, will rest both on the sorts of questions we might reasonably expect to have answered by any narrative (Who? When? Why? How? Where?), and on elements of narrative discourse which a comparison of fictional works reveals has been, at different times and in different genres, included or excluded.

In his sketch for a ‘gap analysis’ of literary works and genres Ingarden, as we have seen, moves towards a more practical conception of the places of indeterminacy as gaps in the telling which are variable, patterned and more or less salient. But if most literary theorists and critics who have been concerned with how writers manipulate the unsaid have followed him in this respect, disregarding the notion of ‘ontological incompleteness’, one exception is Lubomír Doležel. In a programme similar to the one proposed by Ingarden, Doležel suggests that fictional texts might be studied and classified according to the ‘density’ of their determining statements. What is meant by this density of the text is the characteristic ratio between what it makes explicit and what it leaves unsaid, and between these poles the grey area of what it implies, which is always open to interpretation and disagreement. In different texts these three values—the explicit, the implicit, and ‘zero texture’—vary both in frequency and the areas in which they occur. But for Doležel this is not simply a matter of representation. The text’s density is directly mirrored in the structure of the fictional world it creates, which comprises a solid core of determinate facts, a penumbra of implicit facts, and an outer darkness of gaps where there are no facts to be known. As finite creations, all fictional worlds are incomplete; but they are incomplete in different ways and to different extents, depending on the density of their creating text.

If Doležel’s underlying argument for incompleteness is the one with which we are now familiar, his insistence on it is motivated as much by aesthetic considerations as logical ones. The incompleteness of fictional worlds, for Doležel, is above all what safeguards their uniqueness and autonomy against the kind of naturalizing reading which reduces works of

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23 ‘The complementary story’, op. cit. 215
fiction to mimetic representations of the actual and familiar. To deny or overlook incompleteness, he argues, is to be blind to the unique structure the fictional world has as a consequence of its unwritten areas. These gaps in the text can be used in many ways. For example, the fewer the details by which an object is constructed, the more these details will stand out as significant: ‘The radically incomplete physique of the romantic hero serves the stylistic aims of romantic narrative: a physical detail surrounded by emptiness is brought into sharp focus and thus offered for symbolic reading’\textsuperscript{25}. Through the silences of the text a writer can also choose to concentrate the gaps within a particular realm of being such as the sensible, the natural, or the mental world, and in this way rearrange the hierarchy of these spheres by pushing one into the background, another into the foreground. Following an example of Martínez-Bonati, Doležel points to the near absence of material setting in Goethe’s \textit{Elective Affinities}, which serves to push to the foreground, with the greatest definiteness, the moral and mental lives of the characters. For Doležel, this background-foreground structure is a distinctive feature of the fictional world itself, not merely of the way in which it is presented in the narrative. What these examples are taken to show is the way in which the incompleteness of the fictional world guarantees its ‘sovereignty’, granting it a structural specificity vis-à-vis the world we know from experience.

But if Doležel is clearly right to emphasize the semiotic significance of the unwritten areas, it is not obvious that the gaps must be transferred into the fictional world itself in order for the reader to respect them. To return to the example of the romantic hero, why should the physical details which are provided not stand out against the surrounding silence of the text, rather than against the indeterminacy of the hero himself? In regard to everything the text leaves unsaid, the hero can be considered perfectly determinate; indeed on Doležel’s own terms we might argue that it is one of the ‘implied facts’ of the fictional world that he is no less complete than we are. But with respect to what is left unspecified the hero is also fundamentally unknowable. In other words, the significance of the gaps is still appreciated, but viewed in epistemological terms. Instead of comprising facts, implied facts and no facts, the fictional world as it appears to the reader is structured according to what can be known, what can be inferred, and what can never be known. This is not to say that Doležel’s account is wrong. If the fictional world is understood as an artefact constructed through language, then it is indeed made up of facts and gaps in accordance with the density of the text. But while this illuminates the ‘world-making’ power of the fictional text, it ignores the fact that fictional language usually seems, like factual discourse, to reveal rather than construct the world to which it refers. This can easily be seen if we consider that for Doležel there can be no

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. 170.
question of *concealment* in the fictional text. On his analysis we cannot say that the narrator of the Romantic novel, or that of *Elective Affinities*, has withheld or omitted certain information, since this would imply that there was something *there*, some reserve of facts, which *could* be withheld. If the fictional text gives us a complete knowledge of its incomplete objects, then we can never say that the account it provides is incomplete or partial. But this is obviously something we often do want to say, particularly when the narrator is dramatized as a person engaged in a communicative act whose omissions and selective choices reveal something of his or her character and intentions. It is certainly an illusion to see the narrator’s account as a partial disclosure of something which precedes the telling, but this illusion, of which every reader of fiction is aware, need not blind us to the significance of what is left unsaid. On the contrary, to interpret the gaps in terms of strategies of revealing and concealing often enriches their meaning with additional layers.

What *might* blind us to the significance of the text’s silences, on the other hand, is the sort of ‘filling in’ of the gaps which we have seen Ingarden and others claim to be an unavoidable part of reading—and, not surprisingly, this is the object of Doležel’s strongest attack. Criticizing Wolfgang Iser’s theory of reading, although the criticism would be more appropriately aimed at Ingarden, he claims that instead of positing the gaps in the text as structured conditions which the reader is to fulfil, Iser views them as stimuli for the imagination of the reader, who fills them in according to inclinations founded on personal experience. These various ‘completions’ of the text are on the face of it idiosyncratic and divergent, but for Doležel they are in fact thoroughly homogenising, since they are based in every case on readers’ experience of the complete ontology of the actual. ‘The filling-in, which was claimed to be an exercise of imagination, is in fact an act of *Gleichschaltung*: the diversity of fictional worlds is reduced to the uniform structure of the complete, Carnapian world.’

Now it is certainly true that to imagine a complete appearance for the romantic hero would diminish the symbolic salience of the isolated physical detail. Or, to use another of Doležel’s examples, to imagine the action of ‘A Hunger Artist’ as taking place in a specific European city would destroy the effect of universality achieved by Kafka’s deliberate silence about place. There is, as we have seen in Ryan’s theory of ‘minimal departure’, a naturalizing

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26 Although Iser’s ‘gaps’ are often conflated with Ingarden’s ‘places of indeterminacy’, they in fact cover a different and much wider range of phenomena, from the ‘gap’ between different segments of a text to the ‘gap’ between constrasting evaluations of a character’s conduct. Ultimately they are not what the text leaves to be completed, but what it leaves to be *connected*—something Iser makes clear by contrasting them explicitly with Ingarden’s places of indeterminacy. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: a theory of aesthetic response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980) 170-179.

27 *Heterocosmica*, op. cit., 171. The totalitarian connotation of the German term, best known for Hitler’s programme of ‘enforced conformity’, is no doubt deliberate, if hyperbolic.
impulse in our filling-in of gaps which can easily tame the strangeness of the worlds we
encounter in fiction. But Doležel’s objection is even stronger than this. It is not simply that
fictional worlds come to resemble ours in the detail: in their imagined appearance, their
inventory and laws, their canon of probability and so on. It is that the very assumption of
completeness is in itself excessively naturalizing and levelling. To regard fictional worlds as
complete means attributing to all of them a uniform ontology which disregards their specific
differences—and this would seem to hold true whatever position one holds on the reader’s
freedom to fill in the gaps.

If Doležel is speaking here of fictional worlds understood from the ‘external’
perspective, as artefacts created through language, then there is indeed a diversity in where
and to what degree they are ‘saturated’ with facts. But there is also no difficulty in our
appreciating this diversity and at the same time, from the ‘internal’ perspective, regarding
them as complete. For many works of fiction, as we have seen, this assumption of
completeness does not seem unwarranted. As participants in the fictional game, most readers
are willing to accept Emma Bovary or Tolstoy’s Pierre as individuated human beings,
existing as we do, about whom they have been told certain things and not others. Yet in other
fictions it is by no means obvious that we can or should regard characters and other entities as
existing in the same manner as the complete objects of realist (‘Carnapian’) ontology. This is
clearly the case, for example, with the personifications of classical allegory, whose
ontological status hovers uncertainly between that of universals and particulars. And it is just
as clearly problematic in a modern work such as Beckett’s The Unnameable, where figures
such as Mahood or Worm are presented, not as having the character of ‘real people’, but
rather as projections of the narrator’s mind, or functions of his need to narrate. To regard all
fictional worlds as complete would indeed enforce an inappropriate conformity. As Ryan
concedes to Doležel, it would ‘be counterintuitive to say that Anna Karenina and Anna Livia
Plurabelle, Jabberwock and Joseph K., Godot and Roquentin, the ship in Moby Dick and the
ship in Rimbaud’s Bateau Ivre are cast in the same existential mold’.

Are we to say, then, that completeness has its degrees? To make the kinds of
distinctions Ryan does, and which do seem intuitively right, is to say that fictional objects or
fictional worlds can appear to the reader as more or less complete. In other words, it is not
simply the case that from the ‘internal perspective’—the perspective of what readers agree to
accept—all fictional worlds are ontologically identical. If in the strict philosophical sense of
the term it makes no sense to speak of ‘degrees of completeness’, in the less exacting
language usually used to discuss works of fiction such talk is not at all uncommon. For

28 Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Fiction as a Logical, Ontological and Illocutionary Issue’, Style, 18:2, Spring
1984, 121-139, 130.
example, in E.M. Forster’s much-used terms, fictional characters are said to be more or less ‘flat’ or ‘round’ depending on the degree to which they are judged to exceed what is said of them in the text. The metaphors of ‘roundness’ and ‘depth’, with their sense of undisclosed dimensions, are precisely meant to capture the illusion of there being more to the thing than what we are told of it. Fictional worlds can also be more or less ‘concrete’; they can be ‘thin’; they can seem neither quite dream nor reality; they can have a ‘phantom’ quality. Fictional settings are said to be ‘stagey’ when they are seen to have more the character of representations than of places we might encounter, like the one-dimensional sets of theatre or early film. In such ways of speaking what is being felt would seem to be an attenuation of the fictional illusion of speaking of a real, complete, independently existing world. The reasons for this weakening are varied and highly complex, but seem to steer us towards the question of the fictional work’s naturalism and—a perennially debated and slippery term—its realism.

Naturalism and realism (understood in a particular sense) are precisely the two factors which Ryan suggests determine the degree to which fictional entities will appear as complete. Taking as a gauge of the completeness of a character how willing we might be to speculate about his or her ‘deep’ psychology over and above what we are told in the text, Ryan argues that Emma Bovary is more complete than Joseph K. ‘because her world is stylized in the naturalistic vein and can be located in time and space, while the world of The Trial presents none of these features’. In other words, the closer the proximity of the fictional world to our own, or the more ‘recognizable’ it is, the more we will tend to regard its denizens as existing as we do and thus to speculate about them as we might about our actual acquaintances. But, as Ryan admits, this is not always the case: ‘some New Novels conjure up the image of the modern world in the most verifiable details, yet the characters who populate these works remain shadows deprived of human density’. To take the opposite example, we might add that fantasy and science fiction novels often go out of their way, with their maps and detailed alternative histories, to persuade us of the completeness of the non-naturalistic worlds they create. The relation between naturalism and what we have called the ‘ontological appearance’ of the fictional world is neither direct nor uncomplicated.

The second and more important factor Ryan puts forward as influencing the degree of completeness of fictional objects is the degree to which the fictional work deviates from the ‘semantic structure’ of realist fiction. At the centre of realist fiction is the construction of a domain of facts which we extract from the narrator’s discourse and on which our attention, as readers, is primarily focussed. This is what Martínez-Bonati terms the ‘mimetic stratum’ of the work; it is what we experience as ‘world’ not as ‘word’. The basic implied message of the

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29 Ibid. 130.
30 Idem.
narrator is ‘This is what is the case’, or where there is a dramatized narrator, ‘These are what I
know to be the facts’. But in addition to the factual domain there are at least three other
semantic layers. There is the private domain of the characters, whose mental representations
(beliefs, dreams, fantasies and so on) we are able to compare with the ‘objective facts’
established by the narrator. Then there is the level of the narrator’s speech act: Who speaks?
To whom? And with what intent? And lastly there is the narrator’s discourse, which, in the
judgments and opinions it expresses and the idioms and grammar it displays, we regard as
indicating something about the speaker’s personality and background. This, then, is the
structure of realistic fiction, which is characterized both by the centrality of the factual
domain and the diversity of semantic layers which the reader must consider: the mimetic
stratum, private worlds, the illocutionary act, and the narrator’s self as expressed through use
of language.

The second class of fiction in Ryan’s very broad typology is that which confines itself
to the representation of the consciousness of characters, without establishing a
domain of facts independent of the characters’ thoughts. This is characteristic of so-called
‘stream of consciousness’ texts, or what Dorrit Cohn more accurately terms ‘quoted
monologue’31. It is the private domain which now occupies centre stage, the basic implied
message of the text being: ‘This is what is going on in so-and-so’s consciousness’. A factual
domain is still implied, however, in so far as the characters’ thoughts are given as being
representations of an independent reality, however distorted they might be. And if this is the
case, Ryan argues, then we can still ‘assume that the characters exist in their world in the
same way we do in ours, and we regard them as fully individuated beings with an objective
existence’32. Since fictional statements are here presented as a quotation or transcription of
private thought processes, the reader is no longer able to reconstruct a speech act, nor to make
any inferences about a narrator from the language of the text.

In the third and final type of ‘fiction’—all of whose examples are drawn, surprisingly,
from lyric poetry—the implied message becomes: ‘This is an image I have fabricated’. The
images which are projected through language are not put forward as fact, or as how things
stand in a fictional world, but as pure artefacts or creations of a mind. And if the factual
domain has entirely disappeared, the other semantic layers of realism are also largely absent.
It is only in this type of text, Ryan argues, that the objects referred to can no longer be
considered ontologically complete, being neither individuated nor presented as existing in
time and space. Instead of telling us that there exists a certain individual, in some time and

31 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative modes for presenting consciousness in fiction*
32 Ibid. 133.
place, which has given qualities, the text invites us to imagine the realization of a limited set of qualities. The tiger of Blake’s poem, for example, is not a particular tiger which happens to be bright and symmetrical, but is the realization of brightness and symmetry. It is the idea of tiger, pure tigerness. In Martinez-Bonati’s terms we are dealing here not with genuine statements (‘there is an \( x \) which is \( a, b \) and \( c \)’), but with commands to the imagination whose objects are abstract and incomplete (‘imagine something which is \( a, b \) and \( c \)’).

But if Ryan’s typology was meant to demonstrate that fictional objects exhibit different grades of completeness and explain why, it does not really live up its promise, since here we find no degrees between ‘existing as we do’ and ‘existing as a projection of a mind’. Instead, the assumption of completeness disappears suddenly in the third type of fiction where there is no remaining trace of a factual domain. Of course it might be argued that Ryan is speaking here of ideal types and that between these there exist various intermediate grades and admixtures. In this case her argument would seem to be that the degree of completeness of fictional objects depends on how clearly and unambiguously a text creates a domain of facts and thus posits an independent ‘fictional reality’. If we turn to the various semantic levels of realist fiction which Ryan identifies, we can see that the fact-creating power of fictional discourse can actually be undermined in ways which correspond to each. On the mimetic level, as we saw earlier, our ability to establish facts from the narrator’s discourse can be impeded by the contradiction between statements, or even by the excessive use of qualifying and hypothetical locutions (not quite, perhaps, or rather…). Next, at the level of the character-world there may be such ambiguity as to what is fact and what is belief, dream or hallucination that the distinction between the factual and private domains breaks down, and we are left in a state of uncertainty regarding the ontological status of the world represented. And finally, at the illocutionary level, the narrator may be so unreliable or so intentionally deceitful that we are unable to take as true anything that he says. Depending on the degree of uncertainty introduced in these ways, the represented objects will, one might argue, appear as more or less complete.

Our purpose here, however, is not to enter a general discussion of the realist illusion and its subversions. What has been lost sight of in Ryan’s analysis—and has been the focus of our interest—is the gaps in the narrative and the effect they have upon our perception of the fictional objects. For Ryan, the question of the fictional object’s completeness is reduced to that of its illusory reality, which is not seen as having any particular connection with what the narrative leaves unsaid. Yet the way in which the gaps are manipulated can have a profound effect upon both the narrative’s degree of naturalism and its realism. Here a few brief examples will suffice: we will see more in the following chapters.
If the naturalism of the fictional narrative depends in part on whether the events it recounts can be situated in terms of our familiar history and geography, as Ryan rightly argues, then to suppress as far as possible any indicators of time and place (as in Kafka’s ‘A Hunger Artist’) will tend to undermine the naturalistic assurance that things in the fictional world ‘exist as we do’. A very different kind of omission is the failure to reveal what a character knows. In Gogol’s great novel, the concealment of Chichikov’s intentions in acquiring ‘dead souls’ until very late in the narrative, when his enterprise is finally explained in perfectly naturalistic terms, means that the reader is left for much of the novel in a state of uncertainty as to whether the fictional world is styled as naturalistic or grotesquely improbable. That this gap in the presentation of Chichikov’s intentions is temporary rather than permanent makes no difference to the effect it has before it is filled, which is to make ambiguous what register of probabilities we are dealing with, and thus the proximity of the fictional world to our own. In both of these cases it is the deprivation of certain information which unsettles the assumptions of naturalism.

With regard to realism, the question which must be asked is whether, or how, the silences in the narrative might undermine the illusion of speaking of real things. Is it possible, for instance, for the gaps to be used in such a way—made so conspicuous or intractable or inexplicable—that they seem to ‘carry over’ into the fictional world and upset its illusory reality? Let us consider one aspect of the realist illusion. As we have seen, it is fundamental to the appearance of reality that fictional objects be seen to pre-exist what is said of them. Two things are actually meant by this. In terms of the narrative, it means that the objects must be seen to pre-exist the events in which they are involved, and in particular that characters must appear to have a history prior to the period of story-time recounted in the narrative. In other words, the characters and their situations enter the story already formed by what has come before it. But if the antecedents to the story are suppressed, along with any indications that there are such antecedents, might not this priority of the characters to the story be put into question? Our sense of there being a time before the story, which strongly supports the illusion of the fictional world’s completeness, may well be considerably weakened if this time is left completely indeterminate.

In semantic terms, what is meant by the illusion of the objects’ pre-existence is that the narrator’s sentences must appear to disclose a referent which is already there. The details we are given of the object must seem to be selected, rather than being the elements by which it is constructed. But might not the gaps be used in such a way as to make the artefactual

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33 The example of Gogol is drawn from Meir Sternberg’s excellent study of expositional delay in Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1978) 220.
nature of the object—its constitution before our eyes from just these elements and no more—impossible to overlook? Now we have seen that it is possible in reading fiction to maintain a sort of ‘bifocal’ vision, clearly separating the world-as-artefact from the world-from-the-inside, the external from internal view, the text as world-constructing from the text as world-disclosing. But can these two perspective always be kept so clearly distinct? Or can the artefactual, so to speak, ‘invade’ the illusion so that the two perspectives blur, objects seeming in this case to be poised uncertainly between autonomously existing things and incomplete constructions? Do the gaps in the narrative always appear as gaps in our knowledge of a world which extends beyond the words, or can they be so stark and stubbornly unfillable that they seem to pass over into the fictional objects themselves, depriving them of their illusory completeness? Can what is left unsaid by the text sometimes seem, even from the internal or ‘naïve’ perspective, to leave nothing to be known?

In order to pursue such questions, which will hopefully become clearer in the following chapters, we must descend to a more concrete discussion of the kinds of gaps found in narrative fiction. The purpose in what follows is not to provide a comprehensive typology of places of indeterminacy, even assuming such a thing is possible. It is rather, for the sake of convenience, to divide the gaps according to the basic domains of the fictional world in which they occur, with a view to addressing a range of issues, following from and extending the theoretical discussion above, which are particularly pertinent to each one. These fundamental domains I have labelled ‘time’, ‘space’ and ‘fictional mind’, and correspond roughly to the traditional categories of ‘story’, ‘setting’ and ‘character’. The justification for regarding these domains as fundamental is a definition of narrative which is hopefully minimal enough to be generally acceptable: the recounting of events (changes over time) involving conscious agents (persons with minds) acting or suffering changes in a world of things (space). If we regard the places of indeterminacy in a text as being unanswered questions, it is clear how this tripartite division forms the basis for a broad typology, since to each of the domains correspond certain basic questions we might ask of any narrative. For time: What has happened? Why has it happened? What has come before it? For space: Where do these events take place and what is this place like? How is this world ‘furnished’ and how am I to imagine it? For fictional minds: What does this person think or know? And why does he or she act this way?

The failure to answer such questions constitutes a gap in the narrative which influences, to a greater or lesser extent, the way in which the events and objects told about appear to the reader. But if we are to bring these effects to light we will need subtler tools than those afforded by the semantics of fiction. Thus far the narrative text has been treated rather crudely as a set of statements which transmit a certain content, namely the facts of the story and the story-world. The how of this transmission—in other words, the formal aspects
of narrative art—have been largely overlooked. There are, of course, a thousand ways to tell a story which consists of essentially the same ‘facts’, and each of these will affect how the reader grasps not only what is told, but also what is not. If the gaps in what we are told can be more or less conspicuous (or troubling, or inexplicable, and so on) this is only partly explained by the importance we attribute to the questions that they leave unanswered—or, in other words, the nature of the missing content. Equally important are the expectations we have regarding the information we can or should be told in this particular narrative type or narrative situation. The formal aspects of narrative most relevant in this respect are those which bear, in Stanzel’s terms, upon the ‘mediation’ of the narrative, whether by the narrator or by the intermediary of a character through whose perspective the story is recounted. In Gerard Genette’s terms, they are the narrative figures which belong to ‘mood’ (how much is told and from what point of view) and to ‘voice’ (the way in which the narrating is implicated in the narrative). Is the teller of the story also a participant in the action, or a witness to its unfolding, whose knowledge of the events he recounts is necessarily limited? Do we sense the presence of a teller of the tale who actively selects and arranges the material we are presented with, or are the marks of a narrator as far as possible suppressed? Is the story told from the point of view of one or more of its characters, whose limited knowledge and range of perception restricts what is disclosed? Clearly there is no way we can grasp the effects of the gaps without attending to such questions. In the following chapters the problem of incompleteness must be joined to narratology.
2.

Missing time

By any definition, narrative involves the recounting of actions or events which occur in time. There is no story without some change of state. Now it is probably possible, at the limit of synoptic brevity, to reduce most of the stories narrated in fiction to a single change of this kind: Othello is destroyed by jealousy, Frédéric Moreau loses his youthful illusions, Marcel becomes a writer. On the most minimal definition of narrative, such as Genette’s, even the single transformation gives something to be recounted—a story—and the sentence which does so is therefore a narrative. Of course every narrative of any interest is enormously more complicated than this, and inevitably recounts multiple events connected by temporal relations of anteriority, posterity and simultaneity. But as soon as there are multiple events we are faced with the question of what happens between them. In any complex narrative there will inevitably be periods of story time which are left empty and unknowable. This fact is brought to our attention in the following amusing address to the reader in Tom Jones, which is only one of many similar:

The Reader will be pleased to remember, that, at the beginning of the second book of this History we gave him a hint of our Intention to pass over several large periods of Time, in which nothing happened worthy of being recorded in a Chronicle of this kind. In so doing, we do not only consult our own Dignity and Ease, but the Good and Advantage of the Reader: for besides that by these means we prevent him from throwing away his Time, in reading without either Pleasure or Emolument, we give him, at all such Seasons, an opportunity of employing that wonderful Sagacity, of which he is Master, by filling up these vacant Spaces of Time with his own Conjectures…

The relevance of this passage to the discussion in the previous chapter is immediately obvious. Not only does the narrator here explicitly signal his intention to omit from the telling large portions of the life he is claiming to recount, but leaves these ‘vacant spaces’ open for the reader to imagine as he wills. The reader, in other words, is given free reign to complete the incompleteness of the narrative. The irony, of course, is that the indeterminate periods of time the reader is invited to fill in are precisely those which have just been declared unworthy of being narrated. Thus the reader’s conjectures, if they are to give more pleasure and profit

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than what the narrator would have been forced to write under the constraint of his supposed fidelity to the facts, can only be lies—a making notable or dramatic of what ‘in reality’ lacks narrative interest. And this brings us to the final point. Far from depriving Tom Jones of the semblance of wholeness, this signalled gap in the narration serves to strengthen the illusion that the story of his life is there, in all its fullness and determinacy, prior to the discourse of the narrator, who encourages the reader to believe that he is only selecting from the totality of this life the most interesting or important events. By highlighting and justifying the omission, the narrator makes it clear that much more occurred than what he is telling; that unlike his History, the life itself is complete. Yet even when an ellipsis is not brought to the reader’s attention in this way, and perhaps not even signalled by a temporal marker such as ‘three days later’, the reader will still interpret the rupture in the narrative as having passed over some existing period during which events continued to unfold. Very simply, this is because the time in which the events of the story take place is treated as if it were real. Because real time does not allow of discontinuities, the periods of time which are left unnarrated are understood by the reader as segments of a continuous whole which have simply not been ‘filled in’. In Ingarden’s terms they are ‘corepresented’ with the periods of time which are narrated, just as the whole continuum of space is given along with the limited regions of the fictional world which are actually described. Between the narrated segments story-time continues, filled, we presume, with events about which we know nothing.

If Fielding so often draws the reader’s attention to his decision not to recount, it is in part because he—or at least his narrator—likes to credit himself with having been the first to take the liberty of picking and choosing which periods of story-time to narrate. His novel, he declares, will not be like a stage-coach which plods the course at an unvarying pace, whether it is empty or full. Instead, like the caller of a lottery who announces only the winning numbers, he will lavish every attention on the extraordinary scene and none at all on the slack periods in the action. Of course Fielding can hardly lay claim to having invented the narrative ellipsis, which is as old as narrative itself. But he is probably the first to have used it with such daring sweep (there is one ellipsis of twelve years in the narration of Tom Jones’ life) and certainly with such self-consciousness. As the quoted passage shows, he is very keenly aware of the problem of how much of his discourse should be allocated to which periods of story-time. There is no fixed or natural ratio between the number of the narrator’s

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35 The Literary Work of Art, 238.
36 These signalled ellipses are particularly frequent when it comes to conversation: eg. ‘The Conversation began to be very brilliant. However, as nothing past in it which can be thought material to this History, or, indeed very material in itself, I shall omit the Relation.’ Ibid, 797. For an analysis of this figure see Kristina Taivalkoski-Shilov, “‘Chut!’ Du discours non rapporté dans les romans de Henry Fielding’, Neophilologus 86, 2002, 337-352.
37 The History of Tom Jones, op. cit. Book 2, Chapter 1, 59.
words and the number of days they recount. The narrator’s ‘history’ can dilate or contract quite independently of the period of time narrated.

This variable ratio between the number of pages of narrative discourse and the length of the period of time it narrates is what is generally known as narrative pace or speed. For Genette, the speed of a narrative has two logical limits. At one extreme is the sort of ellipsis we find in Fielding, where some period of story-time elapses with no corresponding section of narrative; at the other is the descriptive pause, where the diegetic world is described while no period of story-time passes. Between these poles of infinite speed and infinite slowness lie the two canonical narrative tempos. There is the scene, which aims as far possible to replicate the time narrated in the time it takes to narrate it—an impossible task given the variability of reading speed, but at least approached in dialogue, which is the paradigmatic scenic mode. And there is the summary, which covers a wide range of speed between ellipsis and scene. It should be noted that in order to judge the speed of a narrative we must be able to determine at least the approximate length of story-time it recounts, which is not always possible. Beckett’s Molloy, for example, makes as much of his vagueness about duration as he does about everything else. Thus, in addition to the basic narrative tempos, we should bear in mind the fairly frequent case of narrative of indeterminate speed. However, the point of Genette’s analysis is clear enough. For him, the only criterion for deciding how much is told in a section of narrative is the number of pages per year or other unit of story-time.

But if this ratio of pages per year has an aura of scientific objectivity, Genette’s scene and summary remain to some extent the rather intuitive and approximate categories he has inherited. The measurement of speed may in itself be precise, but what exactly is being measured? Is it the speed of a page, a chapter, or an entire novel? The problem lies in deciding what delimits the segment of the narrative which is to be set against a certain period of story-time. The articulation of the text into parts and chapters provides no clear indication here, since between these divisions there need not be any narrative discontinuity or change of speed. What does provide the required articulation, for Genette, is ‘important temporal and/or spatial ruptures’ in the narrative—in other words any significant ellipsis or change of scene. To extend a musical analogy used by Genette, these ruptures would be like the long pause or change of key which marks the transition between the movements of a sonata or symphony, the movements themselves comprising discrete passages of different tempo akin to faster or

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38 This applies only to static, or non-focalized, descriptions, not those which implicitly relate a temporally extended act of perception by a character. See Gerard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972) 134-136.

39 On his sojourn with the woman called Lousse, for instance, Molloy declares, ‘A good while, then, with Lousse. It’s vague, a good while, a few months perhaps, a year perhaps.’ Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979) 48.
slower narrative segments. Just what constitutes a significant rupture, however, is much less clear in a narrative than it is in the classical composition, where the break is signalled in both score and performance. If we turn to Genette’s reading of Proust, we find that the breaks he identifies as structurally important are remarkably few in a novel of such length. Yet the fewer the shifts in time and space which we regard as important, the longer will be the segments of narrative they demarcate. And the longer the narrative segments which we then set against the period of time they narrate, the more we will overlook their often very considerable internal variations of speed in arriving at the average given by Genette’s ratio.

What will also be overlooked—and this is more important—is their internal ellipses. When they are viewed as narrative ‘blocks’ corresponding to a certain duration, the scene and the summary are taken to be in themselves unbroken or continuous. Whether more compressed or more dilated, they account for an entire period of time. It is only as such that they can be set in contrast to the ellipsis, which is seen as intervening between them. However if we turn our attention to the level of their constitutive sentences, we can see that summary and scene are themselves riddled with intervals of unnarrated time. Consider the following passage (here in translation) from Joseph Roth’s The Radetzky March, which might be classed as leisurely summary:

He reached the village of Burdlaki an hour after sunrise. His sister and his brother-in-law were already out in the fields. He entered his father’s hut, where they lived. The children were still asleep in the cradles, which hung from thick ropes winding around iron hooks in the ceiling. He got a spade and a rake from the small vegetable patch in the rear and went off in quest of the third willow to the left of the hut. First he stood with his back to the door and his eyes on the horizon. It took him a while to convince himself that his right arm was his right, his left arm his left; then he headed left, toward his neighbour Nikifor, to the third willow. Here he began to dig. From time to time he glanced around to make sure no one was watching. No! Nobody saw what he was doing. He dug and dug. The sun rose so fast in the sky that he thought it was already noon. But it was only 9 A.M.

Taken as a whole, in this case a paragraph, the passage recounts an entire period of some two or three hours. Yet within the paragraph the recounting of this period is far from continuous, as the rhythm of the disconnected sentences makes particularly clear. Lieutenant Trotta reaches the village; at the farm he sees or infers that his sister is in the fields; he enters the hut; he observes that the children are sleeping; he gets a spade from the garden outside... The sentences here present short phases of action, implied observations, or momentary occurrences which are separated by shifts in time and space that are quite distinct, even if they are presumably of short duration and can be relatively easily filled in through inference. These ruptures could certainly not be regarded as ‘important’ in the structural sense Genette intends. Yet they are there, nonetheless, in every passage of narrative which is not descriptive.

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pause or reproduced speech (which is, anyway, no longer part of the narrator’s discourse). As Ingarden argues, following Bergson, a series of connected narrative sentences can never give us time in its ‘flowing continuity’\(^\text{41}\). It can only present isolated segments of time, separated by phases which are left indeterminate with respect to the events that fill them out. It would seem then, as we saw earlier, that the only unit of narrative which contains no hiatus would be the sentence which narrates a single event\(^\text{42}\). In this case, somewhat ironically, it is only if the passage from Roth’s novel were reduced to the grammatical limit of summary that it could be entirely rid of ellipses. In the simple sentence ‘He spent the morning retrieving his buried coins from the farm at Burdlaki’ a great many details about this action have been left indeterminate: How did he get to the village and back? How did he uncover the coins? What was his state of mind? Whom did he meet? But since the action itself is treated as single and continuous, there seems no reason to say that any period of time has been omitted. The event which fills the morning has just been recounted very summarily.

If small ‘internal’ ellipses of the kind we have just seen play no part in the major articulations of the narrative, they can nevertheless be highly significant to way in which we understand the story. This is very clear, for example, when the skipped interval is presumed to be filled by a mental action whose contents we can only infer (eg. ‘After a long pause he picked up the pen and signed the confession.’) But even when the ellipses have no importance for the story or plot, as in the passage from Roth, they are not without their effects. To see this we need only imagine a more ‘scenic’ rewriting of the passage in which the gaps are suppressed by smoothing temporal and spatial transitions: ‘He reached the village of Burdlaki an hour after sunrise and continued to the farm, where he could see his sister and brother-in-law already at work in the fields. He walked down to his father’s hut, where they now lived, and pushed open the door. The children were still asleep in their cradles, which hung from thick ropes winding around iron hooks in the ceiling. He stood for a moment, watching them, then went outside to the vegetable patch at the rear . . .’

The changes made here are relatively minor and unfold as far as possible what is already implicit in the original. Aside from the slight strengthening of Lieutenant Trotta’s point of view, the major overall change lies in the more detailed accounting for the passage of time, especially by means of movements in space. Yet if the changes are small, their effect is significant. To hazard a generalization, most readers would probably regard the rewritten version as being, if only slightly, more immediate than Roth’s. In a loose sense, what is meant by this ‘immediacy’ is our feeling more ‘present’ to the narrated events—our being more easily able to orient ourselves in time and space and thus to ‘see things’, to feel ourselves

\(^{41}\) The Literary Work of Art, 237.

\(^{42}\) On this point Ingarden (\textit{idem}) seems to think otherwise, but his argument is unclear.
‘there’. In the more literal sense what is meant is that the reader’s access to the events of the story is less obviously mediated by a teller.

With this contrast between mediacy and immediacy, we have clearly arrived at the ancient distinction between mimesis and diegesis, or its modern variant of ‘showing’ and ‘telling’. In modern narratology it is a distinction which has rightly been viewed with suspicion for the reason that written or spoken narrative, by the very nature of its medium, can only tell. Excepting the dubious case of onomatopoeia, words do not imitate that of which they speak. What has been meant by narrative mimesis, then, can only be the illusion of directly showing the fictional events. For Genette, the success of this illusion comes down to two major factors: the degree of detail in the narrative, or in other words its speed; and the ease with which we can discern in the narrative the trace of a narrator. The trick of ‘showing’ consists, as he puts it, in saying more, but saying it less; in giving more information while effacing the informer who mediates that information. There is, however, no necessary connection between a scenic level of detail and the dissimulation of narrative mediation. As Genette shows, even in the most dilated scenes of Proust we are never allowed to forget the presence of the agent who produces, guarantees and organizes the narrative; who comments and reflects; and, as a stylist, who writes.

On the other hand, the correlation between narrative summary and the overtness of the narrator is much more direct: the summary is always told. One reason for this which has perhaps not been sufficiently noted is that the ellipses, which are necessarily longer and therefore more conspicuous in the summary, are in themselves a mark of the narrator’s mediation. The most conspicuous ellipsis is obviously that which is commented upon and justified by an intrusive narrator of the Fielding type, who explicitly draws attention to his narrating act. But even when this is not the case, it is clear that the faster the section of narrative, the longer and more salient will be the periods of story-time omitted. To take an extreme example we might think of Flaubert’s famously compressed account of the sixteen years before Frédéric Moreau’s final meeting with Madame Arnoux (‘He travelled . . . He returned.’) Flaubert’s novels are usually taken to mark a signal moment in the modernist retreat of the narrator, and in L’Education Sentimentale the narrator’s function is certainly stripped to a new level of impersonality. We find no narratorial commentary or opinions, no address to the reader, no person involved in a communicative act. Yet when we encounter an ellipsis as striking as this one it is impossible to ignore the presence of an organizing and ‘selective’ consciousness shaping the narrative. And even in the very small ellipsis we can observe this effect, for instance if we compare the passage from Roth with its experimental

43 Figures III, op. cit. 187.
revision. In the rewritten version, where the gaps in the narrative are either removed or disguised, we are given the impression that it is what is happening in story-time, the very flow of the events, which determines what is told—or, to use Percy Lubbock’s notorious phrase, that the story ‘tells itself’. This is much less true of the original. Here the short but noticeable discontinuities make the sentences appear as a succession of rather bald narrative statements which, as selected and independent pieces of information, are more clearly told. As a point of discrepancy between narrative and story, or as the sign of a selective decision, the ellipsis always leaves the mark of a narrator. To tell less of the story is necessarily to tell it more.

For Genette, as we have seen, narrative speed is the only criterion for deciding how much a narrative tells: ‘It goes without saying that the quantity of information is solidly in inverse ratio to the speed of the narrative.’44 If this is the case, then narrative speed would seem to be directly connected to the number of places of indeterminacy left by the text, or what Doležel terms the text’s ‘density’. The faster the speed of the narrative, the more it leaves indeterminate, until it reaches its limit at the ellipsis. Conversely, the slower or more scenic the narrative is, the more we are given to know about the period of time in question. To rephrase Genette’s definition of speed in Doležel’s terms we might say that the narrative discourse creates more ‘facts’ per unit of story-time. In one sense this is true, and yet it would be entirely misleading simply to correlate speed with the degree of indeterminacy of the narrative. Just what the narrative leaves indeterminate, and how important readers consider these indeterminacies to be, is completely independent of the quantity of information it provides about a given period of time. The most detailed narrative can exhibit the most conspicuous and baffling areas of indeterminacy. As many writers have observed, and some like Lukac's have lamented, many modernist novels show a very marked increase in detail—an often extreme narrative retardation—combined with an equally marked failure to make clear the causality of events, the history which bears upon the narrative present, the relevance or otherwise of the myriad details to the action, the connection between different characters, and so on. To speak very roughly, we are given a great deal of ‘what’ and great gaps in ‘why’. Thus rather than speaking of degrees of indeterminacy, we should say that faster and slower forms of narrative—at least in so far as they typically correspond to a more or less conspicuous teller—exhibit very different kinds of places of indeterminacy.

Referring to Ingarden’s open question as to whether the number and type of places of indeterminacy in the novel is dependent on its form, Stanzel argues that it is no coincidence that the two pairs of novelists Ingarden suggests would be worthy of comparison are Mann and Faulkner, Galsworthy and Joyce. For Stanzel, the relevant difference between these

writers lies in the opposition between what he terms the teller-mode and reflector-mode of narration; that is, between the dominance of a teller who performs the act of narration ‘before the reader’s eyes’, and the dominance of a Jamesian reflector through whose perspective the story is told and behind whom the narrator remains concealed, no longer having an audible role as our guide to, and commentator on, the story. On the scale between these poles, Mann and Galsworthy clearly tend towards the teller-mode, Joyce and Faulkner towards the reflector-mode of narration. If this opposition lacks the analytical sharpness of Genette’s categories (it combines, in Genette’s terms, questions of voice, focalization and speed) it nevertheless illuminates how important narrative form is both to the kinds of areas of indeterminacy the narrative generates and to the way in which the reader responds to them. In the teller-mode, where the act of communication is emphasized, the narrator maintains an illocutionary relationship with the reader which involves some degree of trust. When there is no reason to think this trust is being abused, we tend as readers to assume that the narrator will fulfill a tacit obligation to tell us all we need to know in order to understand the story. The teller vouches for the narrative, implicitly assuring us that nothing important has been left out. In fact very often he or she will explicitly justify the relevance and sufficiency of the imparted information by explaining why certain things have been selected and others omitted, providing us, in other words, with a reflexive commentary on the narrative act. For these reasons the teller-mode, while not preventing it, tends not to stimulate the reader to question the gaps or to supplement them through imagination.

In reflector-mode narrative, by contrast, the primary criterion of selection is not that of narrative relevancy as decided and justified by the narrator. Instead, selection is understood to be determined by the limitations of the character through whose perspective the story is presented—a character who has no relationship at all with the reader and is thus in no way ‘accountable’ for what is and is not recorded by her consciousness. In this case, narrative omissions do not in the first place redound on a narrator, but are explained realistically in terms of what the reflector-character does not perceive, know, understand, or regard as important. As Henry James discovered in the writing of *What Maisie Knew*, the more limited is the reflector’s knowledge, the more it will leave ‘great gaps and voids’ in the narrative. Outside the sector of the fictional world illuminated by the reflector’s consciousness there are very large areas of indeterminacy: things unknown or unperceived which may nevertheless be highly relevant to the events which are presented. Because there is no higher authority to dispel this darkness or reassure us of the sufficiency of the narrative information, the places of

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indeterminacy are more pregnant with potential significance and demand more interpretative
and imaginative activity on the part of the reader.

There is thus a very great structural difference between the places of indeterminacy
produced in these two narrative modes, since they are understood in the former to belong to
the teller’s communication of the story, and in the latter to the epistemological horizon of a
character within the story. It should be noted, however, that one omission which cannot be
attributed to the limitation of the reflector-character is the ellipsis of any noticeable period of
story-time during which the reflector is assumed to be conscious. Yet because of the
effacement of the narrator in classical reflector-mode novels (such as Joyce’s Portrait of the
Artist) such ellipses are generally perceived as conventional abbreviations—certainly
attributable to a narrator, or at least to a ‘narrative function’, but not meaningful interventions
which would open up a competing centre of selection. If the ellipses do have genuine
significance for our understanding of the story, omitting information which is clearly
important, then our attention as readers is transferred from the experiencing reflector-
character to the mediation of the telling, which has thereby lost its transparency. Through an
apparently deliberate concealment, or even ‘trickery’, the act of non-communication reveals
itself as an act of communication. In the final chapter we will see how, when we infer that an
ellipsis has deprived us of some significant knowledge held by the reflector-character, the
otherwise effaced narrator becomes perceptible as, so to speak, an agent of concealment.

If we have been speaking so far of the ellipsis of time between presented time-phases, no less
important is the indeterminate or unfilled time which precedes and follows the entire span of
story-time covered by the narrative: the time, so to speak, ‘before and after’. As Alain Robbe-
Grillet has pointed out, the illusion of reality in fiction depends upon giving a sense that the
time-span of the narrative is a segment cut from a broader sweep of time which is no less
‘full’ or determinate. ‘If he wants the illusion to be complete, the novelist is always supposed
to know more than he says; the notion of a “slice of life” shows the extent of the knowledge
he is supposed to have about what happened before and after . . . The substance of the novel,
in the image of reality, must appear inexhaustible.’47 A fine example of this ‘surplus
knowledge’ can be found in Jane Austen’s correspondence with her nephew, in which she
claims to have always known the fortunes of her characters subsequent to the endings of the
novels in which they appear: ‘Mr. Woodhouse survived his daughter’s marriage and kept

Emma and Mr. Knightley from settling at Donwell about two years. Naturally the degree of indeterminacy of the narrative’s ‘posthistory’ depends to a large extent on the type of ending. For example, in modern fiction, and in particular the short story since Chekhov, it is common to find texts which end abruptly or ambiguously, or which deliberately fall short of an expected answer to an open narrative question, practically forcing the reader to imagine various possibilities of continuation or completion. If, by contrast, a narrative ends with the establishment of a relatively settled order, such as Austen’s marriages, the general contours of a continuation which would be in accord with the text are much clearer. In many cases, however, what comes after the end of the narrative, even those told in the preterite, has the character of the narrative future—a future which is, of course, inherently indeterminate. In other words, the posthistory is not revealed because it has not yet come to pass. It is only when the story is situated in a completed past which is clearly anterior to the act of narration that the untold posthistory can be regarded as a true place of indeterminacy.

What precedes the narrative, on the other hand, has necessarily already occurred. As we noted at the end of the previous chapter, the illusion of the reality of the fictional world and its inhabitants depends to a considerable degree on their seeming to be ‘already there’ prior to their appearance in the narrative. The narrative must seem, as it were, to ‘break into’ a larger story at some chosen moment. Before this moment there extends a history which has made these characters, this setting, or this situation what it is, and without which they would be radically incomplete. Obviously a great deal of this prehistory remains indeterminate in any narrative, but there are usually a certain number of antecedents which the reader is required to know in order to make sense of the primary sequence of events which constitutes the story. This necessary information about the fictional world and its history Balzac likened to the ‘premises’ of the narrative proposition. Who, for example, are the actors and what are their relationships? How have they come to be in the situations in which we find them? What has happened in their pasts to make them act and react in the way they do? The narrative presentation of these antecedents can be achieved in very different ways, ranging from the massive preliminary exposition characteristic of authors such as Balzac or Trollope, which establishes the context of the action in great density before the action proper, to the more typical delayed or distributed exposition we find in narratives which begin in media res and unfold the antecedents gradually through a combination of retrospective summary and the

dialogues and memories of characters. The question here is one of narrative order, or deciding where in the narrative certain periods of story time, or what we might call ‘pre-story’ time, are to be narrated.

Delaying disclosure of the story’s antecedents is, of course, one of the primary ways in which writers manipulate the reader’s curiosity, which often bears as much on the past of the action as upon its future. But as we saw earlier in the case of Dead Souls, the delay of exposition can also make uncertain the very character of the fictional world. If the designs which have brought Chichikov to the town of N. were revealed at the beginning of the narrative, where in terms of chronology and explanatory order they naturally belong, then the fantastic ambiguity which surrounds the hero’s quest until the final (published) chapter of the novel would immediately vanish. When we at last learn of Chichikov’s past as a disgraced official with a shady scheme for readvancement it is too late to reverse the effect produced until this point by the gap in exposition. As Meir Sternberg points out, since we can never be certain that the gaps in exposition will be filled, it makes no difference during the act of reading whether they prove ultimately to be permanent or temporary. In terms of the curiosity which propels our reading we regard them as only temporary and read forward to their expected closure. But since we need to make sense of what is happening, and have no guarantee that the information we require will ever be disclosed, we are forced to form hypotheses around the gaps as if they were to remain. Thus in Dead Souls we read in anticipation of an expositional return to the hero’s past and plans which will finally explain his peculiar actions, which we find every bit as baffling as the townsfolk and the landowners.

In the meantime, however, we must entertain hypotheses. Is Chichikov simply a rogue whose scheme we do not yet grasp? Is he mad? Or is he, less naturalistically, and despite his very earthly guise, some more otherworldly figure—a sort of devil or a psychopomp? To ask these questions is still to assume that there is in fact an answer which might eventually be revealed. But if we take seriously the possibility that the gap in the narrative is permanent, this again shifts the ground of our interpretation. If Chichikov’s pursuit of dead souls is never to be explained—which at least to a modern reader does not seem impossible—then we are more likely to search in it for some metaphorical meaning to compensate for the explanatory lack.

The missing key to the story does not lie in the events which precede it, but in a moral, religious or political significance which lies, as it were, ‘beneath’ it. Finally, if we are averse to such allegorical reading, we might simply enjoy the hero’s story on face value, treating it as a gambol of fantasy, like a nose that walks and talks. In any case it is clear that this gap in

50 For an excellent and comprehensive study of the forms of exposition see Meir Sternberg, Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction, op. cit.
51 Ibid. 225.
exposition can only make us wonder what sort of novel we are reading, and to what
corresponding fictional world the narrated events belong. It creates a dynamic field of
interpretation in which various possible novels shed their different lights on what we read. For
those philosophers who take the text as the totality of narrative statements, disregarding its
sequential unfolding, then there is of course no place of indeterminacy here in the strict sense.
Yet because the delay of exposition functions as such for the duration of our reading, it
fundamentally influences the meaning of the novel and our memory of the fictional world.

A mysterious stranger, who seems something of a schemer, arrives one evening in an
unnamed village . . . In Kafka’s *The Castle*, written some seventy years later, we find
ourselves plunged into an opening situation which bears a striking similarity to *Dead Souls*,
but in this case the withholding of the antecedents is both permanent and radical. We are
never told what intentions, if any, have brought K. to the village, and about his past in general
we know so little that he seems not even to have one. Given that the narrative is, in Genette’s
terms, focalized through its hero (Stanzel’s ‘figural’ or reflector mode) the only access we
might have to this missing information would be through K.’s quoted or narrated thoughts or
through his dialogue with other characters. So what do we learn from these? What K. tells
others about his past—that he is a surveyor, married and with a child, who has been called to
the town and has two assistants following—is at best highly doubtful. As for the secondary
characters, including K.’s fiancée, they show an astonishing lack of curiosity in where he has
come from and what he has been doing, almost as if they are conspiring with K. and the
narrator to keep us in the dark. In fact their obstinate failure to consider the questions which
the reader cannot help but ask makes the gap of K.’s history seem to belong less to the
narrative than to K. himself. It is as though the reason they do not think to ask about his past
is that beyond the village, and before the story, there is simply nothing to be known. In other
words, their lack of curiosity naturalizes the place of indeterminacy as a feature of the
fictional world. The only period of K.’s history which appears to have any reality for the
villagers is that which begins from the moment of his appearance in their midst, as if the
continuum of time within the village does not extend beyond its limits. Like the unseen castle
authorities, they seem determined to take up K.’s ‘challenge’ to see in him only what he
claims to be and nothing more—a challenge which is also laid down for the reader\textsuperscript{52}.

\textsuperscript{52} The ‘game’ of fiction, whereby the utterances of the narrator are laid down as a challenge to the
reader to take it to be so, is mirrored within the narrative by the relationship between K. and the Castle.
When K. claims to be the surveyor the Castle has called for, the Castle, as he sees it, ‘takes up the
challenge’ to accept him as such, as if his words were endowed with the stipulative authority of a
narrator’s. Similarly, when the Castle tells K. that Artur and Jeremias are his old assistants K. agrees to
accept them as such. To ask why K. and the Castle ‘play along’ with each other is perhaps also to ask
what, as readers, we are doing in playing along with the narrative.
As for K.’s own knowledge of his past, on this matter as on so many others he remains thoroughly opaque, despite the fact that the story is filtered through his consciousness. Thus although we are confined to the horizon of K.’s perceptions and thoughts, we are left with almost no advantage of knowledge over the incurious villagers. In only two places are we shown K. thinking of his life before he crosses the bridge into the village, and these fleeting memories of his home town and his youth only serve to make the indeterminacy of his past more frustratingly apparent by denying us the knowledge we require. There is much more that can be said about this gap of prehistory, which as we will see again in the following chapter plays a fundamental structural role in the novel. For the moment, however, what needs to be emphasized is the way in which the indeterminacy of K.’s past makes him seem to be created only in and through the events of the narrative, as if he only comes into being by crossing the symbolic bridge into the story world, where he is free to invent himself—and to be invented—out of nothing. This silence about his past is so extraordinary given the narrative situation, and so strongly supported within the story by the silence of the other characters, that it seems to pass over into K. himself. In this way the illusion of reality inherent in the ‘slice of life’ is considerably weakened. The time and space of the story are made to seem self-enclosed and autonomous, cut off from that temporal and spatial continuity which makes the illusionist narrative appear to be a selected segment of a history and geography which extends beyond its limits and whose reality is independent of the text.

Even the ellipsis seems at certain points in *The Castle* to ‘pass over’ into the fictional world itself, rather than being simply a gap in the narrative account of a presumptively continuous story-time. The clearest example of this occurs in the first chapter of the novel when K., as he returns to the inn after his first foray into the village, is astonished to find that evening has suddenly fallen, although it seems to him—and equally to the reader—that only a few hours have passed since he set out after breakfast. Here the period of time between the events of the morning and those of the evening has not been omitted from the narrative; rather it is within the story, or within K.’s own experience of time, that this portion of the day has disappeared. It is as though the formal constraint on the narrative to leave no significant period of K.’s waking hours unaccounted for, which is particularly clear in these early chapters, demands that any ellipsis must also be made a feature of the fictional world. If the narrative is to jump forward to the events of the evening, then time within the story must

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53 ‘[I]t was, much to his astonishment, quite dark. Had he been away that long? But it was only an hour or two, by his calculations. […] And until a moment ago there been steady daylight, then just now darkness. “Short days, short days,” he said to himself as he slid off the sleigh.’ *Franz Kafka, The Castle*, trans. Mark Harman (New York: Schocken, 1998) 16.
similarly contract or disappear. In this way the illusory distance between the continuum of story-time and its narrative representation collapses.

It is worth noting here that the relentlessly chronological narrative of *The Castle* stands in stark contrast to the experiments in narrative order which are typical of many other early twentieth-century novels. In fact one of the characteristic features of modernist fiction is often taken to be the extreme disjunction between the chronology of the story and the order of narration, marking a new aesthetic autonomy of the récit, unshackled from the imperatives of histoire. Yet even in a novel such as *The Sound and the Fury*, where this tendency is carried to an extreme, it remains possible to reassemble at least some chronology from the fragmentary and disordered presentation of events. In other words, the text still pretends to refer to an independent order of time which is whole and continuous, in contrast to a narrative marked by often extreme discontinuities and anachronies. However in certain works of post-war fiction, most strikingly in the *nouveau roman*, the assumption of a continuous and chronological story-time—and thus the very meaning of narrative itself—is systematically put into question. In response to attempts by reviewers to reconstruct a comprehensible chronology from *La Jalousie*, Robbe-Grillet revealed that is was absurd to suppose ‘there existed a clear and unambiguous order of events, one which was not that of the sentences of the book…The narrative was on the contrary made in such a way that any attempt to reconstruct an external chronology would lead, sooner or later, to a series of contradictions.’

Here the modernist striving for the autonomy of the literary work is carried to the point of rejecting the illusory reality of story-time—or, in other words, refusing to let the reader make believe that the narrative discourse refers to continuous flow of events which is independent of it. Once the order of events has become the order of sentences, the text now claims to constitute the only reality to which we have access. It is, in Robbe-Grillet’s words, ‘its own reality for itself’. If this is the case, then it makes no sense to speak of temporal places of indeterminacy, since there is no longer a putative completeness of story-time against which the narrative might be measured. Between the impossibly ordered scenes and tableaux there are no unnarrated periods of time. The most we can say of the breaks in the text is: here there are no words.

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54 *For a New Novel*, op. cit. 154. The impossibility of establishing any kind of chronology has led many narratologists to deny that *La Jalousie* can still be called narrative. See for instance Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987) 65.

55 Idem.

56 As Gerald Prince writes, ‘There is no world I can abstract from *La Jalousie*, no material with which I can fill its gaps and plug its holes, no algorithm in terms of which I can distinguish what is said from what it is said about. *Here* must be *here*, at this point in the text. *Now* must be *now*, at this moment in
If the preceding discussion has focussed on the ellipsis and the gap in exposition, there remains to be mentioned a very different kind of place of indeterminacy which is also broadly ‘temporal’: the failure to tell us in what year, what decade, or even in what century the narrated events took place. Clearly with this question we have moved far beyond the narrative treatment of time and into the broader question of naturalism; that is, the degree to which the world constructed in the fictional work is modelled upon the actual world. To ask when a story is set is in fact a curious question, since it seems to presuppose that fictional events can be slotted into the same history as those which actually occurred. Sometimes this dating of events is done in a narrative with the greatest precision, as in Leopold Bloom’s journey through Dublin on June 16 in the year 1904. More often it is implied with less determinacy through resemblances between the fictional world and a recognizable historical phase of our own, with its known events, customs, ideas, social forms, technologies and so on. At the other extreme are works of fiction in which events cannot be thus situated, either because they take place in an indeterminate past or future, as in fable or science fiction, or because the fictional world is so different from our own, so unplaceable, that it seems inappropriate to situate its events within the history with which we are familiar. This, again, is the case with The Castle, whose world is as difficult to situate in time as it is in space. It is not simply that the novel fails to answer the question ‘When?’: it is rather that it confounds any attempt at periodization. The historical cues that are given to the reader contradict and thus cancel each other, rendering the historical setting at the same time recognizably modern and strangely archaic, the existence of photography and telephony pointing to Kafka’s present, while the quasi-feudal rights of the castle officials point to the past. But even if the coexistence of the modern and archaic is itself taken to be characteristic of modernity, or of the Austria-Hungary of Kafka’s own time, it would be as absurd to say that the story takes place in the early twentieth century as in any other ‘real’ time. Although connected to the present—communicating with it, as it were, via the castle telephone—the time of the novel is an ‘other’ time, which is not our own past or present, nor with any certainty a projection of the future. This kind of historical indeterminacy gives rise to a sense of disorientation which has been experienced as an interpretive challenge. Should it be taken to signal a timeless universalism? An allegorical intent? An assertion of the autonomy of art, freed from the constraints of mimesis? Or is it a way of addressing the present by writing to ‘one side’ of it, creating a

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world which, in Thomas Pavel’s words, is like ‘a colony established overseas’ which reflects back upon the life and practises of the mother country\textsuperscript{57}?

But if *The Castle* is clearly set in an ‘other’ time, can we say that the June 16 of *Ulysses*, the 1859 of Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, or the 1913 of Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* are any less fictional for having been given a date? In each case we are dealing, not with historical reporting, but with an alternative or possible version of a time from the actual calendar. Musil’s 1913 is not the actual year, however much the poignancy and ironic humour of the novel derive from the fact that the reader, unlike the characters, knows that what really occurs in 1918 is not at all the great ‘festival of peace’ which in the novel is being planned for that year. The difference between works of fiction which date events and those which refuse to rest rather on the degree to which, and the ways in which, they draw upon readers’ knowledge of the actual world in constructing the world of the fiction. This, as we will see in the following chapter, is even more clearly the case for the *placing* of events in fictional space.

3.

Missing space

Because of the inherent temporal bias of narrative, the presentation of space in fiction allows for a far greater degree of indeterminacy than that of time. While a narrative in which no period of time is determined through the recounting of events is impossible by definition, we can readily find actual examples of narratives, such as those composed purely of dialogue, in which the space of the action is left entirely indeterminate. It is for this reason that so many of the examples of fictional incompleteness are drawn from fictional space, whose schematic character is contrasted with the visual determinacy of cinematic or pictorial space. Yet however little effort has been made to determine it, we still assume as readers that the events of the narrative are occurring in a fictional somewhere. Almost always this fictional space is imagined in its everyday Euclidean conception as being an extensive continuum which, like time, does not allow of gaps or discontinuities. The naturalistic assumption of ‘corepresentation’ thus applies as much to those regions of space which are left indeterminate as it does to periods of time. To use an example of Ingarden’s, if all the action of a narrative is shown as taking place within a room, without any mention of what lies beyond it, we will naturally assume that space does not simply come to an end at the limits of these four walls.

In fact fictional space is for the most part made up of ‘rooms’ like this—regions of relatively determinate space which are like islands in an indeterminate spatial continuum. Often a character will leave one setting and appear in another with the intervening space being left ‘unwritten’. Take the following passage from J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace:

He clears out the refrigerator, locks up the house, and at noon he is on the freeway. A stopover in Oudtshoorn, a crack-of-dawn departure: by mid-morning he is nearing his destination, the town of Salem on the Grahamstown-Kenton road in the Eastern Cape.

His daughter’s smallholding is at the end of a winding dirt track some miles outside the town: five hectares of land, most of it arable, a wind-pump, stables and outbuildings, and a low sprawling farmhouse painted yellow . . .

58 If it is objected that the pure dialogue has crossed the border from narrative to drama, we have only to imagine a dialogue interspersed with narration of the interlocutors’ thoughts, but with no clues as to their physical surroundings or even proximity to each other.
59 The Literary Work of Art, 223.
With an economy characteristic of the author, the time and distance of a full day of driving is here compressed to a single sentence. Between David Lurie’s house in Cape Town and Lucy’s smallholding near Salem lies an expanse of indeterminate space.

But just how indeterminate is it? Could one not argue that since we are dealing here with a real place, namely South Africa, we have only to open an atlas to discover that between Cape Town and Salem there exists not only the town of Oudtshoorn, but also Calitzdorp and the Kougaberg river? Indeed might not a South African reader, if quite unconsciously, ‘fill in’ this region of space left indeterminate by the text by invoking his or her knowledge of the landscape of the Little Karoo? Clearly the question of spatial indeterminacy is greatly complicated by the fact that the space constructed in works of fiction is in most cases ‘superimposed’ upon the familiar geography of the actual world, just as fictional time is superimposed upon actual historical time. In fictional narratives we constantly come across the names of places which belong not only to the fictional world, as does Lucy’s smallholding, but also to the actual world, as do Cape Town, Oudtshoorn and South Africa. Are we to say, then, that whereas Lucy’s farm is fictional, the Cape Town referred to in the novel is the real, existing city of this name? If this is so, then the Cape Town of the novel, no matter how little it is specified by the text, must, insofar as it is real, be considered perfectly complete and determinate.

A number of philosophers, such as Terence Parsons and John Searle, have argued in this way that the places and people found in works of fiction may be categorically divided between the fictional and the non-fictional. In Parsons’ terms there are those objects which are ‘native’ to the story, and which have only those properties ascribed to them by the text, and those which are ‘immigrants’ to the story from the actual world, and which are therefore complete. But even if this view has a certain appeal to common sense, it rests on the mistaken assumption that any places or persons which ‘immigrate’ to the story will maintain all the properties they have in the actual world. Even if many writers strive to make it appear that Paris-in-the-story has the same complement of properties as the actual city—that it just is the real and complete Paris—the abundance in the fictional repertoire of more or less strikingly counterfactual versions of actual places proves that this is by no means always the case. In other words, when the proper name is transferred to a fictional context it does not necessarily carry with it all of the identifying characteristics of the place to which it refers in actuality. Identity of names does not guarantee identity of referents. Nor, it should be added, does Parsons’ ontological distinction between natives and immigrants find much support in our experience of reading, where there is no necessary correlation between a fictional object

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having a counterpart in reality and our sense of its completeness. Indeed it is often the case, as with the Cape Town of Disgrace, that a supposedly ‘actual’ setting will appear ill-defined and lacking in concreteness in comparison with places that are purely fictional. When ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ elements are mingled in a work of fiction they are usually not treated, and do not appear to the reader, as belonging to distinct ontological realms.

In Searle’s speech-act theory of fiction the distinction between the real and fictional is, if anything, even more pronounced. For Parsons, who follows Meinong, fictional ‘natives’ like Lucy’s smallholding are genuine objects, only those which happen not to exist. Thus although they are ontologically very different from immigrants, they can nevertheless, like any objects, be legitimately referred to. For Searle, however, who allows in his ontology no such thing as non-existent objects, there is only a pretence of referring in the use of an expression such as ‘Lucy’s smallholding’, since there is simply no such place. The use of the name ‘Cape Town’, by contrast, is a genuine act of referring which carries the same commitment to truth as in any non-fictional use of language. Where the act of referring is only pretended there can be no possibility of error; but if a name in a story refers to an actual object then the author is constrained by the facts and what is said of that object may be judged accordingly. It is reality that determines what properties the object has, not the sentences of the text. If this is the case, then readers of fiction would interpret statements about real objects in a fundamentally different way from those where reference is pretended, reading the former as truth-functional and the latter as not. Yet it would hardly occur to any reader familiar with the rules of the fictional game to see it as an error or deception when an author alters details concerning a place or person which has a namesake in the actual world, as if this were an instance of bungled reporting. In fact it is not at all clear how, on Searle’s theory, an actual place can be the domicile of fictional characters or fictional settings without infringing the commitment to truth involved in serious referring. If, for example, a work of fiction is set in a ‘real’ country at a particular point in time, then it follows that the introduction of any ‘fictional’ setting into that country must be counted as an error, since the actual country contains no such place. What are postulated by Searle as non-fictional ‘elements’ within the

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62 John Searle, Expression and Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 72. If Sherlock Holmes is said to cross London by a geographically impossible route, then ‘Conan Doyle has blundered’. Searle seems strangely unaware of the distinction in third-person narrative between author and narrator. In first-person fiction, on the other hand, ‘pretending to refer’ means pretending to be someone—the narrator—who makes a speech act, while ‘serious referring’ is attributed to the actual author. To take account of heterodiegetic narrators this model can easily be universalized. However the division of roles between narrator and author shatters the unity of the speech act. Even the single sentence ‘Emma Bovary left Tostes’ must be seen as having two different speakers, the impersonated one who refers to Emma, and Flaubert who refers to Tostes.

63 The convention observed in mainly nineteenth-century fiction of reducing place names to initials—‘this happened in the town of R…’—is no doubt partly to avoid violating the illusion of truthfulness by
work of fiction, or isolated real acts of referring among its pretended speech acts, quickly threaten to overwhelm the whole.

The alternative to ‘mixed’ theories such as those of Searle and Parsons is to view the fictionality of fictional worlds as complete and homogeneous. On such a view, any actually existing places, people or events which cross the border into a fictional world thereby undergo an ontological transformation which puts them on the same plane as those which are invented: Parson’s immigrants become, so to speak, ‘naturalized’. Something like this is implied by our common way of speaking of ‘the Napoleon of War and Peace’ or ‘the Russia of Gogol’, where this person and this country are put forward as having been created by an author like other fictional entities. One of the most forceful defences of the global nature of fictionality in recent years has come from the ‘possible-worlds’ theory of fiction developed by Doležel, Ryan, Pavel, Umberto Eco and others. On this view, the fictionalization of an actual object is understood as its transformation into a possible version of that object—or, more accurately, into a version of that object in an alternative possible world which is created in and through the fictional text. The only domain of reference for the proper names in the text, including those shared by an object in the actual world, is the possible world which that text constructs. In other words the name ‘Napoleon’ in War and Peace refers strictly to an individual within the world of that novel, and as such Tolstoy has the freedom, if he chooses, to depart from and even contradict what is known of the historical figure.

This is not to say that there is no relation, aside from the identity of names, between the fictional Napoleon and the French emperor of history. Within possible-worlds semantics the proper name is understood as what Saul Kripke terms a ‘rigid designator’—a referring expression which designates the same object in any possible world. If, for example, we speak of what Napoleon would have done had he won the campaign in Russia, we are speaking of a Napoleon who might have been. In this possible world the name ‘Napoleon’ still remains attached to the object, despite the fact that the object is identified by a quite different set of descriptions (the victor of Borodino, the emperor of Russia, and so on). Of course it remains a question just how far the alteration in an object’s properties can extend before the name ceases to function as a designator. For Kripke, at least some essential identifying properties must be preserved if the same name is to apply, but these are sufficiently minimal to allow a very considerable variation between an object and the possible counterparts to which we

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introducing a fictional place name into a ‘real’ geography. Of course the incomplete name also suggests that the true identity of R… and its inhabitants has been suppressed or censored, thus strengthening the illusion of veracity. Gogol often treats the convention with ironic humour, counterposing its truth-effect with the absurd implausibility of the narrated events, as in the story ‘The Carriage’. The Squabble, trans. Hugh Aplin (London: Hesperus, 2002) 101-116.
In fiction, as Doležel points out, the strength of the proper name is sometimes stretched to its limit, since writers give themselves the freedom to alter even the most well-known characteristics of the actual entities they incorporate into fictional worlds.

If some such argument for the global nature of fictionality is accepted, then it is clear that we cannot automatically attribute all of what we know of an actual place to its namesake in a fictional world. In terms of the question with which we began, this means that the gaps in the fictional presentation of the place can not in any straightforward way be filled in by the reader through recourse to his or her knowledge of its counterpart. That said, however, it is important not to exaggerate the uncertainty of transferring our knowledge across the fictional border. In naturalistic fiction, where the narrated events are situated in a geography and history which closely resemble our own—and where the facts, laws, possibilities and probabilities of the fictional world do not contradict those generally accepted to hold in the actual world—then we tend to assume, as readers, that this similarity can be extended into many of the unwritten areas of the text. It goes without saying that much of what is left unstated in naturalistic fiction is so clearly implied that it leaves no real indeterminacy: the reader’s knowledge of the actual world is assumed and relied on to a very high degree.

But here we must distinguish between the general concordance between the fictional place and its actual counterpart, which takes place on the level of a world-knowledge which is more or less clearly transferable, and the attempt to establish fictional places as having the same ‘ontological density’ as real ones, which works primarily through an appeal to the reader’s sensory imagination. This sort of concretization, or what Henry James called ‘solidity of specification’, is often taken as a defining feature of classical realist fiction. Its aim is to put the objects referred to in the text ‘before the mind’s eye’ through descriptions which give the illusion of perception, thus endowing them with the concreteness and plenitude of lived reality to the extent that we might imagine ourselves to be in their presence. As such it is an essential part of fabricating the illusion of reality: the sense that the objects referred to and described are in no way ‘deficient’ to those we might actually encounter. When the object in question is an ‘actual’ place—such as Paris in the novels of Balzac—the

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64 As Kripke explains, ‘the properties an object has in every counter-factual world have nothing to do with properties used to identify this object in the actual world.’ *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge MA.: Harvard UP, 1980) 50. What these essential properties are will, of course, be a matter of dispute.

65 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, op. cit. 17. In cases of extreme alteration, such as we find in certain works of postmodern fiction, we might say that instead of simply ‘following’ the same individual through possible life histories the name, asserts, as if by fiat, that identity has been maintained.
verifiable truthfulness of the description supports the verisimilitude of the fictional events which appear against its background. Balzac, in fact, is James’ cautionary example of a writer who takes solidity of specification, one of the novel’s great virtues, to the point of being an aesthetic vice in his striving to be ‘colossally and exhaustively complete’66. Take the following abbreviated passage from Cousin Bette, noting the detail of description, which in full continues for almost two pages; the fidelity to actual geography; the repeated references to well-known features of Paris; and the density of spatial indicators and other purely ‘informational’ elements whose function is to authenticate the reality of the object being described67.

It will not, certainly, be supererogatory to describe this corner of present-day Paris. Later it will be unimaginable…Beyond the archway leading from the pont du Carrousel to the rue du Musée, anyone visiting Paris, even for a few days, is bound to notice a number of houses with decayed façades . . . The rue du Doyenné and the blind alley of the same name are the only passages that penetrate this sombre and deserted block . . . These houses, submerged and darkened by the raising of the Square, also lie wrapped in the perpetual shadow cast by the high galleries of the Louvre, blackened on this side by the north wind . . . These so-called dwellings are bounded by a swamp on the rue de Richelieu side, a sea of jostling broken paving-stones towards the Tuileries, small plots and sinister hovels facing the galleries, and steppes of dressed stone and half-demolished ruins by the old Louvre.68

What happens when these features of the realist construction of a place with an actual counterpart are denied? In a draft preface to The Man Without Qualities Robert Musil asks why, instead of ‘an invented metropolis’, he chose Vienna as the setting for his novel—a question which might surprise many readers for whom the choice of Vienna seems hardly incidental. By raising the alternative of a ‘purely fictional’ setting, Musil clearly intends to forewarn the reader against too parochial an interpretation of the novel’s concerns. But if the question itself is provocative, the answer is even more so. The reason for choosing a real city, Musil claims, is that “it would have been more effort to invent one than a ‘crossed-out’ Vienna”69. Leaving aside the excuse of laziness, which is surely tongue in cheek, this shows that Musil was quite aware of what he had done to his fictionalized city. The ‘crossing out’ of Vienna is in fact a very deliberate strategy of omitting precisely those elements of the realist novel which support the impression that the narrated events, like those of history, occur in the

66 Henry James, French Poets and Novelists (New York: 1964) 78.
67 Roland Barthes calls ‘informants’ these units of narrative discourse, irrelevant to the action, which locate in time and space, such as the age of characters, times and dates, compass directions and so on. They are essentially ‘realist operators’ which serve to embed the narrative in a world taken to be the actual one. ‘Structural analysis of narratives’, A Barthes Reader, ed. Susan Sontag, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 267-268.
reader’s own world—that the Vienna of the story is the actual place, faithfully depicted in its concrete and recognizable details. Because of the referential power of the proper name, this erasure must begin with the treatment of the place names themselves. Just as the Austro-Hungarian Empire is consistently referred to, and so defamiliarized, by the deflationary sobriquet ‘Kakania’, so Musil’s Vienna is very rarely referred to by name. Admittedly there is no indeterminacy here, since on the famous opening page of the novel, rather as in an aerial photograph, we are brought down from the stratosphere to a busy city street in what we are told, with ironic exactitude, is the Imperial Capital and Royal City of Vienna. But immediately the narrator undermines the reassurance we feel from having been thus ‘situated’:

We overestimate the importance of knowing where we are . . . Why are we satisfied to speak vaguely of a red nose, without specifying what shade of red, even though degrees of red can be stated precisely to a micromillimeter of a wavelength, while with something so infinitely more complicated as what city one happens to be in, we always insist on knowing it exactly? It merely distracts us from more important concerns.

So let us not place any particular value on the city’s name. Like all big cities it was made up of irregularity, change, forward spurts, failures to keep step, collisions of objects and interests… All in all, it was like a boiling bubble inside a pot made of the durable stuff of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions.70

This dismissal of the name no sooner than it has been given has an interesting rationale. On the one hand the passage suggests that the Vienna in which we find ourselves is so infinitely complicated, or so infinitely describable, that to bring it under its name is a simplifying reduction. The name, in a sense, is not particular enough, deluding us with a false sense of having identified exactly what it is that is being spoken of. But on the other hand the name is too particularizing for what is merely a city ‘like all big cities’, characterized in a highly abstract way by movements and relations which are typical of the modern metropolis. The ‘more important concerns’ from which the name might distract us are thus those which go beyond Vienna—thematic concerns which transcend the specificity of place—and those which, on the contrary, go to the very heart of Vienna and the Empire, but which can not be grasped if we cling to the security of the name, expecting from it a representation of the place we think we know.

What is meant by the ‘crossing out’ of Vienna becomes clearer as one proceeds into the novel, where one cannot help but be struck by Musil’s steadfast refusal to establish the city as a concrete place. This is hardly for reasons of economy: the novel has the length and tempo of the grandest realist attempts to represent individual and social life embedded in a concrete historical and material setting. Yet here we find barely a mention, let alone

70 Ibid., Volume One, 4. Ellipses mine.
description, of any well-known features of Vienna, and a construction of space in general which is strikingly indeterminate. In fact this is so much the case that situations and events hardly seem to be anchored in space at all, reflecting both the \textit{geistlich} level at which the most important action of the novel unfolds and the air of floating unreality which prevails during this innocent eve of historical calamity. What few descriptions of physical settings one finds are most often cursory, generic or abstractly vague, and the even fewer descriptions of Kakania as a concrete entity—rather than Kakania as idea—tend towards ironic cliché\textsuperscript{71}. As a setting or background for events, Vienna and the Empire remain strikingly absent. In this abolition of ‘background’ Milan Kundera rightly sees one of Musil’s greatest innovations and a departure from realist form which, if less noisy than those of his contemporaries, is perhaps no less radical. No longer concretized through description, nor bound to the actual through links of recognition, Musil’s Kakania renounces any pretension to being ‘lifelike’, to being a representation of a real place. It is, as Kundera writes, ‘the Empire transformed into an ironical replica of the Empire’\textsuperscript{72}.

Although a very different novel, not least in its overall economy or reticence, Coetzee’s \textit{Disgrace} reveals a strategy of ‘crossing out’ which is in some ways similar to that of Musil. Apart from Lucy’s farm, which receives a minimal description, all the other places in the novel, whether or not they have an actual counterpart, remain almost as unimaginable, as ‘invisible’, as the expanse of unwritten space between Cape Town and Salem. We asked before whether a reader familiar with South Africa might not use his or her knowledge to fill in the unwritten areas of the text with imaginative projections, so to speak ‘restoring’ to these places their concrete particularity. Now it needs to be emphasized that there is no directly given, unmediated reality—the real South Africa, or the real Vienna—which the reader might draw on to plug the holes in the text. This reality is itself always selectively shaped by particular interpretations or cultural understandings; for example the Vienna of cultural monuments, or the pastoral South Africa. When the place in the fictional world is thoroughly deconcretized then all such interpretations or ‘versions’ of the place become questionable or uncertain. But regardless of how they are shaped or selected, the reader holds a certain stock of images of the place—more or less idiosyncratic or clichéd, rich or poor—with which he or she might supplement the areas of indeterminacy. Whether and when such filling-in is legitimate is, as we have seen, a matter of vigorous debate in theories of reading. It is also a

\textsuperscript{71} See, for example, the apostrophe to ‘vanished Kakania’ on p.28. (‘And what provinces they were! Glaciers and sea, Karst limestone and Bohemian fields of grain . . .’) Also worth noting in this section is the use of \textit{negative description} which, as in Gogol’s writing, leaves the described object in a deliberately ‘median’ vagueness or indeterminacy. Just as Gogol’s Chichikov is not fat but not thin, not old but not young, so Kakania has cars on its roads, but not too many, enjoys luxury, but not too much, and so on.

problem which has commonly been noted in discussions of the adaptation of literary fiction to
the medium of cinema, which cannot help but translate the schematic formations of the text
into optical and auditory perceptions which are highly determinate.

So what would be lost, in the case of these two novels, through an imaginative or
cinematic ‘completion’ of the text? In both novels the gaps in the representation of place
function on a number of levels. For instance we might argue, following Martinez-Bonati’s
account of the rearrangement of ontic spheres, that the suppression of the sensory and spatial
results in both cases in a construction of place as something to be thought rather than
imaginatively perceived. Musil’s Kakania is above all an idea, Coetzee’s South Africa above
all a problem. We might also say that in these novels the incompleteness in the presentation of
space affects the fictional world by depriving it of a certain ‘solidity’ or ‘stability’. Kakania is
a fragile and precarious entity, threatened by history and without secure connection to the
‘real’ of geography. In the case of Disgrace it is more that the unimaginability of South
Africa for the reader is transferred into the fictional world itself, where it there takes on a
broader sense, the country itself at this point in history being not yet understood, opaque and
uncertain, its future unimaginable. Finally, at the most general level, the omission of
concretizing description of space, as we have seen, increases the distance between the
fictional place and its actual namesake by, so to speak, ‘emptying’ the latter and severing our
links of recognition, making it unclear where and to what extent our knowledge can be
extended. At the very least it is clear that without the points of attachment or embedding in
the real which such descriptions provide, the fictional place entertains a much more uncertain
relationship with its correlate.

Because of the complexity of the problems it raises, we have dealt at length with the
incompleteness of places with whose names we are familiar. It is now time to turn to those
fictional worlds in which the map or the atlas gives us no orientation at all. Let us again take
as an example The Castle, which, as has often been observed, has the kind of indeterminacy
of setting which is found in typically pre-modern literary forms such fable and allegory. The
only possible clues as to where, in terms of our familiar geography, the nameless village in
which the action takes place is located are the names of the characters and certain aspects of

73 Obviously some functions of the gaps are specific to each text. For instance, in Disgrace the
cancellation of South Africa as a sensible presence might be seen as determined by the focalization of
the narrative through David Lurie, reflecting the fact that he belongs less to the country in which he
physically resides than to a Europe of the mind. The novel’s overall reticence or ‘minimalism’ is also
connected both to its thematic concern with reduction, divestment, or ‘starting from nothing’, and to
Lurie’s own reflections on the exhaustion of English and its inadequacy for dealing with the realities of
South Africa.
the villagers’ mode of life, which are together suggestive of central Europe or Germany (of course Bohemia is often assumed). There are also in the novel two points at which places on the actual map are mentioned: the first, when the castle official by the name of Sordini is said to be Italian, the second when Frieda suggests to K. that they leave the village and move to the south of France or to Spain. Yet the world of this novel is in other ways so unfamiliar that these suggestions and references in no way warrant the extension of our knowledge beyond what is given in the text. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, everything is done to thwart our reading according to Ryan’s principle of minimal departure. It would be entirely to miss what is achieved through Kafka’s use of indeterminacy if one were to assume from Sordini’s Italianess, or from the existence in this world of castles and churches, that beyond the village lies the familiar geography of Europe and therefore the rest of the world74.

Indeed the only real indication in the novel that there is anything at all outside the limits of the village is K. himself, about whose history all we can say with certainty is that he has come from elsewhere. Like the time before K.’s arrival, the territory that lies beyond the space in which the narrated events occur is radically indeterminate—so much so that the village and castle hill are made to seem situated in a surrounding nothingness, to be located nowhere but within their own bounds. As was suggested in the previous chapter, this thoroughgoing omission of a geographical ‘outside’ works against the sense that what is shown in the novel is a selected segment of a broader world to which the text could potentially refer. It thus seems to run counter to Ingarden’s claim that the represented objects and events ‘always constitute a segment of a still largely undetermined world . . . as if a beam of light were illuminating a part of a region, the remainder of which . . . is still there in its indeterminacy.’75 Instead, the borders of the space constructed in the novel are those of the narrative itself, which commences with K.’s entry from an outside which is prior to the story. The structural parallel between K.’s entry into the village and the reader’s simultaneous entry into the narrative is so strong that the border which K. crosses in passing over the bridge does not seem to be internal to the fictional world—the border, that is, between one part of this world and another—but rather the very border of this fictional world. K.’s entry into the village thus has almost the quality of Genette’s ‘metalepsis’, a passage across a diegetic and not a geographical threshold. The indeterminate ‘outside’ which K. leaves behind in entering

74 Ryan argues elsewhere that if the world constructed by a fictional text contains Paris, then ‘by a law of geographic solidarity it must have France; if it has France, it must have the geography of the entire world’, (Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Possible worlds and accessibility relations: a semantic typology of fiction’, Poetics Today, 12:3, 1991, pp.553-576, 559 footnote.) Certainly nothing is explicitly said in the text which would contradict the assumption that the world of The Castle preserves the geography of the actual world, and thus on Ryan’s terms there is no cause for a ‘departure’ from our given world-knowledge. Yet the novel’s anti-naturalism, its radical use of indeterminacy, and its narrative structure make such an assumption completely inappropriate, as we will see.

75 The Literary Work of Art, 218. My italics.
the village seems as external to the Castle-world as the ‘outside’ which the reader, who is likewise an alien, leaves behind in following the hero across the bridge and into the narrative. In a similar vein, Dorrit Cohn is quite right to say that Frieda’s plea for an elopement to France or to Spain is rejected not only by K., ‘but just as emphatically by the reader’s sense of congruity’76. Indeed it is almost as if Frieda were proposing a sort of ontological trespass. The references to France and Spain do not affirm a spatial continuity which makes the sphere in which the story takes place a segment of a broader world with an implied familiar geography. Rather they seem to reach out of the fictional world and into our own, like another ‘bridge’, revealing at the same time their discontinuity and their peculiar communication.

But to say that the world of the village and the Castle is self-enclosed is not to say that it appears as itself complete; as, so speak, an island of determinacy beyond which lies an indeterminate nothingness. It is true that many of the settings within the village—the Bridge Inn, the taproom and offices of the Gentleman’s Inn, the school, the houses of Barnabas and Brunswick—are given descriptions which render them highly concrete. As Robbe-Grillet observes, the ‘hallucinatory effect’ of Kafka’s writing is due in part to the extreme clarity and precision with which places, objects and gestures are described and thereby made to seem in a stubborn and incontrovertible way ‘there’, making highly problematic the symbolic and oneric readings which they nevertheless seem to invite77. But the space between these settings is not only, like time in the novel, frequently elastic and distorted—quite unlike objective, uniform, mathematical space—but is again extremely indeterminate. The whiteness of snow and darkness of evening which repeatedly descend over these intervening spaces are like physical manifestations within the fictional world of the incompleteness of the narrative. They can thus be seen as examples of what Thomas Pavel calls ‘enacted incompleteness’, the transfer of the inherent incompleteness of fictional representation into the world constructed by the text, where it is thematized, reflected or made a characteristic feature78. This is particularly clear in the case of the Castle itself, whose extreme indeterminacy—the impossibility of establishing it as a stable entity over which one might have any overview or survey, or whose characteristics one might define and delimit—is made a central theme of the novel79. It would be absurd to say that even within the world of the novel the castle is a

76 Dorrit Cohn, ‘Castles and Anti-Castles, or Kafka and Robbe-Grillet’, Novel: A Forum on Fiction, 1971, 19-31, 21. The incongruity of Frieda’s suggestion might also be seen in temporal terms. Through a strange confusion of space and time, what is outside the village is, from the moment K. enters, already in a past which has been left behind.
77 For a New Novel, op. cit., 165.
79 It is the indeterminacy of the castle which lies behind the early interpretation of the novel as a sort of pilgrim’s progress towards the God of negative theology. (A God who, for every attribute, is neither a nor not-a if of course the paradigmatic indeterminate object.) This interpretation has since received
‘complete’ entity. Even if we consider it only in a spatial sense as a physical object (which of course it is not) there is a strong suggestion that its internal architecture is infinite and therefore undeterminable, with always another adjacent office or another threshold beyond the last, without any end or centre. The castle officials, too, are touched by this indeterminacy, as in the case of Klamm, who seems to have no fixed physical appearance of his own beyond the conflicting reports of the villagers. Even for Barnabas, who sees him regularly, Klamm never quite seems to answer to his own description.

If one of the effects of the places of indeterminacy in *The Castle* is to rupture our sense that the space of the novel is akin to real and continuous space, or that the world is ‘complete’ within the fiction, this is also to some extent true of the fictions of Beckett. Yet in Beckett the causality more typically runs in the opposite direction. It is above all the invalidation of the narrator’s utterances through negation, qualification, contradiction and explicit fabulation which undermines the ‘character of reality’ of the represented objects, and with it any sense of their completeness. In the late works there is barely even a residual illusion that what is referred to and described pre-exists the act of reference and exceeds the act of description. The basic building-blocks of a fictional world—‘A place, that again . . . A place, then someone in it’—are explicitly presented as imagined, as brought into being through language simply in order that something may be said of them. They are merely the requisite furniture for a narrative, if it can still be called such, postulated by a voice which is as reluctant as it is compelled to speak. To be said by this voice is to be brought into a precarious and provisional existence which can just as soon be ‘unsaid’ through correction or negation. As for what is not said, it is nothing. The assumption that the places and things referred to have the character of reality has been completely undermined, and with it any sense that there must necessarily be more to them than what is said of them. As the narrator of *Fizzle 5* reminds us explicitly, ‘There is nothing but what is said. Beyond what is said there is nothing.’

much criticism, a good deal of it just; but it would be wrong for this reason to overlook the importance of the castle’s indeterminacy. Purely in formal terms we might see it as what drives the narrative structure of open episodic invention, the necessarily uncompletable accumulation of episodes which can get no closer to the receding and indeterminate object which is the narrative telos.


81 *Fizzle 5*, in *The Complete Short Prose*, op. cit., 236.
4.

Missing thoughts

The thoughts of characters are in one sense simply actions like others, about which the narrative can tell us more or less using a well-known array of techniques: narrating them as events, ‘reproducing’ them as the verbalized inner speech of characters, or transposing them into indirect discourse. Yet these events which occur in the consciousness of characters are importantly different from other events in being something which can only be revealed in fiction. It is actually a remarkable fact that when a fictional narrative fails to reveal the thoughts of a character who is referred to in the third-person that this should be regarded as a silence at all, since in any other form of discourse what has been left unsaid is something unsayable. Outside of the conventions of fiction, all of those phrases which we take for granted in novels—‘he feels’, ‘she thought to herself’, and so on—are impossible or infelicitous speech-acts. Indeed for some writers, such as Käte Hamburger and Dorrit Cohn, the use of verbs denoting mental actions in the third-person is one of the clearest distinguishing features of fictional language. Even if we do not follow Hamburger to her conclusion that the language of fiction is, by virtue of its failure as speech-act, not an utterance at all, and therefore has no narrator, it certainly seems the case that narrative fiction is the only instance in which the ‘subjectivity of a third-person qua third-person can be portrayed. Of course the privilege claimed by fiction to reveal the thoughts of third persons is one which is not always used: certain of Hemingway’s stories are the best-known example of a type of narrative which comes close to revealing nothing about what characters think.

But the fact that modern ‘behaviourist’ and ‘camera eye’ narrative is so often noted as anomalous shows the extent to which the convention governs our expectations.

If fictional narrators often claim the privilege to relate what can only be known to characters, they may also, at the other extreme, provide information which is not, or could not

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83 Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, 83. Homodiegetic narration, which is modelled upon real utterance, and thus precludes the presentation of thoughts other than the narrator’s, is, for Hamburger, a foreign body in fiction; not truly epic, but lyric. Yet there are famous cases where the pragmatic restrictions of this form of narrative are ignored, as when Proust’s Marcel narrates the dying thoughts of Bergotte, which he could not possible know.
84 Particularly ‘Hills Like White Elephants’ and ‘The Killers’, even if the latter contains a few ‘lapses’ where the narrator implicitly reveals a knowledge of Nick’s mind (eg. ‘He had never had a towel in his mouth before’). Ernest Hemingway, *Men Without Women* (New York: Scribner, 1928) 89.
be, part of the characters’ knowledge. The extent to which the knowledge of the characters influences what the narrator is prepared to divulge depends upon what has traditionally been called narrative ‘perspective’, or what Genette rechristens ‘focalization’. Although the visual connotations of Genette’s term, and his unfortunate framing of the question as that of who sees the narrated events, have led to many misunderstandings, focalization should be understood as a relation between what the narrator tells of the story and what the characters know of it. It is only in so-called ‘omniscient’ narrative that there are no restrictions at all on what might be divulged by the narrator, who is not only free to report on the thoughts of any of the characters, but also to inform the reader about what the characters could not possibly be aware of, such as the falsity of their private beliefs or what will occur in the future. Such a panoramic and unrestricted purview on the story Genette terms ‘zero focalization’, although, as William Nelles suggests, it might more aptly be called ‘free’ focalization to convey the range of narrative options which are open to the narrator.85

This is a freedom which can be restricted in either of two ways. In external focalization what is barred from the narrative is the entire subjective dimension of the story which is private to the characters. Genette’s own formulation, that the narrator in this case tells less than what the characters know, is, however, slightly misleading, since although the narrator cannot say what the characters know, she may well provide information which exceeds their possible knowledge. In recounting the story of a blind man, for instance, the narrator would be free to describe what the character is unable to see, but not to inform us that he cannot see, which could only be inferred from his behaviour or speech. The limits of the narrator are those of an external ‘observer’ who lacks the special fictional power of knowing other minds.

In internal focalization, on the other hand, the type of information which is disallowed is precisely that which is inaccessible to the knowledge of a given character. The narrative can tell us anything which the character thinks and feels, can narrate or describe anything which falls within his implied or explicit perception, but can say nothing which logically exceeds his epistemological limitations and thus implies a perspective on the story other than his own. The narrative function of this character whose range of knowledge limits what can be told is nicely captured by Seymour Chatman’s term ‘filter’, which is unfortunately not as widely known as the ‘reflector’ of Henry James, or the ‘focal character’ of Genette.86 The finite knowledge and situationally limited perception of the character filter or select what information about the story and story-world can be disclosed.

86 Seymour Chatman, ‘Characters and Narrators: Filter, Center, Slant and Interest-focus’, Poetics Today 7:2, 1986, 189-204,196. Genette similarly speaks of the focal character as a ‘sort of information-
It should be noted, finally, that these three types of focalization can be used in a strict sense to describe a particular narrative segment (down to the level of the sentence), or in a looser sense to typify the characteristic mode of an entire narrative. For example, the narrative which is characterized by internal focalization will almost always contain passages which could be regarded as externally focalized, where events are narrated without the character’s thoughts being revealed or even implied through the intrusion into the narrative discourse of expressions typical of that character’s thought and speech. When speaking of entire narratives we should thus say that the freely focalized narrative can tell what the characters know and more and less; the internally focalized narrative can tell what the character knows and less, but never more; and the externally focalized narrative can tell more and less, but never what the character knows.

In setting limits to what can be told, focalization clearly has a profoundly important bearing on the kind and frequency of gaps in the fictional narrative. Indeed the rule of focalization which is operating in a narrative is recognized by readers largely by means of the areas of indeterminacy which it entails. Conversely, once this rule is understood it will significantly affect how readers respond to what the narrative leaves untold. This is particularly true of the type of narrative which rose to prominence with the late novels of Henry James: the internally focalized heterodiegetic narrative, or what Stanzel, less cumbersomely, calls the ‘figural’ narrative. As we have already seen in the earlier discussion of Stanzel’s ‘reflector mode’, a great many places of indeterminacy in such narratives will be understood by the reader, once the logic of internal focalization has been grasped, as gaps of knowledge on the part of the reflector. What is not revealed to me I assume is left untold because it does not pass through the ‘filter’ of the character’s limited knowledge and understanding.

It is this unified principle underlying the selection and ordering of information, which can be revealed only if and when it comes to the character’s knowledge, which so appealed to James, providing as it does ‘the sense of a system [which] saves the painter from the baseness of the arbitrary stroke’87. Such arbitrariness is no more evident than when the omniscient narrator, although clearly capable of revealing anything and everything, conceals from the reader relevant narrative information which is later discovered to have been known all along to the characters. By suppressing information on a whim, simply to manipulate the reader’s knowledge for aesthetic effect, the omniscient narrator shows himself to be as ‘irresponsible’

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87 *The Art of the Novel*, op. cit. 89.
as he is ‘majestic’\textsuperscript{88}. In this case the disadvantage of knowledge in which the reader is placed has no intrinsic connection to the material of the story, but is imposed from without through a sort of narrative trick.

When the narrative is filtered through the consciousness of a reflector, on the other hand, the release and suppression of information finds a realistic justification. This has a profound influence on the effect and meaning of the gaps in the text, since their reason is now sought \textit{within} the story as something which follows from the situation or personality of the reflector. Although this is clearest when what is omitted lies outside the reflector’s horizon of knowledge, it is also true of the gaps in the narration and description of what the reflector \textit{is} aware of. To take the case of description, it is always possible to interpret the selective choices made—which parts and attributes of the perceived object are mentioned and which are not—as providing clues to the personality and state of mind of the implied perceiver. Although these selective choices are in fact one of the means by which the focal character is \textit{constructed}, the reader agrees to accept them as if they were \textit{determined} by the character’s filtering consciousness. What finds mention in the description is thus understood as what is particularly salient or notable to the character, relevant to his or her ends and interests, or resonant with his or her mood. What is excluded from the description will tend to be understood, contrarily, as what remains unnoticed or only subordinate in the character’s consciousness: what is unremarkable, familiar, irrelevant, filtered out by mood, unacknowledged, avoided, or unconsciously repressed.

A good example of a descriptive gap of this kind is that of the reflector’s physical appearance, about which the reader is very often left in ignorance. Who could say, for example, what Stephen Dedalus or Joseph K. look like? Given the logic of internal focalization, it is of course not possible for the reflector to be described in a way which exceeds what he or she could be aware of. If a reflector were said to ‘toss her head gracefully’ or to ‘rub her tired-looking eyes’, the descriptive terms would imply a perception and a judgment which are clearly not her own. Such an excess of information with respect to the governing mode of focalization is what Genette terms \textit{paralepsis}\textsuperscript{89}. Yet it is certainly possible, without paralepsis, to describe the reflector as she appears to herself, whether literally (in a mirror) or in her imagination. Now the failure to do so is often so marked that we might see this place of indeterminacy as nothing more than a conventional literary sign—an exaggerated ‘invisibility’ which serves to divide the cast of characters into the one who perceives and those who are perceived, thus emphasizing the narrative function of the former. But exaggerated as it often is, the gap here nevertheless has a clear realistic motivation.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid. 328.
\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Figures III}, op. cit. 211-213.
Because what is familiar or habitual to us remains for the most part unthematized, or below the level of consciousness, what is most familiar to the reflector often remains unmentioned, while the new, the unexpected, or the unfamiliar vision of the familiar rises to prominence. In other words, the density of description mimes the phenomenology of perception. It is for this reason that the characters and settings whose descriptions are left most indeterminate are often those which the reflector knows too well to ‘see’. Descriptive gaps in the figural narrative thus have a very different meaning from those we encounter, for instance, in the nineteenth-century ‘omniscient’ narrative. Because, in the latter, the narrator’s account is not exclusively bound to the consciousness of characters, but is directed at informing an ignorant reader, the number of words devoted to the description of a thing is a much more reliable indicator of its importance in the story. (On being introduced by the narrator for the first time, for example, the minor character will merit a short description, the major character a longer one.) In the internally focalized narrative, by contrast, the detail with which a thing is described is less a gauge of its narrative centrality than of its subjective salience.

The indeterminacies which construct a sense of the reflector’s familiar world are also strikingly evident in the unexplained references we often encounter in narrative openings; for instance, the use of pronouns to refer to characters and objects which have not yet been identified, or the use of the definite article for objects which have had no prior mention. Although not restricted to the figural situation, these grammatical peculiarities very often signal the presence of a focal character. If we take a typical opening of this sort—‘She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue’—we might immediately ask in confusion, Who sat at the window? And which window? Which avenue? The sentence here presents the situation as if the answer to these questions were already known, but it is not the reader’s familiarity which it presupposes. The unexplained pronoun and definite articles refer to an unspoken context and prehistory to the events, the knowledge of which we assume is stored in the consciousness of a reflector. And since the reflector is not engaged in an act of communication, she has no responsibility to recapitulate what she knows in order to make it accessible to the reader. These opening indeterminacies which are presented in the guise of the determined throw the reader immediately into a world already known.

Since the gaps in figural narrative force us to ask both whether and how they are attributable to the reflector, they often pose a considerable interpretative challenge. Let us

consider an example, drawn again from Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. In discussions of the novel a number of writers have assumed that Melanie Isaacs, the young student with whom the focal character David Lurie has an affair which costs him his job and reputation, is, within the racial categories of apartheid South Africa, a Coloured. This rests on several clues, the strength of which could only be judged by those more familiar with South African society: the descriptions of Melanie and her family, her apparent casting in a university play as a Cape Malay, and Lurie’s etymological musing on her name as ‘the dark one’. If we accept that this evidence is strong enough to support the assumption, then what we have here is an implicitly signalled gap in the explicit determination of this character. Neither in Lurie’s presented thoughts, nor in the descriptions which are focalized through him, is his student’s racial background selected for mention. (The nearest we come is the description of Melanie’s cheekbones as ‘almost Chinese’ in appearance). Compared with the weightier silences in the text, this one is perhaps of only minor importance; yet given the shadow South African history casts across the novel, and the highly charged racial-sexual politics which surround the rape of Lurie’s daughter Lucy, the unspecified ethnicity of Melanie is at least intriguing. If Lurie’s sexual conduct towards Melanie transgresses not only the codes governing intergenerational and teacher-student relations, but also the racial taboos of the old South Africa, this would both strengthen and complicate the disturbing resonance between Lurie’s ‘not quite’ rape of his student and his daughter’s later violation by three black assailants.

So why, though implied, is this detail omitted? The most obvious interpretation is that the silence here reflects the unimportance of this distinction to the focal character, indicating to us that this is not the way he thinks or the kind of thing he notices. Thus Derek Attridge takes the non-mention of Melanie’s race to suggest that Lurie is free from the ‘classificatory syndrome which afflicts so many South Africans’. This straightforward reading is not implausible; throughout the novel race plays no prominent part in Lurie’s classifications of others, with the important exception of his and Lucy’s attackers. Yet there is also evidence against it. At the point in the narrative when Melanie first appears, Lurie has already twice selected from an escort agency prostitutes who are advertised as ‘exotic’, which shows that he is certainly not oblivious to race when it comes to his sexual desires. In this case we are faced with the very different possibility that Lurie’s predilection for ‘exotic’ women is so habitual or ingrained that in his appraisal of Melanie the racial distinction is one which is not particularly marked. As a student she stands out to him as ‘unengaged’ and ‘strikingly

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93 Derek Attridge, ibid., 317
dressed’, but as an object of desire she is only one exotic beauty among others. A third possibility is that the gap in the description indicates, not something overlooked or unremarkable, but something which Lurie suppresses or disavows. It is true that Lurie does not shy from other uncomfortable thoughts about his liaison with his student, acknowledging its paedophilic, quasi-incestuous, and even, to a limited extent, its violatory character. But it could be that certain culturally imbued racial-sexual fantasies and prejudices lie too deep for him to see, or are too repugnant to his confessed beliefs for him to acknowledge. In other words, Melanie’s race in this case would be something Lurie does not want to notice or reflect upon.

In each of these hypothetical readings it is the ‘filter’ of Lurie’s consciousness which is seen as responsible for the gap we are assuming to have been left in the description. But what if this gap is not attributable to the focal character? Even if what we are given in the description of Melanie is what Lurie sees and knows of her, might there not be more to what he thinks than is revealed, as indeed there is at other points in the narrative? The question here comes down to how we understand the role of the narrator in a narrative as ‘purely’ figural as this, where even apparently straightforward narrative sentences are occasionally hijacked in mid-stream by the verbal consciousness of the focal character, who selects the words which complete them94. As Stanzel argues, the voice of the narrator in the figural narrative is often so muted, or so inextricable from the consciousness and verbal style of the focal character, that it no longer makes sense to speak of the ‘dual voice’ of free indirect style, with its demand on the reader to distinguish which elements of discourse are attributable to the narrator and which to the character95.

But if the question ‘Whose words?’ loses its pertinence with this convergence of narrator’s and character’s language, the attribution of the silences in the text remains more uncertain. In other words, we have to ask whether the gap in the description of Melanie reveals a selective decision which is independent of, and thus in competition with, the selective principle of focalization. Whether we attribute this decision to the narrator or the author does not matter here; the point is that the suppression of information would be external

94 For example, ‘Her hips and breasts are now (he searches for the best word) ample’, or ‘He remembers Melanie…drinking the coffee with the shot-glass of whisky in it that was intended to—the word comes up reluctantly—lubricate her’ (Disgrace, 59, 168, ellipsis mine). In the second sentence what begins as a fairly typical narrator’s report of non-verbal thought ends up coinciding with Lurie’s verbal consciousness, as if it were Lurie who is narrating his own act of memory in the third person. The internal focalization of Disgrace is also particularly ‘pure’ in other ways, such as the consistent reference to Lurie (in non-attributed discourse) as ‘he’, which accords with both Stanzel’s and Genette’s observation that there is in figural narrative an increased use of pronoun over name to refer to the focal character. This may be because the name is a more ‘externalizing’ referring expression, being further from how we think of ourselves, or refer to ourselves in thought. Use of the proper name certainly seems to make the narrative function more prominent.

and ‘strategic’ rather than internal and characterological. To ask why the gap has been left
would thus require us to consider its possible intended effects on the reader—or perhaps,
more specifically, its effect on South African readers, since the silences in a text often speak
in a very particular way to an audience which they also imply. It may be, for example, that, in
conforming to a certain ‘official’ censorship of racial distinctions, the silence asks South
African readers to consider to what extent the historical divisions, privileges and prejudices of
race continue to operate under the cover of this ban. Does the racial difference, which is left
unspoken, affect the meaning of the relationship between Lurie and Melanie, or is this simply
a matter of what occurs between an ageing male teacher and his young female student? How
much does Melanie’s race matter? Ultimately this is a question which has been left for the
reader to decide; and since it is not even clear that the question should be raised, whatever
response the reader chooses will uncomfortably implicate him or herself.

If we do choose to see this implied silence as being independent of focalization then
we of course have no way of knowing what, if anything, David Lurie thinks about Melanie’s
race. Instead of reflecting a gap in his thoughts, the silence becomes a possible gap of his
thoughts—a point where we are told less than what the focal character is conscious of. This
leads us to the opposite, and much commoner, type of infraction against the code of internal
focalization which Genette, adapting the rhetorical term, calls paralipsis. In the broad sense,
paralipsis covers any kind of lateral omission in the narrative, where it is not some period of
story time which is omitted, as in the ellipsis, but rather a constitutive element of a situation
or event which is narrated. As a breach of internal focalization, however, it refers specifically
to ‘the omission of some important thought or action of the focal hero, which neither the hero
nor the narrator can ignore, but which the narrator chooses to hide from the reader’96. In other
words, paralipsis is the deprivation of information which the reader legitimately expects,
given the presumed equivalence of what the narrator tells of the story and what the focal
character knows of it.

From a naturalistic point of view there must of course be innumerable thoughts of the
character which the narrator omits on the grounds of irrelevance, just as there are many others
which need not be made explicit because they can be readily inferred from action. But when
the omitted thought is relevant to our understanding of the story and can not be easily
inferred, then we have a sense of deliberate concealment. So how do we know that some
thought of the focal character has been concealed in this way? For Genette, the simple answer
is that we are told so. In all of the examples he chooses to illustrate this figure, the omission is
one which is ultimately laid bare by the narrator, who reveals, late in the piece, that the

character has been in possession all along of significant knowledge which we would expect to have been apprised of earlier. Paralipsis is thus essentially a matter of narrative order—an incompleteness of the narrative which is revealed through a retrospective, or ‘analeptic’, completion. In Stendhal’s *Armance*, for example, the unhappiness of the character Octave, whose thoughts are presented in detail throughout the narrative, is only finally revealed to be due to sexual impotence, despite the fact that he could hardly have been aware of his distress without also thinking of its cause. Having led us to believe that we are privy to all of the character’s most important thoughts, the narrator withholds this crucial piece of knowledge for the purely aesthetic purpose of surprise—an act of James’ ‘irresponsible authorship’ if ever there was one.

The reason why Genette restricts paralipsis to revealed omissions of this kind is no doubt because only these are guaranteed by the text and thus free from psychological speculations which go beyond a pure narratology. In discussing Camus’ *L’Etranger*, for example, Genette argues that we can only call the near absence of information about the narrator-hero’s emotions and interpretations a paralipsis of his thoughts if we assume, tendentiously, that Meursault does in fact have thoughts and feelings which he chooses not to tell—that there is more to the story, in a psychological sense, than what the reader is given. To see a lack of psychological information as concealment of thoughts is always an interpretive move, and one which in this case normalizes the character of the hero by explaining his peculiar blankness as an effect of narrative omissions.

However, the essential point about paralipsis, for Genette, is surely that it is a point of divergence from the code of focalization which the narrative has established—a challenge to our expectations akin to the accidental note in tonal music. Because the dominant ‘key’ in *L’Etranger* is focalization through Meursault’s perceptions, but very little through his reflections and his feelings, it is those passages in which he does interpret and emote which strike us as unusual. If, by contrast, we are given almost constant access to the focal character’s thoughts, the points in the narrative which break the rule will be those in which this access is apparently withdrawn. The clearest example of this is where some unexpected or significant action of the focal character is narrated without the motives or the moment of decision being revealed. Such ‘externalizing’ moments have been explained in various ways. Without them, as Jean Pouillon pointed out, the internally focalized narrative faces the danger of a character who, being too transparent, is incapable of surprising us—a danger not only to aesthetic interest, but also to the realist illusion that the character’s psychology extends beyond the fraction of it that has been revealed. (Convincing surprise is, of course, Forster’s

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97 *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, op. cit. 124.
chief criterion of a character’s ‘roundness’.) Unless the focal character retains some opacity the reader is also deprived of the space for interpretation and imaginative projection which makes him or her an active ‘co-creator’ of the work. And finally, such gaps are often left in order to avoid the weak specification of motives which are too complex, or too vital to the meaning of the narrative as a whole, to be made explicit.

But however the enigmatic motives of the focal character are justified or explained, the question here is whether the omission in such cases is ‘external’ or ‘internal’. The problem with calling this kind of silence a paralipsis is, again, that it assumes the self-transparency of the focal consciousness. Even if we are justified in assuming that the action of the focal character must have a motive, this does not necessarily mean that the motive is known any better to the character than it is to us. To remain with Disgrace, let us take the example of the scene in which David Lurie prostrates himself before the mother and sister of Melanie Isaacs. This is certainly a surprising action, and one whose motives are left largely to the reader’s interpretation, since the only reflection of Lurie’s we are given is his wondering, as he stretches on the floor, if his gesture is ‘enough’. But enough, we need to ask, for what? Enough to show his genuine atonement for what he has done to the daughter? Enough to satisfy Mr Isaacs, at whose prompting he carries out the apology? Enough to fulfil the ‘state of disgrace’ which he is trying to accept as his way of being? It could be any or all of these: we do not know. But nor is it clear that we are at any disadvantage, in our ignorance, to the focal character himself. In other words, it is impossible to say whether the silence here follows from internal focalization—a necessary silence about what David Lurie does not know or understand—or runs against it by withholding some of what he thinks.

Yet if the paralipsis here is uncertain, there are other cases in which it would be difficult to argue that the reader has not been deprived of important knowledge held by the focal character, even though the omission is not retrospectively revealed. A striking example which we have looked at in the previous chapters is The Castle. Here we have a novel which is generally taken as a paradigm of Stanzel’s figural situation, where almost nothing is narrated which does not appear to or in K.’s consciousness. And yet this mind which we would expect to be transparent is often extraordinarily opaque. Take the following passage from early in the novel in which K., who has claimed to the Castle authorities that his assistant surveyors will be arriving shortly, is introduced by his innkeeper to two men, quite unknown to him, who are presented as being these very assistants.

99 This view of The Castle is not uncontested. There are in fact a number of passages and locutions in the novel which imply a narrator with knowledge in excess of what K. could know; most notably the brief continuation of the narrative after K. has fallen asleep in the episode with Bürgel. For a survey of the argument over these passages, see Eric Miller, ‘Without a Key: The Narrative Structure of Das Schloß’, The Germanic Review, 66:3, 1991, 132-140.
“Who are you?” he [K.] asked, glancing from one to the other. “Your assistants,” they answered.
“Those are the assistants,” confirmed the landlord softly. “What?” asked K., “you are the old assistants whom I told to join me and am expecting?” They affirmed this. “It’s a good thing,” said K., after a little while. “It’s a good thing that you’ve come.” “By the say,” said K., after another little while, “you’re very late, you’ve been most negligent!”


The psychological omissions here are of course the two ellipses in the narrative before K. speaks, first, bafflingly, to accept the two men who have been assigned to him as his ‘old assistants’, then to scold them. If these two ‘little whiles’ signify anything, it is surely a moment of decision on K.’s part to which the reader has not been made privy. How K. has interpreted the motives of the Castle, and how he has assessed his options in responding to the bluff, we simply do not know.

What makes this enigmatic scene particularly interesting is that it occurs in the portion of the novel which the manuscript reveals was originally narrated by the character we now know as K. Apparently changing his mind about his initial choice of person mid-way through chapter three, Kafka rewrote the existing draft with a heterodiegetic narrator, a revision which involved almost no amendments but the substitution of the pronoun ‘I’ by ‘K.’ and ‘he’. As one of the few non-anecdotal examples of an author’s decision to make this conversion, the manuscript of *The Castle* has been of considerable interest in the study of narrative, providing a test case for comparing the advantages and disadvantages of these two types of narration. For the purposes of this study, the change in Kafka’s manuscript leads us to consider, as a final question, the extent to which the choice of a homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrator affects the way in which the gaps in the narrative appear to the reader. In other words, what difference would it make in this passage if it were K. himself who failed to tell us his own thoughts? How does the category of ‘person’ affect the places of indeterminacy? To make it easier to approach this question without seeing K’s through the I’s, here is Kafka’s original version:

“Who are you?” I asked, glancing from one to the other. “Your assistants,” they answered. “Those are the assistants,” confirmed the landlord softly. “What?” I asked, “you are the old assistants whom I told to join me and am expecting?” They affirmed this. “It’s a good thing,” I said after a little while, “it’s a

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good thing that you’ve come.” “By the say,” I said, after another little while, “you’re very late, you’ve been most negligent!”

Now the ease of Kafka’s ‘transvocalization’ of the narrative is due to the extreme effacement of the original homodiegetic narrator. As narrator of the ‘Urschloss’, K. makes no reference to his situation in the narrating present, expresses no opinions or judgments, and reveals no knowledge of the events he narrates in excess of what he could have known as he experienced them. In other words, the narrative is strictly focalized through the experiencing self, whose perspective on events eclipses the mediation of the narrating self, exactly as in the typical figural situation. For Genette, who tends to dismiss the importance often given to the category of person, it in fact makes little difference in the internally focalized narrative whether the narrator is homo- or heterodiegetic. In his discussion of Agatha Christie’s The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, for example, he argues that the trick which is played on the reader does not lie in having the murderer’s identity hidden behind the narrator, but rather in having the narrative focalized through the murderer, while concealing essential information which this focalization ought to include—namely, the focal character’s knowledge of his guilt. The misleading effect of the paralipsis would thus be exactly the same had Christie chosen a heterodiegetic narrator with clearly indicated internal focalization. And the same argument, one might assume, would apply to the effect of Kafka’s change of person on the paralipsis in the scene above. In fact Genette names The Castle among other internally focalized heterodiegetic narratives which might be rewritten in the first person (or, more precisely, returned to it) without the change of voice being ‘such a catastrophe’.

In an early discussion of Kafka’s manuscript Dorrit Cohn puts forward the very different argument that the paralipses in the narrative are far more incongruous in the first-person version than in its final ‘K. revision’. While it is justifiable, for the sake of suspense, for a homodiegetic narrator to withhold the truth about the events he experienced—in other words, to focalize the narrative through his own earlier and still ignorant self, concealing the knowledge he has since acquired—it would, she argues, ‘be entirely illogical for him to withhold the truth about his own inner being, to feign ignorance of his own conscious motives and desires’. But by presenting himself as a psychological mystery, this is precisely what Kafka’s I-narrator does. The logic which is thereby broken, for Cohn, is the identity of the narrator and character, which is only maintained by the thread of memory that assures the continuity of the self. When the narrated or experiencing self is presented as opaque, the mnemonic connection with the narrator is broken and the ‘I’ is put under an intolerable strain.

102 Narrative Discourse Revisited, op. cit. 67.
103 Ibid. 112.
Thus when it is K. who narrates his introduction to Artur and Jeremias, his silence about his motives for accepting them as his old assistants ‘becomes unacceptable’\textsuperscript{105}.

But Cohn’s objection to Kafka’s original draft is surely much too strong, unless one also regards as ‘unacceptable’ the near absence of psychological information in narratives such as \textit{L’Etranger} or the homodiegetic novels of Dashiell Hammett. This is not to deny the peculiarity of the psychological silence in these narratives, however we choose to interpret it—whether as the narrator’s concealment of his thoughts and emotions, as due to the narrator’s alienation from his own earlier self, or as due to a genuine lack of reflections and feelings to recount. But this peculiarity could hardly be called ‘illogical’. If that applies to anything it would be the combination of homodiegesis with pure external focalization, where the perspective on the narrated events does not coincide at all with the narrator’s perceptual field or possible knowledge (eg. ‘From a distance I seemed to be absorbed in reading a book, apparently unaware of the pistol aimed at my back.’). Moreover, it is not clear that the peculiarity of the abovementioned narratives is ultimately due to voice. Would not an internally focalized \textit{heterodiegetic} narrative, which tells only what is perceived by a focal character, but nothing at all of his thoughts, equally challenge our expectations of what we ‘should’ be told in an internally focalized narrative? The only significant difference would be that if we interpret the silence about the character’s thoughts as an omission, and not as indicating an absence of thought, then the \textit{impersonality} of the heterodiegetic narrator makes it pointless to engage in psychological speculations about this omission. While we might ask whether Meursault’s silence about his innermost thoughts reveals an extreme self-alienation, or whether the reticence of Chandler’s narrators about their thoughts and feelings reflects a ‘hard boiled’ persona, there is no similar question we can ask about the impersonal narrator.

The psychological silence in the \textit{Urschloss} is obviously quite different from these two later examples in being \textit{intermittent}, rather than consistent. Cohn is well aware of this inconsistency in the I-narrator’s treatment of his thoughts, pointing out the strange suddenness with which the narrative withdraws from ‘inner discourse to impersonal account’, or from

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{105} Ibid. 36. Cohn treats the peculiar paralepses and paralipses in the \textit{Urschloss} as if they were an oversight which, when Kafka noticed them, forced his revision. In having the narrator use expressions of doubt or ignorance regarding himself (eg. ‘I seemed altogether indifferent’) Kafka was ‘apparently forgetting that the self cannot “appear” to the self; but only to others’. However, not only is it extremely unlikely that Kafka forgot anything of the sort, but such expressions are equally at odds with the logic of the figural situation (if not with our sense of what is logically sayable, as is ‘I seemed’). In fact, after the deletion of the last ‘I’ in the manuscript such locutions almost disappear, meaning that the continuation of the manuscript could be less incongruously translated into the homodiegetic voice than the chapters which were originally narrated by K! (We are leaving aside here the anomalous description of K. asleep in Chapter 23.) What seems much more likely is that Kafka was experimenting with a form of ‘self-alienated’ first-person narration, marked by quite radical moments of external focalization, but decided for whatever reason to discontinue the experiment and return to the figural situation he used in \textit{The Trial}.
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transparency to opacity. In fact the paralipses in these opening chapters are so frequent and so large that they do not appear merely as occasional infractions of the implicit code of focalization, but make uncertain which code is actually operating. It is this, I would argue, which makes the narrator’s concealments so troubling and disorienting—and they are just as much so in the final heterodiegetic version. Because of the internal focalization, our understanding of the events, and also our sympathies, are aligned with K., who is trying, like us, to make sense of an alien world. Yet the consciousness through which we have access to the events is in many respects as enigmatic to us as it is to the villagers. K.’s concealment of his motives from those he meets is played out, in a parallel way, on the reader, who is thus left at a double disadvantage, since placed in the position of ignorance of both parties, deprived of any secure perspective from which to grasp the story. Our expectation of enlightenment is repeatedly raised by the transparency of the focal character, only to be frustrated by the omission of those thoughts which would most help us make sense of his actions.

Since one can only assume that this inconsistency does seem more ‘unacceptable’ to Cohn in the homodiegetic version, this may be because self-narration carries with it, for her, an additional expectation, perhaps derived from its kinship with autobiography, that the narrator will reveal his thoughts if he knows them or inform us if he does not. If the reader feels this ‘confessional’ expectation, it will no doubt add to the incongruity of the paralipses. But the variability of readers’ response to Kafka’s manuscript is strikingly illustrated by Stanzel’s reading of exactly the same scene. Like Cohn, Stanzel believes that the logic of homodiegetic narration leads us to expect that the narrator will justify his actions and account for all essential thoughts, the reason in this case being that the homodiegetic narrator is personalized. He is an identifiable person—this character—who is telling us the story. As we saw in an earlier chapter, Stanzel argues that in personal narration, we ‘tend to place our trust in the narrator when it comes to selecting the most important events and deciding what will be represented and what is to remain undetermined or blank’106. This presumption of a reliable guide to the story is sufficiently strong, for Stanzel, that the two pauses in the first-person version of K.’s meeting with the assistants do not appear as omissions at all. Rather, the ‘two replies to the assistants come only after an appropriate pause, which at most serves to make clear to the two the proper distance [i.e. social distance] between them and the first-person narrator’107. It is only in the final version, when there is no longer a personalized narrator to guarantee that no important information has been omitted, that the pauses before K. speaks become true places of indeterminacy.

107 Ibid. 212.
If we must, again, accept the authenticity of this response, Stanzel’s reading is nevertheless at odds with both his own theory of narrative and with Kafka’s text. As we saw from our earlier discussion of Stanzel’s ‘teller-mode’, the reason why we trust the personal narrator to provide us with all necessary information is because he or she is an ‘audible presence’ who is overtly engaged in a communicative act. Yet the narrator of the *Urschloss* is no less discreet than the impersonal narrator of the figural version, remaining silent about his current knowledge and circumstances, providing no justification of his narrative choices, and focussing all attention on the narrative present of his experiencing self. Indeed the only thing which *does* draw attention back to the narrating act is its deficiencies. It is in the act of *not-telling* that the narrator becomes temporarily manifest—and it is here that his identifiability in the homodiegetic version may indeed make a difference. From the beginning of the *Urschloss* the I-narrator has over and again failed to explain his actions and provide information which would normally be regarded as essential, to the point where his reliability as a narrator *as well* as his reliability as an actor in the story is seriously in question. Because the ‘I’ who conceals his thoughts from the landlord and assistants, inscrutably accepting their preposterous claim, is the same ‘I’ who conceals his thoughts from the reader, playing with us a parallel game, this unreliability is redoubled, making the narrator-character seem both more of a schemer and more thoroughly opaque, since is he is so on two levels. In the heterodiegetic version, by contrast, our attention is likely to be focussed more upon the content of the omitted thought than on the act of omission itself. What tactics has K. decided upon here and to what ultimate end? If we ask in addition *why* this information has been omitted, this is not a question which refers us back to the narrator’s character, since the narrator, being impersonal, has none. It is rather a question about the aesthetic design and meaning of the narrative, for which responsibility lies with the implied author.

On this reading, then, the effect of vocal selection (or ‘person’) on the psychological silences is different from, and less extreme, than Cohn and Stanzel argue, but also more significant than is allowed by Genette. In the homodiegetic version the omission is something which someone has not told me, whereas in the heterodiegetic version it is simply, in the passive, something which has not been told. We have seen how, in the passage from the *Urschloss*, the narrator’s evasiveness about his own thoughts mirrors his evasive behaviour as a character, thus strengthening our perception of his ‘trickiness’ in both capacities. But if the act of narration is tainted by the unreliability the narrator displays as a character, this is will affect in a very important way the meaning of the more fundamental gaps in the narrative. The suggestion in the previous chapter was that these gaps in the narrative—above all, the gap of K.’s past—were so pronounced, and so strangely naturalized within the world of the story, that they seemed to pass over into that world and deprive it of its illusory completeness.
The time before K.’s arrival and the spatial realm beyond the village are as if missing from the fictional world. In the original draft of the novel, however, this effect seems to me to be considerably weakened. Since there is here an identifiable agent whom we can charge with the omission, and one tainted by the unreliability of his acting self, the gaps will tend to be viewed instead as *gaps in the telling*. In other words, the narrator’s past is something which he *conceals* from the reader in the same way his narrated self conceals it from the villagers. It may also be that the *retrospective* nature of homodiegetic narration helps to naturalize this omission of the past which is so arresting in the final version. Because the narrator has a continuity of identity with the narrated self, this continuity is also projected back into the narrative prehistory. If homodiegetic narration logically guarantees that the I-narrator must *still* exist in a narrating present—a time, after the narrated events, about which we know nothing—then by extension he would seem also to have an existence in the indeterminate time which precedes his arrival in the village.

This reading thus adopts elements of Cohn’s and Stanzel’s—the temporal distinction of homodiegetic narration and the identifiability of the I-narrator—but interprets them in quite a different light. The failure of Kafka’s original I-narrator to reveal his thoughts is by no means illogical, but nor does the personalization of the narrator reassure us of the completeness of the information he provides. Yet, *pace* Genette, the homodiegetic voice does significantly alter the meaning of the narrative by shifting the locus of the gaps more clearly from the fictional world to the narrator’s words.
Conclusion

If we cast our minds back to the beginning of this study we will recall how Roman Ingarden suggested, alongside his official definition of the term, a subtler and less stringent understanding of the places of indeterminacy in the literary work. No longer are the Unbestimmtheitsstellen simply the infinite number of truth-value gaps which are inevitably left in the fictional object by the finite fictional text—the peculiar ‘holes’ in the events it recounts, or the persons and places and things it describes. Instead, Ingarden asks whether different works or genres of fiction might not be distinguished according to the kinds of places of indeterminacy they select, by the greater or lesser number they contain, and by characteristic regularities in the way they are deployed. In other words, the places of indeterminacy are now viewed as both an aesthetic feature of the literary work and as one of its poetic ‘materials’. When they are understood in this way, Ingarden suggests, they might open a whole new field of study for literary theory and criticism. They are something which can be classified, whose use and effects can be analysed, and the examination of which may even help to clarify the distinctions between different narrative types.

In the course of this study we have clearly travelled a long way from Ingarden’s original understanding of the places of indeterminacy. While the philosophical arguments over incompleteness with which we began have continued to provide us with a background set of problems—above all, the problem of what we can assume to lie beyond the limits of what the narrative tells us—it is the second understanding of the places of indeterminacy which has been the object of our interest. In fact the examination of the types and modes of leaving-out in Chapters Two to Four could be seen as an attempt to develop and justify precisely the sort of literary ‘gap analysis’ which Ingarden proposes.

Although the typology I have set out makes no claim to being complete or entirely systematic, it has hopefully identified some of the most important kinds of place of indeterminacy: those which belong to the strictly narrative function of recounting events and accounting for time; those which belong to the broadly ‘descriptive’ function of determining objects, places and states of affairs; and those which pertain to the ‘psycho-narrative’ function of representing consciousness. For each of these types of gap I have tried to provide examples of the ways in which they can be deliberately deployed or artistically manipulated, while at the same time showing how the narrative’s characteristic patterns of omission are frequently determined by basic formal choices, such as the mode of focalization and the type of narrator. If these formal elements of narrative typically generate different sorts and different ‘regularities’ of leaving-out, they also, as we have seen, have a fundamentally important
influence on the way in which the areas of indeterminacy are grasped by the reader. How the narrative is focalized, whether the narrator is personalized or impersonal, and whether or not the narrator belongs to the world of the story’s characters, to a large extent determine how we explain or attribute the gaps and thus the sort of interpretation they require.

It is only when we have clarified this connection between the form of the narrative and its places of indeterminacy that can we begin to speak meaningfully about the effects of the gaps. The most familiar of these effects is no doubt the arousal of the reader’s curiosity, which is the basic motor of narrative dynamics—the pattern of enticement, frustration, delay and reward which is typical of each narrative genre. But while the manipulation of the will to know is obviously fundamental to any discussion of the gaps, the focus of this study has not primarily been such questions of plotting and movement, which have already been well studied. In speaking of the effects of the gaps I have wanted instead to go back to Ingarden’s original concern with what the places of indeterminacy mean for our understanding of fictional objects, only recasting this problem as an aesthetic, rather than a strictly logical, one. The aim, in other words, has been to investigate how the gaps in the narrative affect what I have broadly called the ‘ontological appearance’ of the fictional world: our sense of its completeness or incompleteness, its ‘flatness’ or ‘depth’, its particularity or universality, its concreteness or its vagueness. I have tried, too, to show the importance of the gaps in situating the fictional world with regard to our naturalistic assumptions: in establishing its distance or proximity to the world we know; in styling it as a self-enclosed and autonomous realm or as one continuous with the actual world and its history; and in determining how familiar, how strange, or how undecideable the fictional world might be.

Since much of the discussion in the previous chapters has been both detailed and tied to specific texts, there seems little point here in recapitulating what we have found and revisiting earlier examples. Moreover, because the pattern of leaving out in every narrative is no less unique than the fictional world it constructs, it is difficult to make useful general claims about the relation between them. For this reason I would like to end on a deliberately practical note with a reading of a single short narrative, the analysis of which will provide an opportunity to review some of the themes of the earlier chapters and to make some concluding remarks.

**The story of Isaac**

In the first chapter of *Mimesis* Erich Auerbach famously contrasts the scene of Odysseus’ homecoming in the *Odyssey* with the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac, arguing that
these two ancient texts represent two fundamentally opposed narrative styles. Whereas the basic impulse in Homer is towards a ‘uniform illumination’ of phenomena which seems to leave no aspect of the story hidden or unexpressed, the story of Isaac is presented as if in a heightened chiaroscuro, with a few decisive moments in the action being sharply illuminated against an obscure and mysterious ‘background’. In other words, it is the extent and the importance of what the narrator is prepared to leave unsaid which sets the second narrative apart. The critical points in the story are left largely unexplained, the passage between them is compressed or omitted, their history and context is not given, the personae are not introduced, and the whole of it is told without description, digression or narrative redundancy. Aside from the illustrative value which the Biblical narrative therefore has, it is also short enough to quote in full:

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.
And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou has not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and beheld behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

When reading this brief account, even without the benefit of Auerbach’s comparison, it is impossible not to be struck by how little we are told. After a single piece of commentary on the action which is to follow—that ‘God did tempt Abraham’—the narrator proceeds to recount the events without providing any further interpretation and without making any further claim to know the thoughts or intentions of the actors. There is no setting of scene and

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109 *Old Testament*, King James version, *Genesis* 22
no exposition of narrative premises. Instead, the action begins with God’s calling of Abraham’s name and Abraham’s response, ‘Behold, here I am’. But immediately we might ask, as Auerbach does, where is this ‘here’ from which Abraham responds? And how, and from what place, does the voice of God make itself heard? Whereas in Homer we would find each character situated in some specific location, engaged in some activity and particularized according to some epithet, here all that is made perceptible to the reader are two placeless and unqualified utterances.

If the indeterminacy in the opening situation is immediately striking, the ellipsis which follows God’s giving of the command is just as much so, since what is lost in this silent interval is Abraham’s immediate response to what he has been called to do. Does he meekly assent? Does he cry out in anguish? The opportunity here to reveal the strength of Abraham’s faith and the significance of its testing seems to have been deliberately passed over. Yet even if Abraham were given voice at this point it would perhaps help little to clarify his state of mind. We have only to look elsewhere in the narrative to see that speech conceals far more than it reveals about the speaker’s thoughts and intentions. What does Abraham mean, for example, when he tells his son that God will provide a lamb for the offering on the mountain? Is this a reassuring lie, a metaphoric truth, or does Abraham genuinely trust that God will have mercy? The direct discourse of characters is not, as it is in Homer, a full and explanatory externalization of their thoughts, but an indication of thoughts which remain hidden. Speech is not explanation but act, and no less mysterious than other actions in terms of its intentions or origins.

After the aforementioned ellipsis, which presumably covers the period of time until the following day, Abraham rises ‘early in the morning’ to prepare for his journey and sets out. Then, abruptly, ‘on the third day’ he lifts his eyes to see the place which God has designated for the sacrifice. Between Abraham’s departure and this first glimpse of the mountain lie some three days of travelling about which we have been told nothing. Omitted in all its details, the journey is, Auerbach writes, like a ‘silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath, a process which has no present, which is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead’110. Although we are given the name of the travellers’ destination, we do not know whence they have come, nor anything about the landscape through which they have passed. In both a spatial and temporal sense, it is as if the journey ‘took place through a vacuum’.

As for the various objects in the story, they, too, are completely indeterminate beyond the function they serve in executing God’s command. They are mere named particulars:

110 Auerbach, 10
‘serving-men, ass, wood, and knife, and nothing else.’ In fact the only person or object
particularized in any way is Isaac, who is described, in God’s words to Abraham, as ‘thine
only son whom thou lovest’. But since the sole purpose of this information is to tell us how
terrible is the test of Abraham’s obedience and faith, it reveals nothing at all about what Isaac
is like in his own right—for example, how old he is, of what character, or how loving and
faithful a son. What is missing here is clearly much more than descriptive ornament. Without
knowing even whether Isaac is a young boy or a grown man we have no way of imagining
how he might respond to what is done to him on the mountain in Moriah, which remains a
fundamental mystery. Does he struggle and plead with his father, or does he knowingly and
willingly submit? How is it even possible for Abraham to subdue him? What we are told
about the final moments leading to the sacrifice has a brevity which is almost intolerable. To
the list of other preparatory tasks is added the bald statement that Abraham ‘bound his son
Isaac and laid him on the altar’, as if this action required no more explanation, no more
dilation, than the splitting and piling of wood.

Salience
Already we can see in this single narrative all of the most important types of gap discussed in
the previous chapters. To the first group belong the ellipsis and the gap in exposition of
narrative antecedents, although we should note here that the latter would be diminished if we
took into account what has already been told of Abraham’s history in the earlier chapters of
Genesis. In the second category, which is broader and less well-defined, are all those places
of indeterminacy which are not strictly temporal—in other words, where it is not some period
of time which is left indeterminate, but some person, or thing, or region of space. Some of this
missing information, such as Isaac’s age and character, we might also regard as narrative
‘premises’: information which we feel is required in order to understand what has happened,
why it happened, and how it was possible. But aside from such failures to provide specific
information which we deem relevant to the action, there is also the more general failure to tell
us what this fictional world is like—an almost complete absence of descriptive specification.
Finally, when we turn to the third class of gaps, we find the psychological dimension of the
story almost completely unilluminated.

That all of these kinds of place of indeterminacy should be found in a single narrative is
hardly remarkable in itself. In any extended narrative it is no doubt possible to find areas of
indeterminacy which fall under all of these headings. So why is it that in this narrative they
make such a strong claim on the reader’s attention? To put the question more generally, why
is it that in certain cases the gaps in the narrative come to the fore as one of its salient features?

The primary reason, as we seen throughout this study, is of course that the missing information is felt to be relevant to our understanding of the narrative action. What is noticeably lacking is some part of the causal story which would explain the narrated events and make them cohere in a meaningful way. Now in the story of Abraham and Isaac the narrative sequence has been reduced to little more than a skeleton. Once God’s command has set the goal towards which the narrative is heading, almost nothing is mentioned which is not directly relevant to reaching that goal. Yet this terse narration of the practical steps Abraham takes towards the execution of the command also leaves out the entire psychological account of why he does what he does, and thus entire chain of explanations which runs from the command to the eventual reprieve. Even if we take into account what has already been told in Genesis about Abraham’s relationship with God, we do not know in what parts Abraham is motivated by trusting obedience, fear, obligation, or hope of reward. Nor do we know how close he comes to succumbing to the temptation to disobey, and thus whether another outcome to the story remains possible until the final raising of the knife. The gaps in the narrative require us to consider a whole range of stories which would make sense of the events. It should be emphasized, however, that what readers regard as being relevant to the action, and thus which gaps appear to them as most striking and significant, is historically and culturally highly variable. Our sense of explanatory relevance depends, after all, on our deepest understanding of the world and of ourselves—our understanding of human agency, individuality, divinity, causality and so on. Thus the questions which weigh most heavily on one audience might, in another time or place, even seem inconsequential.

If the criterion of pragmatic relevance forces us to notice certain insufficiencies, it does not reveal the absence of other kinds of information which serve no direct causal-explanatory function, such as concretizing descriptions of the physical world. It is only in comparison with other narratives that these more ‘optional’ elements of narrative will appear as absent or scarce. In Auerbach’s reading it is the ‘fullness’ of Homer—his digressions and descriptions and delight in the physical world for its own sake—which brings out the descriptive poverty and extreme narrative focus of the Biblical narrative. Although the contrast here is explicit, it is more often an implicit comparison with other narrative types which reveals the distinctive patterns of omission in the narrative we are reading. No matter how hard we try to read according to expectations which are appropriate for the type and period of the narrative in question, we cannot help but also view it through the selective filter of other narratives which show up where and how it might have said more. It is this familiarity with other styles or genres which makes us see, for instance, that there might have
been a more ‘scenic’ treatment of the events on the mountain, or a descriptive dilation of the journey to Moriah. In this case the gaps stand out not so much as an absence of required information as the non-fulfilment of a narrative function with which we are familiar or which we have come to expect. When this non-fulfilment is clearly a reaction against the literary tradition—for instance, when the naming of central characters is eschewed in certain modern novels—then the omission may be regarded as a significant feature of the narrative’s style and structure. In this case we can legitimately claim that the gap belongs to the narrative, rather than being ‘imported’ by the reader through comparisons which carry the danger of anachronism or irrelevance.

Finally the gaps in the narrative may stand out for the sort of ‘narratological’ reasons which we have analysed at length in the previous chapters. Here we are talking of the way in which the formal features of the narrative—above all the mode of focalization and the type of narrator—raise certain expectations regarding what and how much will be revealed which give rise to a felt absence when disappointed. For example, as we saw in Chapter 4, a failure to reveal the motivations of a character will be particularly striking when the narrative is focalized through that character because the moment of psychological opacity appears not only as a gap of relevant information, but also a withholding of something which can and should be told in that narrative situation. It is an implicit ‘rule’ of disclosure which has been infringed. In a similar way, the narrative may challenge the reader’s natural expectation that it will continue according to the regularities it has already established. For instance, if a narrative has previously given the impression of accounting for the continuous flow of story-time, a sudden ellipsis of any substantial period will stand out with particular force. Or, to take a converse example, a single long description in a narrative which is otherwise descriptively parsimonious will highlight the gaps in what has come before. Here the gaps are revealed through an inconsistency or contrast which is internal to the work itself.

Following from this, we should note that many more places of indeterminacy which may not be conspicuous in themselves come to light when we reflect on why the details which are given in the narrative stand out as they do. To use Auerbach’s visual metaphor, the places of indeterminacy are like areas of darkness which surround the illuminated elements of the narrative and give them a heightened intensity. For example, when we are told in the Biblical narrative that Abraham rose ‘early in the morning’ what sets this detail in relief is the surrounding silence concerning matters of time. If we were also told what time of day it is when God addresses Abraham, or when Abraham first sets his eyes on the place of sacrifice, then the time at which Abraham rises to prepare for his journey might hardly be noticed. Long journeys, after all, call for early departures. But when this single detail is set against the absence of similar information we are prompted to question its motivation. Why this
indication of time and not others? Since it has no special relevance to the action, its significance, it seems, must lie elsewhere: it ‘expresses the resolution, the promptness, the punctual obedience of the sorely tried Abraham.’\(^{111}\) Although the surrounding places of indeterminacy are not conspicuous in themselves, it is nevertheless they which draw attention to the detail and give it its significance. For this reason they no less part of the structure of the narrative than the areas of darkness are part of the composition of the chiaroscuro painting.

To summarise, the salience of the places of indeterminacy depends on three main factors amongst which there is always a complex interplay. First, we take note of the gaps when the information we are given is insufficient for constructing a meaningful causal story from the sequence of narrated events. Second, the distinctiveness of the narrative’s omissions come to light against the background of other narratives. And finally, we notice the failure of the narrative to tell us what its own formal structure and internal regularities have led us to expect\(^{112}\).

‘Background’
As we have seen from the beginning of this study, the gaps in the narrative need not in any way diminish the fictional illusion of speaking of real things—things, that is, which precede and far exceed what is told of them. Indeed on Auerbach’s reading it is precisely what remains unspoken in the Biblical narrative which gives it its ‘quality of background’—the sense that behind the events of the story, which are so simply and tersely narrated, lie unplumbed depths of consciousness and time. ‘Background’ is what we feel to bear upon the action although we cannot see it: the hidden thought behind word and act, the characters’ pasts, the unknown antecedents to the action. Of course if we situate the narrative in its broader context, then we know a good deal more about Abraham’s history than is revealed in the quoted passage. But even though we are never shown Abraham remembering what God has previously done for him and promised him, and even because we are not shown it, this omitted history is present in his actions and gives them their tension and complexity. Abraham’s silent obedience, Auerbach writes, ‘is multilayered, has background’\(^{113}\).

What Auerbach calls ‘background’, then, is essentially the sense of a surplus beyond what we are told. In the case of the Biblical story we might even say that the suggestive

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\(^{111}\) Auerbach, 10.

\(^{112}\) Because we are interested here in the general reasons, we have not mentioned more specific ways in which the gaps may be brought to the reader’s attention, such as through the narrator’s explicit commentary. Here belong all those locutions which signal an intention to omit: ‘I shall not attempt to describe’, ‘I shall pass over’, etc.

\(^{113}\) Auerbach, 15
influence of the narrative’s silences gives a sense of a surplus which extends beyond what could be told. Through their sheer size and importance, the gaps call for an interpretation and imaginative supplementation which has no end. ‘Since so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon’114. But if the gaps in the narrative call for interpretation, they do so in two quite different ways which Auerbach does not distinguish.

The first type of interpretation is essentially realistic. By leaving crucial aspects of the action unexplained, and by keeping the events and objects largely indeterminate, the narrative invites us to dig deeper into the unknown background of the story. We hypothesize about causes and motivations, imagine reactions which have not been described, give flesh to relationships which have only been hinted at, narrate to ourselves what might have occurred during significant ellipses, wonder how certain actions are practically possible, consider plausible antecedent conditions, and so on. In this kind of ‘reconstructive’ interpretation we treat the fictional events and objects, like real ones, as far exceeding the small portion of them to which we have been given access. When the gaps in the narrative are regarded in this way as gaps in what we are given to know then they certainly do not flatten or abridge the fictive reality. On the contrary, they encourage us to treat it as far deeper and more complex than its limited and schematic presentation. In fact it is precisely the absence of such gaps in Homer—the transparency he gives to character and motive, the full explanation of antecedents and causes—which makes his representation of human life appear to Auerbach as comparatively ‘flat’ and limited, however delightful. Because Homer refuses to leave anything he mentions ‘half in darkness’ it becomes defined by, and thus limited to, what is said of it.

But if the gaps in the Biblical narrative open into the depths of an unknown background, they at the same time have the very different effect of depriving the story of the particular and the sensuous. Because so little is said about the events, they do not seem to have been recounted simply for their own sake—or in order, as Auerbach says of Homer, to ‘bewitch’ us with their vividness or beauty. Rather, they seem to have been recounted for the sake of some deeper and concealed meaning. Admittedly we are predisposed in this case to search for such a hidden meaning by our knowledge of the narrative’s religious motivation and function; yet the general point is well recognized. The more the story is deprived of the element of particularity—the level of detail which makes it appear the story of these people with their particular histories in a particular time and place—the more the reader will tend to turn towards the question of its universal significance. In other words the places of

114 Idem
indeterminacy prompt a search for the meaning or point of the narrative which leads us away from the narrated reality, which becomes abstracted and universalized. What the story is really ‘about’ is not this particular individual and his sufferings, but, for example, the relationship between God and Man, the sacrifice of Christ prefigured, or the competing claims of faith and familial love. What is mysterious in Abraham’s actions is not the private thoughts which lie behind them, but some deeper truth which they embody.

There is thus a tension between the two kinds of interpretation which the gaps in the Biblical narrative seem to invite. On the one hand the absence of explanation asks us to probe the factual and psychological ‘background’ which would make sense of the action. What does Abraham think about the manner in which God is testing him? Does he waver? Who is Isaac and what is his relationship with his father? Yet, on the other hand, the cancellation of the particular and sensuous prompts us to look, not deeper into the events of the story, but, as it were, right through them to their meaning and significance. In Biblical exegesis, as Auerbach points out, this second kind of interpretation has often reached such proportions that the narrated reality is in danger of being forgotten altogether.

It should be emphasized that there is no necessary conflict between the work of reconstruction which delves into the story and the more mysterious work of abstraction which gropes towards the universal. In fact they are for the most part closely connected and influence each other reciprocally. The way in which we explain and imagine the narrated events will strongly influence our understanding of their broader meaning, just as our growing sense of the story’s significance will influence the way in which we reconstruct the events, both retrospectively and prospectively. In the Biblical narrative, however, so much about the story has been left indeterminate that the way in which we choose to reconstruct it is essentially arbitrary unless it is guided by what we think the narrative has to tell us. In other words, it is the second kind of interpretation which must take priority. Whether we see Abraham’s obedience as motivated by fear and selfish expectation of reward or by a serene and steadfast faith, whether we see Isaac as an innocent boy or as a knowing adult, are ultimately questions which can only be decided by our understanding of the story’s deeper meaning, or by a turn to doctrine, since in the words of the narrative itself there is no more justification for the one than for the other. Departicularized, deconcretized, unexplained and unembellished, the story presents itself as a space for infinite interpretation.
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