

## Fragments

I was born before my time. When my time came, the place was occupied by someone else; all the good things of life for which I was now fit had suddenly become unfit. It was always too early or too late. Too early to behave like a grown boy and run ahead of the governess who wheeled my younger brother through the park in his blue carriage, too late to sit in that carriage looking like Queen Victoria and getting all the attention. Too early to have collected in my body at birth the soul of my grandmother, too late to have known her and be able to mourn her. Too early to be given injections of longevity which would be invented in the year two thousand with television and space travel, too late to have known the grand life of the Gay Nineties, with gas lamps, horse-drawn carriages, and private railroad cars. Too early to be treated with deference, too late to be treated with tenderness. Too early to be brought up in freedom, too late *not* to be brought up in freedom. My education was a very strict one, yet it could no longer be the strict Victorian, Prussian, militaristic education my mother had received, or the strict Jesuit education my father had received. So I can really claim that I was brought up in revolt against those rules, but the revolt came only from my parents, who then wielded those rules, pretending they were lenient while they were only talking.

My earliest ideals were all extremely worthy but somewhat contradictory: to be able to cry (proof of a tender heart), to be able not to cry (proof of a manly heart), to be forever grateful to my parents for benefits received (proof of humility), to remember forever what I owed to myself (proof of independence), to leave mother alone (proof of respect for other people's independence), not to leave her alone (proof of respect for other people's feelings). How could, in fact, a mother make herself independent if

she must always fear for the safety of her children? They never clashed by accident, those worthy ideals: they came in two and ran on the same track in opposite directions. If I kept them both in sight, having placed all of myself into both engines, I could only watch them clash. If I kept only one in sight (the tender heart or the strong character), my soul fled from the other and was lost to the love and esteem of my parents.

"Extremist!" they would say, "no sense of proportion." To keep their love, their esteem, and my proportion, I had the choice to either run against myself, or stay solidly rooted in mid-air and refuse to go anywhere by any train. As an obedient son I ran against myself and refused to go anywhere, staying solidly rooted in mid-air.

I was born a good child. Had I lost both my parents at the age of three or four, six at the most, I might still have become a good man. The trouble was I lost them when they had already lost me. And yet I am devoted to their memory. They tried their best...but perhaps not, because they did their worst. I refuse to believe that their best was of such a low quality. This would be like accusing them of inhumanity or stupidity. Other interests kept them captive: here is a far more charitable view. They were caught unawares by their anatomy. They were fit to have children, not to tend them. In other words, they were like everybody else, who casts upon his children some of the evil left unused by his parents on the day of their death. Hell is this side of life. The dead are punished over here for all their sins. No need of devils with their forks and flames. Our children are the devils, filial love is their instrument of torture. Oh, how the dead must suffer when they see their nonsense triumph! Two are the disadvantages of death: we are either forgotten or

remembered. If the Hereafter clarifies our thoughts (and they are too confused to be stored in eternity that way), if our minds at least emerge in a better condition than our bodies, then the dead must begin to understand, they must open their eyes the very moment we are closing them on their sad faces, and they must watch the scene, not from "up high," but from any point lower than the ceiling. They must begin to haunt us in full daylight, when ghosts are never feared and inner voices never heard, and they must cry and plead: "Forget us, oh, don't honour us, it hurts too much." To no avail.

MY FATHER was a doctor and descended from a dish on which his face (half lion and half satyr) could be seen all in red with a wide open mouth and two fiery eyes, flowers and naked women coming out of his skull, two cornucopias coming out of his ears, two cleft feet (obviously his own) on the two sides of his beard, and two identical sets of musical instruments (flutes, long trumpets, mandolins, and bagpipes) tied to the ends of his long, red moustache and plunged into an oval night all to themselves (they were painted on black). But ever since he had begun to study medicine, he had (as he said) "pulled all the nonsense out of my head" and closed his skull, letting black hair grow over it. The cornucopias had been replaced with just one stethoscope which he kept in his pocket and used only to hear the answers of the microbes to his patients' coughing and counting. His skin had become pink with shades of yellow, and he kept his mouth shut or opened it only to talk and eat and pick his teeth with a gold toothpick in the form of a sword he used only when my mother was not watching. I never knew what had become of the musical instruments until one day I noticed them in a dark library in the house of an old gentleman who had become our friend, or rather our clown: the Marchese Carlo Tempi of Rome, whose English-Russian wife was more or less a friend of ours and whose father-in-law, a Mr. Schultz from Petersburg, was really our friend and also, in a way, our broker. But not all of the musical instruments were there: the bagpipes and the trumpets were missing, and the black oval night was also gone. The only person who could know anything about them was obviously my father, and so the truth came out. His disclaimed all descendance from those dishes: they were older than he, and besides, they were

English and he came from a small town called Laterza in the province of Lecce in Southern Italy.

In nineteen-thirteen my father invented Diphtheria. I discovered this fact by listening behind the living-room door whilst he was talking to another doctor. I could not understand what need there was to invent another disease, when there were so many already, but whatever he did was wise and good. He also invented on that same day the Italian word "*insomma*" which I had never heard before. He seemed to enjoy using it, but as the word was new, he tried it on to see how it would fit, and every time he did so there was a long, medical silence (the silence of injections, of pulse-taking, of chart readings, in which silence a doctor waits for results); then they resumed their conversation. After another while, again my father used that word and again there was a silence. I decided I would use it myself, and tried it with the maid in the kitchen shouting "*Insomma!*" Strangely enough she knew it already, and yet my father had not moved from the living-room.

I ran back to my listening-post, and heard that Pope Pius X had just died. I wondered whether Diphtheria had been tried on him while I was in the kitchen, and was curious to know how my father could have done it all so quickly. Then I heard that the Campanile of Venice had just fallen (nothing to do with Diphtheria, but all the same, how many things in such a short time). "*Insomma*" said my father, and the other doctor approved, then said he had to go, and I was sure he was going to spread Diphtheria all over the town. "*Insomma*" said the doctor before leaving, and my father wished him good luck.

Then there was a dispute between me and my sister. She said that before being born I had been dead for centuries and no one had ever noticed it. So I ran to my father and asked him.

"You never were," he said. "You were just born five years ago, and you will not die for another ninety-five years, I hope."

"Yes, but *before* I was born."

"You were unborn."

"Unborn and not dead?"

"Yes, you must be born to die."

I did not press the matter any further. I understood it as an order. You could not sit at table without washing your hands, so you were not allowed to die unless you were born. But in some remote countries, I thought, a boy could

disobey his parents and die first. The idea seemed absurd, but fascinating all the same, if for no other reason, as a fantastic form of disobedience.

And so we spoke about a great many things, all a bit delicate, because they all converged upon the only point of interest which was also the only one that could never be mentioned, namely, death. A doctor was immune to disease, therefore a doctor could not die, but there was nothing reassuring about this. Such concepts as eternity or immortality are apprehended only by exemplification. A few inches of infinity in a painting are all we know of real infinity. Thirty or forty years of life seen from the heights of my five years of age were such a proof of immortality that one could even die if one had lived so long. In fact, my father spoke about death as a good thing, and, besides, he was *dirty with time*, the marks of death could not be washed out of his skin. His neck was full of irregular lines, and I asked myself why they should not have been made more calligraphic and parallel. He was beginning to have a double chin, a face within a face, or rather a new face behind a face, and the loose flesh under his chin swelled like a curtain in the wind, and the back of his hands was shiny and brown with irregular spots (the dirt of time again), when they hung low the veins came out in knots ready to blast, and when he fell asleep after a meal breathing through his open mouth, he was rehearsing for his death.

Looking now at a picture of my parents taken after the invention of Diphtheria (my father was then forty-three, my mother thirty-five), they looked like adolescents: not a wrinkle in their faces, not a shade of awareness in their eyes. But children are astronomers: they calculate the arrival of a comet long before it becomes visible, the decay of their parents is measured on their own freshness; that wrinkle that will scar their mother's mirror in ten years like a sudden bad omen, has been their first toy when she was young. The only guarantee that our parents were not going to die came to us from the fact that they could still give orders. Such phrases as: "You heard me!—What are you waiting for?—Do you want to be spanked?"—chased away every doubts as to their nearing death. They must have known they were still safe and strong. When instead they lost interest in our crimes and let us be without trying to discover whether their orders had been duly carried out, we felt in this a loss of interest in the world, and the nearness of death. We never knew which

of these two fears was preferable: the fear of violence or the fear of freedom.

I DID not learn much about death that day. I still saw it as a low entrance to a cavern: people going that way must slowly bend in order not to bump their heads against the ceiling as they entered, and in spite of his age my father was still walking straight, thank God. But I learned a great deal about that past in which the world was forced to do without me. There had been, long before I was born, those earlier gods who rise beyond the great oceans of tears offered by descendants to forefathers. There they stand like tall mountains baking in distant sunshine, often hidden in mist, and we here, sunk in mire to our chin, we who have never used our legs to walk, are proud that we have come down from such heights. On my father's side I see shadows of peasants bent under olive trees, hardly distinguishable from the soil. Their actions are agricultural and seasonal more than moral or personal. Their anonymity, their silence, makes me feel that down there in Apulia I descended from olive trees, fig trees, and almond trees, also from oxen, goats, and donkeys, and no longer from dishes. That was a world of passivists, the real victims of God. A world of mourners, too. History: a come-down from the golden age; hope: a crime; health: a form of treason; eating well: a defiance or a lesson to those who believed they could starve you; money: a constant cause of bereavement, while earning it, while keeping it, while spending it; the presence of the rich: like the presence of God, you kneel in front of them, you beat your chest, you cry because you know they are too powerful to be also human. But while your head is in the dust, your eyes are on their feet, and your feet on the go.

On my mother's side instead, I see fir trees crashing noisily under the axe, uncombing other fir trees in the forest, I see lumber yards, industrial villages and smoke from factories, compasses, ledger books and shelves, binoculars and beards, bales and boxes on quaysides, gold-rimmed spectacles and banks, offices on black beaches with green seas and icebergs, offices on white beaches with blue seas and pyramids, and, at the centre of it all, a quiet house with heavy curtains in a quiet street of Moscow. This was a world of activists with a religion of their own, even a trinity of their own, an Iron Will, a Sense of Duty to Mankind, and a Gigantic Self-

Respect. Money in that world counted for nothing, or much rather, it counted, to become sinful afterwards, was therefore treated with caution and contempt. It had the same function as mercury in the thermometer: it measured effort, worthiness, therefore honesty, too. Left to itself outside the glass tube, it could never be mastered, it would break into smaller infinities which no finger could grab.

Closer to us in time: the later gods, known also as the dead, who do emerge (if at all) from the ocean of tears. The last dead in our family were all in the respectable but somewhat distant category of grandparents, far beyond reach of tears for us children, who had either not known them, or could hardly remember them. My Italian grandparents were no gods. They were human and buried. They had died at the same time or almost, and soon after the funeral my father had to go back to medical school and obtain his degree, then come back home and look after his seven sisters and whatever was left of his estate. His dreams of academic work, teaching medicine as a form of philosophical discipline, were set aside, and he became a country doctor. That is why, if he spoke of his parents at all, it was with reverence but without grief, and without mentioning their exceptional virtues or the wrongs they had suffered. They were gone from his memory like the smell of burnt candles and warm flowers, incense and disinfectant from the room of the dead after the funeral.

We had only one picture of them in the house, a two-seater picture: my grandfather, with whiskers that swelled his fat face considerably, seemed to emerge from the fog, as my father had done one rainy day, peeping into a tea-room to see whether we were still seated there drinking our hot chocolate. His face had emerged suddenly from the fog blanketing the crystal, we had seen him talk to us and we had talked to him, but he could neither hear us nor answer us. Of my grandmother I knew only that she had never had her picture taken in her lifetime, because her husband would have considered this a form of treason. In fact, in that one picture there she was already dead, and there was more fog around her than around him. Her head, half-hidden in white lace and sunken into a pillow, the white of her eyes showing, and her teeth showing: she seemed almost a skull. And yet those two asked nothing of us. They did not even want to know what we were doing when no one was looking at us. They did not even use

their star to blink at us when we had told a lie. No death current if we touched them. Also my Russian grandfather was surprisingly harmless and contented with his old ration of tears. He had died when my mother was eleven, she had cried for a day then left him for a teddy-bear we still have in the house, but even this toy, though more sacred than any of my grandfather's portraits and even his marble bust, had a much smaller charge of sacredness than any of my grandmother's toys. There was a tragic reason for this fact.

**W**HEN I opened my eyes on the world, the corpse of my grandmother was still rotting about the house.

The suffocating smells were neutralised with essences: sandalwood, smoked silver, camphor oil, face powders, moth balls, jasmine, Russian leather, Chinese tea, Japanese lacquer, candied roses, burnt paper, incense, even boxes of un-smoked ancient cigars. But the smell of decay was stronger than all these. We had it in our cribs, we had it in our toys, we had it in our food, so we began to putrefy before we were allowed to grow. There was not a clean handkerchief, not a clean bedsheet, napkin, tablecloth or towel in the house, not a fork, not a knife, not a cup or a saucer, not a sheet of writing-paper, not a book, that was not marked with her initials and cursed with her organic fall from that title of possession. Walls were stained with her images, in brown on brown, in black on white, in oil, in tempera, in pastel, in miniature, always with that sad look demanding grief and worthiness, all examples to follow taken from sacred moments of her life: here she was standing in a personal pyramid of sealskin, topped by three layers of pearls, the protruding double chin, plus bulging cheeks, high cheekbones, frowning forehead, hair, and a small sealskin baby bonnet tied under her chin with ribbons (all of which items became symbols of virtue); there she came in a bust of white marble ("Be as pure as this marble" was the unspoken dictate to be read in that bust); further down under glass and in a heavy gilded frame with oak leaves and ribbons, two of her chins almost buried in sable, she seemed to imply that one must be as finely drawn and painted as that sable (and whoever was sableless was wrong); in the adjoining room, in a large photograph, she sat hugely in white lace under a lace umbrella in her victoria, against the glaring background of hotels, palm trees, and balconies; then she

came all in black, seated in a low sleigh with black horses, black fir trees and snow for a background; then, in another picture, she was seated alone at the head of a large banquet table, with a window behind her, so all one saw was a white tablecloth with dishes, glasses of all sizes, bottles, carafes, and flowers, tending toward that dark shape of a goddess who did not seem at all tamed by those tributes. But her photographers went on trying their best to drag a smile out of that mass of international proteins. They took pictures of her on elephants in India, on camel back in Egypt, on the Pyramids, inside the Pyramids, under the Sphinx, amid the ruins of Pompeii (she did smile in that one as if to imply "See what I do to cities when they make me angry?"), and from each of those images there came a stream of sadness strong enough to ruin the most normal of children, let alone one like me who was already ruined by the mere fact of descending from her.

The only picture in the house which seemed somewhat reassuring was that of her rich tomb in Berlin. She of course was not to be seen in it, a grave-stone held her safely down, and a huge marble block with an overfed angel sitting on it had been added to the weight just in case. I, in my evil mind, saw her all wormy and frothing with cadaveric soap and still not smiling, but a look at that angel made me forget these shameful images at once. But when I learned that she was not under that stone, I was quite disappointed. That was only the picture of her former future tomb; it had been taken after her husband had been buried there, in fact, his name carried the dates of birth and death, and hers, carved under his, only the date of her birth. That God might follow me through a thousand walls was bad enough, but then He was the Great, Merciful One. He forgave everything, and I was not his relative. I was just one out of billions of children from all races and countries, and to follow them all required time even for Him, while the same omnipresence in the hands of a person like my grandmother who had no use for anyone outside the strict family circle and who never forgave a son of forty if he smoked in her presence or got married in her absence, was a real danger. No one had yet explained to me that the mere fact of existing put me in the number of those who had crucified the Lord, and for this reason I felt innocent when I compared myself to a Jew. I was already suffering from a strong Pilate complex; I was washing my hands of the whole business. The

case of my grandmother instead seemed more serious. She had suffered more than Christ, because not one of those who had exploited her and cheated her had ever repented in public or had built a single church to better repent in it, while the churches of Christ could not be counted. Yet she had always given without asking for anything but gratitude. She had given more generously than it was customary even in Moscow. And though people are known to be bad, and nothing may be expected of them, grandchildren are not just people, and my grandmother had the right to expect the best of me as a bare minimum. That is why she blinked at me all the time from her personal star, when I passed in front of her portrait having just told a lie.

"Did you brush your teeth?" my mother asked me.

"Yes, I did."

"Can you swear?"

"Yes, I can."

"On your grandmother's grave?"

"No."

"Then you don't swear, you just simply confess that you have told me a lie. And last night too, and so the night before, you always swore and you always knew these were lies, therefore you have two oaths, a false one and a solid one taken on your grandmother's grave, but can you really believe that your grandmother doesn't know these things? Do you realise that every time you tell a lie you are spitting on her grave? How many times have you been spitting on her grave lately?"

Now this was very confusing. At times I had brushed my teeth, at times I had only brushed the corner of the bathroom shelf with my toothbrush. Could I, with so many lies on my conscience already, volunteer to put under that heading also the rare occasions when I had told the truth? She kept insisting she wanted to know the exact number of lies I had told her. And as the choice was up to me, I first went through the comedy of a great deal of mind-searching and soul-searching, and then chose to have told her the smallest possible number of lies in order to save my soul from a new crime: that of killing my mother. At the same time I realised that it was much too late for me to recapture my soul on its way to perdition, so I decided that I would at least never soil myself with the worst of all sins, namely, ingratitude. I would always remember my debts of gratitude, always repay my benefactors a hundredfold for



the smallest advantage or favour. Indeed I went so far as to swear to myself that I would never profit by the benefits given me but for the purpose of praising my benefactors, and even in the field of education, I would never learn anything without learning and honouring my teacher's name and generosity first and foremost. This may sound a bit excessive as a form of self-chastisement, even for a grown person, but it is only in the description of such processes as are praised from the outside and in their adult consequences, that they may seem unthinkable for a child's mind. In reality they represent but survival of the child in the adult. All that is needed to bring them about is the timidity of a child afraid of divine punishment or of adult reproach if he should dare forget that he must quote his father or his mother every time he remembers that the earth turns or that the sun goes up and down.

"Who has told you these things? Where would you be if a loving father (or mother) had not worked very hard to learn them and to pass them on to you?"

MY PARENTS were generous. They contented themselves with exacting that minimum of gratitude that all parents exact of their children for the fact that they feed them and clothe them instead of throwing them into the river as they well may if they so pleased, the child having no voice in the matter and no means of self-defence. And that is bad enough. But in the case of my grandmother they always came out with new evidence that the whole world should have thanked her for everything. Which evidence was given by my mother to my father in my presence, or even when I was not there, in a tone of conversation, as if this were a social occasion and one of the two had come as a guest of the other for tea. I thus formed the belief that my mother went out of the house every night (they always stayed together in the daytime) to gather new details of the deeds of this wonderful person (my grandmother) whose untimely disappearance was still the object of universal grief. How could my mother otherwise have always had new things to recount that my father had never heard about? I knew from my own experiences in the world how difficult it was to have something new to tell, even for a few seconds. All my most interesting accounts of what I had experienced, heard, or thought during a day came to an end after only a few minutes, even if I had recourse to a

detailed description of what I had seen in shop windows, or of the animals I had seen at the zoo. Or the trees in the park. That my parents had not always known each other seemed a bit strange to me.

"Good afternoon, sir."

"Good afternoon, madam."

And then: "Oh, you must be my wife, if I am not mistaken."

"You are right, and you must be my husband."

"True."

"How are you, sir?"

"Very well, and you?"

"Oh, very well indeed."

"And how are the children?"

"Oh, you mean our children?"

"Yes."

"Very well, thank you, they are asleep in the next room."

*Etc.* Now was that not strange? Yet it was true, and what our parents did every afternoon was but the continuation of this comedy. What made those gatherings especially interesting for me was that I always learned extraordinary new things, and all on the same subject, all constantly leading to the same known conclusion, that there existed no gratitude on earth.

"Anything, anything, I would rather admit than lack of gratitude," said my mother, "theft, murder, are a thousand times preferable to these manifestations of human criminality."

Then came the examples. She opened the *Revue des Deux Mondes* at random, and found in it an article by a certain philosopher or a certain psychologist and she almost at once exclaimed:

"How strange! These are mother's ideas! I remember so clearly when she suggested them to the man who has written this article! Isn't it awful that he should have taken such unfair advantage of her genius? Why not acknowledge at least that the ideas came from her?"

I remember her reading a book about Gladstone. I did not know that Gladstone had been dead for some time. She at once recalled how Gladstone had been staying at the same hotel with my grandmother in Lausanne, and how he had discussed all the major problems of the time with her, how she had given him advice, and how he had thanked her in a letter for her "most stimulating conversation and her brilliant remarks." And now my mother recognised in Gladstone's life the pattern of her mother's own foreign policy for Great Britain.

"He could have told her he was going to use her ideas," she concluded. "What hypocrites, the British!"

Also my father did this, but he attributed all the discoveries and ideas to Leonardo and to other great Italians. When he read in the papers that for the first time in history a man-made iron bird had crossed the Alps, and that the French claimed credit for the flight (the pilot's name being Chavez), he said: "It should have been an Italian, and the plane should have carried the inscription '*This was made possible by the genius of Leonardo.*'"

Thus every time the telephone rang, he mentioned the fact that the telephone had been invented by an Italian, Meucci, and not by Alexander Graham Bell, an American. Meucci was a Florentine, like Dante. And when he explained the pendulum to us he said: "Remember, Galileo's pendulum. Thanks to an Italian we can say it is now seven o'clock!"

**B**UT luckily for us, neither Meucci, nor Galileo, nor Leonardo were our grandparents. Among the people who had been helped by my grandmother there was even Tolstoy, with whom there was a phonetic link: his wife and my grandmother had exactly the same name. And also an epistular link: my grandmother had translated his essays into German. He too, who had thanked my grandmother for her thoughts on the Kingdom of God and everlasting peace, had then failed to let her know that he was going to develop these thoughts "so typical of her" in his new essays on both these subjects. Had she only known that a man she so worshipped had agreed with her views so completely... she might still be with us. "These are the things that help you stay alive: the feeling that what one has given has been fully received. All the rest does not count."

But even more than the ideas she had given Tolstoy and (so I thought in my ignorance) Galileo and Voltaire, not to mention a number of psychiatrists of the French school, were all the precious friendships that people had established in her house with other people, forgetting that those were *her* friends, and that their fortunes, even at times their marriages, their children, were due to my grandmother's generosity. How many people had grown rich and powerful because they had met someone with her help or at her house! And how many had profited by her advice! Madame Morosoff, just to mention one of them, the greatest steel in-

dustrialist in Russia at that time, had applied my grandmother's advice in an industrial crisis which had threatened to become a small revolution. Her thirty thousand workers (I am quoting from memory, I have carefully avoided checking all these fragments of a child's recollections) had gone on strike. The director of the steel mills had been nailed into a barrel, rolled down to the river and drowned. Madame Morosoff had gone to the mills unaccompanied, faced her workers, and asked them to stop all that nonsense. And they had stopped, hanging their heads in shame. Anyway, the whole plan had been suggested to her by my grandmother, whose husband had at one time faced a crisis of the same type even if on an infinitely smaller scale (he had three hundred workers, and his were cotton mills, not steel mills), and it was my grandmother's advice that had prevailed on that occasion.

With so many examples of ingratitude trumpeted into my ears all the time, could I help feeling as I felt? I decided that gratitude would become my life career, and for a day or so I kept this a great secret, then, as no one seemed to notice how grateful I was, and the ingratitude of others was beginning to irritate me, I decided to reveal it to the only person from whom it should have been kept secret: namely, my mother. I even told her so. "Don't tell yourself you must not know this, it is a great surprise for you."

She was so grateful to me, she called me grandmother's only worthy descendant, and I went to bed that evening feeling so proud that I recall no other such occasion in my life. Before going to bed I marched all through the house with my hands behind my back and my head high, I was aflame with imagination, I saw detailed scenes of my future life pass in front of my eyes, in which scenes I, forgetful of injustice and slander and even of physical violence, insisted on being grateful to my enemies for a small act of kindness they had done me years before and which they, but not I, had forgotten. And my grandmother blinked at me from the sky with such abundant tears of happiness that for the first time in the history of the universe, as I remarked triumphantly, it could be said that rain was falling from a star. This remark made me famous at once. But the next time I lost my temper she took unfair advantage of my confidence and ridiculed me in front of everybody.

"So this is a knight in armour who defends

his grandmother? The one who has sworn never to forget a benefit as long as he lives? Come and look at him, children," said she, calling my brothers to the scene. "Do you know who this is?"—and she revealed my secret, imitating my style and even my pronunciation, concluding in a violent diatribe against me:

"Oh no. You, a grateful person? You, a champion of charity and justice? You, my boy, are the least grateful person in this world. You think only of yourself."

My humiliation reached a climax that suddenly transformed me into the very person whose description had wounded me so only a minute before. It was the very opposite of an act of rebellion. It was pure obedience. Confronted with such proofs of my hypocrisy, my selfishness, my cruelty, I became selfish, hypocritical, cruel. It was an acted out confession, or the confession of an actor for whom every bodily expression, every form of relationship between him and the objects in his room is a word in his grammar and a rule in his syntax.

I RECALL this occasion because it was my funeral. My parents did not know that I was accompanying my character, crying behind him like a mourner. It was a form of maturation from superficial to deep sorrow, I, who until that day had always cried like a child for superficial reasons, was now crying so deep beneath the surface of the earth that no one could suspect the existence of that torrent of tears under my feet. My parents took it very badly: they saw only what they saw with their eyes, and it shocked them that I should not be playing the usual ham-act of true love and repentance. So to cure me of the devil that was in me, my father gave me a public spanking until I cried "Enough, enough! I promise to be good!"

In the course of this ceremony, touched as he was by my cries, he beat me more and more strongly to punish himself at my expense, then told me: "I am hurting myself more than I could ever hurt you," he said. This was a bit too much; to regain my lost dignity, I decided to turn this into a stunt and make everybody laugh. Trembling in every limb because I knew what was going to follow, I said, "Yes, but whose arse is red here? Yours or mine?" (To say "arse" in 1913 or '14 was a crime even for an adult. A child from a good family who said such a word to his father became an insoluble problem.) This time I was given the honour of a punishment in which he did not get the lion's

share, every blow was meant to hurt me and me alone.

"How is that possible?" shouted my father at the top of his voice. "I suffer to punish him, I tell him so to have at least a bit of understanding from him, I almost apologise to him for performing my duty, and is this the result?"

That was my first experience of a heavy price paid for a brilliant remark. But this was not my style at all. In fact, I never had any relief from such performances. They were lies then and later, when I specialised in them at a price constantly heavier, and not so much in punishment as in repentance. I despised myself thoroughly for behaving that way. Sensitive as I was, I reviewed the whole scene in my mind as I knelt in a corner afterwards or (much later in life) as I went into a corner by myself because no one was close enough or bold enough (or cared enough) to punish me, and there I savoured all the sadness of the episode. Also: and this is an important element in my confession, the episode became amusing only in its re-telling. Which was all pure invention, even when the brilliant remark had been actually made, because my voice was always trembling with emotion, so that the brilliant words themselves were mostly inaudible. Thus, without at all possessing the stage-presence of a clown, I earned for myself the useless (and unwanted) reputation of being one. No one was more ashamed than I after such a performance, and no one prouder when he heard it re-told. My father decided that he must break my character and eventually did, poor man, and he worked very hard to obtain such a wonderful result. I must describe the whole process in full.

The humiliation caused by that physical punishment and the loud declaration of my unworthiness left real physical traces all around me, more so than on my battered behind. I grew hungry for silence, not to rest in it myself, but to use it as cotton wool with which to soak up all the shrieks and the insults that others might have heard. I wanted to dry up every memory of what had just taken place in the house, I wanted time, not only silence, plenty of time to push everything away towards the dark well of the past in which guilt loses its sting. I hurried up the clock, and I spied on the faces of my parents, my brothers, and the maids, for signs of boredom and indifference, even after my claim to high ideals had been fully re-established. Those faces had been far too attentive before. They had relished my ruin, they



had formed silent and negative opinions of me, and I wanted to know that these had been forgotten too. Thus I began quite early to suspect that perhaps an ideal of gratitude placed on so high a level was not prudent, but, on the other hand, I could not artificially try to remember my past fallibility nor accept the idea that it would soon present itself again. I really felt that I was not the same person who had sinned, and I had, for that naughty child of a minute before the same contempt I had for last year's shoes and clothes and for their impotence to follow me in my growth. Promising to be a man five or ten minutes after having been a child was part of the technique of full forgiveness. Neither I nor my father believed much of these promises after a while, but we made them again all the same, he, because he believed that this might have a good effect on me: "*Promissio boni viri est obligatio*," he would say; and I, because it seemed to me that he believed in them. There was no end to my ambition of saintliness and gratitude and peace, that infinite peace that only comes from the approval of the persons we love. But there remained a residue of shame, submissiveness, and fear, which upset my relationship with everybody else.

That is the reason I became closer to my father: I knew that he alone had completely forgiven me. The others had been too indifferent to have gone so far down and come back so far up to the surface again, tied to me like the devil to the damned. There was also the fact that my father knew how to sell me his medicine: his blows, he claimed, had completely purged me of the devil. And he advised that I mumble to myself whenever I felt the temptation of wickedness surge up in me: "*Vade retro, Satana*." With this, he kept insisting that the devil was nothing but a "*Fictio mentis*" of the lowly. "Give yourself time and anger will subside," he said. These words are time absorbent, any other words would do just as well, except that these are better: they have always been used by saints and geniuses, there is a great moral tradition attached to them, and besides, they are true.

"Satan is a name for our pride: Satan must go."

Then I began to feel that violence was part of love, and that my father loved me more than he loved the others, because he had beaten me more. Thus, when any doubt arose in which I might have won my point by using my intelligence and my persuasive powers in discussions

with others, I preferred to deliberately force the issue and make way for the devil in me, because for one thing it was shorter than to carry on a discussion with my brothers or with a stupid maid, and secondly, it was also shorter from the moral point of view. I knew that if my brothers or the maids made the slightest remark about my "well-known evil temper" I would hit them at once, feeling the unfairness of this blow, so why not hit immediately, why not repeat my well-known role of the boy possessed by the devil, in order to be able to sit quietly with my father, he and I alone like two grown persons, after the usual fall and resurrection? In other words: *the road that leads to peace through pain seemed far shorter and surer than the road through well-ordered conversation*. And also more rewarding: in the end I alone was worthy of his attention, while the others were excluded. They would stand on their own. If this was the beginning of masochism it was for precise, logical reasons: to find an understanding not to be left alone.

MY MOTHER never had any definite plans to transform me or to break me. She was simply using me, as she used everyone else, to bring herself as often as she possibly could to a crisis of tears, thus renewing the illusion that her mother had just died and her feeling of loss was still undampened by the passage of time. She could not even think in terms of a moral education that would carry either me or any of my brothers towards a given future of our own, from which she was excluded. She wanted to be a child together with her children, Time being our common enemy. Independence and loneliness were to her the same evil. Whenever trouble was about to arise, she claimed it for herself to celebrate her solitude by asking me: "What would your grandmother say if she could see you now?" Then instantly, without bothering to wait and see whether this question had not struck the right chord in my heart (it always had, all that was needed now was a cheerful tone) she dealt the final blow: "I am glad she has died." After such a stupid remark made in bad faith, all she could do was cry and accuse me.

Frankly, I preferred my father's blows. If one must cry, he gave me a lot to cry about and quickly, too. With her, instead, all I could do was to let her have the right of way and wait. I was emotionally exhausted, there was a feeling of great rest about me, a pleasant silence, a

temptation to close my eyes and sleep, to which temptation I could never yield. I was on duty, like a guard in high uniform at an official ceremony. How dare I, who had heard such hard words about myself, I, forever condemned to infamy, I, who had made my mother cry, fall asleep like an angel and snore? But it was all so tiresome. If at least she would come to the point (I knew all the phases of the process by heart), in which she asked me: "Aren't you sorry for what you did? Don't you want to be good again?" But it took her so long to reach that point that, when she came to it, she herself was about to fall asleep, and we still had quite a long way to go, long detours through the forests of reproach and repentance; this was like the "long way home" in our afternoon walks, while father's trial and punishment was like a brisk winter walk along the lake and back home by the short-cut through the park. Because she always wanted to cry twice during these scenes: having embarked upon the painful trip through her own past, having recalled what she herself had done to her poor mother years before, how could she just forgive herself and forget all about it so easily? Only one person could forgive her, and that person, alas, was gone forever.

"Gone forever," she said, this being the verbal faucet to the fountains of tears. "Gone forever," and down they streamed, those tears. She cried so that it killed every filial affection, every trace of human pity in me. There remained only fear in front of so much suffering. Also a great shame for her in front of me, because she became ugly, her nose became red, the harmony of her face was destroyed by strange muscular contractions, as if she was about to laugh. I felt like shouting "Stop it!" as one cries to an adult when he is about to scare a child and does so by simply making faces at him. Reconciliation and forgiveness came in those cases at one millimetre from indifference, half a minute before supper, a walk, or nightly rest.

"Let's not think of these things any more," she said.

"Thank God," I thought, and yawned at once.

**B**UT there remained grandmother's holy objects, holy umbrellas, holy hat, holy fur coats, holy jewels, stationery, books and toys, everything she had owned, and that was everything we had, except for children's shoes and for a couple of night-pots in the nursery, and each of these sacred things could tell our grand-

mother how it had been touched or looked at, our very secret thoughts could be revealed by them to her, they were spies, also amulets, they even had secret curative powers in a way, morally at least.

"I was just looking at grandmother's things."

"I was playing with grandmother's peacock, grandmother's duck, grandmother's turkey."

These were excellent reasons to be thought innocent and left alone. And if I happened to be roaming the house with evil plans in mind, or evil thoughts (nothing exceptional: a lie to tell or to conceal, or the rehearsal of a scene of liberation, imagining that my brothers had all died, I being the only survivor and my parents' only hope), I stayed carefully away from all those objects, without doing so deliberately: I was guided by an instinctive knowledge of the opportunity of certain associations, for I knew that a soul engaged in sin should not be exposed to those sources of virtue. Perhaps what also worked here was a habit of associating those objects with a peaceful and blessed state of mind. And I recall a very clear nostalgia for those objects that were still only a few steps away from me, as if that very first withdrawal marked the beginning of a long journey from which there was no safe return. There was almost a fatigue of the Unknown in me, not only of the Unknown: also of the effort it would take to explain to those objects that my thoughts were not really so evil, and my lie not so grave. Which shows that I did have a sense of measure, for I knew that pictures and objects could not see me, but that I could see them. I knew that if I looked at them they would at once be invested by me with true existence and that, once the spell began functioning, nothing could stop it. The notion: "Those pictures are just cardboard and light, or canvas and pastel, or white paper and pencil," did not serve any more.

Thus the growing security given by age and health and the infinite joy attending them could only help me cheat God and disbelieve all I was taught about Him that was fearful. But I was not always well, and with illness came fear and a feeling of guilt.

**I** WAS the fourth of a crop of five children, three born before my grandmother's health had begun to be seriously impaired. It had always been seriously impaired, she had always been sick, always on the point of dying, always wounded, battered to a pulp, pushed, carried,

dragged to her grave by thankless children, but then also always healthy, alert, attached to life, an example of indomitable energy and wit to the very last moment of her life. One never knew what to believe, so one took everything as gospel truth and shining evidence of her perfection. Three of us were born before her exceptional agony, as I had begun to say, but not free of putrefaction, either. Another corpse was still rotting away while my grandmother was alive: that of her father. When she finally died, taking with her of course all the perfection of the world, he automatically graduated to a heaven of evil, from which he looked down upon us in the glory of his sins.

No longer worthy of tears (he had had far too many), he was now a free target to laughter and abuse. But then even this abuse was of a sacred character. When my mother, describing her grandfather, said of him: "He was a thief, a scoundrel, and a swine," this did not mean that we, his great-grandchildren, should be ashamed of him. Oh no. These words were spoken with a nostalgic love of theft, arrogance, ignorance, avarice, vanity, murder, the whole list of the capital sins enriched with the latest additions in the field of criminal pathology, as if these and these alone had been her guiding principles and her ideals. She delighted in telling the most horrible tales about him: how he had slowly murdered his wife (this was not true at all, she had died of tuberculosis, so the best blow in his career had not been dealt by him but by the usual God). He had tried to bring up his four children to his own standards of stupidity and cruelty: they had deserted him and he had let

them starve for years. His only daughter, my grandmother, who had married the man he had chosen for her, eloped with a young man from a very poor family and asked for a divorce, which in those days, in a Lutheran family of the most solid banking bourgeoisie of Moscow, was regarded as a crime. She had finally married the young man and lived with him in great poverty until he had made good; in fact, he became richer than his father-in-law, and only then did the old man show lenience towards his daughter, but it was she now who refused to receive him in the house, so he did everything he could to ruin her husband. Even his youngest son who had stayed with him was forced to leave in the end, for he took special pleasure in humiliating everyone. Only when people were completely destroyed, both morally and financially, did he seem satisfied for a brief moment, and when they came to him begging for help, it was his joy to sneer at them and have them kicked out of the house by his servants. After these tales were told in front of his large portrait in our living-room, there remained in the air an aura of pride and modesty, the same that follows all great music: the pride that we were able to understand it, and be made humble by its beauty. That a very special tone be needed for this litany of ancestral abuse I was made to realise the day I tried it on a guest, repeating the same words I had heard from my mother many times. I was stopped and sent to bed.

"One does not say these things."

"But you say them all the time."

"That is an entirely different matter."

And it was.

## *Traveller's Check*

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## Enlightenment and Radicalism

By Sidney Hook

THE FIELD of intellectual history is beset by many difficulties. Primary among them is the extent to which the assumption—inescapable to the very nature of the enquiry—that history is made or determined by the ideas men hold, is true. Leaving aside the influence of complex objective factors of the physical environment, the pattern of historical events seems clearly to be woven out of the interacting influences of interests, ideas, and personality. To assign relative weights to these elements is a delicate task. The best-grounded historical accounts have revealed the unplausibility of all monisms even when the predominance of one or another factor has been established for a specific period.

The difficulties of intellectual history are compounded when we attempt to assess the influence of philosophical ideas on human affairs. Here the temptation to yield to one's own philosophical prejudices, to use the record as an argument or as evidence for one's own philosophical beliefs is almost overwhelming. But if our investigation is to rise above a disguised question—begging apologetics and reach conclusions which appear valid to enquirers of other philosophical persuasions, we must resist this temptation. In other words, we must regard the influence of philosophical ideas in history not as a philosophical problem but as an historical, empirical problem, in principle no different from an enquiry into the effects of the industrial revolution on the movement of population or the causes of the Spanish-American war.

It is from this point of view that I propose to examine Professor Michael Polanyi's main theses in his essay "Beyond Nihilism,"\* and also to say a few things in defence of the principle of radicalism which, according to him, threatens "to throw us back into disaster" if acted upon.

AS I UNDERSTAND Professor Polanyi, he is asserting two propositions: (1) The influence of the rationalist ideal of a secular society, which we associate with the Enlightenment, in fact led to the monstrous Bolshevik and Nazi Revolutions of the 20th century. (2) The characteristic doctrines and practices of modern totalitarianism or nihilism are "logical consequences" of this rationalist ideal, particularly of its naturalist forms.

With respect to the first thesis everything that Professor Polanyi says seems to me to be a crass illustration of a very loose form of the *post hoc, propter hoc* fallacy. I do not find a shred of valid evidence to support the view that the rationalist and universal humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment played any role, no less a decisive one, in the theory and practice of the architects of the Communist and Nazi Revolutions. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence—a whole mountain of it—against this view.

Indeed, Professor Polanyi himself when confronted by the fact that the ideals of Locke and Bentham, imported into France with such allegedly disastrous consequences, helped in England and the United States to create an unprecedented, humane welfare-economy, not even approached by any religious culture of the past, explains this in terms of the moderating effect of existing institutions. Without examining the truth of the specific assertions made concerning the institutions in England and in the United States which prevented "the self-destructive implications of the Enlightenment" from being realised, such recognition is completely inadmissible on a theory, such as Professor Polanyi's, that ascribes decisive historical importance to philosophical ideas.

For it can be argued with equal, if not better, logic that what explains the differences in the development of Anglo-American liberalism and European totalitarianism is *not* the presence of ideals but different social institutions which, in the one case, permitted the gradual social re-

\* ENCOUNTER, March, 1960.