



Geerten Maria Meijnsing was born in 1950 and was raised a Catholic in Haarlem. Inspired by classical forms and the romanticism of the turn of the century, he and some friends wrote a prodigious trilogy under the pseudonym Joyce & Co. *Erwin* (1974) was about dandyism and the art of writing, *Michiel van Mander* (1979) was about friendship and painting and *Cecilia* (1986) was about love and music. This remarkable writers' collective also produced *Werkbrieven* ('Work Letters', 1982), *Venetiaanse brieven* ('Venetian Letters', 1982) and some further stories in *Erwins Echo* (1982). Meijnsing, the driving force behind Joyce & Co., wrote *Een meisjesleven* ('A Girl's Life') under the pseudonym Eefje Wijnberg and proceeded to drop his mask and start a new literary career under his own name. *Veranderlijk en wisselvallig* ('Fickle and Changeable', 1987) earned the author immediate recognition in the form of the AKO Literature Prize. The follow-up, *Altijd de vrouw* ('Always the Woman', 1991) received a nomination for the same annual prize. Meijnsing, who lives in Italy has also translated a large number of books by authors such as Marcel Proust, George Gissing and Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo).

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"Woman is ever fickle and changeable" wrote Virgil in the Aeneid, and Meijnsing uses this quote as a thread running through what he calls his 'double-decker'. In the first part, *Veranderlijk en wisselvallig* ('Fickle and Changeable'), he describes how the hero succumbs to melancholy when the writers' collective breaks up after finishing their trilogy (!), how he cheats on his pregnant wife five times, and how he finally brings his young daughter to an Italian cloister school. This second part is the ethical counter to the aesthetic first volume: here the love of one woman, confined to the background in the first part, is a central theme. The author recalls memories of times gone by (she has left him and their daughter) with a deep all-embracing melancholy: "Marriage or living together, both guarantee the end of love", he sighs. The love of his life in the background turns out to be Eefje Wijnberg. A dramatic ode is dedicated to her: the author's attempt to turn his sorrow into literature, into immortal art. The story of Erik (the hero's name in this reflection) and Eefje's relationship is imbedded in a wonderful description of the present in which Erik and his daughter Chiara drive to the station in Pisa to meet Laura, possibly the new love of his life. That is the only way to stop mourning for the previous one. But whether Laura does become his new girlfriend we are not told. Once again the story is about the events that led up to the present. Eefje: beautiful, vivacious, jealous, unfaithful, slovenly and untouched by the melancholic introspection to which Erik is prone whenever he retreats into his books or is forced to play the (far from chivalrous) role of househusband while she goes out on the town. 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', readers of *Veranderlijk en wisselvallig* will think, but as is clear from the earlier quotation Erik does not agree: nothing is more doomed to fail than a man and a woman who love each other living under the same roof. The platonic ideals embraced and expressed by the hero in vibrant language do little to heal his disappointment about the failure of his relationship. I do not know whether Meijnsing actually meant it that way, but his statement that if you want to be happy it is better not to fall in love seems a bit frayed at the edges when you read what led him to this conclusion. "I would rather be alone", he says on the last page. It is not convincing, but that is what makes *Altijd de vrouw* such a human book.

ARJAN PETERS

Altijd de vrouw is at least as attractive as Veranderlijk en wisselvallig. Style, temperament and metaphor once again reveal Meijnsing to be on a par with A.F.Th. van der Heijden.

VRIJ NEDERLAND

The stories [in Veranderlijk en wisselvallig] show Meijnsing to be a competent portraitist ... Above all, the stories in this collection reveal the remarkable skill of the writer. Geerten Meijnsing proves he is able to enthrall the reader for more than 300 pages.

DE VOLKSKRANT

... as always a perfectly composed structure ... Meijnsing's work betrays more of the qualities of the ever-expanding roman fleuve: it is never finished and continues to excite. This sort of book is addictive.

TROUW

An interview with Geerten Meijnsing

‘My book is like a house full of corridors, with fixed relationships and many mirror effects’

by Gerlof Leistra

translated by Paul Vincent

By casting aside his pseudonym Joyce & Co., Geerten Meijnsing seems to be beginning to write in a more accessible manner. In 1988 he won the AKO Literary Prize with his novel *Veranderlijk en wisselvallig* (‘Fickle and changeable’). Now there is a sequel, *Altijd de vrouw* (‘Always the Woman’). An interview about literary form, readership, the differences between him and A.F.Th. van der Heijden, love and rivalry with his sister Doeschka.

A little reluctantly, the writer has just popped up from Italy ‘to stand behind the shop counter’. He would sooner have stayed in Tuscany where he has been living and working these past twelve years. “I have become blasé. While the publication of my first book was still something of an event, nowadays publication dates do not interest me so much. That whole circus just keeps you away from your work.”

In the background, an Italian opera can be heard. We are sitting in the living room of his Amsterdam pied à terre. Lots of books, and on the window sill a word processor. The writer serves *spumante* and lights a cigar. He formulates his expressions with care. Before another couple of complicated whole sentences roll off his tongue, he first allows his head to sink between his shoulders. His hands are constantly in motion as if holding a conversation of their own.

On the table lies a file full of notes where Meijnsing scribbles a few notes now and again with a pencil. “Writing is an eternal process. You aspire to perfection which you feel you have achieved at a certain point, but which you will never achieve absolutely. As you would very much like to it is tempting to continue to work on a book after having submitted the manuscript to the publisher. I would be happiest writing the same book over and over again and then make sure it improves ever time round. But I have to keep the whole show on the road.” Geerten Meijnsing, now 40 years of age, began as a 24-year old with his novel *Erwin*, the first part of the trilogy whose other parts are *Micheal van Mander* (1979) and *Cecilia* (1986).

The books appeared under the pseudonym Joyce & Co., which was in fact a writers’ collective which also initially included Keith Kanger Snell. The trilogy consists of high-minded observations on literature, art and music. The display of erudition commands admiration but also antipathy.

Meijssing nods. “That has become my trade mark. It is a prerequisite that you kick your readers in the shins, that they I begin to revolt. Literature must not merely confirm. Then you would be quite inadequate as a writer. A book is not only intended to be perceived but must also spur the reader on the self-reflection. “ My only reservation: “I would have liked to have written the Erwin trilogy in a different manner. The tone is serious, while the book deals with a kind of philosophical irony. About the failure of aesthetic ideals. Later the thought strikes you that a tragicomic tone would have enable you to achieve more.

That is what makes Anthony Powell’s *A Dance to the Music of Time* so brilliant.

Diary

For almost four years, Meijssing worked on *Altijd de vrouw*. “Such a book needs time. You cannot be expected to produce a fixed number of pages per day. It matures slowly. You must focus your thoughts and read a lot around the subject.” For years, Meijssing has kept a diary. “This consists not only of all sorts of personal emotions but, above all, of encouragement as regards ways of life. What should I eat. Or what I should especially avoid drinking. Or stopping completely. I must scourge myself and talk to myself in a very stern tone of voice, otherwise I just cannot write.” The writer grows slightly irritated when asked whether he makes use of his diaries for his novels. “I consider that a mean and suggestive question.” He looks turns his penetrating gaze on me. “ But to be honest, I do so. Atmosphere especially can be so pithily formulated there so that I copy what is written there almost word for word.” The protagonist in *Altijd de vrouw* is a writer by the name of Erik who lives in Italy. He sums up a relationship that has failed. Meijssing describes the novel – which easily reaches or even goes beyond the level of *Veranderlijk en wisselvallig* – as the ethical second part of a ‘doubledecker’ on the subject of love. “In the first aesthetic part the melancholy hero of the book stood like a Don Juan among his five mistresses. In *Altijd de vrouw* the protagonist, now a Tristan-figure, confesses his eternal love for one woman.” Despite biographical correspondences with the author and the protagonist, the book jacket text says ironically: “Geerten Meijssing is not the protagonist of *Altijd de vrouw* “The author sucks at his cigar and sighs deeply. “A real autobiography would always be a fiction. The writer adopts an attitude and leaves things out. The advantage with a novel is that you can go much further in your descriptions. But it remains a novel” The protagonist of *Altijd de vrouw* has written a novel about his girlfriend Eefje. It was under the pseudonym Eefje Wijnberg that Meijssing published his controversial novel *Een meisjesleven* (‘A Girl’s Life’). Women reviewers especially slated the book. Emma Brunt said in the *Haagse Post* that the book was as ‘empty as a pub after closing time’.

Meijssing had expected similar reactions to his book *Veranderlijk en wisselvallig*. But, to his surprise, these did not come. “My mother and quite respectable

friends of hers read the book with enjoyment. Even the Bishop of Haarlem considered it a very fine book. The book could not possibly offend anyone. In *Altijd de vrouw* I go out of my way to write from the point of view of a man who is the epitome of heterosexuality. I am curious to see how it will be received.” *Altijd de vrouw* is by no means an uncomplicated love story allowing the reader can go into raptures. Erik is seeking self-knowledge and only gets to know his body through his relationship with Eefje. But in doing so he loses his soul to her. “That is a Platonic idea,” says Meijnsing. “His soul is transferred to her and this makes him lose his specific essence. By pondering on and writing about this, Erik seeks to rewin his soul. His longing for love could be seen as a transferred longing for beauty and, one step higher, towards wisdom. This is the philosophical undertone of the book.”

Pregnant style

His latest two novels are written with much more gusto than his previous work in which the construction dominated. The writer jumps up: “Nonetheless, these novels are also built up in a solid numerical fashion. If you have a fixed number of words at your disposal you are obliged to formulate your thoughts as precisely as possible. This is what produces a pregnant style.

But it also of architectonic importance. The book is like a house full of corridors with fixed relationships and mirror effects. The reader does not have to see this immediately, but it is there in the background.” The writer now adopts a lecturing tone of voice. The construction of *Altijd de vrouw* is, so we learn, borrowed from the rabbit fables of the 13th Century Italian scientist Fibonacci. “It is a sort of golden mien relationship where every number is the sum of the previous two. I strongly believe in such a constructivist principle. Even optically, it makes a great difference whether a text consists of one block or a number of separate passages.” After a couple of mouthfuls of spumante Meijnsing expounds on his vision of the plot of his novel. “For me it is conducive to thoughts and a rather grim conclusion as regards love. With love, the chances of disgust and all kinds of types of loss become much larger. The only way to keep the hindrances to attaining peace of mind at bay is to concentrate on philosophical problems and not to expose yourself to the dangers of a love life. That is the essence of my book.” When asked whether he has adopted a new, more accessible style in *Veranderlijk en wisselvallig*, the writer remains silent. As if he does not wish to capitulate to the public at large. “It may seem to the world at large that there is perhaps question of a turning point in my oeuvre. The only thing you can point to is the fact that a different author’s name stands at the top of the texts. But my next book, a novel about the unwritten thoughts of Plato does resemble the Erwin trilogy once more. It is also less contemporary. That’s what I find so creepy about the last books.”

Own judge

For Meijssing, any reference to a specific time is a mortal sin. “You should only do so to give the text a certain pace. Films from the Sixties just can’t be watched any more owing to all those pairs of trousers with flairs.” Only the greatest ones do not fall into that trap, according to Meijssing. “The work of Proust has nothing to do with photographs from that epoch.” Concessions to public taste are impossible, posits Meijssing. “Of course you must not write in a deliberately obscure way. I have at times done like Joyce & Co. taking as valid that Jesuitical saying that language has been invented to hide ones thoughts with. Nowadays, I think differently about it. And what is more, every phrase should give pleasure. But in the end it depends on what you yourself think. You are your own judge.”

Although success eluded him for a long while and Meijssing’s works have only begun to sell better after he won the AKO Literary Prize, he has never doubted his own talents. “One of the faculties of the self-confident professional is that you, despite a poor reception or none at all, can lean back with an element of assurance. Because deep in you heart, you know that is good. I do not write because I am eager to be read. I write because I like writing, wish to create something beautiful. I have no urge to spread the word.” His eyes take on a somewhat obsessive look. “I am in a hurry because I would still like to do so much. The fact that I might never be able to realise these plans makes me anxious.

Time and energy are my greatest enemies. I sometimes sit in my chair, smoke a cigar, drink a glass of something and read through my older books. In so doing, I obtain comfort from what I have achieved. But it is not, of course, an experience that continues to fill you life; it is at best fleeting.” Concern for earning one’s daily bread is what Meijssing terms an interruptive element in his life as a writer. “I harbour the hyper-Romantic longing for independence. But I would even feel very much at home in the culture of the mediaeval court. In our times, its rôle has been taken over by the Fonds voor de Letteren (‘Foundation for Literature’). I could not exist without this foundation, would not have been able to write these books.

Meijssing has many literary translations to his name. “In the future I will only translate such writers as I find very fine and to whom I want to draw other people’s attention: Domenico Lea, Guido Ceronetti, Jacques Laurent, Roberto Calasso.

Translating is the most intimate relationship possible with your favourite writer.”

Compulsive expression

The theme of *Altijd de vrouw* has striking parallels with the novel of Meijssing’s elder sister Doeschka: *De beproeving* (‘The Ordeal’). The writer grins. Very

strange, indeed, very strange.

It was a surprise to both of us. Such a theme is seemingly in the air. You would almost begin to believe in the existence of a *Zeitgeist*.

“At first, Doeschka and I couldn’t stand each other. But over the years, a kind of mildness has set in. We even manage to appreciate one another’s work. But it is all still a very sensitive issue and we are unable talk openly about it.” In its change between descriptive language and philosophical reflection, Meijssing’s work reminds one of that of A.F.Th. van der Heijden. “And yet I have tried very hard in just this book not to let myself be forced into compulsive expression. I have consciously cut down the use of metaphors to the bare minimum. But I have been writing against myself since I possess a great urge to express myself. Doeschka always says: ‘What you gain in breadth, you lose in depth.’ She is right in that respect.

He considers Van der Heijden a great writer. “I immediately read his latest novel, *Advocaat van de hanen* (‘Lawyer To The Punks’). Brilliant, but I wish in no way to compete with him as to who can produce the best work. I skate in my own tracks.” In *Altijd de vrouw* Erik notes in his diary: “Sex and all the rest: worth nothing compared to my work, the things therein, the protagonists: work is the only sphere where I feel alive, the only area where I can feel happy and without restrictions.” Can Meijssing too, live only in his work? A melancholy smile flickers across his face. “I feel myself to be much richer and freer in the books than in real life. In a book like that you are completely yourself. In that world, no carelessness or half heartedness exist. “ His voice grows soft. “The only truth in my life is that of my books. My personal life is of no significance whatsoever and is completely subordinate to that of my books. It is not the pleasantest of lives imaginable, such a bookish life. But it is no dog’s life although I do bemoan my fate sometimes when I sit on my own slogging away for months on end.

In its lack of precision, ordinary life is far less attractive to me than life in books. That is what attracts me to reading: the illusion that you are living in that world. You never eat such a tasty pancake as in Malot’s *Nobody’s Boy*, do you? I have the great desire to become the protagonist of one of my books. Perhaps that is the most important reason why I write.”

Sample Translation

Always the Woman

(Altijd de vrouw)

by Geerten Meijnsing

(Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1991)

Translated by Paul Vincent

[pp 261 – 288]

The roads to Pisa (encore)

*Ein Weiser seh' ich stehen
Unverrückt vor meinem Blick;
Eine Strasse muss ich gehen,
Die noch keiner ging zurück.*

(‘I see a wise man standing
Unbudging before my gaze;
I have a road to travel,
Whence none has yet returned.’)

Because they had left home far too early, he could afford the luxury of taking the old road to Pisa. For once Chiara did not keep whining from the back seat that she was feeling sick, or asking how much further it was or if they were nearly there yet.

He had never used this road again in the intervening seven years. There were so many faster routes to Pisa, and he had driven there so often to collect her from the train. However, the very act of turning off onto the old road, set somewhat apart from the main traffic routes, which had sunk into obscurity and which he himself had always driven past, made him realise that he could not forget anything until he had remembered it all once more.

By following this same forgotten road he was, as it were, retracing his steps and could obliterate them one by one, erase his tracks, roll the thread of memory back into a ball with no loose ends, find a key to the solution from the clues provided, search for a way out of the impasse.

And in the static moment of the present time began to pass. Years of undigested experiences were released and violently expelled: the petrified debris of sentiments, which had blocked his path, shot out of him with the force of renewed desire like diarrhoea – his soul was finally purged.

He was not freed of a nagging phantom pain – the thought that he could still go back to a woman whom he could never possibly live with again – until he actually went through the usual motions to meet and welcome her, to collect her from Pisa station: just like he used to he had tidied the house, prepared everything for her arrival. In those days he had been a confirmed bachelor; now he was a kind of widower, anxious to come out of mourning; now he was taking a child with him that he would never have dared dream of then.

His head spun when the past in which he had been trapped was cut off and removed by a surgical operation on time: in the few moments it took him to get back to Pisa – so-called real time to which he had to cling so as not to lose his equilibrium entirely (‘there is a daily service departing from Amsterdam and arriving in Pisa at eleven-thirty the following evening’) – the lost years had streamed past, for him to recover and write them off.

Everything which did not take place in real time – his car driving along the dark road, with the child in the back whose knee he pinched occasionally to persuade himself of her reality – was equally unreal: the year that he had waited for Eva, the year since she had left him, all the years he had spent with her.

Everything was the same and yet different: expectation versus memory. Back then he had not had anything to remember; now there was scarcely anything to look forward to. The apparent repetition in the external circumstances made him realise that a genuine repetition of events was impossible and anyway undesirable. He was passing the same places; the same images were being projected onto his retina; perhaps he was, incorrigibly, the same – but how differently he experienced the landmarks in the dark landscape he was driving through! She had devastated both town and countryside for him – his town, and the countryside where he had long ago begun to feel at home when he had stayed

and waited for her return. He felt that pain at countless spots on the road: its enchantment – locked villas in sleeping gardens enclosed by cypress hedges, the looming white fronts of Romanesque churches, the wispy tops of bamboos and plane trees which screened the river – had been shattered by her. Everything had a painful memory attached to it – everything had been reduced to a malevolent opera set, abandoned by the singers, a relic of badly played scenes which had evoked emotions of hope and despair. The same scenery had been used for disparate pieces from quite different genres: his life with Kanger, his life with her and his life alone – superimposed layers of experience, lending a different colour to the same things, which on worn, well trodden spots sometimes revealed a glimpse of an earlier mood.

Reality, real time: at about eleven the daily jazz programme began, but he preferred to play a tape of an old record he had managed to track down after a long search, *The House of the Blue Lights*. Whenever he played that piece, he saw Pisa station in his mind's eye and felt the chill of waiting on a winter night. As though he were already in Pisa, while he was still on his way there, had scarcely left home. The years had gone by as fast as his thoughts, faster than his restored car (with its layers of filler over old dents).

Where at first there had been a fallow field full of thistles and dandelions behind the cemetery, an ultramodern stadium had now been built, with smooth turf and a cinder track. The road itself, which for years had been dug up and partially closed off while they laid a new methane gas pipe, had now been given a new asphalt surface in which fresh potholes had already appeared. The trees lining the road, planes and limes, had become overgrown, been pruned and become overgrown again for the umpteenth time. Nature, which at first had been a hostile element to be beaten back as far as possible, was now protected, but the plane trees – once the pride of Lucca – had caught red rot, like teeth that have been neglected for years, and were being pulled up and destroyed by an energetic town council, creating gaps in the landscape of the past. The view as it used to be was richer, with more nuances in the greys and a greater depth of field than could

be obtained from the same perspective today. As you got older, you started missing more and more things; the world seemed to have become older and wearier, stripped by bulldozers and road builders; levelled for illegal jerry-building. At the same time the world had become fuller and busier: there were more cars, more tourists and more people, even though according to the statistics the birth rate was falling. He had multiplied himself by two in his child. And if the indigenous population did not supply their own offspring, people came from elsewhere, from the Balkans and darkest Africa, to graze off the best and richest spots on earth. Even this late in the evening he encountered them at junctions, Slavs and Bashi-Buzuks, armed with sponges and squeegees which were as dirty and thirsty as their owners, whose sole possessions those items often were.

Times were changing, but he had stayed the same. You could not draw any moral from the past: you had to come to terms with it, but you were not intended to rid yourself of it, because what are we except our past? Only by using the drastic remedy of a new love (in Kanger's words), could you cure the sickness of a previous one. But then you were back in the same boat, and one's spiritual resistance was not improved by the cure.

As he always did he drove into the station square at Pisa, but parking was no longer allowed in front of the station: the more cars there were, the fiercer the fight against them became. In order to prepare people in advance for the Communist utopia of public transport only, it had been made impossible to get close to Pisa station under your own steam. Or was it because the railways, forever the centre of scandal, at present over the gold sheets affair, had already been closed down? Think of how many times, on the narrow roads between Lucca and Pisa, he had seen complete railway carriages being transported on trailers. It had long since ceased to surprise him! Provided that that particular train, in which she had had to spend nearly twenty-four hours, arrived!

So that after parking his car a little way further into town and walking back to the square with a sleepy Chiara clutching his hand, they entered the newly painted station of Pisa, which had a greater reputation in literature than in

passenger transport. It was no longer necessary to buy platform tickets; what had once been called a platform (*banchina*), was now known as a track (*binario*).

What little life there was in the night-time station centred on the buffet, which over the years had more or less become his local. Chiara ordered a *succo di frutta* (apricot flavour) like an old hand and he had the same as he always did on such occasions, an espresso with a *china calda*; he snapped a Tuscan cigar in half with a practised motion, putting one half away in his leather case. Then they took up their positions on the middle of the three platforms, so as to be able to keep a watch on the trains. Since they had once put Eva on a train together, over a year ago, Chiara had cried out whenever she saw a train: ‘Look, Mummy’s on the train!’ And she was right: Eva had been on a train travelling away from them for the past year.

‘What if she’s not on the train?’ asked Chiara in a worried voice. He had promised to buy her a *luce di stelle* Barbie doll, which she had immediately spotted in the station kiosk, if Eva were not on the train.

‘Of course she’ll be on the train. She said she would be, didn’t she?’ Chiara did not know what she wanted most: the visit her father had prepared her for, or the doll she had been promised as a consolation.

It began raining gently – no problem: these manoeuvres (Kanger’s term) on Pisa station had become routine. He had inquired and the train was not delayed. Eva had arrived at and left from this station. The times he had welcomed her and said goodbye to her here! It was all familiar to him. He scarcely noticed the details any more: the marble of the benches was cool in summer and cold in winter. She had come and left. All kinds of things had happened in the intervening period, been suppressed, and evoked again so that they could finally be forgotten. Whatever your emotions, the trains stayed neutral and kept to the same timetable, as though none of it mattered. You waited for your own destination, and if the train was late you waited a bit longer. This train was on time for a change: fate could not care less.

‘There she is; there’s the train!’ cried Chiara, dancing about. He did not care any more, having prepared himself for the worst. The certainty of the timetable had also left him indifferent: ‘There is a daily service...’ Moreover, you could only get a clear view when the first batch of passengers had spilled onto the platform and dispersed in the direction of the various exits, *usare il sottopassaggio*. Whenever two people are trying to find each other in a crowd, it is best if the person waiting stays in a strategic spot. Otherwise you may miss each other. He was patient: he knew from experience that the long-awaited person was always the last to emerge from the train, from the furthest carriage, added at Amsterdam station, pushed further and further back at each stage of the journey, gathering grime in Belgium and northern France, cleaned in Basle, tapped with long brake hammers in Göschingen before the stretch across the Alps, searched with special thoroughness for *droga* (‘...departing from Amsterdam’) when it entered Italian territory.

What would she be wearing? Would he be able to recognise her, separate from the ideal image that he preserved of her, weary after a long journey, having descended from on high to pay a ‘simple’ visit to mankind, to concern herself with a decrepit mortal like himself?

Meanwhile the platform had virtually emptied; light flooded out from the open doors, and the faces he could see at the windows in the enclosed comfort of the compartments had no intention of getting off. Didn’t she know where to get off (‘...a train arriving at Pisa at eleven-thirty the following evening’)? Feeling old and jaded, he worked his way down from the front to the back of the train, then from the back to the front. The train was waiting for the signal to leave. Doors slammed and a conductor asked him to get on board if he were going to. (‘Shall we go on, or get married first?’) In reply he double-checked with the guard that this was the right train, her train. It was not his train: he was left standing where he was, without being carried along by new events which were supposed to give his life a new direction.

He bought the Barbie doll for Chiara. The fluorescent spangled dress glowed in the dark.

With death in his heart, where it had long since announced its approach, he drove back, mindlessly, empty and black, sinking deeper and deeper into the pit of his dead-end existence. Freed from his past, but at the same time deprived of a future. Only now did the house they were driving back to, tidied as it was, strike him as truly empty and abandoned – he was frightened of nothingness.

As he drove up the lonely hill to his fortress, the sweeping beam of his headlights picked out the vision of an angel, sitting in the dark grass leaning against a rucksack. For a moment he thought he had gone mad, become the plaything of dreams and delusions: neither his eyes nor his reason could be trusted any longer. Then he heard her voice, which he had never been able to get out of his mind. Hadn't he got her telegram? She had waited the whole day at Pisa airport, in tears because he hadn't come.

He squeezed her arm, she kissed him full on the mouth: actions in real time, the here and now, truth and life. Chiara supplied the name that his mouth could no longer utter, 'Laura!'.

‘The Rot Sets In’

*Mein Herz ist wie erstorben,
Kalt starrt ihr Bild darin;
Schmilzt je das Herz mir wieder,
Fließt auch ihr Bild dahin!*

(‘My heart feels dead and frozen,
Her picture’s locked cold within;
If ever my heart melts again,
Her image will flow away too’.)

In my love for Eva I was not much different from the tenor-sax player coming into a half-empty, smoke-filled joint at two in the morning to play the millionth version of *Body & Soul*. Meaning that I was playing my tune under the weight of that entire tradition, in the hope of attracting attention, and because I could not help it. I was both bound and free, improvising but having to keep within the framework and follow certain rules. The same old refrain, which still always sounded significantly different.

One striking characteristic of such renderings was that they became better, more impressive and more moving, the less I tried to avoid clichés. This phenomenon, known both in music and on the stage as ‘going over the top’, seemed to apply in a more intense form to the thoughts of the abandoned lover, who had little further use for real poetry and measured words. I played with crude effects, so that it seemed as if I were not taking my role seriously, without realising that the audience I was clowning for had already left. For her my commonplaces, as soon as my words became more emphatic and were directed straight at her, had quickly become rather embarrassing and inadequate – there was too much interference... For me they were still usable, these clichés and

catchphrases that I kept repeating to myself, like a lunatic who can no longer stop talking and entreating, varying between a mumble and a scream.

That happened to me literally. I found myself constantly talking to myself: my impressions came straight out of my mouth, with one observation directly linked to the next. Clichés acted as a method of quickly and accurately evoking the vision behind those perceptions; they referred to the inescapability of my situation.

I was frightened that even words, which came too easily, and were hence without the slightest value or effect, would also desert me, just as the smell and the flavour, light and colour had vanished from my life the moment that Eva left me. And to be inadequate in language, to dry up because there was nothing more to say, was a catastrophic prospect. Only via language could I enter the domain of her life, since she had denied me access to her body. With words I could try to summon her back, without looking round, because the act of looking back on my happiness would make my loss real for the first time: I did not dare look back, forbade myself to think about the past. Only if I dried up and could find no more words for my lament would I be really cut off from that past and strangely mutilated and emasculated.

Still, as with all hangovers, my tongue became heavier and heavier in my mouth. It had become too big for my palate, a sure sign of dementia, and was flopping around slower and slower, unarticulated and swollen. Just like that other organ, senselessly and idiotically swollen for someone who was no longer there: both instruments of pleasure, but if for lack of a counterpart they turned against one they soon became instruments of torture which I should have preferred to get rid of if I had not been cherishing the plan of getting rid of myself in one go, just as she had got rid of me.

Now that I was reduced to a phantom, my voice was all I had. I no longer ate, and drank all the more heavily, with an insatiable drinker's thirst, in order to lubricate my throat. The remains of the breakfast which Eva had feasted on before she had left had been left where they were for days. She really knew how

to breakfast, did my Eva: love had always made her hungry. Love made me thirsty. It had simply amazed me that she could wolf her food down under such circumstances: it did not suggest any great respect for the situation; Eva would not let herself be denied everyday pleasures by a death or nuclear disaster. In her book the four cardinal virtues were eating, drinking, laughing and sleeping. ‘And what about making love then?’, I had once asked her. ‘Where does that come in?’

‘All you think about is sex!’ Eva had replied. I didn’t give a damn about any virtue: all I thought about was sex. About Eva. About sex with Eva. About how on another occasion she had said that she could not go for forty-eight hours without sex: after two days she simply had to have a man in her bed. The journey back with Storm took two days. He might not be the lucky person this time, but then someone would have to be found at once in Amsterdam, that wicked city. Or would ‘this guy Boxhoorn, this Boxhoorn’ be ready and waiting at the other end, to take over the torch which I myself had lit and borne with such pride?

‘I’m not leaving you for another man,’ she had assured me that last evening. Maybe not, but there had always been a man in Eva’s life; men were needed – more than one, the answer to the riddle was that simple – as a confirmation.

‘What does that mean? What needs confirming?’ That’s what our conversations were like, that’s how naive my questions had been.

‘That I’m a woman.’ How on earth did she come up with something like that? I had not seen that. (‘Am I in the picture?’ Eva often used to ask whenever my gaze strayed to another woman, in the never-ending comparison to see if she was still the best.) She was not just any woman to me. Eva was always the one.

To tell the truth, I would have preferred Storm to take pity on her, rather than that washed-up woman-chaser with his clown’s violin. Soon she would be touring the world in his circus – anything was good enough in her eyes provided I disapproved and was as different as possible from what I did. She had absolutely no acrobatic skill, but a leopard skin would not look bad on her, and she could dress and undress very prettily. That was in demand. But why the hell wasn’t it enough that it was in demand with me? Did she really need a tent full of people?

‘Stop swearing, Daddy mustn’t say bad words; it frightens me, ‘Chiara admonished me, bringing me back to my senses a little: *piano, piano, sotto voce, senza parlare*. Eva had shrugged her shoulders at such outbursts.

‘I want to be admired.’

‘But I admire you.’

‘Have yourself looked at, Erik, and spare me those feeble compliments. You despise me even more than your own books.’ I really did admire her, for example for this kind of crazy slip of the tongue, which gave the unintended lustre of wit to her retorts. Eva always answered as though she had to defend herself; she crossed swords with me. We sharpened our blades on each other. While in the beginning they were lightly dancing foils that we fenced with, in the end we hacked at each other with bare sabres.

And now my adversary had gone – we had not even fought to the bitter end. I was alone on the abandoned battlefield, *en garde*, flailing wildly about me like Don Quixote’s prodigal son. Come back if you’ve got any guts – I thought you weren’t afraid!

Chiara puts her head round the door of the room. ‘I get frightened when you talk like that, she says to me. ‘I always think there’s someone there.’

Aren’t I anyone then? Was I less than Boxhoorn?

‘What has this Boxhoorn got that I haven’t got?’ I had asked in my desperation. Softly, because I was not even interested in her reply. I usually knew what was coming.

‘He really loves women. For you they’re just a hobby. And he makes me laugh.’ Humour, Kanger had once said, is the last resort if you want to keep a woman. How did he know, never having lived with a woman himself? Look at us, Kanger had said. I was incapable of being insulted by Kanger (which infuriated Eva), but she always managed to put her finger on the sore spot. The time came when I was no longer amused. I did not expect much amusement in the future. My mistake was that I was deadly serious about everything to do with her. Of course I didn’t love women, because I loved her. And all women in her. In other

women, I loved her most of all, as the superlative. I had never made a hobby of women – let Kanger be my witness: my love had been a sickness which had turned me away from philosophy and the pure life, my only hobby.

I was still sick, with utter conviction. And now I needed nursing. I vomited next to the chair, so as to be able to bring up the words clogging my mouth. No, it's nothing, Chiara, Daddy is not sick, just a little sad:

*Morgan is sad today
Sadder than yesterday.*

My mumbling turned temporarily into song when, putting a brave face on it, I had to keep watch by Chiara's bedside. I was armed to the teeth – she need not fear – with a repertoire that I had inherited from Eva, the Jewish bride's dowry, all she had left me besides the child, who had become both a life insurance policy and bait to lure her back with. If I had forgotten the words the tune could keep me going. I could sing wordlessly, making meaningless sounds. But usually I knew those words from my past only too damned well, and could not fit them to music. At my wit's end I tugged the string on the music box which had hung in Chiara's cradle, and in Catherine's bed. I did not play myself any more: the musician turned his rumbling pot compulsively and let things speak for themselves – everything goes its own way. For Chiara that tinkling Schubert melody, *rallentando*, symbolised absolute safety, happiness and love within reach, infinitely repeatable.

Unfortunately the music box had the opposite effect on me: those moments of happiness only became truly transient and irretrievable when you were reminded of them. And the most dreadful thing about this musical box mechanism was that you could not turn it off. I was forced to endure the torture which I myself had set in motion; a sweet torment which was at its cruellest and most refined as it slowly died away, so that one was inclined to make the unbearable refrain start all over again from the beginning: it must not stop!

It did not stop, this pain which I thought I was well prepared for and which tormented me with a comparable mechanism. I must not forget anything and did not want to remember anything, know anything but the present and the future. Every time it had almost slipped away, this awareness of my impossible situation, it came pouring back over me like a cold shower. I smothered the musical box in the blankets of her cot, and tried to muffle my shrieks and howls in the same blankets.

Despair rose and fell in me like the rhythm of the sea, or rather at high tide I had the foolish conviction that everything would very soon come right – after all, outwardly nothing had changed. Eva's clothes were hanging in the wardrobe, her papers were still on her desk. I carefully left untouched the cotton wool pads, used tampons and balls of hair in the pedal bin in the bathroom and the half-smoked filter cigarettes in the ashtrays all over the house: nothing must be thrown away – her rubbish was precious to me.

However, just as often it was low tide, and expectation churned out of me, sucking a black vacuum of unfathomable panic into the pit of my stomach, which could no longer tolerate any food. If she had really gone – which I could not believe, which I must not believe – I did not need to keep up the pretence of this existence. Bad and insufficient food, too much drink, no exercise at all except for the spinning in my head, little sleep and lots of masturbation had weakened my spinal cord and I had lost my reason. Words and concepts, which now swirled through my head unimpeded, must be brought into line and under control, according to the most basic rules of syntax: meaning and understanding would then follow of their own accord.

Eva has gone. I love Eva. Eva, come back!

I did not get much further to start with, though I urged myself to take the next step. Eva has gone temporarily. She must love me too. Eva will come back!

Hope and despair came from the same box, were each other's reverse, evoked their supposed opposite – because you could only hope for what you no longer really believed. You only believed in what you knew was not true. I believed in

love and hoped for Eva's return. Hoping and believing were things you did against your better judgement, even though you could keep it up for a lifetime. Despair and disbelief amounted to the same thing; the difference was in one's positive or negative frame of mind. In my view all hope was evil and futile, and so could be better described as despair. Once hope had been dispelled the same feeling was called despair. What at first had disappeared, now turned out to be present again, under another name – they could not fool me. The seductive figure of hope still hid beneath the shabby cloak of my despair.

Of course I had always refused to listen to the warnings of my brother Kanger, and had not escaped the emotions and discomforts of a love affair. I had thrown myself completely on Eva's mercy, just as I was at the mercy of the hope she had left behind.

The end of the summer in which my Eva had left was accompanied by violent thunderstorms. Hailstones as big as marbles battered the roof tiles. The rain which followed found its way under the tiles and came in through the roof in various places. I did not even have enough saucepans and buckets – I let things take their course. Below the windows and by the front door the floors were under water. Chiara had leaped out of bed at the first clap of thunder and clung to me. The electricity had failed even before the first flash of lightning. It would be a while before it came back on. She whimpered fearfully, 'Let it be all right, Daddy!'

We sat in the dark with just a candle and heard the dripping, trickling and gushing around us. This was all the security I could offer her. The intimacy of our domestic bliss was as leaky as a sieve, unable to withstand violent external influences. The flicker of lightning lit up our rickety hovel.

If I could have observed us from a distance, peered in through those same badly fitting windows, I would have seen how things stood: at each flash, which made Chiara close her eyes in fright, I would have seen the lines in my embittered face, I would have seen our helpless destitution, in which everything we had- built up was wiped out by the very first rainstorm; would have realised

what it meant to grow old. There and then, in those first weeks after her departure, I became old – your youth is something you lose suddenly, like innocence.

As though the harsh light illuminated deeper recesses in that old skull of mine, I suddenly remembered the mythical figure of Epimetheus: a fool who sees the truth too late. In conversations with Eva I had always been afflicted by this *esprit de l'escalier*, only thinking of the right answers after the event.

I had wanted to raise myself to the level extolled by the ancients as the contemplative life. As a thinker I had failed in all my actions and remained a lonely, fantastic dreamer, for whom the morning star rose too early rather than too late ('this person must be careful not to become an eternal bachelor'). Above all, because of my contemplative disposition I was endowed with a capacity for suffering which had enabled me to long for, enjoy, renounce and regret and subsequently to go on forever desiring the unattainable prize that had been within my grasp. Eva had enriched my life with all kinds of gifts for which I had had no time or use. This mysterious dowry had merged into sweet images which dissolved into thin air the moment my earthly desire tried to touch them. I had been unable to give anything to Eva, so richly endowed by the gods. I had not given her a child, she had given me one. The fulfilment of my longing may have been given to me in her future unattainability: for the rest of my life I could indulge that longing by remembering her and remembering how often I had lost and remembered her before. The great intensity of this Platonic anamnesis enabled me to realise that I could keep what I had lost to fleeting reality as an unchanging ideal. Always the one: in Eva I had encountered the essence of woman, the perfection and destructiveness of a woman who had brought nothing but happiness into my life only to rob me of it again and make me forever a man of memory.

These days, when anyone says to me, 'So sadly she's gone for good then, has she?', I have my answer ready, 'And that's why I can't lose her any more – she's mine for good!'

People shrug their shoulders, just as Eva shrugged her shoulders when I said something she did not like. They think I have lost my reason together with my wife. At other times I simply deny it: it's nothing, she's on holiday, at work, on her way to see us. To anyone willing to listen I extol the wonderful qualities of my wife, who a short while ago was simply a girlfriend. Having once been childishly proud of our unmarried status, while in both practice and theory we were simply living as man and wife, I now boast of my family life with lying enthusiasm. Unilaterally extending the time we were together, I maintain without batting an eyelid that we have been married since I first knew her and that we have already celebrated our tenth anniversary, in private. I tell the baker and my neighbour, the wine merchant and myself that there is nothing to touch our love, nothing to touch Eva. Since we never let anyone in the house, so as not to disturb our married bliss, I can even pretend to other people that she has not gone at all, not even temporarily.

'Why don't we see *la biondina* any more?' They'd better not talk about her, because I have a jealous nature and will defend my darling the moment anyone so much as glances at her.

'My wife is in the kitchen.' – 'She's not feeling too good and has to stay in bed. – 'Eva has locked herself away to get on with her thesis; she has no time for socialising.'

Meanwhile the mess in the house got visibly worse – she had never been a good housewife. I could not expect her to concern herself with such trivial matters. Her task was of a higher order, and we had to treat her with great circumspection, did better not to disturb her and quietly went our own way, Chiara and I. Cobwebs began to appear between the chair legs. Tiny spiders, moths and flies seemed to be raining on my desk, ants poured out of the chinks between the tiles. To help, I told Chiara, they clear up the crumbs that fall from the table; that means less sweeping for us. The broom would only disturb our peace and drive away the good memories. In the spring, if all goes well, Mummy Eva will help us give the place a thorough clean, because every summer new life

begins, or rather life begins anew, because what more could we want than what we already have, aren't we well off, just the two of us together, and of course with Eva there the whole time, because you can be sure that not a moment goes by when she isn't thinking about us, however busy she is, we must give her time, we're not in any hurry after all, are we? As long as we have enough to drink we can hold out. And now we are going to light the stove again, you'll see how cosy it will be. Just imagine: the first evening the stove is lit, we'll have a party. I'll make you hot chocolate, like Eva taught me, because that is the best way of consoling you.

For consolation I had devised a consolation machine, which gave us both satisfaction: Chiara wrapped her arms and legs tightly around me, while I tickled her ribs and her bottom. Exhausted with laughter we fell into the chair. 'No, Daddy, stop it, stop it – don't stop,' gasped Chiara. She is a woman like Eva and has not yet arrived at the ominous formula which in Holland can land fathers and husbands in court: 'I said stop and he just went on!'

We have agreed that until Eva gets back, Chiara can sleep with me in the big bed. We have to get through this together and not let the mood be ruined by being consistent in matters of upbringing. That is what Eva is for, she sets out the guidelines, and I supply the necessary everyday actions. Each of us looks after the other, Chiara and I, and we do not lose sight of each other for a second. Whenever, for form's sake, I sit down at my desk, she nestles like a cat in the hollow behind my legs. We go to the bottega together to get bread and drink. When there is a breeze of any kind, we lie on our backs in the grass under sky which is being infiltrated by autumn and from where the birds – yes even they – are leaving for better climes, looking up at our little kite. Chiara sends up heart-shaped notes along the string to her mother which she has cut out and painted at home in advance. A cross is the symbol for a kiss: add three from me if there's room on the paper.

The necessary actions of everyday life: preparations for winter are an enjoyable diversion. We were almost looking forward to our isolation becoming

even greater, and laid in a supply of wood and wine with which we could be independent of the outside world, self-sufficient.

The wine was too young, the wood too wet. (Oh, my plane tree, that I made pay for her offence!) Both gave us a headache, but we were confident that everything would improve of its own accord. Young wine can only age, and wet wood dry out. Anxious to usher in the new season I had not bothered to dismantle and clean the stove, or sweep the chimney. At first this replacement for Eva as the centre of the house, as the source of warmth and the focus of our concern and attention, spluttered violently in protest. Poured smoke from every cranny, belching great clouds into the room, required constant relighting, and could not be left alone for a moment. That gave us something to do, besides working out how to get by on our dwindling finances, how long we could sustain this game of hide-and-seek – stay where you are and don't move – when she could reasonably be expected to find us. No one answered the questions I asked aloud about it, just as the shopkeeper no longer answered when I kept conjuring up visions of new parties for which I need bottle of whisky every other day, and soon every day. The car was not used any more – what was the point of going anywhere? This was our home base, we must remain at our posts here, to make sure we were at home when Eva gave up looking for us. I had put the car on blocks – the wheels hung helplessly in the air and from what I saved on petrol I could fill up with whisky. In my place of exile wine was cheaper than petrol, and whisky better value than motor oil, even though I used more than my DS.

At least the stove responded, and apart from Chiara was the only person I had to talk to. It sang, spluttered, exploded with indignation, sighed, groaned and growled. Sometimes it made the same sound as the Renault-4 in which Eva had driven off. That was the only reason that the outside door opened these evenings, to see if a car, if her car were coming up the path.

Nothing. My visions were not made of flesh and blood, not even rusty steel, Or even paper, come to that. After I had cooled off in the open air, I felt lucid enough again for a moment not to be fooled by anything else.

‘What a world we are forced to live in!’ was how I summed up my research. Contrary to what people usually think, there is no such thing as a unique ‘real world’ as something given, independent of human thought patterns and the symbols of language. What we call the world, Daddy’s little girl, is simply the product of the human mind, which with symbolic procedures – whether they be words, numbers or images – constructs the world.

The world of phenomena, the world in which we live, is something that we create with our intellect. These constructive actions required to make a world consist of diverse and complex constructive activities.

The world as created by us may be produced by the cognitive activity of the artist (the ‘world’ of Powell’s *Dance to the Music of Time*), or the scholar (the world of ideas of the Platonists, or the gravitational fields of modern physics), or the man in the street (like in the everyday world of your marbles, putting fuel on the stove and finishing that bottle). If only I can relinquish the idea of ‘reality’ and your innocent eye which supposedly sees things exactly as they are, without ‘interpreting’, I am bound to conclude that my astonishing observations are dependent on the concepts I use – such as love, sun and stars – and that the world of the stars which I point out to you is itself a creation of my mind. All the worlds with which I am concerned have been constructed from other worlds which I have taken on trust. We are never in contact with a kind of original reality independent of my comprehension or the mental capacity of other people who thought before us. It is not that I start from an absolute premise or from something which precedes all thought, but I have to make do with the kind of constructions which lead to the creation of a possible world. My world can be created only by the transformation of the worlds and versions of the world which have already been constructed. *Body & Soul!*

Then it must also be clear that we must not look for truth in the relationship between a view of the world and something outside it, but in the characteristics of that version itself and its possible links with other views. But just as there are many correct views, each of which holds good for one version of the world, there

are many different worlds. In this I have found a kind of truth formula in which every consistent view has a corresponding world – are you still listening or are you already asleep?

And that is what I did: I maintained an elaborate, rationally underpinned view, and consistent views create worlds. However different these worlds may be from worlds according to different views, expressing and formulating such a view is equivalent to creating a world.

Who says I am not moving with the times, have never heard of deconstruction? Because I can just as easily demolish the world which I have constructed. What am I saying? All I can do is demolish, all conceivable worlds. I don't know anyone called Eva. My daughter? A figment of my degenerate brain, because I cannot stand absolute solitude. Everything I tell my friends is a lie – I cannot stop lying. For example, I have to tell Justus the story again and again. My story is quite different from his. When he claims to be talking about the same things, I can scarcely recognise anything: are we really talking about the same people? In retrospect many things are placed in a different light by his reading of events. Everything turns out to be much worse than I thought. I get angry, am in a constant state of aggrieved excitement, beg him to shut up. No one need interrupt me, I didn't ask for anything, did I? I'm not interested in other people's opinions. Let them judge my words by their truth content most of all, not by the sweetness of their sound. As long as I am talking...

Everything in the house was rotting: little by little I was forced to throw away the food I had bought because I thought I had to keep going. Instead of having a meal a day I could dispose of a whole menu daily: a fish with some potatoes, dubious eggs and black wilted lettuce, rancid butter and mouldy sausage. Outside, right by the door, the rubbish bags were piling up: they attracted snakes, rats, cats and stray dogs, but no blond girl in red high-heels. I was building a *cordon sanitaire* of rubbish around me. And the less I ate, the less I needed to shit. This house had once been rich in excreta, which simply fell from the back of the house into the stinging nettles and blackberry bushes. A healthily shitting family. My

metabolism had almost ground to a halt as though to slow down time and feel the chill of sorrow ever deeper in my bones, around my skeleton. First the fruit displayed on the table had started rotting, this summer's harvest: plums, pears and figs turned purple and brown and black. White maggots poked their heads out of the joints in the table. Finally I would become overripe myself: the rot was bound to spread from my surroundings to myself. I was prepared to give in to it, a worm was gnawing at my guts from inside anyway. My conscience, heart and liver had been attacked and undermined.

However, people are stronger than they think. Sorrow and pain have almost as much stamina as indomitable hope. I did not become softer and weaker but tougher and harder and determined to drink my hurt to the dregs. However much I drank I was still drying out. Fate paralysed me, I stiffened and congealed, went off like game that has to hang after it has been shot. What was left of my heart froze and petrified – I did not want it to melt, because what I could preserve in a frozen state would flow out of me when it thawed.

When I fell silent for a moment, all I could hear, on my chair next to the extinguished stove, was the hum of the refrigerator. It was virtually empty. Often it was the only light still on at night, when I opened the door to look into the empty space that I should have liked to crawl into like a cupboard for a foretaste of the chill of the grave. Woe is me, you fool!

Right at the back of the empty freezer compartment, which sucks in my thoughts and congeals them like breath in the cold, I find a plastic bag containing hard, dried-out slices of cheese which she had brought with her from Holland when she had come back on a previous occasion.

Mature but still sliceable!

The hot tears cloud my eyes, a lump in my throat clears, the words I wanted to swallow string themselves together into an unstoppable chain and I vomit as though the last of my bodily juices need to be expelled before I am really freed and emptied of feelings. There is nothing more to vomit or say, but my body goes through the old, inverted, peristaltic motions and I am racked by unstoppable

convulsions. As I retch I call out to you: ‘Can’t you see what you’ve done to me?’

I know: it’s my own fault, you did not ask me for anything and warned me for long enough. I have long since forgotten exactly what I want from you, or why I simply have to win you back, have you and keep you. Ow, that’s my sore spot: the first two things I managed, the last I cannot. And so the situation is reversed, – even though you don’t want me, you’ve got me, or at least what’s left of me. It’s not much and it’s without pride: a wreck, an unburied ghost, a zombie with a voice that cannot stop talking and telling you: I love you, it’s you I love, you’re the one who made me and then broke me.

What can I do? What else can I do or say? How can I be rid of you? I cannot run away, because wherever I go, you will come after me, or rather the thought of you which is precious to me. I cannot manage to demolish my world before I take one last tour round it, and re-experience all the pain. ‘Were there nice moments too?’ I hear you say. Listen to who’s talking! That is precisely my torment: that the greatest joy led only to the deepest pain! And what’s more you are the one who always denies that there was any love in our life, because you don’t want to know anything more about my life which for me was our life together. That is why I must do precisely what I cannot do: remember the past that you have forgotten. That punishment is too harsh; you must not and cannot hold me to it.

It’s your fault: purely and simply because of what and who you are, just because you are, and gave me a life that could not be mine, set a world in motion which I could no longer bring to a halt. Because you are still there – just not here. I shall rub your nose in that past, pour salt on your wounds, drum it into that beautiful sweet face of yours. That’s the way to treat naughty girls. You’ve left me so helpless that all I can do is give you a parting kick, dig my heel in and twist. God help you!

I’m well aware that there’s no point, and that I cannot hurt you, dent you in any way: and I thrash out all the more wildly. The more futile my empty words sound, the louder I shall scream them, and repeat them till they are devoid of all

meaning. Please spare me your understanding or sympathy: I can still manage pity for myself. I am not asking for alms, not for friendship – you can stuff that last offer of yours, I don't want you any more, do you hear? There's no need for you to come back, not even 'just for a visit', and don't you dare mess things up with fine-sounding promises and those indestructible charms of yours. Because there is nothing left of them for me. Have I grown old, too old for you? So have you, and it is your tragic fate, which has finally caught up with you, that you don't realise it. What we had happens only once in a lifetime, and what you did you cannot do again. And get away with it. You won't escape, you diabolical vessel full of all the poisons that delight under the wide heavens, on the boundless earth – you who are everything, everything that has ever refreshed me with feelings of joy, and brought me solace in the lee of your perfume – all I have tasted of divine pleasures and spiritual fulfilment – all that, all that – my Eva Pandora. If I can't catch up with you, you'll catch up with yourself.

How can I hurt you? You once asked me if I was honest, the question I dreaded above all others. In fact I am not even clear about it myself, but I'll tell you what you want to hear. I tried to give you every thing you wanted – but not what I could have given, not myself. Love is not even my most powerful weapon. If we are agreed on that, there is no point in fooling you any more: I prefer to be alone. As for you: you took me far too seriously – I didn't mean much of it, it was just a joke.

And together with my desire I have lost my voice: I'll get a sheet of paper. I can still speak without saying anything, even if it sounds like a raven cawing, *scratch, scratch*. It won't be a letter to you. I'm writing this for myself. Because my longing goes on and on and needs language:

immerzu, immerzu.