

But time is passing, the women are all talking at once, and it is nearly impossible to have a conversation, much less to impose its subject. She tries delicately to take up topics they raise and lead them toward what she wants to tell them, but she fails: as soon as her remarks move away from their own concerns, no one listens.

The waiter has already brought the second round of beer; her first mug is still standing on the table with its foam collapsed as if disgraced alongside the exuberant foam of the fresh mug. Irena faults herself for having lost her taste for beer; in France she learned to savor a drink by small mouthfuls, and is no longer used to bolting great quantities of liquid as beer-loving requires. She raises the mug to her lips and forces herself to take two, three swigs in a row. Just then one woman—the oldest of them all, about sixty—gently puts her hand to Irena's lips and wipes away the flecks of foam left there.

"Don't force yourself," she tells her. "Suppose we have a little wine ourselves? It would be idiotic to pass up such a good wine," and she asks the waiter to open one of the bottles still standing untouched on the long table.

Milada had been a colleague of Martin's, working at the same institute. Irena had recognized her when she first appeared at the door of the room, but only now, each of them with a wine glass in hand, is she able to talk to her. She looks at her: Milada still has the same shape face (round), the same dark hair, the same hairstyle (also round, covering the ears and falling to below the chin). She appears not to have changed; however, when she begins to speak, her face is abruptly transformed: her skin creases and creases again, her upper lip shows fine vertical lines, while wrinkles on her cheeks and chin shift rapidly with every expression. Irena thinks Milada certainly must not realize this: people don't talk to themselves in front of a mirror; she would see her own face only when it is at rest, with the skin nearly smooth; every mirror in the world would have her believe that she is still beautiful.

As she savors the wine, Milada says (and instantly, on her lovely face, the wrinkles spring forth and start to dance): "It's not easy, returning, is it?"

"They can't understand that we left without the slightest hope of coming back. We did our best to drop anchor where we were. Do you know Skacel?"

"The poet?"

"There's a stanza where he talks about his sadness; he says he wants to build a house out of it and lock himself inside for three hundred years. Three hundred years. We all saw a three-hundred-year-long tunnel stretching ahead of us."

"Sure, we did too, here."

"So then why isn't anyone willing to acknowledge that?"

"Because people revise their feelings if the feelings were wrong. If history has disproved them."

"And then, too: everybody thinks we left to get ourselves an easy life. They don't know how hard it is to carve out a little place for yourself in a foreign world. Can you imagine—leaving your country with a baby and with another one in your belly. Losing your husband. Raising your two daughters with no money . . ."

She falls silent, and Milada says: "It makes no sense to tell them all that. Even until just lately, everybody was arguing about who had the hard-

est time under the old regime. Everybody wanted to be acknowledged as a victim. But those suffering-contests are over now. These days people brag about success, not about suffering. So if they're prepared to respect you now, it's not for the hard life you've had, it's because they see you've got yourself a rich man!"

They've been talking for a long time in a corner when the other women approach and collect around them. As if to make up for not paying enough attention to their hostess, they are garrulous (a beer high makes people more noisy and good-humored than a wine high) and affectionate. The woman who earlier had demanded beer cries: "I've really got to taste your wine!" and she calls the waiter, who opens more bottles and fills glasses.

Irena is gripped by a sudden vision: beer mugs in hand and laughing noisily, a bunch of women rush up to her, she makes out Czech words, and understands, horrified, that she is not in France, that she is in Prague and she is doomed. Oh, yes—it's one of her old emigration-dreams, and she quickly banishes the memory of it: in fact the women around her aren't drinking beer now,

they're raising wineglasses, and again they're toasting the daughter's return; then one of them, beaming, says to her: "You remember? I wrote you that it was high time, high time you came back!"

Who is that woman? The whole evening she's been talking about her husband's sickness, lingering excitedly over all the morbid details. Finally Irena recognizes her: the high-school classmate who wrote her the very week Communism fell: "Oh, my dear, we're old already! It's high time you came back!" Again, now, she repeats that line, and in her thickened face a broad grin reveals dentures.

The other women assail her with questions: "Irena, remember when . . . ?" And "You know what happened back then with . . . ?" "Oh, no, really, you must remember him!" "That guy with the big ears, you always made fun of him!" "No, you can't possibly have forgotten him! You're all he talks about!"

Until that moment they have shown no interest in what she was trying to tell them. What is the meaning of this sudden onslaught? What is it they want to find out, these women who wouldn't lis-

ten to anything before? She soon sees that their questions are of a particular kind: questions to check whether she knows what they know, whether she remembers what they remember. This has a strange effect on her, one that will stay with her:

Earlier, by their total uninterest in her experience abroad, they amputated twenty years from her life. Now, with this interrogation, they are trying to stitch her old past onto her present life. As if they were amputating her forearm and attaching the hand directly to the elbow; as if they were amputating her calves and joining her feet to her knees.

Transfixed by that image, she can give no answer to their questions; anyhow, the women are not expecting one, and, drunker and drunker, they fall back into their chatter, which leaves Irena out. She watches their mouths opening all at the same time, mouths moving and emitting words and constantly bursting into laughter (a mystery: how is it that women not listening to one another can laugh at what the others are saying?). None of them is talking to Irena anymore, but they're all beaming with good humor, the woman

who started off by ordering beer begins singing, the others do the same, and even when the party's over, they go on singing out in the street.

In bed Irena thinks back over her party; once again her old emigration-dream comes back and she sees herself surrounded by women, noisy and hearty, raising their beer mugs. In the dream they were working for the secret police with orders to entrap her. But for whom were tonight's women working? "It's high time you came back," said her old classmate with the macabre dentures. As an emissary from the graveyards (the graveyards of the homeland), her job was to call Irena back into line: to warn her that time is short and that life is supposed to finish up where it started.

Then her thoughts turn to Milada, who was so maternally friendly; she made it clear that nobody is interested anymore in Irena's odyssey, and Irena realizes that, actually, neither is Milada. But how can she blame her? Why should Milada be interested in something that has no connection at all with her own life? It would be just a polite charade, and Irena is glad that Milada was so kindly, with no charade.

Her last thought before sleeping is about Sylvie. It's already so long since she's seen her! She

misses her! Irena would love to take her out to their Paris bistro and tell her all about her recent trip to Bohemia. Get her to understand how hard it is to return home. Actually you were the first, she imagines telling her, the first person who used those words: the Great Return. And you know something, Sylvie—now I understand: I could go back and live with them, but there'd be a condition: I'd have to lay my whole life with you, with all of you, with the French, solemnly on the altar of the homeland and set fire to it. Twenty years of my life spent abroad would go up in smoke, in a sacrificial ceremony. And the women would sing and dance with me around the fire, with beer mugs raised high in their hands. That's the price I'd have to pay to be pardoned. To be accepted. To become one of them again.

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One day at the Paris airport, she moved through the police checkpoint and sat down to wait for the Prague flight. On the facing bench she saw a man and, after a few moments of uncertainty and sur-

ther, in this mingling of different historical periods, in *Immortality*.

As a young writer, in Prague, I detested the word "generation," whose smell of the herd put me off. The first time I had the sense of being connected to others was later, in France, reading *Terra Nostra* by Carlos Fuentes. How was it possible that someone from another continent, so distant from me in itinerary and background, should be possessed by the same aesthetic obsession to bring different historical periods to coexist in a novel, an obsession that till then I had naïvely considered to be mine alone?

Impossible to grasp the nature of the *terra nostra*, the *terra nostra* of Mexico, without looking down into the well of the past. Not as a historian would do, in order to see the chronological unfolding of events, but in order to consider: what does the *concentrated essence* of the Mexican *terra* mean to a man? Fuentes grasped that essence in the form of a dream novel where various historical periods telescope into a kind of poetic and oneiric metahistory; he thus created something almost indescribable and, in any case, hitherto unknown to literature.

Most recently, I had the same sense of secret aesthetic kinship in Philippe Sollers' *La Fête à Venise*, that strange novel whose story occurs in our own time but is a stage setting for Watteau, Cézanne, Monet, Titian, Picasso, Stendhal—for the display of their remarks and their art.

And in the meantime came *The Satanic Verses*: the complicated identity of a Europeanized Indian; *terra non nostra*; *terrae non nostrae*; *terrae perditae*; to grasp that shredded identity, the novel explores it in

different locations on the planet: in London, in Bombay, in a Pakistani village, and then in seventeenth-century Asia.

The coexistence of different periods sets the novelist a technical problem: how to link them without having the novel lose its unity?

Fuentes and Rushdie found fantastical solutions: in Fuentes, his characters move from one period to another as their own reincarnations. In Rushdie, it is the character of Gibreel Farishta who ensures that supratemporal connection by being transformed into the Archangel Gibreel, who in turn becomes a medium for Mahound (the novel's variant of Mohammed).

In Sollers' book and in mine, the link has nothing fantastical to it. In his, the paintings and the books seen and read by the characters serve as windows into the past. In mine, the past and the present are bridged by common themes and motifs.

Can our underground aesthetic kinship (unperceived and imperceivable) be explained by some influence on one another? No. By influences undergone in common? I cannot see what they might be. Or have we all breathed the same air of history? Has the history of the novel, by its own logic, set us all the same task?

The History of the Novel as Revenge on History Itself

History. Can we still draw on that obsolete authority? What I am about to say is a purely personal avowal: as a novelist, I have always felt myself to be within history, that is to say, partway along a road, in dialogue

with those who preceded me and even perhaps (but less so) with those still to come. Of course, I am speaking of the history of the novel, not of some other history, and speaking of it such as I see it: it has nothing to do with Hegel's extrahuman reason; it is neither predetermined nor identical with the idea of progress; it is entirely human, made by men, by *some* men, and thus comparable to the development of an individual artist, who acts sometimes tritely and then surprisingly, sometimes with genius and then not, and who often misses opportunities.

Here I am making a declaration of involvement in the history of the novel, when all my novels breathe a hatred of history, of that hostile, inhuman force that—uninvited, unwanted—invades our lives from the outside and destroys them. Yet there is nothing inconsistent in this double attitude, because the history of humanity and the history of the novel are two very different things. The former is not man's to determine, it takes over like an alien force he cannot control, whereas the history of the novel (or of painting, of music) is born of man's freedom, of his wholly personal creations, of his own choices. The meaning of an art's history is opposed to the meaning of history itself. Because of its personal nature, the history of an art is a revenge by man against the impersonality of the history of humanity.

The personal nature of the history of the novel? But if it is to form a whole over the course of centuries, would not such a history need to be unified by some common and enduring—and thus by definition supra-personal—meaning? No. I believe that even this common meaning is still personal, human; for over the

course of history the concept of this or that art (what is the novel?), as well as the meaning of its evolution (where has it come from and where is it going?), is constantly defined and redefined by each artist, by each new work. The meaning of the history of the novel is the very search for that meaning, its perpetual creation and re-creation, which always retroactively encompasses the whole past of the novel: Rabelais certainly never called his *Gargantua-Pantagruel* a novel. It *wasn't* a novel; it *became* one gradually as later novelists (Sterne, Diderot, Balzac, Flaubert, Vancura, Gombrowicz, Rushdie, Kis, Chamoiseau) took their inspiration from it, openly drew on it, thus integrating it into the history of the novel, or, rather, acknowledging it as the first building block in that history.

This said, the words "the end of history" have never stirred me to anguish or displeasure. "How sweet it would be to forget the monster that saps our brief lives as cement for its vain monuments. How sweet it would be to forget History!" (*Life Is Elsewhere*) If history is going to end (though I cannot imagine in concrete terms that "end" the philosophers love to talk about), then let it happen fast! But applied to art, that same phrase, "the end of history," strikes me with terror; that end I can imagine only too well, for most novels produced today stand outside the history of the novel: novelized confessions, novelized journalism, novelized score-settling, novelized autobiographies, novelized indiscretions, novelized denunciations, novelized political arguments, novelized deaths of husbands, novelized deaths of fathers, novelized deaths of mothers, novelized deflowerings, novelized child-births—novels ad infinitum, to the end of time, that

say nothing new, have no aesthetic ambition, bring no change to our understanding of man or to novelistic form, are each one like the next, are completely consumable in the morning and completely discardable in the afternoon.

To my mind, great works can only be born within the history of their art and as *participants* in that history. It is only inside history that we can see what is new and what is repetitive, what is discovery and what is imitation; in other words, only inside history can a work exist as a *value* capable of being discerned and judged. Nothing seems to me worse for art than to fall outside its own history, for it is a fall into the chaos where aesthetic values can no longer be perceived.

Improvisation and Composition

During the writing of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes did not mind altering his hero's character as he went. The freedom by which Rabelais, Cervantes, Diderot, Sterne enchant us had to do with improvisation. The art of complex and rigorous composition did not become a commanding need until the first half of the nineteenth century. The novel's form as it came into being then, with its action concentrated in a narrow time span, at a crossroads where many stories of many characters intersect, demanded a minutely calculated scheme of the plot lines and scenes: before beginning to write, the novelist therefore drafted and redrafted the scheme of the novel, calculated and recalculated it, designed and redesigned as that had never been done before. One need only leaf through Dostoyevsky's notes for *The*

Possessed: in the seven notebooks that take up 400 pages of the Pléiade edition (the novel itself takes up 750), motifs look for characters, characters look for motifs, characters vie for the status of protagonist; Stavrogin should be married, but "to whom?" wonders Dostoyevsky, and he tries to marry him successively to three women; and so on. (A paradox that only seems one: the more calculated the construction machinery, the more real and natural the characters. The prejudice against constructional thinking as a "nonartistic" element that mutilates the "living" quality of characters is just sentimental naïveté from people who have never understood art.)

The novelist in our time who is nostalgic for the art of the old masters of the novel cannot retie the thread where it was cut; he cannot leap over the enormous experience of the nineteenth century; if he wants to connect with the easygoing freedom of Rabelais or Sterne, he must reconcile it with the requirements of composition.

I remember my first reading of *Jacques le Fataliste*; delighted by its boldly heterogeneous richness, where ideas mingle with anecdote, where one story frames another; delighted by a freedom of composition that utterly ignores the rule about unity of action, I asked myself: Is this magnificent disorder the effect of admirable construction, subtly calculated, or is it due to the euphoria of pure improvisation? Without a doubt, it is improvisation that prevails here; but the question I spontaneously asked showed me that a prodigious architectural potential exists within such intoxicated improvisation, the potential for a complex, rich structure that would also be as perfectly calcu-

In the realm of totalitarian kitsch, all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions. It follows, then, that the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch is the person who asks questions. A question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies hidden behind it. In fact, that was exactly how Sabina had explained the meaning of her paintings to Tereza: on the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth showing through.

But the people who struggle against what we call totalitarian regimes cannot function with queries and doubts. They, too, need certainties and simple truths to make the multitudes understand, to provoke collective tears.

Sabina had once had an exhibit that was organized by a political organization in Germany. When she picked up the catalogue, the first thing she saw was a picture of herself with a drawing of barbed wire superimposed on it. Inside she found a biography that read like the life of a saint or martyr: she had suffered, struggled against injustice, been forced to abandon her bleeding homeland, yet was carrying on the struggle. "Her paintings are a struggle for happiness" was the final sentence.

She protested, but they did not understand her.

Do you mean that modern art isn't persecuted under Communism?

"My enemy is kitsch, not Communism!" she replied, infuriated.

From that time on, she began to insert mystifications in her biography, and by the time she got to America she even managed to hide the fact that she was Czech. It was all merely a desperate attempt to escape the kitsch that people wanted to make of her life.

She stood in front of her easel with a half-finished canvas, the old man in the armchair behind her observing every stroke of her brush.

"It's time we went home," he said at last with a glance at his watch.

She laid down her palette and went into the bathroom to wash. The old man raised himself out of the armchair and reached for his cane, which was leaning against a table. The door of the studio led directly out to the lawn. It was growing dark. Fifty feet away was a white clapboard house. The ground floor windows were lit. Sabina was moved by the two windows shining out into the dying day.

All her life she had proclaimed kitsch her enemy. Hadn't she in fact been carrying it with her? Her kitsch was an image of home, all peace, quiet, and harmony, and ruled by a loving mother and wise father. It was an image that took root within her after the death of her parents. The less her life resembled that sweetest of dreams, the more sensitive she was to its magic, and more than once she shed tears when an ungrateful daughter in a sentimental film embraced the neglected father as the windows of the happy family's house shone out into the dying day.

She had met the old man in New York. He was rich and liked paintings. He lived alone with his wife, also aging, in a house in the country. Facing the house, but still on his own, stood an old stable. He had had it remodeled into a studio. Sabina and would follow the movements of her brush from one end to the other.

Now all three of them were having supper together. The old woman called Sabina "my daughter," but all indicated

would lead one to believe the opposite, namely, that Sabina was the mother and that her two children doted on her, worshipped her, would do anything she asked.

Had she then, herself on the threshold of old age, found the parents who had been snatched from her as a girl? Had she at last found the children she had never had herself?

She was well aware it was an illusion. Her days with the aging couple were merely a brief interval. The old man was seriously ill, and when his wife was left on her own, she would go and live with their son in Canada. Sabina's path of betrayals would then continue elsewhere, and from the depths of her being, a silly mawkish song about two shining windows and the happy family living behind them would occasionally make its way into the unbearable lightness of being.

Though touched by the song, Sabina did not take her feeling seriously. She knew only too well that the song was a beautiful lie. As soon as kitsch is recognized for the lie it is, it moves into the context of non-kitsch, thus losing its authoritarian power and becoming as touching as any other human weakness. For none among us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely. No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition.

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Kitsch has its source in the categorical agreement with being.

But what is the basis of being? God? Mankind? Struggle? Love? Man? Woman?

Since opinions vary, there are various kitsches: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, Fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national, international.

Since the days of the French Revolution, one half of Europe has been referred to as the left, the other half as the right. Yet to define one or the other by means of the theoretical principles it professes is all but impossible. And no wonder: political movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on the fantasies, images, words, and archetypes that come together to make up this or that *political kitsch*.

The fantasy of the Grand March that Franz was so intoxicated by is the political kitsch joining leftists of all times and tendencies. The Grand March is the splendid march on the road to brotherhood, equality, justice, happiness; it goes on and on, obstacles notwithstanding, for obstacles there must be if the march is to be the Grand March.

The dictatorship of the proletariat or democracy? Rejection of the consumer society or demands for increased productivity? The guillotine or an end to the death penalty? It is all beside the point. What makes a leftist a leftist is not this or that theory but his ability to integrate any theory into the kitsch called the Grand March.

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Franz was obviously not a devotee of kitsch. The fantasy of the Grand March played more or less the same role in his life as the mawkish song about the two brightly lit windows in Sa-

bina's. What political party did Franz vote for? I am afraid he did not vote at all; he preferred to spend Election Day hiking in the mountains. Which does not, of course, imply that he was no longer touched by the Grand March. It is always nice to dream that we are part of a jubilant throng marching through the centuries, and Franz never quite forgot the dream.

One day, some friends phoned him from Paris. They were planning a march on Cambodia and invited him to join them.

Cambodia had recently been through American bombardment, a civil war, a paroxysm of carnage by local Communists that reduced the small nation by a fifth, and finally occupation by neighboring Vietnam, which by then was a mere vassal of Russia. Cambodia was racked by famine, and people were dying for want of medical care. An international medical committee had repeatedly requested permission to enter the country, but the Vietnamese had turned them down. The idea was for a group of important Western intellectuals to march to the Cambodian border and by means of this great spectacle performed before the eyes of the world to force the occupied country to allow the doctors in.

The friend who spoke to Franz was one he had marched with through the streets of Paris. At first Franz was thrilled by the invitation, but then his eye fell on his student-mistress sitting across the room in an armchair. She was looking up at him, her eyes magnified by the big round lenses in her glasses. Franz had the feeling those eyes were begging him not to go. And so he apologetically declined.

No sooner had he hung up than he regretted his decision. True, he had taken care of his earthly mistress, but he had neglected his unearthly love. Wasn't Cambodia the same as Sabina's country? A country occupied by its neighbor's Communist army! A country that had felt the brunt of Russia's fist! All at once, Franz felt that his half-forgotten friend had con-

tacted him at Sabina's secret bidding.

Heavenly bodies know all and see all. If he went on the march, Sabina would gaze down on him enraptured; she would understand that he had remained faithful to her.

"Would you be terribly upset if I went on the march?" he asked the girl with the glasses, who counted every day away from him a loss, yet could not deny him a thing.

Several days later he was in a large jet taking off from Paris with twenty doctors and about fifty intellectuals (professors, writers, diplomats, singers, actors, and mayors) as well as four hundred reporters and photographers.

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The plane landed in Bangkok. Four hundred and seventy doctors, intellectuals, and reporters made their way to the large ballroom of an international hotel, where more doctors, actors, singers, and professors of linguistics had gathered with several hundred journalists bearing notebooks, tape recorders, and cameras, still and video. On the podium, a group of twenty or so Americans sitting at a long table were presiding over the proceedings.

The French intellectuals with whom Franz had entered the ballroom felt slighted and humiliated. The march on Cambodia had been their idea, and here the Americans, supremely unabashed as usual, had not only taken over, but had taken over in English without a thought that a Dane or a Frenchman might not understand them. And because the Danes had long since