

ZORAN ŽIVKOVIĆ

THE WRITER  
THE BOOK  
THE READER

TRANSLATED FROM THE SERBIAN BY

ALICE COPPLE-TOŠIĆ  
(THE WRITER & THE READER)

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(THE BOOK)



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## THE WRITER

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## THE BOOK

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Translation edited by **Tamar Yellin**.

## THE READER

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# THE WRITER

# A VERY SHORT NOVEL, WITHOUT CHAPTERS, ABOUT WRITING AND DARKNESS

I switched on the computer.

First I pulled down the Venetian blind, of course. That was part of my morning ritual, and on sunny days like this one it had a practical function. Nevertheless, I also pull it down on cloudy days, superstitiously striving to maintain the ambience. My study looks to the east, and my desk faces a large window, so that, without the blind, I would have to squint and scowl until noon to see anything on the screen. This way there's no need to squint, but on cloudy days, for the sake of maintaining the ambience, I strain my eyes in unnecessary semidarkness.

Not that I pull it all the way down. I leave a gap of about fifteen centimeters above the windowsill, so that sunshine reaches the area where it is definitely welcome: an eight-sided glass vessel, set in the window. That vessel, formerly a small aquarium, has been converted to serve as a flowerpot for a group of miniature cactuses, the kind with very small pink and white flowers. Light also slants through the narrow slits between the horizontal plastic bars, creating shimmering arabesques in the dusky air of the room. Even if I sat with my back to the window, I think I would keep the blind down at such times of the day just to

enjoy the transient play of bright and dark stripes on objects in the room. The peculiar impression of unreality thus created, one which (for reasons unknown to me) I find very stimulating, is enhanced by dust motes floating in the air, caught by diagonal beams of light. I know that some writers are not at all influenced by their immediate surroundings. For me, the ambient mood is almost everything.

The trouble, however, is that an appropriate ambience, while surely indispensable, is not sufficient for success in my work. If my environment alone mattered, I would have finished the book I am working on long ago. The environment being faultless, the book stalled nevertheless—and near the end, at that. When I began to write it, I had the impression, without clearly knowing why, that the thing would be a novel. However, matters took a different turn: episodes succeeded each other, but with so few connecting points that, as the writing progressed, there appeared before me something which would be (at best) a collection of loosely linked stories. Definitely not a novel.

I do not, of course, have anything against collections of stories, nor do I consider them intrinsically less valuable than novels, yet there started to creep over me a feeling, if not of disappointment, then definitely of expectations imperfectly fulfilled. Yet I did not despair of turning it around: what I had written could still grow from a conglomerate into an amalgam, but for this to happen, one more chapter was needed, the closing one, which would grab those only seemingly heterogeneous episodes and weave them into a whole. My intuition alone told me, and only in a whisper, that such a chapter was at all possible; but intuitions do not write, and that final chapter, required but by no means guaranteed, stubbornly refused to materialize.

I deliberately ascribe to that chapter the quality of volition, the ability to decide, quite independently of my wishes, whether it will or will not come into existence. I do this without any desire to undermine the proud authority over their own words to which certain other writers lay claim. Only in my own name do I speak, and solely on the basis of my personal experience of writing. In my case, the act of writing can hardly be called “creative”; I am, at best, perhaps an intermediary . . .

When I sit at the keyboard, I experience only the vague tension of a go-between who expects to be used, certainly no sense of divine inspiration, least of all a godly trance in which I might see the entirety of the work in a single, all-encompassing vision, and then just sit down to perform the necessary technical chores, to type it up. Nothing like that with me; rather the opposite.

At the outset, I face a wall of darkness. I have no idea what I will write about, what will pop up on the screen. And then, especially if the environment is perfect, sentences begin to well up spontaneously from that darkness, while I watch with growing impatience to see how the thing will come out. If there is any recognizable stimulus prompting me to go on, it is this reader-like curiosity.

When I am reading some exciting or otherwise interesting work, written by one of my colleagues of the keyboard, the same curiosity drives me to fly through the pages; but when I write, there is an unfortunate physical limitation which prevents me from satisfying that curiosity anything like as fast as I want to. It is this: I type with only one finger—my right index finger—which, after decades of over-exploitation and maltreatment, has become markedly thicker and more gnarled than its fellows.

Although I manage quite a respectable speed for one finger, the swiftness with which it flies from key to key is far from sufficient to cope with my impatience. Yet when I tried to use the fruits of modern technology and replace the keyboard with a dictaphone, so that I might improve my speed enormously by just saying out loud those sentences which spontaneously arise from the darkness—then nothing at all emerged. The silence was total, as unrelieved as it was mysterious.

I spent several sessions of many minutes in front of that gadget; it was turned on, but its sensitive microphone failed to register anything except my tongue-tied impotence and those minute office noises which are normally disregarded or not heard at all: the hiss of curtains in a gentle flow of air, the creaking of the dry parquet, the progressively more fatigued buzzing of an insect who will pay with his life for his failure to comprehend the existence of a perfectly transparent

yet impenetrable substance such as glass, the subdued sounds of the outside world going about its own business six floors below . . .

A friend of mine, who unexpectedly dropped by for a visit yesterday, and to whom I confided my understandable frustrations with the act of writing, immediately explained to me, concisely and unambiguously as is his custom, what the problem was. That darkness, from which is born whatever I am writing (said he in the voice of authority), is nothing but my subconscious mind. It is, though, slightly odd, he remarked, wrinkling his forehead significantly and raising his eyebrows above the rim of his glasses, that subconsciousness will only express itself through one finger, instead of through the mouth, which would be far more natural and usual. So, in all probability, he concluded confidently, this has something to do with some repressed childhood experience, some unpleasantness which happened to me but which I am refusing consciously to confront.

As it happened we were in my study at the time, and I was sitting on a couch which, being covered with corduroy in a dark-purple floral pattern, has a strong calming effect; so he suggested that I should immediately stretch out on it while he remained in the nearby armchair. Then together we should try to “ferret out” (his expression) whatever obstacle was hindering me. First he asked me for a pencil and a notepad, and to unplug the telephone. This was a necessary condition, as the ringing of a phone unnerved him terribly at the best of times, even during an ordinary chat (which is why he had never had a phone installed in his apartment), and on an extraordinary occasion such as this it would be quite unconscionably distressing. Perhaps the only thing that rattled him more than a phone ringing was the barking of dogs.

At first I thought he was joking, but then, seeing that he meant it quite seriously, I had no option but to agree, although I did not feel at all inhibited by any gruesome experiences, and definitely none from childhood. Nor did I think that a man of letters like himself, and one without any experience as a parent (essential if one is to have any understanding whatsoever of children’s difficulties, I think), would be

the person best suited to undertake such “ferretings.” I had only started to unburden myself to him in the first place because I was convinced that my problem was of a literary, not psychiatric, nature, although I grant that the distinction may not always be very clear-cut.

Thus did we come to spend the next hour and a half in an avid analytical search through the most bizarrely piquant details of my early childhood.

*When did my mother stop breast-feeding me?*

As if I could remember that! As far as my memory from that age goes, it may be that she never breast-fed me, that she had no milk and that I was on a bottle from day one. I do not know; we never talked about it, and it is far too late for me to ask her now.

*Did my father often threaten me by shaking a finger at me and raising his voice, especially while I was on the potty?*

Well, I only remember, foggily, that I shouted at the very top of my voice (whether on the potty or not, it was all the same) whenever I was truly determined to get something, and that it worked well as a method of browbeating my father, because he was, as I soon discovered, on the soft side.

*Which finger did I prefer to suck?*

I suspect that my friend had a concealed desire for me to say it was my unfortunate right index finger, but I had to disappoint him there: it was, as it is with all kids, my thumb. I did not tell him (because he did not ask, and also because I feared that it might sidetrack his investigation) that Mother once told me what a lot of trouble she had persuading me to stop sucking my thumb; in the end, when I was fully three years old, she had to smear quinine over it, so that I could not keep it in my mouth all the time.

*Did I habitually wear items of female apparel?*

Of course not! My mother’s were too large and my sister’s too small for me. But what’s that got to do with anything?

There were many more questions, all in a similar tone, more or less shrewd or confusing, and I answered as truthfully and sincerely as seemed appropriate. My friend made diligent notes on the pad, taking

very great care that, whenever I turned to him from the couch (mainly to glare at him suspiciously because of some question or other), I could not see what he was writing down. But, being a hopeless case of professional absent-mindedness, when he ended his unusually lengthy visit he forgot to take the page with the notes along, although he surely meant to do so, because he remembered to tear it off the pad.

(This forgetfulness was by no means out of character. My home always contained at least one, and not infrequently all three, of the following items: his reading glasses, their thick old-fashioned frames fastened in one place with a piece of sticky tape already hard and brittle with age; his umbrella, from which a couple of bare ribs protruded; and his threadbare cap from which the cloth-covered central button had fallen off, no one remembers how long ago.)

This lucky circumstance gave me the opportunity to satisfy my understandable, although—I confess—unconscionably indiscreet curiosity, and to peep into my own anamnesis. A surprise awaited me: there was no text at all, just a dense grid of thin, straight lines criss-crossing each other at various angles.

Try as I might, I was unable to decode that pattern; I turned it this way and that, held it so close to my eyes that the lines blurred, and so far away they blurred again, but to no avail. There was, of course, no question of asking my friend for an explanation, and I myself could conceive of only two: either he was using some very complex code, which would be superfluous, since his everyday handwriting was quite as indecipherable to everybody else as this gridwork puzzle, or he had been doing what people usually do when a pencil and paper are at hand but they have no real motive to do anything: he had just scrawled meaningless doodles, under the scholarly pretense of taking clinical notes.

Though frustrated over the anamnesis, I nevertheless obtained the diagnosis. Once he had finished his questions, my friend devoted a good ten minutes to considering his notes, voicing only an occasional “Hm!” or “Yeeees . . .” The first sound gave the impression of deep thought, of serious concern, even, while the second was extended and

seemed to end with both an exclamation point and a question mark. Both, of course, served to heighten my alarm as his quasi-patient, which was only partly relieved when I heard him pronounce final judgment on my case. That resolved certain matters only to bring forward new, unrelated problems—though by way of consolation, at least the new trouble had nothing to do with the traumas of my early life.

Essentially, I had no great reason to worry, my friend assured me at the end of the session; he spoke slowly, as one does when one hesitates and gropes for the words that will express one's meaning most precisely. The case was certainly interesting, primarily because it was unusual. Really, who would have expected the subconscious mind to find expression through a finger rather than a mouth? Most unusual. And extremely hard to fathom. But what mattered was that it was expressed. All I needed to do was to go on writing. I was free to do so, and it would be of some use. The subconscious mind would, eventually, regurgitate what it found too indigestible.

He never should have said that it would be "of some use." If he had refrained, matters would have ended harmlessly, then and there. He would have satisfied his weakness for grandiose posturing, which requires a grateful listener, and which was his main reason for visiting me; I am probably the last of the entire circle of his friends who still has the patience for such long and increasingly tedious exercises in intellectual exhibitionism. Although he always sits in the armchair and I on the couch during his visits, this had been the occasion for a reversal of our usual roles. Usually it is he who keeps talking, disgorging for my benefit the accumulated silt of a life filled, beneath a very thin veneer of success (professor at the University and, for one stop-gap term, even Head of Department), with various disappointments, rejections, frustrations, wrong choices and misanthropy.

I had been tolerant in letting myself be splashed with all that bile, that bitterness, that desperation, and at times I felt as I suppose all psychiatrists must feel: like a sponge with an unlimited capacity for soaking up dirty water, which makes the sponge heavier but doesn't alter its shape.

But I am not a professional psychiatrist, so at times deformations inevitably happen, when the sponge becomes too heavily saturated with dirt. Patience fails me mainly when his tone shifts from his usual ironic hauteur, which I can more or less endure, to the cynical or downright malicious, which always irritates me.

On such occasions, especially if they follow a bad day of my own, I stop acting the benevolent listener and start doing things I know will anger him. Harmless sponge turned into bristling sea urchin. Of course I know that such behavior is immature and that I will regret it later, but from time to time I am genuinely unable to resist the temptation. The livid rage which then comes over him gives me a satisfaction akin to the slaking of lust.

So I am supposed to keep writing mainly for therapeutic reasons, yes? Very flattering! Well, that could not go unpunished. I myself am allowed to hold my own writing in as low esteem as I like. I can berate it as insufficiently creative, etcetera—but what gave him the right to speak of it with such open contempt? On all previous occasions he had, at least, expressed himself obliquely, so that I had no excuse to claim insult and rebel.

I remember, the first time I told him of my attempts at prose composition, ingenuously expecting some support from him, he responded with a lengthy lecture that conveyed one basic, kindly meant message: writing is a labor of paramount seriousness and, if I had any sense, I would not even contemplate it unless impelled by dire need. He phrased his message skillfully, in neutral terms, as if it did not, in fact, concern me, but was more a general message to all hopeful beginners who have no inkling of what they are getting themselves into.

Shortly thereafter, however, he informed me that he himself had also started writing a novel. The solemn tone of his announcement—as if I should feel honored that such precious information had been imparted to me—made it abundantly clear that it would be inappropriate for me to ask him whether he had forgotten his own advice to future writers: it did not, apparently, apply to himself. Unlike the rest of the heedless

multitude, my friend, a man well versed in literary matters, knew just what he was doing.

As weeks and months flowed by, I evolved into a sort of accomplice in the creation of his work, though that may be overestimating my role. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I was a traveling companion, a mild Doctor Watson upon whom destiny had lavished an unearned favor: to pay with small, technical services for the privilege of dwelling in the company of the great Holmes, while Holmes solved a case of ineffable grandeur and, en passant, threw to his ignorant assistant some crumbs from the ongoing banquet of magisterial skill which was his daily bread.

The technical services were mostly the use of my laser printer, from which emerged chapter after chapter of my friend's novel as soon as each was completed (he, to whom all technology was an odious mystery, refused to purchase anything except the most basic computer, and even that only at my urgent insistence), while in exchange it was my unique gratification (and obligation) to be the first to read them. I also received, direct from the horse's mouth, explanations for whatever seemed to me unclear, as well as for such passages—especially for such passages—which I, in my simplicity, had thought clear enough.

My friend justified this serial enlightenment in terms of a conviction, which grew ever stronger as the novel progressed, that he himself would be the most authoritative—indeed, the only—competent interpreter of his own literary output. He alone would really be able to penetrate all its secrets and perceive every delicate nuance. For a while he even contemplated writing a long critical essay about his own novel, to be published as an afterword to the book itself, though later he dropped that idea and never told me what made him change his mind.

Thus was I given to attend not only the birth of a work of art, but also the accompanying lectures in literary anatomy, where the holy mystery of creation was, solely for my benefit, revealed to its very marrow, to its ultimate constituent elements. To the atoms of writing, as it were. Related to this was my first introduction to the “Mozart Syndrome.”

In a voice subdued almost to a whisper, as befits the conspiratorial revelation of a great secret, my friend informed me of his resemblance to that famous citizen of Salzburg, Austria. Both of them were in possession of that unique, in fact—why not say it?—divine gift whereby the work one wants to create appears in front of one in its entirety, in a great flash, right down to the smallest detail.

Lest I should by any chance think that he immodestly set himself in the same rank with Wolfgang Amadeus—it must be that I carelessly allowed a certain shadow of mild disbelief to pass over my face, although I try hard to keep it totally expressionless during such confessions—my friend hurriedly added the humble qualification that, unlike the great composer, he was most usually hit by such flashes in the most unsuitable surroundings.

For instance, the lightning which announced the arrival of his first novel into the world struck him while he was shaving in his bathroom. And, indeed, he pointed his finger at a small horizontal slash which had not yet completely healed, as the whole thing had happened quite recently. He left open the provenance of five or six other safety-blade slashes on his face—were they, too, the effect of divine inspiration, or merely owing to his well-known clumsiness? In any case, shortly thereafter, my friend stopped shaving; perhaps to reduce the time spent in the undignified surroundings of his bathroom, he grew a beard.

The entire work having been revealed to him in one flash, he—unlike me—was not driven by a reader's impatience to write it down as soon as possible. This was just as well, because he steadfastly adhered to the slowest method of writing invented since the tablet and chisel: he used paper and pencil. (Had he been able to obtain papyrus, I think he would have used that.) As I have mentioned, I somehow managed to persuade him to buy a computer—though, in fact, a dictaphone would have suited him better—but he typed the words into the computer only after he had them down on paper.

He tried to make it look like a part of his ritual of writing, similar to my creation of exactly the right environment, but I think there was another reason: his instinctive distrust of technology. The few

appliances that he could not avoid using—geyser, iron, electric heater, hairdryer—in his hands went wrong more often, more comprehensively, and at more awkward moments, than with anyone else. To that were added certain traumatic experiences which he suffered at the very beginning of his computer era.

Having initially installed a simple word-processing program in his machine, I dictated to him some basic instructions for working with it, which he diligently scribbled down. No one will ever know whether his handwriting was, on that occasion, too illegible even for him, or whether he just lost his way among the instructions which to me seemed simplified almost to the point of imbecility; but the very next morning he phoned me to ask how to call up on screen the text (eleven and a half pages) which he had spent much of the previous day writing, carried away by the creative joy of having so swiftly mastered this symbol of modern times.

By means of long and patient questioning, I gleaned from his ever vaguer and more nervous answers, that in all probability he had, after the previous night's work, simply switched off the computer and taken himself blissfully to bed, deeply satisfied with his efforts, having saved not a line of text. Now he was, naturally, angry at himself and no less at the computer, but angriest of all at me; for I had put him up to it. Eleven and a half unrepeatabe, unique pages gone with the wind!

He sounded so truly shaken with the realization that, indeed, nothing could be done about it, the text was irretrievably lost, that I had no heart to ask him one cynical question: How could something vanish if it was carved into his mind by divine inspiration? What was lost was, at worst, half a day of typing, which is annoying but hardly a tragedy. He had but to sit at the keyboard again and simply type exactly the same text as yesterday, to the letter, and then be sure to save it.

Although my friend subsequently experienced many other stressful situations with his computer, none were so catastrophic as this first one, mainly because he thereafter adhered strictly to his own rule that, regardless of Mozartian flashes and all the rest, he would first use reliable paper, and only then entrust anything to the fickle memory of a machine.

Most of these minor computer problems arose from my friend's great facility for doing precisely the opposite of what he intended: most commonly, to erase the text he meant to save; then would follow his more or less distraught telephone call from some neighbor's phone at whatever time of day or night he had stopped working, and I would speed as unhesitatingly as an ambulance to his quarter of the city, there to rescue what was recoverable.

Although after the first such intervention I categorically instructed him that, unless he was one hundred percent sure about what to do, he must do nothing whatsoever until I arrived—least of all switch off the computer (unless smoke was billowing out of it)—he quite frequently did switch it off (without any justifying smoke) and was thereafter unable to explain why.

Why, with all that trouble, didn't he give up the computer altogether? Why did he, in this single instance, agree to carry on his martyrdom, bearing this cross of technology, when he had contemptuously rejected every other aspect of it—refusing, for instance, to learn to drive a car although it would have made his life considerably more comfortable, especially as the burden of years became heavier and the public transport system worse *pari passu*; or by refusing to have a telephone, the lack of which had such embarrassing consequences for himself and his neighbors as he invaded their apartments to make calls, usually at awkward hours.

I think the main culprit here was my laser printer. Once his own eyes had verified that, between the moment when he brought me a text saved on diskette to the moment he got the same text printed on paper, faultlessly processed into book format, only a few minutes of time need elapse, it dawned on him that his worst nightmare had ended. For this outcome, he was willing to pay any price: sell his soul to the devil, and even worse—embrace the technology which he otherwise rejected with the contempt of a higher being.

If there was one thing he loathed even more than technology, it was the prospect of collaborating with publishers' copy editors, typists and proofreaders. The first of the three species, copy editors, dared

to desecrate, by their amateurish half-knowledge, the faultless sanctity of his text. That their intentions were benign did nothing to justify their unhallowed deeds. Quite the contrary; he experienced any intervention of theirs as a physical wound. It sometimes happened that an intervention was indeed inappropriate, because the copy editor failed to understand the context; but, mostly, they were grammatical corrections, and proper beyond any possibility of debate, because they were backed up by the official Grammar and Orthography of our language.

The trouble with that was that my friend only partially, and conditionally, accepted the authority of the Grammar and Orthography, for he regarded many of the compilers of those documents as dullards and jackasses. There was no easy way to resolve such situations, because the Grammar and Orthography were the Law and the Prophets to the copy editors, who refused to budge from the laid-down norms even when they privately agreed with my friend that some of the official formulae might not be the most fortunate.

But his troubles with copy editors were moderate, cerebral differences of opinion next to those that arose from the joint actions of typists and proofreaders. My friend was aware that those who type manuscripts inevitably make a number of errors (and he was especially grieved by the multitudes of words incorrectly divided between syllables at the ends of lines), and equally aware that such errors might slip by proofreaders (one of whom once responded to an angry rebuke from the professor with the hesitant remark that there would be fewer such occurrences if the professor did not have such a difficult vocabulary, and especially if he made his paragraphs shorter), and so he demanded to be the last living soul to read the galleys immediately prior to printing; but even that was no help.

The printed books simply crawled with typos. Some mistakes were so glaring that the simplest explanation was that he himself was grossly inept as a proofreader—he simply had no eye for it—and one must also bear in mind that he was reading his own text. But my friend rejected this interpretation, although it would be clearly in the spirit of Occam's Razor, which, in other matters, he frequently invoked. Nobody

could convince him that these errors did not spring from a conspiracy, calculated to harm his text as much as possible.

Typists and proofreaders, he propounded, opening his soul to me on one occasion, deliberately make the sort of errors which will be hard to spot. How else to explain the fact that in all forty-three places in his latest book where he intended the dignified word *drevni* (ancient) to appear, they had printed the banal *drveni* (wooden)? And on eleven of those forty-three occasions, the word was at the end of a line and divided into syllables incorrectly. All of which was, of course, discovered only after the book was in the bookshops.

After these traumatic experiences, which colored a good first half of my friend's creative life, it is clear why the transition to electronic book-publishing was, for him, a gift from Heaven. All of a sudden, no more copy editors! No more typists, not a single proofreader in sight! The nightmare was dispelled by the diskette, on which he could record whatever he liked, without the nauseating obligation of arguing subsequently with some incompetent individual about what might or might not be stated just so; better still, no more living in terror that malevolent gremlins would deliberately sabotage his work. The headaches the machine cost him were trivial in the glorious light of these benefits.

As I had played a key part in his cyber-enlightenment, and as the services of my laser printer were always at his disposal, he found it appropriate, as a man of breeding, somehow to express his gratitude. Recently made aware of my fond wish to launch myself, also, into the adventure of writing, but, naturally, disapproving of it ("there must be some sense and order in things, these matters are, as is well known, serious, we cannot all do everything, *quod licet Iovi* . . ."), he decided, as the most competent authority, to soften his stance and to admit me, despite all my faults and his own misgivings, into the realm of Literature, but only to the limited extent which he considered justified.

He introduced me as a character in his novel.

I appeared infrequently, apart from which it was strictly forbidden that I recognize myself, so I was allowed no opportunity to take public pride at having finally entered World Literature. The ban was based

on the principle that any prose character exists independently of their real-life model, which is fine from the standpoint of literary theory, no doubt, but I have a faint suspicion that there was more to it in this case. Had my friend allowed me to recognize myself publicly, and thus gratify my vanity—and what would that have cost him, anyway?—it would have set a precedent, which might lead to many other recognitions, especially among the principal characters, and that was definitely to be avoided.

With this in mind, I was ordered explicitly and from the start that when I read his novel it must be from the standpoint of an amnesiac, so as to reduce to a minimum the danger of any such recognition. My attention was drawn to the axiom that only such virginal reading, unburdened by any unwelcome comparisons with reality, might be regarded as a proper reading.

To fulfill this requirement I acted as dumb as I could, but with only patchy success. I managed more or less not to know the things I knew of the two main characters, but my memory persistently refused to betray me when my own persona appeared on the stage of the novel. What blew the whole thing sky-high was not my friend's decision that in his novel only I, of all the characters based on real models, should appear under my actual name; rather, it was the genitive form of the possessive pronoun which was almost always attached to it in that context: the pronoun "our."

Although many people are unaware of it, "our" is no ordinary possessive pronoun. In fact it amounts to a title, and a title not easily won. Almost equivalent to a knighthood, one might say, albeit not one granted by a king. The title "our" is conferred by socially prominent families in our town; the individuals who receive that honor, after many years of devoted service, are particularly hardworking and loyal menials and servants, errand-boys, butlers, housekeepers, gardeners and in general those who free the distinguished family from dirty, manual, technical—in a word, unbecoming work.

To become "our," which denotes the highest possible degree of intimacy between the upper and the lower level of society (and that

means reaching the borderline of caste separation, a line that can never be crossed), you have to be always at hand, for a very long time, whenever there is a blown fuse or lightbulb to be replaced, a drain to be unclogged, a stove hotplate to be fixed, linoleum to be glued to the kitchen floor, sagging bookshelves to be firmed up, a picture to be taken to the framer's shop—or when computer glitches need to be sorted out.

The services of a chauffeur are also highly valued. No wonder: would a serious person squander time on such trivialities as learning to drive, or buying and maintaining a car, when that same time could be applied so much more graciously, for instance to reading the collected works of Immanuel Kant? (An extremely chic occupation in the most respected strata of the upper classes.)

In my friend's novel I retained my real name, and even filled a role similar to what he presumably imagines my real role to be, but only his skillful use of the possessive genitive "our" conveyed the full literary depth of my character. Marginal though I was, in this one respect I managed to outshine all the other characters, even the protagonist, because none of them, despite the author's utmost efforts, received such a delicately nuanced linguistic treatment. It is a marvel what can be achieved with only three letters.

If the character in which I, without permission, recognized myself had not been so successful, it is unlikely that I would have been quite so hurt by that final, written confirmation of how I appear in the eyes of my friend. I would have glided coolly over the entire matter, and would even have felt superior—telling myself that it was just the caricature I had expected—but in the circumstances such composure was impossible.

Although I did what I could to curtail its corrosive effect on my psyche, my injured vanity soon started to influence my behavior towards my friend. He, of course, had no idea what lay behind my increasing tendency to do things which we both knew upset or unnerved him. As I have mentioned, I had sometimes done such things before, perversely enjoying his rage, but only under extreme provocation; now the smallest matter would serve to raise my hackles.

Such as when he popped in for a visit unannounced.

That was, in any case, his usual habit, derived from his firm belief that he was doing me a great favor by condescending to spend time in my company—and not for short periods, either. Such paratroop raids on my time were not invariably welcome; indeed, he often interrupted me in the course of work that could not be postponed; but he did not notice—or chose not to notice—the embarrassment which he so often caused me. I myself was inhibited by my wish to be a considerate host, which restrained me from telling him openly how I felt; and as for my other signals, more delicate but nonetheless clear to anyone of normal sensitivity—he was deaf and blind.

Yesterday, all unannounced, he spoke from the intercom, stating his name briefly, as if it were a password good at every door. The occasion was the most inopportune yet. On that very day, at that precise time, after many sterile weeks, I had sat down once again at the computer, enjoying that increase of tension which intimates that something new is about to start flowing out of the darkness whence springs my prose. I hoped it might be the long-delayed closing chapter; it was really high time to complete the project, be it a novel or a collection of stories. The ambience was faultless at last: through the lowered slats the afternoon sun, by now invisible, was sending painfully strong blue light in thin streaks.

As my frustration was unavoidable, it was inevitable that I should react in some way. If I was to be denied this opportunity to write, at least we would discover, once and for all, why that process should differ so much between my case and his. Indeed, could there be any contrast stronger than a Mozartian flash against an impenetrable darkness? I therefore mentioned the darkness to him, expecting him to reject it instantly with one of his displays of livid rage. But none emerged; instead, and quite unexpectedly, I was awarded that superior psychiatric seance, concluding with the catastrophic words, “And this will be of some use.”

Without that diagnosis, nothing would have happened. My initial anger had already ebbed, mollified by his ridiculous questions that I

had answered in suitably ridiculous terms. Now it flared up again, and I, blinded by its glare, decided to go one step beyond the rational, to a place I had never taken anyone before—to the far shore, the other side of the darkness. I had to punish him somehow, and if this failed to enrage him, nothing would.

It had to be presented as science fiction for maximum emotional impact, his loathing for that genre going far beyond the ordinary. He despised many aspects of literature (he despised all literature in fact, except a few favored authors—coincidentally, those whose books only he was competent to interpret, like his own), but he could, in rare moments of relative benevolence, find the odd extenuating circumstance for a few genres and authors; for science fiction, never. He did not tolerate SF in any form, not even the parodic, which (subject to a number of rigid constraints) he regarded as the only permissible approach to genre literature.

For a long time I had attributed this to his naive prejudice (born of his disgusted refusal ever to open any work of that sort) that SF consisted exclusively of gauche and unreserved praise of the technology for which his own general distaste was so well known—the computer being the exception which tested, and on this occasion confirmed, the rule. But after many hours squandered in bitter and utterly fruitless debate with him about this, I perceived that there must be something more to it. He was not bothered by SF as such; he could have dismissed it with a single glance, one of his well-practiced expressions of supercilious disdain would have sufficed.

What really bothered him, apparently, was my intimacy with the genre. By seizing every opportunity to denigrate science fiction, mostly without any provocation, he was in fact, for reasons most noble and friendly, struggling to save my blundering soul. Sometimes he did it with the softness of a missionary, sometimes with the cruelty of the Inquisition, though (to judge by the inexorable and fervent passion that then possessed him) he preferred the latter mode. His orthodox crusade for my salvation from the pestilence of SF gradually grew into a real obsession, which showed in his rhetoric; he would open almost

any discussion of the genre with his adaptation of Cato: “Science fiction delendum est!”

Now was the hour for SF to strike back.

*There is nothing whatsoever creative in the act of writing*, I stated as my opening shot. It was calculated to anger him enormously, but my conscience was clear; he had brought it on himself. *There are no flashes, and no godly trances.*

(He started to blink at that, as he usually does when something rubs him up the wrong way.)

*There is only the darkness which yawns between the worlds—between this, our world, and multitudes of others, some very similar and some totally different. Some monotonously ordinary, and some unthinkably strange. To say of these worlds that they are far from us would be incorrect, because the darkness which separates us is neither space nor time. They are neither near nor far, neither before nor after. They are beyond.*

(Here he used his index finger to loosen the knot on his tie. It was of a garish green background, embellished, near the lower end, with several small spots of mustard, egg and gravy, almost invisible in a pattern of similar color.)

*Only those who have the Sight may look through that darkness. But even among them, not all share the ability. Some see better, some worse; some notice many details, others can barely make out the contours of the most salient landmarks. For this reason the reports of what has been seen vary markedly. There are good reports, and poor reports; some report detail, some general outlines. Yet none of it is invented or created. There is no invention, only testimony. No creation, only mediation.*

(At this point a sound escaped from the bottom of his throat; it was supposed to be a mere clearing, a controlled little cough, but it emerged more like a death rattle.)

*On that other side, there are also some with the Sight. They, too, can penetrate through the darkness, and see another world: our world. And all the worlds which are separated from us only by space and time. Worlds ordinary and worlds miraculous. Some of those who see us think, in their pride and vanity, that we are a mere figment of their own minds. Others,*

*whose devotion is more ardent, more selfless and more pure, know that we were not created in their “heads,” that we are as real as they.*

(He started to wriggle in the armchair, crossing and uncrossing his legs, left over right, right over left. The shoe on the upper leg would, in the process, hang momentarily over the glass slab of my small coffee table where I keep a ceramic vase. It looked out of place there, partly because it was so tattered and dirty, but mainly because both the shoelaces were wrongly threaded through the little metal-reinforced holes, so that they barely tied at the top.)

*Nothing save the Sight has managed to pierce the darkness so far, and many, both here and there, believe that things can never be otherwise—that only the ethereal Sight may cross the cobweb bridge which connects the worlds. Few are the persistent ones, on both sides, to whom the impossible is just another word for challenge. The daring who will, imprudently, reach for the ungraspable, the unreasonable who will without consideration chase the uncatchable, the heroes who dash madly for the unattainable. Their curse is immeasurable, but also immeasurable is their glory.*

Judging by the flustered flush suffusing his face, an explosion was imminent, but, to my surprise and disappointment, none occurred. For several long minutes he sat there in deep silence, his mouth shut though he was breathing deeply as he gazed at me over his glasses without blinking. Then his head started to sway left and right. When, finally, he did speak, it was in a trembling voice, which showed that the storm within had not yet subsided completely. “How would you like to lie down on the couch one more time, for a little while, hm?” he proposed.

I lay flat on the couch, almost repentantly, perceiving how wrong I had been. I had never before told anybody anything about the darkness, the Sight, the worlds, and the rest, so I had no standards of comparison. The expected reaction seemed to have aborted because I had gone too far: as I had recounted it, the story must have been a little too rich even for a man with a far smaller burden of prejudices than his. To him it must have seemed a clear and simple confirmation that I was seriously deranged. That diagnosis helped him to quell his anger.

We commenced another psychoanalytical seance, but he took no notes on this occasion—he needed none. Indeed, it was only for the sake of form that my self-appointed shrink needed to ask any questions, for everything was already clear to him. He merely seized on the chance to display his great and enviable skill in formulating astute questions. He pressed his fingertips together and rested his chin on the summit thus created, in the manner favored by the most searching questioners. And on he went.

*Did I find pleasure in watching fish copulate in my aquarium?*

I doubted that I would recognize what they were doing. Ichthyology is not my forte. In any case, the aquarium, while I had one, was to me more an arena of premature death than one for creating life, the domain of Thanatos, not Eros. That was why I had given it up, despite my delight in the wild, exotic beauty of its tiny residents. It was enough to make a single little mistake—forget to feed them, for instance, or wrongly adjust the thermostat and the air pump—and mass extinction followed. The cactuses which now reside in the ex-aquarium are no less beautiful, but far less demanding, and their lives are far less fragile.

*Did I frequently experience an erection in an airplane during takeoff?*

Of course not, because I very rarely travel by air, and when I do my terror is directly proportional to the altitude which we have attained—no basis for sexual excitement. If there is any eroticism in flying, it could only be in the appearance of clouds seen from above. These look so . . . sleepy, intoxicating.

*Would I rather make love to a hedgehog or a stork?*

Not much of a choice. My suspicion is that both would be exceedingly painful. But if one must follow such a line of speculation, why not take it to the limit? Turning towards the armchair, I confided that the ultimate sexual experience of a *ménage à trois* with one of each would suit me best. I did so with some diffidence, but that was immediately dispelled by his brief, insight-laden smile.

*Did I ever dream that a computer was attempting to molest me?*

No need to dream: I frequently had that impression while fully awake, when (mainly in response to my mistakes, but sometimes

through whims of its own) it started to act in an unpredictable, capricious manner. But on such occasions I had no one to call for help; I had only my own ingenuity and patience to rely on. Yet the question was not entirely vacuous: yes, the computer did sometimes slink into my dreams, although for reasons of my own I was not prepared to give my friend any details lest he become even more firmly convinced that something was wrong with me, though it certainly was nothing to do with molestation . . .

After several more questions in the same spirit, when the time for the verdict arrived, I expected nothing good. My answers had, obviously, confirmed the conclusion which had been present from the start. He gave me the gaze which he normally reserves for those occasions when he is about to flunk some good-looking co-ed. A gaze so eloquent, that in fact he had no need to add the words: “When will you shake off that science-fictional . . . childishness? See where it has brought you.” I sat up on the couch and closed my eyes. I started to rub my forehead, just above my nose. The dull drumming which had started there told me for certain that I had reached the limit of my endurance. From its outset the whole exercise had been devoid of any meaning or purpose except to afford me a modicum of rather perverse entertainment, but now it was time to end the show.

The afternoon had long since melted into evening, made yet darker by the blind, which was still down. The only illumination in my study was the ghostly gray radiance from the computer screen—the monitor on which I had been prevented from typing a single word. The frustration was overwhelming—not that the flow from the darkness had ceased; the tension was still there, and perhaps I could yet give it rein, if only allowed the chance. But I was to be allowed no chance.

Before his visit was finally concluded, two hours and thirty five minutes later, my friend first regaled me with an extended lecture on the history of entelechy; delivered a detailed account (with commentary) of an anecdote from the seventh or eighth volume of the diary of his favorite writer; colorfully retold the story of a bizarre event from his childhood involving a huge, vicious dog that I had heard at least ten

times before; reported to me with damning exegesis the most unseemly intrigues now convulsing the Faculty, and at the very end—the dessert comes last—he told me of his new literary undertaking, which was, in fact, the main reason for his visit.

He announced it in a becomingly dignified tone. Thus I learned that, very recently, his second novel had come to him, as had the first, in a single flash of enlightenment; this time, though, not in the bathroom during shaving, but in an even more awkward place: in the basement of his apartment building, where, in his absentmindedness, he had ended up by mistake.

Lest I suffer any unnecessary anxiety, I was immediately told, unambiguously and with a bountiful smile, that on this occasion also I would enjoy all the benefits I had previously been granted: I would be allowed to utilize my laser printer without hesitation, I would retain the exclusive right to read each fresh chapter before anyone else, and to have everything clarified to me firsthand. Finally, as though as an afterthought, he added, with a mildly menacing motion of his finger, that the ban on any inopportune recognition would not, of course, be lifted.

By the time he finally left—forgetting to take with him not only the page from the notepad with the coded shrink's notes, but also his reading glasses—the drumming from above my nose had spread throughout my head. It was particularly sharp at the base of my skull where it joins the neck; I kept massaging the place with one hand, but the great splotch of pain at anchor there refused to sail away. My many years of experience with migraine told me ineluctably that the critical point had been passed: no medicine could help me now. All I could do for myself in that condition was to lie down, close my eyes and hope for the blessed deliverance of sleep . . .

Which did arrive, but only after I had passed through torment. The epicenter of pain moved around, mercilessly and successively crushing my sinuses, my temples, my forehead and the back of my head. The hardest to bear was when it hit the base of my eye sockets; I felt as if a red-hot iron were burrowing from the inside, seeking to goad my eyeballs into popping out to escape the searing heat.

This bodily infirmity inevitably brought on a deep depression. I sank into a reverie over the many opportunities that my life had once afforded, and now were missed or wasted—either way, gone irretrievably. I tried to grope my way towards the darkness, to invoke it, but now there was only the mere absence of natural light, punched through with numerous, multi-colored flashes of headache. I had lost the connection that I had awaited so long; the link was severed, leaving behind a mute emptiness. All lost, ruined—and for what?

As if in answer to that question, fragments of the evening's conversation started to drift back: frozen images which would briefly emerge from the abyss of memory, only to plunge back into it and dissipate into nonexistence. Their swift succession had a hypnotic, sedative effect on me; too gradually to notice, the pain retreated into the background, then evaporated. And just as surreptitiously, while I was intent on the unreal lights flowing across my inner eyelids, I fell asleep.

In dreams the show continued, but now the images came to life. There was a woman without a face; she was trying to feed me with milk from her vast, swollen breast, yet I somehow knew that she was not my mother; milk spurted all over my face from that udder, on which the branching network of veins was clearly visible; milk painted my face green and trickled down my chin, but I kept my mouth firmly shut, fearing that it might be snake venom.

The breast was replaced by a night pot, also unnaturally enlarged, which levitated above my head and bobbed about, as if shaken by violent waves. It was obvious that the contents might at any moment fall on my head unless I could find shelter; I looked around urgently, but I could see only a boulder of some sort; closer observation revealed that it was a marble statue of an index finger upraised in warning. The finger began to sway and totter, with a harsh screeching sound, and this caused a current of air which finally overturned the yellow chamber pot.

Instinctively I raised my arms over my head, but they were inadequate protection against a heavy shower of shiny letters which splashed down on me. The letters varied in size and color, and the porous sty-

rofoam of which they were all made had a mild, sweetish fragrance, like that of fruit tea. The shower increased to a waterfall, and soon I was waist-deep in this alphabetic flood, then shoulder-deep. It was like standing helpless in a grain silo, while tons of wheat cascaded down.

Once the letters covered my head I began to choke. In panic, I reached up with both hands to swim for the surface, but instead of emerging from the sea of letters, I merely slid up and out of an item of clothing which, after I had somehow struggled out and grabbed some air, I realized was more appropriate to a woman: a lady's formal evening dress, in turquoise brocade, sleeveless, and cut low in the back.

I hardly had time to ask myself how I came to be wearing such a thing, before I was horrified to discover that I had on further female apparel under it: a two-piece suit in dark red, consisting of jacket and skirt—such as airline stewardesses often wear. I quickly struggled out of that as well, but my torment was by no means ended thereby. Underneath the jacket was an airy, light, flouncy, summer dress. It had a flowery pattern in dark violet which I seemed to know from somewhere; while pulling it off over my head, hands trembling, I recognized it from the couch in my study.

The fashion show went on and on: after the light dress there were black trousers, also of flimsy material, with very narrow legs which barely covered my calves, teamed with a bright silk blouse. Thereafter came a crinoline in heavy brocade supported on a thick wire grid; tight blue jeans and a cotton gingham shirt; a blue kimono, its back completely covered by an embroidered dragon; tight, bottle-green corduroy trousers and a canary-yellow, turtleneck sweater in lambswool.

Struggling out of each layer, I moved at an ever more neurotic tempo. There seemed to be no end to my capacity for female clothing, even though I never seemed at all overdressed. But, when the first hint of an end appeared, I greeted it not with relief but with panic. I pulled myself out of an old-fashioned, floor-length gown with a tight bodice (which was wrongly laced), to find myself clad only in a petticoat.

I managed, with some difficulty, to overcome the momentum of my frenetic stripping, afraid of what I might find underneath. For several

moments I stood still, torn by conflicting drives: the urge to rid myself of the petticoat, which I definitely had no business wearing, and the wish to leave it on so as not to face the terrifying certainty of switched gender. But this unstable balance could not endure for long: with slow, hesitant moves I finally slid the straps from my shoulders, and the silky petticoat flowed off.

It revealed no body, male or female. There was, in fact, no body to reveal. A form, of sorts, yes; remotely body-like, but definitely not human, and perfectly transparent. I gazed unblinkingly down at a most unusual aquarium, where a varied population of little fishes darted among tiny cactuses.

I barely had time to marvel before the perfectly limpid water of the brick-shaped yard-long aquarium was suddenly made turbid by a thick redness gushing up from the bottom. Before this bloody haze completely blocked my view, I saw the fishes swimming madly to impale themselves on the cactus needles. The long, thin daggers penetrated their bodies and re-emerged, but the red liquid was not their blood—it spurted from the tips of the daggers themselves, which trembled lasciviously with each emission.

I felt myself partaking of their bliss, as if I were collecting some sort of rent from the tenants who had chosen to celebrate this orgiastic spree of death in my bizarrely altered torso. But it was not my destiny to share their climax; a large stork suddenly materialized beside the aquarium, a tall bird wearing thick-rimmed glasses (their rims repaired in several places with brittle old sticky tape), and a worn-out, mustard-colored necktie. She (for I regarded the stork as female) stood next to the aquarium for a few moments, shaking her head in obvious disapproval and disgust, then with a single, violent stabbing motion, drove her thick beak through the wall of glass.

I experienced a sharp pain, as if a sword had been driven into my vitals. I opened my mouth to yell, but no sound emerged; in mute agony, I looked on helplessly while the pinkish, gluey contents of the aquarium slowly oozed round the stork's legs. But when the last of the fluid had trickled out to expose the bottom there was no sign of what

ought to have been there. No detumescent cactuses, no fishes impaled thereon: only a multitude of sponges, trembling gelatinously, newly and obviously swollen with what they had absorbed.

The stork bent down to press the sponges caressingly with her beak. She did not do it randomly but in meticulous order, and the pressed sponges did not release dirty water, as I for some reason had assumed they would. Quite the contrary, small sea urchins covered with slime emerged from them. In color they ranged from a darkish yellow to almost black, and they made tiny sounds similar to the peeping of chicks.

Having coaxed them all out, the stork raised her head, turned her beak up, opened it, and uttered a clear, metallic gong-like sound, which to the prickly chicks was, undoubtedly, a signal to leave the site of their entry into the world. As soon as they made their way across the bottom of the aquarium and between the glass shards around it, each one achieved a metamorphosis: they changed from sea urchins into common hedgehogs, large, completely black, and covered with a forest of long, bristling spines.

The stork turned away from me and slowly walked into the distance, while the hedgehogs formed up into two separate rows or columns behind her. Once the formation was complete, the stork flapped her wings and took off, folding her legs under her body. I was not greatly surprised when the hedgehogs also took off, maintaining perfect formation; nor did it seem odd when I, too, rose up to fly at the rear of the squadron. But I was completely baffled by the fact that flying in this insubstantial, invisible airplane, with an ever-deeper abyss beneath my feet, didn't frighten me. On the contrary, I felt light-headed, almost drunk with joy, and thrilled with the experience.

I soon got the vague impression that this excitement was becoming palpable, swollen. Suddenly embarrassed I looked down, but there was nothing to be seen: I still had no torso. Perplexed, I raised my eyes—and noticed that I was alone in the air. No stork before me, no hedgehogs, no invisible airplane. Nothing. Just a vast shimmering grayness into which I stared dully.

Then, before fear could take possession of me—which would undoubtedly lead to a headlong plunge—I realized what the shimmering was: a colossal computer screen, filling the entire heavens in front of me. Nothing was written on it, but that did not worry me. I knew, with the complete certainty typical of dreams, that words would very shortly appear on that screen; huge words, shining as bright as the Revelation itself, words which would flow not from my head, but from the darkness, across the cobweb-thin bridge, from the other side.

Unless . . .

Unless a sound came.

And, inevitably, there was a sound.

Very quiet at first, soft as the last buzzings of a dying insect lying slumped beneath the impenetrable obstacle of a distant windowpane. It rapidly rose to a muted roar, the purring of the well tuned engine of a limousine driven by a white-gloved chauffeur, with Immanuel Kant himself sitting in the rear, reading his own Complete Works. That in turn was modified into the silvery tinkling of a small bell on a salver, of the sort used in the mansions of the rich to summon a liveried footman.

Of course, I had to respond, there was no way of backing off from that obligation.

My eyes still closed, I extended a hand and gropingly found the phone on the bedside table. Before lifting the receiver and croaking out a drowsy “Hello?” I opened one eye and observed the large red numerals on the alarm clock’s display: 06:14. Instantly the base of my skull began to throb.

It was he, of course. I did not wait to hear any questions; instead, I gave him two affirmative answers right off: yes, he had forgotten his glasses at my place, and yes, he could come and get them. Yes, I was already awake. No, no, it was by no means too early. Oh you don’t say? You had to wake him up to make this call? Well what sort of a neighbor is it, in God’s name, who is still asleep at this time of day! Unheard of! I know you cannot work without them. Yes, a new novel, you told me. No, I am not going into your part of town today, unfortunately, but I’ll be at home. All day, yes. Good.

While I went through my morning routine, the splotch of pain resumed its progress through my skull. But it was not as blinding as on the previous night: now it produced only muffled flashes which hit me mainly in the region above the eyebrows. I stayed in the shower for longer than usual. Thin sharp jets of warm water gradually leached the pressure from my head, but it returned as soon as I started toweling myself dry in front of the clouded mirror, surrounded by a mist of warm steam and ethereal bathroom smells.

The pain finally disappeared only after I had drunk a large cup of strong, hot tea. It was some English mix, of uncertain origin, and it smelled simultaneously of fir trees and dog rose. The tea was more black than brown, even after I squeezed into it one-half of a juicy, thick-skinned lemon. I felt the effects of the mixture almost instantly, as if I had introduced it directly into my bloodstream, not through my stomach.

The blind: I pulled it down slowly, ritually. Its shadow, sliding over my face exposed to the heat of the morning sun, seemed to switch off some great electric heater. Today would, again, be unbearably hot; once again I anticipated a visit which might last for quite a while, although its ostensible reason didn't seem to justify a prolonged stay; and the beneficial effects of the tea would pass sooner or later, which would assuredly bring on a return of the headache. Each one of these three circumstances would be, in itself, sufficient to shatter the perfection of the ambience, so I could afford no further delay.

I switched on the computer.