

An Experience in Literary Translation

Translation and Commentary on Jean Barbe's

*Le travail de l'huître*

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## **Abstract**

### An Experience in Literary Translation

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Through the translation of and commentary on Jean Barbe's short novel, *Le travail de l'huître*, this thesis seeks to explore some of the issues that arise during the process of translating a literary text. Based on Umberto Eco's theories on interpretation, one fundamental premise is that translation is first and foremost an act of reading, and part of the translator's task consists in learning how to read for the work of translation and where such reading actually begins. Antoine Berman provides the second fundamental premise, which is the requirement for the translator to develop a consciousness of him or herself as a translating subject whose specificity inescapably influences the translation process and the product of that process. For the more detailed work of textual analysis, the thesis relies first on the work scholars such as Jonathan Culler, for an understanding of the literary nature of this text, and Gérard Genette and his work on textual borders. The final translation of *Le travail de l'huître* was also produced in light of the work of many practising translators, whose thoughts and practices provided an interesting comparison and contrast with the work of the theorists.

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## *INTRODUCTION*

When you describe the history of a translation, that translation will change under the gaze of whoever is reading it. (Basso 53) (All translations from Basso are by the author of this thesis.)<sup>1</sup>

Translation is a lived experience. It is the necessary negotiation of meaning across practices, discourses and languages, without which no intersubjective communication or understanding is possible. Translation studies, as they have developed over the last few decades, have brought the ubiquity of translation into view and have led scholars to confront in an unusually direct way the relationship between theory and practice: translation is what we do all the time, and accordingly translation theory has to account for what we do and explore what we might want to do, ought to do, wish we could do, etc.

Among the many translation fields, literary translation has a special place. Not only can literary translation claim a kind of historical priority in terms of translation studies (it is in the translation of culturally important texts that translation *as an issue* first emerged) but also from a theoretical point of view. Paradoxically, literary translation is not what we do all the time (life is more prosaic!) but, precisely because it is emancipated from many of the compelling constraints of pragmatic translation, literary translation is a privileged locus for reflection on the possibilities and limits of translation. This is the reason I chose to focus this thesis on the issues raised by the translation of a literary text, namely Jean Barbe's *Le travail de l'huître*. This text has many advantages for the task here contemplated. Firstly, it is fairly short: this made it possible to maintain a firm grasp

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<sup>1</sup> "Se racconti la storia di una traduzione, quella traduzione diventerà diversa agli occhi de chi leggi." (Basso 53)

on the overall trajectory of the narrative. It is stylistically uniform (with some signal exceptions): this made it possible to focus on certain translation challenges that recur throughout the text, as well as on the few striking variations and the translation problems that they present. It is written in a delocalized language (again with some signal exceptions): this simplified the thorny question of intended audience and reception (or at least displaced it from issues of linguistic form to issues of content which are more manageable from a translation point of view.) And yet these advantages are not mere shortcuts but rather allow the issue of the role of the translator to emerge more clearly than in situations in which the difficulties are so imposing that the translator would seem to have no option but to betray the original, rendering his or her intervention more apparent, though not necessarily more consequential. In the case of Barbe's text, translation is, on the contrary, deceptively easy; however, on reflection, this ease provided an opportunity to challenge what seemed obvious and "natural" to arrive at what is rigorous and consistent. On the other hand, what seems obvious, natural and easy provides a kind of "reality check" in relation to what is theoretically consequent, thus challenging the validity of the theoretical approach, testing it against actual practice. It is in this space of creativity at the intersection of theory and practice that the impact of translation studies can best be observed.

Umberto Eco and Antoine Berman provided the fundamental bases for my approach to this translation project. Eco's contribution was particularly useful in that, in his view, "a text is a machine conceived for eliciting interpretations" ("The Author and His Interpreters") and, therefore, before a literary text can be translated, the translator must come to an understanding of the imagined world which the text evokes. In this way,

Eco links translation to his theory of interpretation and of literary “possible worlds” (*Six Walks* 246). These possible worlds are those made manifest by a specific text. Saying that any text can be interpreted in any number of ways does not mean that all interpretations are valid; they must make sense according to the rules of the game activated by the text.

*Le travail de l’huître* describes a world in which a man becomes invisible. The story which follows is then created by the author and reader together. An author cannot give all the information concerning the “world” of the novel. Such an attempt would lead to the creation of an entire world, so the author counts on the reader to fill in the story according to the logic set out in the text; this the reader does through a process that Eco describes as a series of “inferential walks”: “readers, in order to predict how a story is going to go, turn to their own experience of life or their knowledge of other stories” (*Six Walks* 50). At a given point, and guided by clues found in the text and supplied with information from his or her own “encyclopaedia” or general knowledge base, the reader sets off into the story in a particular direction, which may or may not be “correct” and which may involve turns and twists and backtracking as further information is provided by the text and augmented by the reader. Of course, learning how to read the text is, in this case, only a prelude to learning how to translate. Eco summed up, at the end of *Dire quasi la stessa cosa*, what I consider to be a guiding principle or perhaps *attitude* to adopt during the translation process:

Fidelity is, rather, the tendency to believe that translation is always possible if the source text has been interpreted with passionate involvement; it is the promise to identify what seems to us to be the deep meaning of the text and the ability to negotiate wherever necessary the solution that seems to us the most appropriate.

If you consult any dictionary you will see that among the synonyms of fidelity the word “accuracy” is not to be found. There are, rather, loyalty, honesty, respect, reverence.<sup>2 3</sup> (*Dire quasi la stessa cosa* 364) (My translation)

One of the most influential and admired translation theorists, Antoine Berman, focused attention on the position of the translator and the importance and difficulty of bringing this position to the surface so that its influence can be understood and confronted. From this standpoint, Berman’s famous and somewhat misapplied “tendances déformantes” are useful not so much as a diagnostic tool for revealing the weaknesses in any particular translated text but rather as an aid to making the translator’s position visible to him or herself throughout the translation process. In a manner of speaking, it is the translator who is “deformed,” and if he or she has the stomach for a long look in the mirror, it may be possible to straighten out some of these deformities or find a way to address them. Domenico Jervolino (in a discussion of the ideas of Jean-René Ladmiral) describes this reflexive aspect of translation: “There is clarification also in the psychological sense in that translation studies as a self-reflective discipline involves a process of self-analysis carried out by the translating subject, the initiation of something that resembles a therapeutic discourse” (84). (All translations from Jervolino are by the author of this thesis.)<sup>4</sup> This aspect of Berman’s thought is most applicable during the revision phase of the translation process in which Berman emphasizes the importance of

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<sup>2</sup> “La fedeltà è piuttosto la tendenza a credere che la traduzione sia sempre possibile se il testo fonte è stato interpretato con appassionata complicità, è l’impegno a indentificare quello che per noi è il senso profondo del testo, e la capacità di negoziare a ogni istante la soluzione che ci pare più giusta.

Se consultate qualsiasi dizionario vedrete che tra i sinonimi di *fedeltà* non c’è la parola *esattezza*. Ci sono piuttosto *lealtà, onestà, rispetto, pietà*.” (Eco 2003)

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Eco did not consult *all* dictionaries. The Garzanti clearly gives *precisione, esattezza* as synonyms for *fedeltà*.

<sup>4</sup> “Chiarificazione anche in senso psicologico in quanto la traduttologia come disciplina riflessiva comporta un sorta di lavoro analitico del soggetto traduttore su se stesso, l’instaurazione di qualcosa che si assomiglia a un discorso terapeutico.” (Jervolino 84)

reading and re-reading: of paratextual materials, of the original, of the translation and—eventually—of the last two together. This analysis is two-pronged: an assessment of the translation necessarily involves an element of self-assessment, revealing in so far as possible the translator’s intervention. The key for Berman in this process is “respect” (*Pour une critique* 92), respect for the text but also self-respect. The translator’s position is not one of “servility” before the text but a recognition that “le traducteur doit toujours *faire-oeuvre*” (*Pour une critique* 92); nor is it one of treacherous disregard of the text but an open acknowledgement that “Le traducteur a *tous les droits* dès lors qu’il joue franc jeu” (*Pour une critique* 93).

Though Eco and Berman provided the fundamental approaches for this project, I received aid and comfort from many other theorists and translators. Lawrence Venuti takes Berman’s summons for translators to “jouer franc jeu” a step further. Venuti’s work introduces an element of instability into the translation process by insisting on the violence that translation inescapably inflicts on the text, and forcing the translator to face the fact that this violence has a meaning and that the translator must take up a position in relation to this meaning. In other words, every translation embodies a project and the translator must both become aware of that project and decide what kind of role to play in it. In my view, these two theorists establish a creative tension between the need for the translator to adopt an attitude of respect, even reverence, for the text (Berman), and the parallel need for the translator to embrace—and acknowledge—his agency as a creative interpreter of the text (Venuti).

*Per una filosofia della traduzione* by Domenico Jervolino, a professor of philosophy at the University of Naples and specialist on Paul Ricœur, was also extremely

interesting and helpful as an overview of the various strands in the evolution of Translation Studies, but most especially for his explication of Ricœur's thinking on translation.

Among the many translators whose thoughts on translation I have read in the course of this work, one in particular stands out. Susanna Basso is an accomplished English-to-Italian translator with many works to her name. In 2010, she published a short work on translation entitled *Sul tradurre: esperienze e divagazioni militanti*, which has been an invaluable source of examples and insight into the translation methods of one practicing translator. It was especially interesting to be able to view her experiences in light of the theories of Eco, Berman and others.

I would like to mention one other theorist whom I came across at a very opportune point in this project and who helped me resolve an unexpected difficulty. Once I had constructed a first draft of *Le travail de l'huître*, I had the uncomfortable sensation that I had locked myself out of the house and left the keys inside. Or, to borrow Julian Green's analogy of the walled city (187), I had laid the last stone in the fortress wall but had also bricked up all the entrances, leaving myself stranded on the outside: I had no starting point from which to apply Berman's methodology. I needed to find a way to begin thinking about *my* translation rather than about Barbe's novel. Gérard Genette, in his book *Paratexts*, showed me a way in. In fact, he made me see that there was no wall around this city, that the text, far from being an unapproachable citadel, was a great spreading conurbation (though resembling London's tortuously tangled twists and turns rather than Toronto's rectilinear sprawl) with no clear border dividing country from town, or text from the world-around-the-text; the two dissolved into each other, which allowed

me to abandon the “siege and sack” analogy of translation for one of “exploration / encounter / exchange.”

Eco, Berman, Meschonnic, *et al* stress the importance of learning how to read for translation, but Genette brought home to me in a practical way at what point this reading begins—a point reached far in advance of the text itself. There is always some layer to go through before one enters the text proper even if only the epitextual details of cover art. Genette pointed out this (rather obvious) fact to me and awakened my awareness that these paratextual features would have to be dealt with in my translation and in my thinking-about-translation; they also provided an unthreatening starting point to the process. Genette gave me the theoretical tools to start thinking *small* rather than *large* about my text and pointed out the signposts into my own city, my own Babel, and it is worth remembering that Babel was a city first; after all, it is the Tower *of* Babel.

## *TRANSLATOR*

In choosing as the subject of this M.A. thesis to translate a work of fiction, I embarked upon an enterprise that differs greatly from my work as a professional translator: the nature of the text to be translated, the issues and questions that arose, or rather, that I chose to address, the translation difficulties to be recognized and resolved and the liberty to be embraced and controlled are some of the factors that I was able to explore throughout this project. These factors, though not entirely absent from my professional work, are rarely dealt with in detail or in depth during the course of that work. This is largely due to the requirements of clients (for the most part the federal government), who tend to impose strict guidelines on how a document is to be translated. These documents range from quasi-legal texts such as immigration and employment insurance appeals, funding recommendation reports consisting of dry lists of facts and figures, punchy Power Point presentations, sprawling meeting minutes or collective agreements filled with legalese, and I have even faced the challenge of translating, or rather, deciphering, hand-written documents, such as cover letters in applications for appointments to quasi-judicial bodies.

In all of this work, accuracy is the most important factor but, in truth, time overrides all other considerations to the extent that, on occasion, a “rough” translation is preferred to a late one. However, even where there is adequate time to produce an adequate translation, there is generally little left over to explore what could be called translation issues. I make a point of describing the nature and constraints of my professional work because they have been fundamental in shaping my position as a translator and have, therefore, played an inevitable role in defining my translation project.

As Schleiermacher realized long ago, the choice of whether to domesticate or foreignize a foreign text has been allowed only to translators of literary texts, not to translators of technical materials. Technical translation is fundamentally constrained by the exigencies of communication. (Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* 42)

There is a certain level of tension between the habits imposed by or developed in the course of my professional work and the attitudes and approaches I was free to adopt in the process of translating *Le travail de l'huître*. I also had to set aside what could be called the comfort of limitations and overcome a certain fear of freedom. “Do not stray” best summarizes the spirit of the guidelines for much of my professional work, even (in legal texts) to the extent of leaving errors uncorrected. However, the most reassuring of these limitations is time. Usually, there is not much of it, and so there can be little to-ing and fro-ing, second-guessing or backtracking. There is no great difficulty in arriving at a final version; as mentioned above, for good or ill, time puts an end to all debate (at least until the client sends—sometimes debatable but better left undebated—feedback). To use Lawrence Venuti’s term, there is “violence” in this process; it is quick and largely domesticating. In translating *Le travail de l'huître*, in working as a “freelance literary translator,” the scope of the translation process widened enormously.

Over the course of my translation studies and throughout this particular project, it has been very tempting to see the whole field as “an enigma wrapped in a riddle shrouded in mystery.” Antoine Berman suggests that this mystery—if mystery there is—can be penetrated, at least in part, by taking a hard look at the translator or, with a lower

probability of success, the translator taking a hard look at him or herself. It is worth citing the relevant passage at length:

Tout traducteur entretient un rapport spécifique avec sa propre activité, c'est-à-dire, une certaine "conception" ou "perception" du traduire, de son sens, de ses finalités, de ses formes et modes. "Conception" et "perception" qui ne sont pas purement personnelles, puisque le traducteur est effectivement marqué par tout un discours historique, social, littéraire, idéologique sur la traduction (et l'écriture littéraire). La position traductive est, pour ainsi dire, le "compromis" entre la manière dont le traducteur perçoit en tant que sujet pris par la *pulsion de traduire*, la tâche de la traduction, et la manière dont il a "internalisé" le discours ambiant sur la traduction (les "normes"). La position traductive, en tant que compromis, est le résultat d'une *élaboration*: elle est le *se-posier du traducteur vis-à-vis de la traduction*, se-posier qui, une fois choisi (car il s'agit bien d'un choix), *lie* le traducteur, au sens où Alain disait qu' "un caractère est un serment." (*Pour une critique* 74-75)

"Translation is a lived experience." Lived through language, of course. Since language is the stuff with which translators work, I believe that, as part of becoming aware of one's translative position, of the translator's "compromise," it is necessary to examine the translator's attitude toward language and languages, which is a step along the road toward understanding the translator's relationship with translation itself. In *Pour une critique des traductions*, Antoine Berman describes what he calls the translator's "rapport spécifique" with translation. There is much in this description that applies

equally to the translator's attitude to his or her first language, in particular the notion of internalising a *discours ambiant*.

The translator chooses his or her second language both in the wider sense of which language he or she will work in and on, and at the level of linguistic choices—lexis, syntax, etc.—but we are born into our first language, and our experience of and experiences in this language affect how we, as translators, understand both source and target language and how the source text will be interpreted into the target text. However, the translator, as with every other interpreting subject, acts *within* language, is acted upon *by* language. Like the atmosphere surrounding us, we breathe it in from birth and, like air, we breathe in whatever permeates that atmosphere (Lefevere 16). We often refer to linguistic competence as “mastery of language,” but for most of us for most of our lives we are mastered by language and are unaware of much of the message carried by our utterances, which, like “dark matter,” lies hidden in the space around our words exerting a pull on meaning. This dark linguistic matter takes some effort to identify, though we all carry out this task on a daily basis by simply asking for further information, an explanation, a rewording, an intralingual translation to use Roman Jakobson's term.

It is important for a translator, before examining the relationship with his or her second or acquired language, to examine the relationship to the mother tongue, to the source(s) of his or her own language (*parole*). We should understand that we are as much *products* of as *producers* of language. English is my first language; for many years it was my only language, and for most of those years, it was the only language I was truly aware of.

I am a product of a time and a culture which regarded translation as an inconvenient obstacle to be got over and quickly forgotten. English was the imperial language in more than one sense (though this was also a time of political decolonisation, when English lost its status as the formal language of dominance as colonies gained independence, and British red faded from the maps). Schools taught the “great” works of European literature (the other continents were beyond the edge of the known world) in English as part of “English” literature courses. The fact that they were translated or the notion that translation could have had any influence on the stories we were reading was an issue that was never raised. One of the effects of this massive appropriation, which seemed only natural at the time, was to give English the status of a touchstone or default language. This was true of my largely Anglophone corner of Canada and also internationally; English had become the common *koine*, the language of exchange and not only between English-speakers and the Others but often among the Others themselves. Regardless of one’s position in the social hierarchy, the ambient discourse for Anglophones was characterized by a feeling of expansion and dominance often tinged with arrogance. Obviously, authors wrote in other languages, but *in those languages* they lacked the “authority” of English.

We learn a second, third, etc., language for a variety of reasons, from personal preference to necessity—which can go as far as coercion. French is my language of *choice*, in the sense that I chose to learn it and, therefore, regard it in quite a different light from English. It had/has the appeal of exoticism, with a consequent effect something along the lines of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Translation Studies provided me the opportunity of examining my relationship to my first language; the process of translating

*Le travail de l'huître* provided an occasion to contrast that relationship with my attitude toward French. In a word, this attitude could be described as “romantic” (“Characterized or marked by, invested or environed with, romance or imaginative appeal” (OED)). Since French became, from the start of my familiarity with it, my language of “imaginative appeal,” English was forced to bear the burden of the mundane realities of everyday existence. This division of labour places both languages in an unreal and unfair position. Neither is more prosaic than the other, neither more poetic. Both are used to tramp to work, to buy toothpaste, to do laundry; both are used to describe the sublime and the sordid. This may sound simplistic but it is not without consequences for the choices a translator is faced with, choices that, for example, may affect register (in either direction).

In a certain sense, we are more master of our second language than of the first, especially, as in my case, when that language is learned later and in a highly conscious and structured manner, no longer breathed in but ordered *à la carte* and consumed; we are more aware of what we have learned, why we have learned it, what we want or expect it to do (though this certainly does not mean, any more than with our first language, that it always does what we desire it to do). This is inevitably a more limited, perhaps even shallow, mastery, which is why very few of us are able to translate with confidence into a second language. Our first language we know intuitively, the second reflectively. There is, however, a sense of freedom that can come from expressing oneself in an acquired language, freedom from linguistic convention, but also from social convention which dictates or at least influences how certain subjects are expressed or discussed. When it comes to translation, the translator must be careful about assuming that competence in the target language does not also constitute an obstacle to be overcome. Lack of competence

in the source language may result in a failure to catch intended and unintended levels of meaning or in going off in highly imaginative flights of fancy; however, the unreflective exercise of competence in the target language may produce a text that relies heavily on stock vocabulary and expressions, a very smooth, easily digested domestication that never gets off the ground rather than a creative reproduction of what is unique in the source text.

“All acts of translation begin with a thorough investigation of the reading process” (Frame ix). Both Umberto Eco and Antoine Berman emphasize the importance of skilful reading to the translation process, and the task of catching the effects of a term, a phrase or a passage requires mobilising these skills on many different levels. When we learn to read our first language, we do so armed with the vast amount of knowledge we picked up as we learned to speak: when we hear and see the written word, we are often able to associate it with what we have already heard and seen. This is not the case with a second language, which may be learned in “foreign” territory among “alien” associations. Eco states that all acts of reading involve dipping into our “cultural encyclopaedia” (*Interpretation and Overinterpretation* 68) in order to make sense of the “inferential walks” we take as we read: “readers, in order to predict how a story is going to go, turn to their own experience of life or their knowledge of other stories” (*Six Walks* 50). As translators, we must be aware that we are dealing with two encyclopaedias, our own and the one, developed in a different language, in a different culture, in a different “universe of discourse” (Lefevere 18), which informs the text to be translated, and this second encyclopaedia comes in two volumes, so to speak: one specific to the empirical author, and one the author ascribes to the model reader of the original. Acknowledging the

existence and understanding the influence of that second encyclopaedia—through research, imagination and creativity—is a prerequisite to translating. Gregory Rabassa in *Love and Treachery* states “When I’m translating a book, I’m simply reading it in English” (41), but it would seem to be our duty to try to “read” it in French (or whatever source language) as French first, not in spite of the difficulties and differences, linguistic and especially cultural, but because of them, since these are the qualities that likely make the work interesting as literature. However, the translator must read with a view to which of these difficulties and differences are encountered primarily as a reader and which as a translator, since the two may not coincide. The translator can then decide how far he or she can, or must, move the source language toward the target language (or vice versa).

Berman emphasizes the respect the translator must demonstrate toward the source language, but there is also an issue of respect toward the target language. As a translator, I had to perform a re-balancing act without which it would have been impossible to treat both languages as equals—equal in their ability to describe the multidimensionality of experience—and to give English its due and trust it to be capable of expressing my interpretation of the source text without falling into what Berman terms *ennoblissement*. Etymologically, “respect” derives from the Latin *respicere*, which means to “look back at, regard, consider” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). In order to achieve this respect, the translator must make an effort to distance him or herself from both source and target language, to seek out an (ad)vantage point from which to negotiate a middle way between the assimilationist drive of the target language and the exoticising allure of the source language:

une troisième voie, la voie du centre (*textual middles*), caractérisée par des degrés variables de pratique cibliste ou sourcière. Il s'agit de la fusion des deux tendances qui sont d'ailleurs toujours présentes et confondues dans tout acte de traduction, quels que soient le projet traductif et l'approche privilégiée par le sujet traduisant. (Bandia, "Le concept bermanien" 132)

Pierre Menard, in Jorge Luis Borges' "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," provides a succinct description of the translator's task (though Menard's undertaking was not quite "translation proper"):

I have assumed the mysterious obligation to reconstruct, word for word, the novel that for him was spontaneous. This game of solitaire I play is governed by two polar rules: the first allows me to try out formal or psychological variants; the second forces me to sacrifice them to the "original" text and to come, by irrefutable arguments, to those eradications. (Borges 92)

The "two polar rules" referred to above are striking in that they foreshadow Antoine Berman's thinking on awareness/experimentation in translation—the translator's freedom to produce a text in the knowledge (insofar as this is possible) of his/her influence on the result: "Le traducteur a *tous les droits* dès lors qu'il joue franc jeu" (*Pour une critique* 93). Menard's partial reconstructions of the *Quixote*, though superficially identical to the original, actually surpassed Cervantes' *Quixote* in that they were written with the awareness of being *the Quixote*, whereas Cervantes' version could not know what it was or would become (Borges 93).

As translators, we generally aspire to have our work "coincide" ("To fall together and agree in position; to occupy the same area or portion of space. To be identical in

substance, nature or character; to agree exactly, to be in precise harmony or accord” (OED)) with the original. Menard rejected the idea of becoming Miguel de Cervantes when writing his *Quixote* as “less challenging (and therefore less interesting)” and chose rather to write “*through the experiences of Pierre Menard*” (Borges 91). Like Menard, we come to our version not through *our* author’s experiences but through our own. Like Menard, in our translations we also seek to avoid—consciously or not—“falling into tautology” (Borges 92). Pierre Menard describes with dispiriting (perhaps exaggerated—though I cannot speak for all translators) clarity one view of the task of a literary translator:

He resolved to anticipate the vanity that awaits all the labours of mankind; he undertook a task of infinite complexity, a task futile from the outset. He dedicated his scruples and his nights “lit by midnight oil” to repeating in a foreign tongue a book that already existed. His drafts were endless; he stubbornly corrected, and he ripped up thousands of handwritten pages. (Borges 95)

## **AUTHOR**

The relationship of the translator to the writer is an erotic relationship always, and you learn something about the person that you're working with in an almost plastic, physical way that you can almost never learn about your friends.

(Howard)

It is a strange relationship, that between translator and author. This is true regardless of whether death has already placed itself between the two, and no less true when author and translator inhabit the same body, as they do in Nancy Huston.<sup>5</sup> There are cases where translators have co-operated closely with authors, such as Gregory Rabassa with Julio Cortazar<sup>6</sup> or Robert Majzels with France Daigle.<sup>7</sup> There are cases where this collaboration has turned problematic, as with Frank Scott and Anne Hébert,<sup>8</sup> or Clarice Lispector, as author: “She was a quiet torment to her translators, insisting that in her virtually untranslatable prose every comma be preserved” (Moore 35) and as translator: “[Her] own translations were widely considered careless and second-rate and done for the rather little money they paid” (Moore 35). This is how Brice Matthieussent, a French writer and translator, in his novel *Vengeance du traducteur*, describes the nightmarish relationship between his translator—“cette modeste zébrure [i.e., Z]” and his demanding, sneering author—the “A majuscule” (who does, in the end, get his comeuppance):

l'autre, ton autre, l'auteur français, t'a entraîné, toi son traducteur marchant  
comme il se doit dans ses pas, fidèle comme l'ombre soudé au corps assujetti à lui  
par contrat paraphé, rivé à ses mots et à ses prescriptions, contraint de suivre

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<sup>5</sup> *Plainsong; Limbes/Limbo*

<sup>6</sup> *Hopscotch; A Manual for Manuel; 62: a Model Kit*

<sup>7</sup> *Just Fine; A Fine Passage*

<sup>8</sup> *Dialogue sur la traduction*

obstinément sa trace pour tomber dans tous les pièges qu'il t'a tendus.

(Matthieussent 94).

And, of course, there are many translators who have had little or no contact with the living authors they have translated. As Susanna Basso states, "I am often asked whether I have met the authors of the texts that I have translated. My answer is almost always no" (151).<sup>9</sup> On those occasions when she has met the author, she admits to a sense of discomfort:

Let me try to explain what it is that bothers me almost every time I think of meeting an author. The first question is: what is it I want? What do I hope to discover from this meeting? For me, the answer seems to be: I'm hoping to recognize someone; I'm hoping to find the image, the voice, the tastes, the humour and the gestures in the words through which I have tricked myself into believing I have already met the person.<sup>10</sup> (Basso 152)

This discomfort accompanies or is perhaps the result of a certain affinity that can develop between the translator and the "authorial entity" (Eco, *Six Walks* 116) as opposed to the empirical author, which can range from a false sense of intimacy to an uncomfortable feeling of voyeurism or intrusion. Even where there is no direct contact, research into the author's life and times in aid of a translation project, or mere curiosity, may lead the translator to discover private, even unflattering, details about the man or woman behind the book. This is especially true in the age of the Internet, when,

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<sup>9</sup> "Spesso mi capita di sentirmi domandare se ho conosciuto personalmente gli autori dei testi che ho tradotto. Quasi sempre devo rispondere di no." (Basso 151)

<sup>10</sup> "Ecco, vorrei provare a dire che cosa mi agita la mente, quasi sempre, al pensiero di incontrare un autore. La prima domanda è: che cosa voglio, che cosa spero di scoprire grazie a quell'incontro? La risposta mi pare sia, per me: spero di riconoscere qualcuno. Spero cioè di riuscire a riportare l'immagine, la voce, i gusti, l'umorismo e i gesti di una persona alle parole attraverso le quali mi illudo di averla già conosciuta." (Basso 152)

particularly for anyone who enjoys any renown whatsoever, it is difficult to be aware of, let alone to control, all the information concerning oneself, be it professional, personal or private. No-one has complete control over his or her own narrative. Authors have less than most, and translators who deal with these authors—through direct contact, through published and public sources or through the works—become aware of several simultaneous, complementary or contradictory, narratives, different voices telling related but not identical tales. And along with awareness of this epitextual flood should come the awareness of its potential influence.

Whether or not a translator chooses to hear what the author has to say, it is the translator who has the final word (at least up until the translation leaves his or her hands). In answer to a question on whether there was any advantage to working with an author, Richard Howard stated:

It's a mixed bag. If you can pick up the phone and ask a writer what the hell he meant, that helps a lot, sometimes. And sometimes I think it's better just to be involved with the text. D.H. Lawrence said never trust the teller. I think translators feel never trust the tale, never trust the teller—trust the *telling*.

Ultimately, I think you are left alone with the text and nothing else, not the writer, not what he meant, but what *you* think the words mean. (Mann)

Umberto Eco states that readers “have to respect the text, not the author as a person so and so” (“The Author and His Interpreters”). The reader-become-writer in the person of the translator must take this one step further: by trusting the “telling,” the translator is placing his/her faith in his/her own understanding, interpretation and voice.

My contact with the author of *Le travail de l'huître* was limited to a set of fairly wide-ranging questions, which received complete and thoughtful answers.<sup>11</sup> An author is not necessarily the authority on his or her work, and my purpose in contacting Jean Barbe was not to discover some sort of truth about his novel but rather to help me establish a context for his text. These questions dealt with general issues of style, background and theme. I also asked him to elaborate on certain of his statements I came across in published interviews. The last question concerned his thoughts on translation, on being translated. I find his answer intriguing and, in an odd, Artful Dodger, way, satisfying: “Me lire en traduction, c’est comme lire le roman d’un autre qui m’a tout piqué, sauf le texte” (E-mail message from Jean Barbe).

Jean Barbe was born Montreal in 1962. He was a left-wing student activist and has worked extensively in print journalism (*La Presse*, *L’Actualité*, *Le Soleil*, *Ici, Elle, Voir* (which he helped establish)), television (Radio-Canada: *La Bande des Six*, *Scènes*, *Les Beaux Dimanches*) and publishing (Leméac). He has become a full-time writer and has published works of non-fiction and fiction, among which the prize-winning *Comment devenir un monstre*.<sup>12</sup>

A cursory glance through Barbe’s biography reveals a superficial resemblance between his private life and the “life” of Andreï, the protagonist of *Le travail de l'huître*. In his own words, Barbe states that, in part due to personal tragedy and public calamity, he withdrew from the very active and public existence he previously led as a young man and in his television and journalism career to shut himself away in the solitary life of a

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<sup>11</sup> Questions and answers can be found in Appendix “A”.

<sup>12</sup> Le Prix des libraires du Québec (2005) and le Prix Philippe-Rossillon (2005).

writer. In an interview with Caroline Monpetit in *Le Devoir*, Barbe describes *Le travail de l'huître* as a “roman métaphysique” and says that it was written “de façon instinctive”:

J'ai pas pensé à ça une seule seconde. Mais après l'avoir écrit, ce roman-là, j'ai eu l'impression d'avoir écrit un autoportrait. Je me sens loin des autres, souvent. Plus jeune, je “runnais” sur la colère... Mais j'ai l'impression d'être un observateur, de ne pas faire partie, d'être en retrait et de regarder, et de ne pas être en interaction beaucoup. (Montpetit)

Barbe has drawn a strong parallel between this particular novel (his fourth) and tragedies and losses in his personal life, as evidenced by the dedication: “Pour mes morts, À mes vivants” (*Le travail de l'huître* 7), and he describes the novel as “un roman sur le deuil. Tous les deuils, même le deuil de soi” (E-mail).

The initial conceit of the novel—Andreï's removal and isolation from the living world—imposed a certain style on Barbe's language, “Le style est en fonction du sujet” (E-mail). Conversation having become impossible, there is very little of it in the novel. “Un homme avance et pense.” Barbe states that both the style and theme of the novel were influenced by Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. The novel is contemplative also in the sense that Andreï learns to contemplate—is given no choice but to contemplate—the world around him, the world without him. He comes to view the world with ironic detachment and becomes the stereotype of a philosopher.

Barbe defines himself as “un nord-américain” and “un écrivain québécois.” He describes *Le travail de l'huître* as “le roman d'un écrivain québécois (E-mail) but categorically rejects the notion that a Québécois writer must necessarily produce Québécois novels or novels “qui ne soient bons ‘que pour le Québec’” (Guy). “Je tiens à

ma langue, bien sur. Est-ce que je tiens à ma culture? Je cherche depuis toujours à en faire un vêtement qui me serrerait moins aux articulations” (E-mail). Whether or not he meant this to be a *jeu de mots*, Barbe consciously employs a language that, in his view, connects him to the “greats” of the novelistic tradition: “Je me réclame du roman du continent américain surtout: états-uniens, sud-américains, en particulier” (E-mail) and seeks to avoid identification with any local linguistic inflection, which explains his preference for a generally standard French and, in particular, for the *passé simple* “...je trouve que c’est une prise de position en faveur d’une longue histoire littéraire. Je m’inclus d’entrée de jeu dans cette tradition. J’aime ça monter sur les épaules de mes prédécesseurs pour voir plus loin, je trouve ça merveilleux” (Guy).

*TEXT*

A short book of approximately 150 pages published by Leméac in 2008, *Le travail de l'huître* is a piece of contemporary fiction. The novel is divided into three more or less equal parts and prefaced with a poem. Though set “long ago and far away,” the story is very much about the here and now, and its explicit and implicit preoccupations are also stimulating from a translation perspective. In *Le travail de l'huître*, Jean Barbe explores the theme of communication, and its im/possibilities, as an act that makes or keeps us human.

*Le travail de l'huître* is set in Tsarist Russia; the events begin in the early 1880s and stretch into the chaos following the end of the First World War. It is the story of Andreï, a young Siberian peasant who runs away from a loveless family life and bleak future prospects to try to recreate himself in Saint Petersburg. Life in the capital, however, merely shows up his position at the bottom of the social order all the more starkly. He becomes involved with a group of bourgeois students and dilettante conspirators. During one of their pointless, drunken meetings he knocks his head and somehow—neither Andreï nor we ever learn the cause—disappears from the awareness of the world to the extent that his past and all knowledge of him seem also to have vanished. His physical condition remains unchanged: needs, desires and physical dangers are the same apart from a single new and lethal ability which he dare not use. Otherwise, he is unable to interact with individuals or influence events in the world around him. This leaves Andreï open to all the world's suffering but unable to avail himself of any of the consolations of human society.

Throughout his long search first for answers and then for meaning and purpose, Andreï does become a highly educated and, in some ways, a cultivated man—ironically, the man he hoped to become when he fled his family, his past and his roots in Siberia for the capital. He travels the world and witnesses events unfold, but always—with two exceptions—from a distance. At the point in his life where Andreï has reached a state of stoic resignation to his fate, a young, pregnant woman literally falls into his life. The second half of the novel relates Andreï’s attempts to keep this woman and her baby safe. The end of the book finds them in Rostov around 1918 along with thousands of other refugees fleeing civil war and plague. Andreï does all in his power to protect the woman and her child, and in the end, as he himself is dying, he believes that he has seen the mother and child recovered from illness. This he takes as a kind of redemption: he has—or he believes that he has—been able to effect some good in the world despite the world’s lack of concern. “Indifference” is the word which best describes the attitude of the worlds Andreï successively finds himself in. And this is the issue the novel sets out to explore: how to break out of isolation, how to connect, how to matter.

In 2009, *Le travail de l’huître* was one of the finalists for the *Prix des cinq continents*,<sup>13</sup> and was described by a member of the jury as being “[le] plus abouti de tous sur le plan romanesque [...] Si le Prix des cinq continents était un prix de littérature fantastique, il l’aurait gagné haut la main” (“Prix”). This rather odd remark indicates a handicap the novel may have laboured under in the minds of critics if not of readers. On

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<sup>13</sup> Prix des Cinq continents de la Francophonie: Créé en 2001 par l’Agence intergouvernementale de la Francophonie, le Prix des cinq continents consacre un roman d’un écrivain témoignant d’une expérience culturelle spécifique enrichissant la langue française. Accueillant désormais tout auteur d’expression française quelle que soit sa maturité littéraire, le Prix des cinq continents de la Francophonie met en valeur l’expression de la diversité culturelle et éditoriale de la langue française au cœur des cinq continents. <<http://www.prix-litteraires.net/prix/107.prix-des-cinq-continents-de-la-francophonie.html>>

the whole, critical reception of the novel was positive, receiving enthusiastic reviews in the French-language press (*La Presse*, *Le Devoir*, *Le Journal de Montréal*, *Voir*, *Le Libraire*), and was generally interpreted as being an exploration of “l’angoisse existentielle” (Monpetit) though there were some questions as to lapses in its adherence to generic conventions, “ces légères entorses aux conventions du genre” (Cameron).

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Roman de l’histoire sans être historique, roman du fantasme sans être fantastique, *Le travail de l’huître* est un conte philosophique halluciné, une réflexion envoûtante sur les liens qui nous unissent, insaisissables et pourtant indissolubles. (*Le travail de l’huître*, back cover)

*Le travail de l’huître* is a literary text, a piece of prose fiction that is difficult to categorise in a straightforward way, as it contains elements that can seem to be incompatible. The excerpt above, from the publisher’s “please insert” (Genette, *Paratexts* 110) on the back cover, does a creditable job of describing what the novel’s genre is and is not. It is fantastic in that an unrealistic premise (the invisibility of the main character) is accepted, and events flow more or less logically thereafter. Like science fiction, the reader is asked to assume that the impossible is possible. Unlike science fiction, the point of this novel is not to explore this “new world”; it functions rather as the literalisation—in both senses—of the metaphor of Andreï’s social situation and subsequent physical predicament. However, there are in fact very few fantastic or magical elements in the novel that could “produce a sense of logical uneasiness and of narrative discomfort” (*The Role of the Reader* 234) in the reader: Barbe has “set his unverisimilar story in a verisimilar background” (*Six Walks* 79). Andreï’s “condition” so closely resembles his

position on the margins of society that the idea that he has now been pushed beyond those margins does not require any great imaginative leap on the part of the reader. The literary conceit Barbe applies to Andreï's fate—his vanishing act—is simply an exaggeration of his actual condition in a world which does its best to pay him no heed. Where Andreï was before was insupportable; where he is now is impossible, but following the logic of the story it simply renders his previous exclusion complete. From the perspective of translation, this element of fantasy does not pose any special challenges. Andreï's fantastic world largely overlaps our own. Eco states that science fiction and fantasy can “arouse a sense of suspicion in respect to our common beliefs and affect our disposition to trust the most credited laws of the world of our encyclopaedia. They undermine the world of our encyclopaedia rather than build up another self-sustaining world” (*The Role of the Reader* 234). However, unlike much science fiction, there is no need to educate readers with the aid of, for example, a specialized vocabulary, to help them find their way through Andreï's world. As Eco states, “The whole universe of intertextuality [...] is ready to offer us a lot of hints as to satisfactory inferential walks” (*The Role of the Reader* 215), and this universe includes a sufficient body of work—ranging from ancient myths and religions, through an abundance of “invisible man” tales, to the current vampire craze—that deals with all manner of otherworldly experience, so the reader does not lack for established, if fictional, referents. “[W]hat has previously happened is more verisimilar than what happens for the first time, since the fact that it happened proves that it was possible. Inferential walks are supported by the repertory of similar events recorded by the intertextual encyclopaedia” (*The Role of the Reader* 216). In *Le travail de l'huitre*, new rules of verisimilitude are established, and our encyclopaedia is rich

enough in fantastic stories “that have previously happened,” if only in imagination, that there is confidence from the outset that such rules can be respected by both author and translator and accepted by the reader. Jonathan Culler calls this willingness on the part of the reader to extend the benefit of the doubt the “cooperative principle”: readers will suspend judgment and forgive a great deal because they do not expect literature, fantastic and historical genres in particular, to follow the rules of “real life”:

Readers assume that in literature complications of language ultimately have a communicative purpose and, instead of imagining that the speaker or writer is being uncooperative, as they might in other speech contexts, they struggle to interpret elements that flout principles of efficient communication in the interests of some further communicative goal. (Culler 27)

Culler does not discuss how protected this cooperative principle is in the case of translated literature. Readers who willingly exercise forbearance with regard to original works (or works they believe to be original?) may withhold cooperation if they suspect—rightly or wrongly—that the “complications” they encounter along their walk through Eco’s woods are not the “natural” obstacles they expect of literature but artificial barriers thrown across their path by this “secondary” author, the translator.

*Le travail de l’huître* is also an example of historical fiction. The story unfolds against a background of real historical events and characters; however, while a historical novel “attempts to convey the spirit, manners and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity” (“historical novel”), Barbe’s novel focuses on the evolution of a single character. According to the author, “La compréhension du cadre historique n’est absolument pas nécessaire” (E-mail). While it is true that a detailed knowledge of

modern Russian history (and it could even be argued that a *too* detailed knowledge is a hindrance to enjoying historical fiction due to errors or omissions or deliberate changes to factual events that may give rise to irritation or sow doubt in the mind of the reader) is not required to follow the plot, the *cadre historique* is inseparable from the novel: a story set in Tsarist Russia is not a story set in Renaissance Italy or in twenty-first century Quebec, whether or not they share a fundamental theme. Much of the historical information in *Le travail de l'huître* is widely known; however, Machiavelli is not Rasputin, and the Florentine hills are not the vast snow-covered steppes of Russia; such details inescapably lend the story a distinct flavour and send the reader's mind off down particular "walks." To a writer interested in exploring a certain theme, the historical framework may seem incidental (though, as both Berman and Eco point out, there is a limit to the trust one should put in an author's statements about his or her own work, and Barbe's descriptions of Russia strongly echo rural Canada), but to a translator this cannot be so. Depending on how far across the spectrum of translation the translator chooses to venture, the historical furniture of the novel must be packed up and moved over to the target language along with everything else. That being said, the aim of *Le travail de l'huître* is not to convey the spirit, manners and social conditions of a past age, as in the historical novel, but rather to chart the course of one man's life.

"C'est un roman d'apprentissage" (E-mail) in the author's words; as such, it is more of a *bildungsroman*, though a rather odd example. The protagonist does learn and grow, but he does so in utter isolation. Rather than coming to terms with his social environment, Andreï comes to terms—can *only* come to terms—with himself; his

evolution is an epiphany that ends the narrative. The fact that Andreï must himself be his sole interlocutor affects the tone of the writing. In the words of the author:

Le style est en fonction du sujet: un homme qui ne peut communiquer avec personne, avec qui personne ne communique: un fantôme. Grande difficulté d'écrire, puisqu'on ne peut se reposer sur rien: pas de dialogue, pas d'interaction. Un homme avance et pense. [...] Mais je ne voulais pas d'un roman au Je. Comment cette confession aurait-elle pu être retrouvée par des humains, nous? Andreï ne pouvait rien laisser comme trace de son passage. [...] Je devais donc l'écrire à la troisième personne. (E-mail)

The “indifference” mentioned above also influences the tone of the writing. Apart from a few terse dialogues, the story is told in third-person narration. With the exception of a lengthy section that deals with the young nameless woman, this narration presents Andreï’s point of view. We know that the narrator’s voice is not Andreï’s since it continues after his death; however, as Andreï evolves into a more articulate character, the distance between Andreï and the narrator seems occasionally to narrow. This is especially noticeable in moments of irony and humour. The narrator is not ironic at Andreï’s expense; rather, Andreï is being ironic about a given situation. At these times Andreï and the narrator seem to share the same voice, and this oscillation occurs throughout the novel though the distance between the two is greatest at the beginning and, necessarily, at the end. The general aloofness of the narration casts a moral chill over events. The most horrible experiences are examined through an often clinical, and occasionally amused, eye. To my mind this is a very successful technique which mirrors Andreï’s condition: just as Andreï has his face pressed up against the glass which separates him from the rest

of existence, we have our faces pressed up against the coldness of Barbe's narrative. This has the effect of heightening those moments of "connection," both for Andreï and for us, when emotion breaks through. As mentioned above, "Le style est en fonction du sujet," and the author's narrative style led to the choice of a generally uninflected, de-localized narrative voice that avoids the "vocabulaire et certaines tournures syntaxiques propres à la langue parlée au Québec" (E-mail).

This leads to the issue of the source text's language: French, French-Canadian, Québécois but without consciously calling upon the resources of Québécois. This is not due to any lack of literary merit or capacity in this variety of French, but simply because the novel, in the opinion of the author, does not call for it: "Je n'écris pas des romans pour affirmer mon identité. J'écris des romans pour questionner, par les moyens de la fiction, le monde dans lequel je vis, et qui déborde de beaucoup les frontières du Québec" (E-mail). *Le travail de l'huître* is, nevertheless, "un roman d'un écrivain québécois" (E-mail) and has thus been influenced by the author's time and place: "Ma culture personnelle est celle que je me suis donnée en faisant des choix pendant 30 ans de vie adulte. Or je vis à Montréal, j'écris à Montréal, j'aime à Montréal et j'élève mes enfants à Montréal, ce qui devrait d'emblée me qualifier en tant qu'auteur québécois" (E-mail).

Canada, Quebec, Montreal represent interesting translation terrain. A country, a province, a city "on the border between languages" (Simon ix), Montreal in particular, whose "doubleness" represents "the banal reality of the everyday" (Simon ix). A history of contact and conflict shapes the language(s) of Montreal and thus played a role in shaping the text of *Le travail de l'huître* and of its "double." Jean Barbe grew up, lives and writes in this "banal reality" and I have translated his novel in the same "place."

As an English Canadian, resident in Montreal, translating a work by an “auteur québécois,” and in this case “montréalais,” it is important to develop an awareness of the nature of the evolution of the French language in Canada, in Quebec, in Montreal; its long isolation from Metropolitan France and the impact of its proximity to English—not solely linguistic but also psychological—has generated changes in the language and in attitudes toward language that are both obvious and subtle. Though the passage below refers to cultures that are rather more distinct than those that developed in English and French Canada, the concept of interculturality applies as well to French—and English—in Quebec:

Traduire un original qui est au départ caractérisé par une certaine interculturalité (ou intertextualité) exige donc une approche qui n’est ni entièrement cibliste ni entièrement sourcière, mais une stratégie raisonnée qui répond aux exigences du projet de traduction dans un contexte plus large d’échange culturel. (Bandia, “Le concept bermanien” 136)

There is an interesting complementarity to the languages of author and translator, original and translation. Québécois and Canadian English, especially in their Montreal context, are noteworthy examples of “a certain interculturality.” Both are overshadowed by older, larger, more established variants. Québécois has a complicated, often prickly relationship with the French of France, while Canadian English—that wallflower language—tends to fade to near invisibility next to British, American and even Australian English. André Lefevere states that “Both the poetics and the ideology of a culture are marked by tension and struggle between centre and periphery, with various outcomes” (86). However, large cultural spaces and literary traditions—“the West,” for example—

encompass smaller cultures, which may overlap, with their own centres and peripheries and multiple struggles on different levels, such as French- and English-Canadian. These two neglected cousins exist and have existed side by side in this city for centuries in mutual suspicion, dependence and interpenetration. Français-canadien evolved into Québécois, from a language that was much pushed around to one that began to push back with some success, while Canadian English struggles to remain distinct from the overwhelming presence of American English. At the same time, these two linguistic and cultural worlds share a porosity that results in a seepage from one to the other. This can be seen, for example, in the advertising for a local TV station: “What’s nous?” That the popular medium par excellence would use such wordplay demonstrates just how commonplace and accepted the presence of the other language is. Concordia University also plays this game with this slogan from its Website: “*Oui* can help.”

Translation is an intercultural activity as well as an intralingual one as it deals with (at least) two linguistic systems embedded in two different cultures.

However, the difficulties inherent in the translation process vary proportionately with the degree of distance between the languages and the cultures involved.

(Bandia, “Translation and Cultural Transfer” 55).

Comparatively, the “distance between the languages and the cultures involved,” in this case English Canadian and Québécois sharing a time and place in Montreal, is not great; they also share linguistic and cultural European roots as well as a near coterminous North American experience. Berman states that prose literature “se caractérise en première lieu par le fait qu’elle capte, condense et entremêle tout l’espace polylingagier d’une communauté” (*Traduction ou la lettre* 50). According to Berman, successful prose

mobilizes the *tongues* which exist within a language, which leads to an “informité” or fluidity resulting from the author’s “non-contrôle” (*Traduction ou la lettre* 51) of his own writing. Bandia goes on to state that “It is advantageous, therefore, for the translator to share a similar ‘life-world’ with the author. (“Translation and Cultural Transfer” 62), and the almost “Siamese” connection between English and French in Montreal would indicate a significant degree of overlap in the life-worlds of author and translator. Such proximity, though, has its dangers in that “the translator’s own ‘life-world’ and experience can have a serious impact on the translation” (“Translation and Cultural Transfer” 62). “Serious” does not necessarily mean negative or irremediable, and the remedy lies in “further penetrating the material of an alien language with an openness for cultural differences” (“Translation and Cultural Transfer” 62) or, as Antoine Berman states, “à reconnaître et à recevoir l’Autre en tant que l’Autre” (*La traduction et la lettre* 74).

As mentioned above, in order for this recognition and reception to occur, the translator must learn, in the view of both Eco and Berman, to “respect” the text (Eco “The Author and His Interpreters” and Berman *Pour une critique des traductions* 92). Berman goes on to say, “Mais nous savons que pour le traducteur, un tel respect est *la chose la plus difficile*” (*Pour une critique* 92). And this seems a particularly delicate issue in Montreal, where English and French live in daily contact whether wished for or not. The “banal reality” referred to above of the linguistic situation in Montreal could have a detrimental effect on the translator’s ability to marshal the necessary respect. The normality of the daily presence of both languages may settle into a “taken-for-grantedness” that obscures the Other in both languages, the result being—especially in the case of two such culturally and linguistically related languages as English and French

in Montreal—that the translator becomes insensitive to difference between the two. The means of undermining this false familiarity lie in reading and re-reading. Just as when familiar objects lose their familiarity if looked at too long or from a different angle, so re-reading will uncover layers of difference in a text. Henri Meschonnic expresses this experience most clearly in *La rime et la vie*:

Lire ne commence qu'à relire. Lire pour la première fois n'en est que la préparation. Car il faut, pour qu'il y ait lecture, que la lecture s'apparaisse à elle-même comme une lecture, une activité spécifique, distincte de l'objet à lire, avec laquelle la première précipitation tend à le confondre, en s'y engouffrant. On lit un livre, un texte. Ce transitif semble épuiser la lecture, comme l'acte de signifier s'épuise dans la chose dite. Mais dès qu'on relit, et qu'une différence éventuelle s'insinue entre une première et une deuxième fois, et à chacune des autres fois une différence nouvelle, alors la lecture elle-même commence à apparaître, en se lisant elle-même, comme un acte qui a son historicité propre, sa tenue distincte de son objet. Elle ne s'y confond plus. (133)

Italo Calvino also emphasises the importance reading, here *à propos* of translation in a statement that prefigures Berman's methodology:

The critical investigation of a translation should be conducted according to a method while examining a sufficient number of examples that will serve as a solid basis for comparison. And this is an exercise that I would not only recommend to critics but to all conscientious readers: as has been noted, we only truly read an author when we translate him/her, or when we compare the original with a translation, or when translations in different languages are compared with each

other. (Another excellent method of judging: a three-sided comparison: original, Italian version and a version in another language).<sup>14</sup> (1779) (My translation)

While translating *Le travail de l'huître*, it was necessary to negotiate a passage between the risk of exoticizing the language due to the influence of my first experiences with French and the risk of failing to see layers of meaning due to French being so intertwined in “normal” Montreal life. The work of contrast, comparison and compromise involved in translation seems ideally suited not only to the exploration of the source or acquired language but also to “the discovery of one’s own language and of its resources” (Ricoeur 21) or as Ricoeur, quoting Hölderlin, says, “What is one’s own must be learned as well as what is foreign” (21). The final product of this translation project represents the middle way I charted through these challenges.

Lastly, I should add that the primary reason I found *Le travail de l'huître* attractive as a translation project is that it seemed to echo many of the themes discussed in Translation Studies. In seeing Andreï as, in certain respects, a translator, I am obviously revealing my understanding of the character and the work as a whole. This interpretation was in large part influenced by the context of this translation—an M.A. in Translation Studies, during the course of which practically everything was seen through the lens of translation. When the time came to commit my translation to paper, this interpretation became fixed in the sense that, as Susanna Basso states, “the written word,

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<sup>14</sup> “L’indagine critica su una traduzione dev’essere condotta in base a un metodo, sondando specimen abbastanza ampi e che possano servire da pietre di paragone decisive. È un esercizio, oltretutto, che vorremmo raccomandare non solo ai critici ma a tutti i buoni lettori: com’è noto, si legge veramente un autore solo quando lo si traduce, o si confronta il testo con una traduzione, o si paragonano versioni in lingue diverse. (Altro ottimo metodo per il giudizio: un confronto a tre: testo, versione italiana e una versione in un’altra lingua).” (Calvino: 1779)

once committed to paper, creates a sense of inevitability, effacing the other choices which had flashed through the writer's mental corridors" (36).<sup>15</sup>

Andreï, is luckless, penniless and uneducated; he is unheard and unseen in life before becoming literally unhearable and unseeable following his bizarre and inexplicable accident. Rendered voiceless, he is forced to listen to the voices of others, to learn, understand and interpret their languages and their message. In the end, he succeeds in translating his desire for connection into meaningful action, which is why *Le travail de l'huître* could be read almost as an allegory or metaphor for translation itself. At the beginning of the story, the main character lacks the ability to express himself to his family, to the woman he loves or to the students with whom he aspires to do great things. If, as Domenico Jervolino states, "parlare è già tradurre" (to speak is already to translate) (27), Andreï is, at the outset, on this most fundamental level, *not* a translator. In the novel, and through no choice of his own, Andreï undertakes a long and painful apprenticeship in translation.

Jervolino seems almost to be describing Andreï when writing of Paul Ricœur's understanding of the work of translation:

The primary affirmation—that represents [...] the striving or the desire to exist, in other words, the *conatus* through which is expressed our founding statement as human beings able to act and to suffer—involves an enormous and always incomplete labour of translation that coincides with the history of our lives, with the endless web of our actions and passions, with the labour of mourning and of memory that such a work demands, with its innumerable challenges and with the

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<sup>15</sup> "le parole scritte, forse, una volta scritte, comunicano una sensazione di ineluttabilità, cancellando le altre opzioni che pure, fulmineamente, devono aver attraversato i corridoi mentali di chi scrive." (Basso 36)

happiness that this work has the power to grant us during the breaks in our journey. (Jervolino 43)<sup>16</sup>

Andreï, by force of circumstance, became an outsider looking in and learns to interpret the world from this position. As mentioned above, Andreï is uneducated and inarticulate—and alone. His life becomes one of endless striving, a constant effort to understand his situation, an effort that is just as constantly frustrated and which leads to withdrawal and a living death. Only when he recognizes similarities to his own plight in another is he able also to recognize his shared humanity despite or perhaps because of the impossibility of contact. “To conclude, if to speak is to translate, then when we talk to ourselves we discover the traces, which we cannot ignore, of the others in ourselves” (Jervolino 43).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “L’affermazione originaria, che rappresenta [...] lo sforzo o il desiderio di esistere, o ancora il *conatus* in cui si esprime il nostro atto costitutivo di uomini capaci di agire e di soffrire, passa per un lavoro enorme e mai definitivo di traduzione, che coincide con la storia delle nostre vite, con la rete infinita delle nostre azioni e passioni, con il lavoro del lutto e della memoria che tale opera esige, con le sue sfide sempre rinnovate e con la felicità che essa ha il potere di accordarci nelle pause del nostro cammino.” (Jervolino 43)

<sup>17</sup> “Se parlare, in conclusione, significa sempre tradurre, anche allorché parliamo con noi stessi scopriamo le tracce, da cui non si può prescindere, degli altri in noi stessi.” (Jervolino 43)

## *TRANSLATION*

There is no clear line between reading and translating. Donald Frame, a well-known translator of Montaigne, states, “All acts of translation begin with a thorough investigation of the reading process” (Frame ix). However, the reading process itself has often been seen as an act of translation: “Reading is already translation and translation is translation for the second time” (Gadamer qtd. in Frame ix). Translation has also been understood to occur even before we learn to read: “When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate” (Paz 152). If “reading transforms the text” (Frame x), then we are, all of us, whether we speak one or many languages, translators. In reading, we perform an act of intralingual translation, and in the sense that reading is a hermeneutical activity, it is also necessarily domesticating: the reader brings the author to him or herself, uses her or her own interpretative tools to understand the text. The translator must acknowledge and embrace this side of reading and then go on to produce a translation that openly acknowledges its project in order to give the reader an honest experience. How faithful it is to the original and whether it enables the reader to experience something of the intention of the original depend on the project itself and the skill of the translator. But a translator is not a typical reader, let alone a “model reader” (Eco, *The Role of the Reader* 206). The translator does not read with an innocent eye; along with striding down what Eco terms “inferential walks,” the translator already reads with an eye to how the text can be transformed, so reading is both an end and a means to an end.

This examination of my translation of *Le travail de l’huître* follows Antoine Berman’s “esquisse d’une méthode” (*Pour une critique* 64), which initially begins with a series of readings and re-readings of the translation and the original *in that order*. The

complication in the present case is that translator and critic are one and the same. I produced the translation following close reading and re-reading of the original before Berman's steps could begin, which taints the process somewhat because, being the one who read the original as an act of "pré-traduction, une lecture effectuée dans l'horizon de la traduction" (*Pour une critique* 68), it was difficult to maintain "un regard méfiant et pointilleux," "un regard purement neutre et objectif" as well as "un regard réceptif" (*Pour une critique* 65) with respect to the translation. To try to alleviate this shortcoming, I solicited the aid of three volunteers, one of whom was bilingual and so could read both translation and original, and two others, who read only the translation. They were not expected to perform an analysis, but their feedback and their "impressions" (*Pour une critique* 65) were useful for the light they shed on what worked and what did not.

The samples that I have chosen to examine represent "zones signifiantes" (*Pour une critique* 70), which influenced my reading of the text, my interpretation of the story and my translation choices. The first section concerns two paratextual elements; the second involves a detailed analysis of the "incipit" or first line of the text and the third comprises an examination of four significant passages from within the main body of the text.

I would like to begin this discussion of the translation by looking at two elements that are actually outside the main body of the text, but that play an important role in setting up reader expectations and in defining the tone of the story to follow. Gérard Genette uses the term "paratext" to describe those elements of the text that lie on the "fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text" (*Paratexts* 2). He further divides these elements according to location, "peritext" being

material found inside the volume and “epitext” lying outside. Readers take their cues to one extent or another from both kinds of information and this is where “the readerly process of making predictions” begins (Eco, *Six Walks* 52). This is true as well for translators with the significant difference that alongside their readerly predictions, the translator has already begun translating.

It is an interesting challenge for translators to understand the role played by both the inner and outer paratextual “halo” (*Paratexts* xvii) surrounding the text. The translator also differs from the general reader in developing, through more or less extensive research into author and text, what amounts to a private or personalized epitextual stash that serves his or her translation project. Literary researchers or biographers would also collect enormous amounts of similar material with the intention of producing a text, but the translator’s intention is to *reproduce* a text or to produce the same text in another language. Much, if not everything, in this collection may already be public knowledge, but the choices made while collecting it, the comparisons made while reviewing it and the weight accorded to each element depend on the individual translator. Would J.K. Rowling’s “outing” of Albus Dumbledore have affected translators’ choices, linguistic choices, if she had made this announcement on the occasion of the publication, in English, of the first volume of her septet, thus, to a certain extent, framing Dumbledore’s character for the entire series? And if so, how? Would some translators even have refused to translate the book at all? The fact that she left the announcement until after publication of the final volume suggests that she (or her publisher?) feared some not negligible effect.

For translators, the problems of peritextual material—that within the volume—are somewhat more straightforward (though the vast majority of these features—font, layout, etc.—will be decided by the publisher, with poetry perhaps presenting certain exceptions (*Paratexts* 34)); strategies must be developed to deal with titles, prefaces, epigraphs, etc., which will be translated, transformed or even deleted (*Paratexts* 6).

*PARATEXTS I: TITLE*

*Le travail de l'huître*

Readers often but not always (especially in the case of an established, successful author, whose name will overshadow any new work, or in the case of a series such as, again, *Harry Potter*, where each new title is secondary to the fact of its being *another* in the series) engage a text, a literary text in particular, by means of its title. This was true with *Le travail de l'huître*, (or, more completely, according to Genette, “Le travail de l'huître, roman” (*Paratexts* 56)) a phrase I found strange, intriguing—important attributes when they convince the bookshop browser to pause and pick up the attached book. Genette refers to three general functions of a title: “to designate, to indicate the subject matter, to tempt the public” (*Paratexts* 76). Following this schema, Barbe’s title fulfils the first function fairly rigorously by being quite distinctive; success of the second function in the case of this highly allegorical title “depends on the receiver’s hermeneutic obligingness” (*Paratexts* 77); as for the third function, based on sales, it succeeded well enough.

Without posing a question, the title raises several: What exactly is an oyster’s work? How does an oyster work? What does it do? Is this really a story about an oyster? etc. Like all names, the title of a novel is potent and has something of a “magic word” or “open

sesame” quality. Of course, one’s reaction to a title, like any other name, is highly personal; someone with a seafood allergy or dietary restriction may turn away in disgust from *Le travail de l’huître*. However, regardless of individual reaction, “a literary title establishes a text as a completely particularised entity” (Briffa 3).

The title may be the first element of a novel that a reader encounters, but it is often the last to be added. Sources of titles are innumerable and, happily, titles may go through many evolutions before a final choice is made; otherwise, we could have “Catch 18” rather than *Catch 22* or “Trimalchio on West Egg” in place of *The Great Gatsby* (*How Books Got Their Titles*). Translating a title is a different but equally involved process and entails “a thorough stylistic analysis or description” (Briffa 2). Briffa and Caruana state that an author may “work cataphorically or anaphorically: he may start from the title and compose his work on it; or he may write the text and then decide upon the title later” (Briffa 4), but in contrast to the author of the original, the translator always works anaphorically—s/he is presented with a title from the outset; how that title is retained depends on the many factors a translator must explore in the course of translating the work in question. Sometimes the choice is easy: *Macbeth* usually remains *Macbeth* for most translations of the play; Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveller* (*Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*) is from the opening sentence of the novel (hence the lack of capitalisation in English, an issue that does not arise in Italian or French titles). Adaptations, on the other hand, often go further: the usual English title of Akira Kurosawa’s *Macbeth*-inspired film “Kumonosu-jō” is “Throne of Blood,” itself an adaptation of the Japanese title, which translates more closely as “Spider Web Castle.” Yukio Mishima’s *Gogo no Eiko*, literally “An Afternoon’s Glory” was wonderfully

transformed into *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea (How Books Got Their Titles)*. In their paper on title translation, Briffa and Caruana state that “Textual titles very often represent writing in its most condensed and compact form, in which language is generally connotational rather than denotational” and that “at times title translation should be treated as a special case within literary translation because of the difficulties it may involve” (Briffa 3). Thus, a title represents a “decisive textual knot” (Graham 42), which the translator must carefully unpick before tying the whole work up again, and this is true even when *Emma* remains *Emma* or *Kamouraska*, *Kamouraska*. Errors abound, especially in film titles.<sup>18</sup> There may also be problems related to the alteration of a title within variants of the same language, as evidenced by the transatlantic kerfuffle over the magical transformation of *The Philosopher’s Stone* into *The Sorcerer’s Stone* in the United States. Generally, however, disagreement of the appropriateness of a given title is more a matter of different interpretations rather than misinterpretations, such as the debate over *À la recherche du temps perdu* or Italo Calvino’s *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* originally translated as “The Path to the Nest of Spiders” (trans. Archibald Colquhoun) and later revised to the more literal “The Path to the Spiders’ Nests” (trans. Archibald Colquhoun, rev. Martin McLaughlin).

[Titles] are dynamic forces, and the target titles have to follow suit in a complementary fashion. And during the translation process, the translator keeps a

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<sup>18</sup> Regrettably, during the course of this research I found that English-speakers seem only too hand-rubbingly eager to find fault with foreign-language translations of English titles, especially in Asia. A good example of this is the belief (which I shared) that Steinbeck’s widow was shown a copy of “Angry Raisons” (i.e., *The Grapes of Wrath*) when on a visit to Tokyo. This seems to have been the result of poor back-translation rather than poor translation, along with a desire to find fault and an unwillingness to give up a good story. For a more complete explanation see <<http://www.snopes.com/language/misxlate/raisins.asp>>. And for an even more recent repetition of the “Angry Raisons” story, see the *New York Times*, “Transloosely Literated” <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/06/books/review/Alford-t.html>>).

certain amount of independence which expresses itself in his/her choices and in the changes or substitutes s/he makes. (Briffa 10)

I am not entirely satisfied in translating “Le travail de l’huître” as “The Oyster’s Work”—though this was my final choice—because to my ear it simply does not convey the strangeness and mystery of the original, though this may largely be due to my own aforementioned perception of French and English. There can be good reasons for completely transforming a title: “The translator visualises the literary work in a fresh manner, and when the translated title gives a different perspective from the original, it reflects the translator’s approach—an alternative that shows a different conception” (Briffa 3), and I did entertain a few dubious alternatives in an unconvincing attempt to exercise my own “independence” (chiefly, “Dark Matter” for the play on *matter*: Andreï is, to the world around him, *immaterial* in both senses of the term; I also had in mind the theory which holds that much of the matter that makes up the universe around us is—so far—undetectable). However, there were certain constraints on giving Barbe’s novel an entirely new title. Perhaps the most important was the challenge of finding an image as evocative as *huître*, which will be discussed below. There was also a textual constraint on a non-literal translation. The main body of the novel is preceded by a poem, the subject of which is a *huître*. This poem goes a long way toward setting the rather bleak tone of the story, and the title renders the appearance of a poem about an oyster somewhat less unexpected. In fact, I would say that the presence of one reinforces the other: the poem elaborates on the title, and without this title, the poem might seem out of place.

Umberto Eco states: “That words, sentences and texts usually convey more than their literal sense is a commonly accepted phenomenon, but the problems are (i) how

many secondary senses can be conveyed by a linguistic expression, and (ii) which ones a translation should preserve at all costs” (*An Experience in Translation* 9), and this peculiar title seemed just too rich in “secondary senses” to tamper with:

connotations must not be considered mere linguistic embellishments; they contain elements of knowledge of the real that must be gathered and communicated in translation through an operation in which the translator is the protagonist with his/her ability to read the original and to mediate the production of the translation. (Jervolino 80)<sup>19</sup>

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An oyster leads a dreadful but exciting life.

(M.F.K. Fisher, chap. 1, “Love and Death Among the Molluscs,” in *Consider the Oyster* 125)

The layers of connotation and implicature that have built up around the term *huître*/oyster have grown so thick that they resemble an age-old oyster itself in solidity and texture. These images and associations range far and wide and cover all the physical faculties (including hearing, cf. Frank Crumit—“What Kind Of a Noise Annoys An Oyster”) and the entire spectrum of affect. In fact, it is difficult to think of another creature/food that activates all our senses and so many of our emotions in such absolutely contradictory extremes while also embodying contradiction itself: “An oyster, that marvel of delicacy, that concentration of sapid excellence, that mouthful before all other mouthfuls, who first had faith to believe it, and courage to execute? the exterior is not

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<sup>19</sup> “le connotazioni non vanno considerate dei semplici abbellimenti del linguaggio, ma contengono degli elementi di conoscenza del reale che vanno colti e comunicati nella traduzione, sulla base di una operazione di cui il traduttore è protagonista con le sue capacità di lettura dell’originale e di mediazione finalizzata alla produzione del testo tradotto.” (Jervolino 80)

persuasive” (Henry Ward Beecher). Rough and smooth (the shell outside and in), slimy or silky (reactions to the flesh), asexual (cold and closed), sexually changeable (alternately male and female) and charged with sexual imagery (e.g., Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*), a symbol of wisdom, resignation and foolishness (“The Walrus and the Carpenter,” Lewis Carroll), producing beauty from ugliness (the pearl)—it would take a daring translator to risk losing such a wealth of associations. Among the many French-language quotations, Francis Ponge, in his poem “L’Huître” does the most complete job of encompassing an oyster:

L’huître, de la grosseur d’un galet moyen, est d’une apparence plus rugueuse, d’une couleur moins unie, brillamment blanchâtre. C’est un monde opiniâtrement clos. Pourtant on peut l’ouvrir : il faut alors la tenir au creux d’un torchon, se servir d’un couteau ébréché et peu franc, s’y reprendre à plusieurs fois. Les doigts curieux s’y coupent, s’y cassent les ongles : c’est un travail grossier. Les coups qu’on lui porte marquent son enveloppe de ronds blancs, d’une sorte de halos.

A l’intérieur l’on trouve tout un monde, à boire et à manger : sous un firmament (à proprement parler) de nacre, les cieux d’en dessus s’affaissent sur les cieux d’en dessous, pour ne plus former qu’une mare, un sachet visqueux et verdâtre, qui flue et reflue à l’odeur et à la vue, frangé d’une dentelle noirâtre sur les bords.

Parfois très rare une formule perle à leur gosier de nacre, d’où l’on trouve aussitôt à s’orner. (Ponge 43)

And of course the silence and isolation in which Andreï is enfolded and in which he then enfolds himself is also oysterish; he becomes his own shell, as he becomes, through his transformation, his own pearl.

The title holds another term that is heavy with meaning. *Travail* radiates its own bright “semantic halo” (Hofstadter 4a). “Emploi, profession, fonction” come first to mind, “activité économique des hommes”; “tâche, labour, besogne”; also a process, “action continue, progressive (d’une cause naturelle), aboutissant à un effet que l’on peut constater”; “période de l’accouchement”; or a condition, “état d’une personne qui souffre, qui est tourmentée” (*Petit Robert 2008-09*). Translations of these terms are equally abundant and the “halo” cast in English by “work” alone fills a thick section of the OED. I was also influenced by Paul Ricœur’s use of the term *travail* in relation to translation as a labour of memory and mourning (Kearney in Ricœur xv), since this seemed particularly apt, as mentioned above, to Andreï’s own situation.

In the end, I chose “work” as encapsulating most of the aspects I read into the title: time-consuming and unasked for toil and (work of) art. “Labour” struck me as too close to employment or childbirth. As for “The Oyster’s Travails,” the loss would hardly have been compensated by what amounts to a lexical *trompe-l’œil*. Briffa and Caruana state that “Titles have potential power that can be released by the textual contexts they operate in” (10). Whatever power the textual context of the original releases in this title I thought was best reproduced in a very close translation even to the extent of keeping the apostrophe. As a result of this roundabout process, the English title, “The Oyster’s Work,” is a literal translation of the French, but I believe it is also *littérale* in Berman’s sense of the term.

PARATEXTS 2: EPIGRAPH

*L'huître se referme longtemps sur sa douleur:  
Elle se cache et attend, au sein des profondeurs.  
Nous sommes comme la chair et le sable incrusté:  
Nous sommes ce qui blesse et ce qui est blessé.  
Où tu vois la beauté, je ne vois qu'un massacre;  
Nos vies sont misérables mais enrobées de nacre.  
Geoffroi de Malbœuf, La légende du siècle.*

(Text reproduced as it appears in my edition of the novel.)

In the translation of verse, anything but the “clumsiest literalism” is a fraud.

(Steiner 254)

Like the title, the short poem that introduces the narrative is another peritextual element that “is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (*Paratexts 2*). The fact that there is no and never was any “Geoffroi de Malbœuf, author of *La légende du siècle*” does not materially alter the purpose of the epigraph, to which Genette attributes four functions; these can loosely be summarized as (1) commenting on the title; (2) commenting on the text; (3) lending prestigious backing; (4) providing tenor and intellectual identity (156-160).

To start from the bottom up, Barbe’s short poem can be said to fulfil function 4 (a) by being there; (b) by being a poem and therefore a rather elevated form of language; (c) by displaying the nobiliary particle “de” and the fairly antique spelling of “Geoffroi,”

which contribute to the “tenor” (160); (d) by being drawn from a “collection” entitled *La légende du siècle*, which echoes Victor Hugo’s *La légende des siècles*; the author of the former is also, in Barbe’s words, “un fils illégitime de Victor Hugo” (Montpetit). There is also a hint of the *Légende dorée/Legenda Aurea/Legenda Sanctorum* or *Readings of the Saints*, which does suit Andreï’s martyred existence.

As for function 3, a level of prestigious backing, at least for those unaware of the deception, is achieved by association with this “published” poet and his collection, and more distantly, for those aware of Hugo’s poem, by that association and possible inspiration.

Functions 2 and 1 are more straightforward; the poem casts a shadow over the entire novel and indicates how the title should be interpreted. One may have no opinion as to an oyster’s “work” or one may picture a cheerful craftsman labouring in his little shop, but the poem describes a painful struggle unfolding in solitude and silence thus providing definition and, as mentioned above, tying title to text.

There is another reason why translator and author would consider it important to retain the poem, a reason which lies outside this volume and would turn *Le travail de l’huître* itself into an epitext: “Ce qu’il faut dire aussi, ajoute Jean Barbe, c’est que cette fable ‘est également un exercice préparant la venue d’un projet plus ambitieux consacré à Geoffroy [sic] de Malboeuf, personnage inventé dont on retrouve les citations dans plusieurs de mes romans” (Cameron).

This is why I did not consider for long, despite a strong and recurring desire to do so, Genette’s option of deleting the poem altogether. Translating poetry demands greater or different skills than translating prose, and I agree with Douglas Hofstadter when he

states that “Translation, too, is a dense fabric of constraints—and thus, needless to say, the merging of translation with poetry gives rise to such a rich mesh of interlocking constraints that the mind goes a bit berserk in a mixture of frustration and delight” (Hofstadter xix).

The first thing one notices about this poem is that it is a poem: its poeticity. It is a poem in part because it looks like one: its physical form, its rhymes and its metre tell the reader that this text is to be read and understood differently from prose. Since form, rhyme and metre are such an integral part of message and meaning (Culler 23-24), the translator needs to consider whether or not to attempt to reproduce them. The poem consists of six lines in three rhyming couplets, loosely alexandrine, with an aa/bb/cc rhyme scheme.<sup>20</sup> However, all of my attempts to reproduce this pattern closely in English left the oyster even more miserable than before, though I was able to replace the near alexandrines with near iambic pentameter and to replace the aa/bb/cc rhyme with an ab/ab/cc. The result (which can be found in Appendix B) was neither *belle* nor *fidèle*, so in the end it was best to go with the “clumsiest literalism,” which at least has the virtue of clarity and seems far more honest than the forced rhyme and metre that is often seen as a sign of doggerel and cliché.

I also sent the poem to a number of friends in hopes of getting some truly “poetic” interpretations, but principally out of curiosity to see how their efforts would vary. The results were occasionally surprising, and it is striking in that, considering that poems come with inbuilt constraints, most of these “poets” felt free to take liberties that I believe they would hesitate to take with a block of prose text. Perhaps this has to do with a

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<sup>20</sup> See Appendix B for all versions.

simultaneous popular understanding that though a poem has constraints poets have none. Curiously, only one (a woman) used “she” for “elle” (though M.F.K. Fisher, in *Consider the Oyster*, uses “he” (125)). All of these efforts, some of which are quite wonderful, can be savoured in Appendix B.

L’huître se referme longtemps sur sa douleur:	The oyster closes for a time on its pain:
Elle se cache et attend, au sein des profondeurs.	It hides and waits within the depths.
Nous sommes comme la chair et le sable incrusté:	We are like flesh and crusted sand:
Nous sommes ce qui blesse et ce qui est blessé.	We are what hurts and what we hurt.
Où tu vois la beauté, je ne vois qu’un massacre;	Where you see beauty, I see only slaughter
Nos vies sont misérables mais enrobées de nacre.	In our wretched lives limned with nacre.

*INCIPIIT*

Once over Genette's "threshold," the reader encounters what Susanna Basso terms the "incipit." Basso believes, and I believe it to be the case here as well, that special attention should usually be paid:

to this opening movement of the narrative, to this first "ahem" of the author's voice that comes out of the silence and speaks up [...] Because the incipit is often (always?) the DNA of a text, masked by "Once upon a time." (Basso 38)<sup>21</sup>

Basso goes on to state that these introductory segments often contain all the information a translator needs to know in order to prepare for the work ahead. To describe what the translator must grasp about the nature of the text from the outset, she uses the word *andatura*, a term generally applied to the physical movement (walk; gait; carriage; bearing) of an athlete or an animal. This is a rather beautiful image to apply to a text, the understanding being that the text is a whole but not a solid block, a body in motion, with sinews and muscles, whose rhythm, to use Meschonnic's term, the translator must set and see in motion before he or she can try to reproduce it in the translation.

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Au moment de sa disparition, Andreï Léonovitch proposait encore une fois d'assassiner le tsar. (*Le travail de l'huître* 13)

This first sentence also constitutes the first paragraph of the novel and as such carries rather a lot on its shoulders. The first line of a novel both is and is not a starting point. It begins the plot but not the story, which opens *in medias res*. (Though much later

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<sup>21</sup> "su quel primo saluto del romanzo, sullo schiarirsi la voce di un autore che esce dal silenzio e prende a dire [...] Perché l'incipit è spesso (sempre?) anche il DNA di un testo, mascherato da 'C'era una volta'." (Basso 38)

in terms of how Eco claims that readers read, i.e., my own unconsciously assumed start to this story, which would be, as I have been given no contrary indications, the Big Bang, since that is the start of my understanding of the world according to my “cultural encyclopaedia” (*Interpretation and Overinterpretation* 68); a creationist would presumably start his or her story on a different foundation.) It is also the beginning of the physical body of the text; this is usually an issue in translating poetry, but as these are the first words the reader encounters—sees/says/hears/savours—in the narrative, it is not entirely inappropriate to consider how altering the syntax could also alter the effect.

The concision and tightness of this sentence is, I believe, a good example of Barbe’s “economy” of language. Its meaning is both forthcoming and unfixed, and it is up to the reader to fill in, with the benefit of his or her encyclopaedia, the “various empty phrastic spaces (texts are lazy machineries that ask someone to do part of their job)” (Eco, *Role of the Reader* 214) or, in other words, what is, for the time being, left to the imagination. In fifteen words, the story bursts open as if a hidden spring had activated the narrative mechanism. First comes the disorienting statement of fact announcing a disappearance, and then the shock of a proposed murder.

What can the reader be *expected* to know from this sentence? It immediately situates the novel generally in time and place. We can guess from the Russian name “Andreï Léonovitch” and from the fact that there is a “tsar” who is still alive to be killed that we are in Russia sometime before 1918; that we are dealing with violent revolutionaries who are contemplating murder; that there is more than one of them since someone is “proposing” something—and not for the first time—to at least one other person. A little knowledge of Russian history allows the reader to make educated guesses

as to time and place: possibly the 1880s in the capital, Saint Petersburg; and target: the unfortunate Tsar Alexander II, who was killed in the early 1880s. We also know that it is Andreï “son of Léon” who disappears, and that this disappearance is rather bizarre since it happens quite suddenly and involuntarily in the middle of a discussion or debate with other people.

The challenge for the translator is to maintain as far as possible the same shadowy spaces, to protect the reader’s innocence and avoid inclining the translation too far in one direction or another, or, as Albert Bensoussan puts it, “Le traducteur doit rendre son texte accessible, mais en se gardant bien de mettre de la lumière quand l’original n’en a pas” (39). Does Andreï become invisible or flee or go missing or die? Does he vanish with a pop or fade slowly from view? Does he propose or suggest or offer to kill, murder or assassinate the Tsar? And so, choices have to be made.

- How vague or precise is the timing of the disappearance:

“Au moment de” – when, at the time of / at the moment of / just before?

- What type of disappearance is it:

“disparition” – a disappearance / a death?

- How foreign should Andreï be:

“Andreï” (manly, warrior; martyred disciple of Jesus) “Léonovitch” (son of Leon; lion, fierce) – keep the Russian name / keep the diæresis / drop the *accent aigu*, yet the original language of the novel is French, so should the reader be reminded of this?

- What type of proposal is this:

“proposait” – a suggestion / a plan / an offer?

- How should the verb be conjugated:

past progressive, occurring at the time / past perfect, just completed?

- How might this proposal be received:

“encore une fois” – again / once again, many times / yet again, a sense that he is tiresomely repeating himself?

- What kind of death is being discussed:

“assassiner” – a sordid murder / an impersonal killing / a political assassination?

- Who will do the killing:

Andreï alone or with accomplices?

- Should it be tsar or czar:

czar is more common and therefore more commonplace in Canadian English, but it is also associated with such American expressions as “energy czar” and “security czar”)?

This short opening segment, cut off as it is by the biographical digression that follows, also offers the translator a practical advantage by providing something of a chink in the towering “block of resistance,” thereby alleviating the “anguish of beginning” (Riccœur 5).

<p>Au moment de sa disparition, Andreï Léonovitch proposait encore une fois d’assassiner le tsar.</p>	<p><b>E1:</b> At the moment of his disappearance, Andreï Leonovitch was once again proposing the assassination of the Tsar.</p>
	<p><b>E2:</b> When he disappeared, Andreï Leonovitch was yet again offering to assassinate the Tsar.</p>
	<p><b>E3:</b> When he vanished, Andreï Leonovitch had yet again offered to kill the Tsar.</p>
	<p><b>E4:</b> Prior to his disappearance, Andreï Leonovitch had yet again suggested that they kill the Czar.</p>

The first of these options best responds to the issues mentioned above and leaves the reader of the translation no better—and no worse—informed than the reader of the original due to, in Susanna Basso’s words, “its greater level of adherence to the structure of the original, but due perhaps, above all, to a certain neutrality which leaves open the direction of the text” (Basso 38).<sup>22</sup>

Any doubts that I had about spending so much time and effort on an opening sentence were allayed by Michele Mari’s short story “La freccia nera” (from his collection *Tu, sanguinosa infanzia*,” which Susanna Basso discusses in *Sul tradurre* (11). In the story, the child-hero is given, by his father, the gift of a book that the boy has, in fact, just read—R.L. Stevenson’s *The Black Arrow*. This lands him in a terrible moral quandary, but he is saved from feelings of guilt and hypocrisy in expressing false gratitude for this unexpected present by the discovery of differences between the first lines of the two Italian translations, “the goal of this comparison was to establish the difference between the two, to prove that the second translation could be read as something entirely new and entirely original” (Mari 89) (my translation).<sup>23</sup> This means that the book his father has given him is *not the same book* and so can be accepted with unfeigned gratitude and read *for the first time* with honest pleasure.

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<sup>22</sup> “il suo maggiore livello de aderenza alla struttura dell’originale, ma forse soprattutto una certa neutralità che lasciava più in sospeso la direzione del testo” (Basso 38).

<sup>23</sup> “lo scopo di quel confronto era di stabilire [...] la loro diversità qualunque essa fosse la leggibilità del secondo come cosa affatto nuova, appunto, e originale” (Mari 89)

*FIRST PASSAGE* (pp. 16-17)

In analysing a translation, we discover the vulnerability of the literary text, its inherent openness to an infinite number of “correct” interpretations, which are themselves forever open to improvement. (Basso 80)<sup>24</sup>

After beginning the novel with the foreshadowed bang of the proposed assassination, Barbe launches into a lengthy digression to provide background and build up to the opening movement before returning the reader, now better informed as to Andreï Leonovitch’s biography and motivation, to the time and place of the first scene. The passage below is important from the point of view of the plot because it describes the moment of Andreï’s disappearance, when “it,” whatever “it” is, happens, though this mysterious event is not referred to at all. The three sentences contain a great deal of imagery and action—sound and fury—in a very limited time and space, several seconds around a table. I tried to keep as much as possible all the elements found in the original even if they had to be relocated, as with the first instance of “table”; above all, I wanted to keep the rather headlong rhythm of the events in the passage whose movement and suddenness also represent Andreï’s plunge into his fate, a movement which contrasts with the stillness of Andreï’s comrades described in the first sentence of the following paragraph.

The dreamlike quality of the passage, its slow-motion speed, is an effect of Barbe’s choice of verbs or verbal phrases (“vacilla sur son cul,” “tombe sur le côté,” “roula en glougloutant avant d’aller se fracasser,” “se penchant pour rattraper”), which

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<sup>24</sup> “attraverso l’analisi di una traduzione scopriamo la vulnerabilità del testo letterario, il suo naturale prestarsi a infiniti visioni “corrette” e da sempre ulteriormente correggibili.” (Basso 80)

slow down actions that in fact take only seconds to play out. In two instances, I replaced Barbe’s fairly generic choices with single verbs: “wobbled,” “toppled,” because a too literal translation seemed both unnecessary and awkward and these verbs, though they take less time to read, are specifically descriptive of actions that take time. But there is a painful loss in not having a phrase like “roula en glougloutant avant d’aller se fracasser” to savour, to draw out of one’s mouth: ou/ou/ou; a/a/a/a/a; en/an/an; er/er; l/l/l/l, and which again slows down the action of this very short scene. My use of “lunged” is debatable as being too violent a movement for “se penchant,” but “bent down” and “leaned over” seem too leisurely.

<p>C’est pourquoi, ce soir-là, lorsqu’il en <u>revint</u> à son idée d’une bombe sur le passage du tsar, Andreï Léonovitch <u>tapa</u> si fort du poing sur la table que la bouteille de vodka <u>vacilla sur son cul</u>, <u>tomba sur le côté</u> en répandant son contenu et <u>roula</u> en <u>glougloutant</u> avant d’aller <u>se fracasser</u> sur les dalles de pierre. En <u>se penchant pour rattraper</u> la bouteille, Andreï s’était <u>cogné</u> la tête contre le bord de la table en bois de noyer. Il <u>hurla</u> de douleur et de colère, puis <u>secoua</u> la tête pour <u>chasser</u> les étoiles qui avaient <u>envahi</u> son champ de vision.</p>	<p>Which is why, that evening, when he again <u>brought up</u> his idea of a bomb along the Tsar’s route, Andreï Leonovitch <u>brought down</u> his fist with such force that the bottle of vodka <u>wobbled</u> then <u>toppled</u>, <u>sloshing</u> its contents over the table before <u>rolling off</u> and <u>smashing</u> on the stone tiles. As Andreï <u>lunged to catch</u> the bottle, he <u>knocked</u> his head against the edge of the walnut table. He <u>howled</u> in pain and anger then <u>shook</u> his head <u>to clear</u> the stars <u>dancing</u> before his eyes.</p>
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*SECOND PASSAGE* (pp. 45-46)

translators may also face “writer’s block,” and entire days may pass staring at a passage as if nothing could ever be made of it. [...] This may happen at the beginning of a book, but in that case it isn’t frightening [...] But it’s the

accumulation of all the decisions you have already made that stalls you and throws you off your stride—you're not prepared for it at, say, page 160. It puts you in a panic; it undermines the value of past choices; it intensifies the feeling of failure, of being trapped. (Basso 102)<sup>25</sup>

The structure of *Le travail de l'huître* is not overly complex nor does its language, though somewhat formal, raise particularly difficult social, cultural or linguistic issues. The challenge was to maintain Barbe's rhythm, which is generally measured and deliberate, and his tone, which is usually detached and cool.

This passage from near the end of Part 1 of the novel introduces a chapter of almost gothic horror in which Andreï is literally staring death in the face. It marks a turning point in the novel in that it describes Andreï's last desperate attempt to be "seen" and also marks the beginning of his withdrawal from the world. It is a claustrophobic, spiralling sequence of physical suffering and existential despair, filled with constrained violence, cruelty and gruesome descriptions of deformities both physical and moral that activate all the senses: all in all, quite a lot of fun to translate. The language builds to a peak of tension, which is released in exhaustion and disappointment. The passage particularly struck me as a notable—perhaps garish—instance of hypotyposis: Barbe has used words to "put something before our eyes as if we could see it" (Eco, *Six Walks* 70) and also hear it, smell it, feel it. My goal was to match the rhythm of the original; however, in the English version below this was not quite achieved for different reasons, one being Barbe's tendency to rely on the semi-colon to make and break the rhythm. For

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<sup>25</sup> "Ai traduttori capitano sciopero di parole, intere giornate passate a fissare le frasi di un testo come se non ne potesse uscire mai niente. [...] Certo, succede anche all'inizio di un libro, ma in quel caso non spaventa [...] Ma il blocco da accumulo spiazza. Non te lo aspetti a pagina centosettanta. Ti mette in crisi, compromette il valore delle scelte passate, esalta la sensazione di fallimento, sempre in agguato." (Basso 102)

example, from the middle of the paragraph that begins “La poitrine était une cage de peau...” Barbe presents one long sentence, containing wave after wave of descriptive clauses joined by semi-colons, these reflect the man’s slow but relentless agony and decay. The effect of this drawn-out sentence is to prolong and diffuse the drama, as if Barbe wanted to hold the reader’s head over the scene, which is also slowed up by the presence of many reflexive verb forms. In comparison, the absence of the colon and semi-colons in the translation and the use of more active verbs speeds things up, producing an almost staccato quality. To borrow Barbe’s musical metaphor, if the French is *lento* the English unfortunately approaches *allegro*, not quite in keeping with the solemnity of the occasion.

One effect I was unable to reproduce was a certain *effet haletant*, the gasping breathlessness created by the many open syllables of the original: “Les mains décharnées s’agrippées au grabat” and “Il râlait. Il gémissait. Il combattait...” However, though the same effect is not adequately reproduced in English, the loss of the breathy exhalations of the French could be compensated by the sharper intakes of the English; consequently, although the original “unity of sound and meaning” (Ricoeur 38) was not retained, it could be replaced by another unity of sound and meaning: “His wasted hands grasped his pallet” and “He gasped. He groaned... he fought...” in order to communicate the desperate fight for air.

<p>Le corps du vieil homme se refusait à mourir. Les mains décharnées s’agrippaient au grabat. Sous le rideau de ses paupières baissées, plissées et fines, les yeux affolés s’agitaient dans tous les sens et roulaient</p>	<p>The old man’s body refused to die. His wasted hands clung to his pallet. Beneath the veil of his wrinkled, translucent eyelids, panic-filled eyes darted and rolled in the shadowy hollows of his white, downy</p>
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dans les orbites creuses, profondément enfoncées dans le crâne recouvert d'un duvet blanc.

Il râlait. Il gémissait. Il combattait, presque immobile, des démons par lui seul perceptibles. Cela faisait plusieurs heures qu'Andreï attendait ce moment.

Regarde-moi, dit-il doucement.

La poitrine était une cage de peau et d'os dans laquelle se débattait un cœur affaibli, erratique : le chef avait perdu le rythme et les musiciens de l'orchestre jouaient chacun pour soi une ultime partition chaotique. Les intestins lâchaient un liquide verdâtre ; la peau cireuse se couvrait de taches noires ; le menton piqué de barbe blanche tremblait ; les jambes s'agitaient pour une course sans but tandis que le torse s'enfonçait lourdement dans la paille du matelas.

Regarde-moi, suppliait Andreï.

Mais le vieil homme ne réagissait pas plus en ses derniers moments qu'il ne l'avait fait les jours précédents. Sa respiration se précipita tout en s'amenuisant. Andreï se pencha sur lui et, délicatement, il souleva de l'index la paupière fripée.

Regarde-moi, demanda-t-il encore.

L'œil se révulsait, jaune, strié de sang, la pupille dilatée au maximum pour

skull.

He gasped. He groaned. Almost motionless, he fought off demons visible only to himself. Andreï had been waiting for this moment for several hours.

“Look at me,” he said softly.

The chest was a cage of skin and bone within which fluttered an exhausted, erratic heart. The conductor had lost the tempo and the musicians in the orchestra were now playing each to his own tune, following a last dissonant score. The man's intestines released a greenish liquid. Black patches covered his waxen skin. His white whiskery chin trembled. His legs jiggled about in a pointless race as his hips sank heavily into the straw mattress.

“Look at me,” pleaded Andreï.

But the old man gave no more sign of having heard in these, his last, moments, than he had in the preceding days. His breathing quickened even as it dwindled. Andreï bent over him and, with his index finger, gently raised one papery eyelid.

“Look at me,” he asked once more.

The eye rolled up, yellowed and blood-streaked, the pupil expanded as far

<p>combattre l'obscurité qui l'envahissait déjà.</p> <p>Andreï murmura :</p> <p>Re...Gar...De...Moi.</p> <p>Mais c'était fini. Un dernier souffle imperceptible s'était échappé des lèvres desséchées. Le vieil homme n'y était plus. Où qu'il fût allé, il avait abandonné derrière lui sa carcasse épuisée.</p> <p>Andreï rabaissa la paupière puis se redressa lentement. Des larmes coulaient sur ses joues. Il était fourbu, comme s'il avait lui aussi combattu toute la journée. Mais le vieil homme ne l'avait pas entr'aperçu au moment de quitter sa vie. Le vieil homme n'avait pas vu, aux franges du monde visible, le fantôme nommé Andreï penché sur lui.</p>	<p>as possible to fight the inflooding darkness.</p> <p>Andreï whispered,</p> <p>“Look. At. Me.”</p> <p>But it was over. A last imperceptible breath escaped through the withered lips. The old man was no more. Wherever he was now, he had left behind him his exhausted carcase.</p> <p>Andreï lowered the eyelid and slowly stood up, tears running down his cheeks. He was worn out, as if he too had spent the day fighting. At the moment of death, the old man had not glimpsed him. The old man had not perceived, on the margins of the visible world, the phantom Andreï bowing over him.</p>
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*THIRD PASSAGE* (pp. 144-146)

The tight-rope walker, like the translator, knows something that neither can ever afford to forget: the first step on the rope must be as carefully considered as those in the middle or, especially, the last one of all—if, for the spectator with her nose in the air, the spectacle will soon be ended, for the walker delicately balanced over the void, the experience will end only when her foot has touched the opposite platform. Paradoxically, to me this seems the true lesson of the acrobat: the absolute necessity not to surrender to the desire to race ahead, but to focus on

the awareness that every step on the rope deserves the same measured attention.  
(Basso 142)<sup>26</sup>

The segment which follows, from the end of the novel, describes Andreï's return to the world (unfortunately as a corpse) and his return to mineral nature after being tossed into the river. I chose to examine this passage because it contains the novel's longest, if still very short, instance of dialogue, whose cold callousness comes as a striking contrast to the "poetic diction" (Lefevere 49) of the following scene.

Basso states that dialogue is merciless in betraying the "false notes" in both originals and translations and that typical conversations are generally constructed out of quite short speech segments (67).<sup>27</sup> These laconic performances, especially that of the older man, certainly follow this pattern and are convincing in terms of the situation and the very lightly sketched characters of the speakers, who come across as "stock" (almost comic) characters, called upon to clear up after the drama is over. The plodding resignation of the older man to the task they must perform (clearing away decaying corpses) contrasts mildly with the—easily suppressed—camaraderie and curiosity of the younger man. The vulgarity that opens the dialogue—*merde/shit* (not an over-translation given the circumstances)—sets the tone of irritated indifference felt by this pair of tired workers at the unexpected and unwelcome appearance of an inconvenient cadaver. They coldly examine the body, take the one item of negligible value and then consider any

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<sup>26</sup> "C'è una cosa che il funambulo, come il traduttore, sa e che non può mai permettersi di dimenticare: il primo passo sulla corda va ponderato tanto quanto quello a metà percorso e, soprattutto, quanto l'ultimo. Se, per lo spettatore a naso in su, l'attrazione sarà presto finita, per chi cammina in bilico sul vuoto l'esperienza non potrà dirsi conclusa se non quando il piede avrà toccato la pedana d'arrivo. Paradossalmente, a me sembra proprio questa la grande lezione dell'acrobata: la necessità assoluta di non cedere alla tentazione di una fretta finale, la consapevolezza che ogni metro del filo prevede un identico tempo di percorrenza." (Basso 142)

<sup>27</sup> "i dialoghi sono impietosi; smascherano il "falsetto" di chi traduce assai prima e assai meglio di qualsiasi altro testo." (Basso 67)

means of disposal that would cause the least trouble to themselves. This last indignity nicely shows up the lyrical quality of the language in the following two paragraphs (which is in turn undermined by the “fish fight” of the next two paragraphs).

Barbe also dispenses with all direct speech markers such as quotation marks or dashes. In these short, simple dialogues this causes no confusion; however, this conversation does not consist solely of words but, especially for the older man, of silence and gesture, gesture that replaces word as opposed to the function of the other action verbs in this passage. In the original, these elements mesh seamlessly with the spoken dialogue while in the translation the quotation marks set the spoken language apart, turning the unspoken dialogical elements into pure description that breaks up the unity and simple elegance of this little drama. They also insist on the vocality of the scene in English by fracturing the intertwining rhythms of sound, silence and movement. Lastly, the quotation marks bristling around each spoken segment act as barbs that catch at the eye and add a lot of “visual noise” to the moment thus raising the volume and reducing the emotional detachment of Barbe’s dialogue.

Merde, dit le vieux une fois le camion parti.	“Shit,” said the old man after the truck had driven off.
Quoi ?	“What?”
On en a oublié un.	“We missed one.”
Tu blagues.	“You’re joking.”
Regarde.	“Look.”
Qu’est-ce qu’il fait là ?	“What’s he doing there?”
<u>Le vieux ne répondit pas.</u>	<u>The old man didn’t answer.</u>
Comment on a fait pour l’oublier ?	“How could we have missed him?”
Le vieux <u>se grattait le crâne.</u>	The old man <u>scratched his head.</u>
Le jeune <u>haussa les épaules.</u> Il <u>regarda</u>	The young man <u>shrugged.</u> He

<p><u>dans la direction</u> qu'avait prise le camion.</p> <p>Qu'est-ce qu'on fait ?</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>Le jeune homme à lunettes fit passer la courroie de cuir par-dessus la tête du cadavre. Il se redressa et lut l'inscription gravée au fer rouge dans la baguette de noyer.</p> <p><i>Juste moi.</i></p> <p>Tu y comprends quelque chose ?</p> <p><u>Le vieux ne répondit pas. Il regarda alentour.</u> Ils étaient seuls, le jeune et lui. Les soldats étaient partis, le camion était parti.</p> <p>Aide-moi.</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>Le vieux <u>indiqua le fleuve du menton.</u></p>	<p><u>looked off in the direction</u> the truck had taken.</p> <p>“What do we do?”</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>The bespectacled young man slipped the strap from around the corpse's head. He stood up and read the inscription burnt into the walnut frame:</p> <p><i>“Myself alone.”</i></p> <p>“That mean anything to you?”</p> <p><u>The old man didn't answer. He looked around.</u> They were alone, himself and the young man. The soldiers had left; the truck was gone</p> <p>“Give me a hand.”</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>The old man <u> jerked his chin toward the river.</u></p>
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*FOURTH PASSAGE* (pp. 146-147)

The watery scene in the following paragraphs picks up for the last time the repeated theme of immersion/realisation/change, which began in chapter 2, and which marks various turning points in the plot. The scene closes Barbe's narrative circle and allows for two interpretations of Andreï's death: a life begun in aimless insignificance now ends in meaningless anonymity; his extraordinary disappearance at the start of the novel concludes with his all too ordinary (for the time and events described) return to nature, into which he definitively disappears. The silence described with the cutting of the “rubans,” “chapelets” and “ficelles” echoes the silence of Andreï's first immersion.

On the other hand, it is also possible to read into Andreï's death the end of a rich and meaningful, if unusual, life in which an unlettered, impulsive peasant boy develops into a cultured and thoughtful man who manages to establish a variation on the nuclear family, which in the end he successfully—manfully—protects.

In contrast to the novel's opening scene, where the language sharpens and slows an event that takes only seconds, the language in this scene pulls away from the event and telescopes days, months and years. The poetic diction, which calls for a heightened attention to matters “of tone, of savour, of rhythm, of spacing, of silence between the words, of metrics and of rhyme” (Ricoeur 38), can be seen in such phrases as “ficelles gazeuses,” “chapelets d’oxygène,” “mouvante lueur sous-marine aux couleurs effacées” and “vide chatoyant des jeux de lumière.” This effect was not difficult to recreate in English, though upon reflection, the translation exhibits a trend toward less generic terms and over-explanation: for example, “slow somersault” for “tournant lentement sur lui-même” or “rosaries” for “chapelets”; “chaplet” does exist in English and is used for both the object and the prayer, but I thought it too uncommon to risk. These factors are indicative of an overall tendency to “hurry things along.”

<p>Le corps coula en tournant lentement sur lui-même. Des <u>rubans de bulles</u> s’en dégageaient et venaient crever à la surface, longs <u>chapelets d’oxygène</u> qui étaient les <u>ficelles gazeuses</u> d’une marionnette abandonnée par son manipulateur.</p> <p>Dans la <u>mouvante lueur sous-marine aux couleurs effacées</u>, le visage d’Andreï semblait reposé. Refermés pour de bon sur</p>	<p>The body sank in slow somersaults, uncoiling, in its descent, <u>ribbons of bubbles</u> that burst on the surface of the water, long <u>rosaries of oxygen</u> – the <u>airy strings</u> of a puppet discarded by his puppeteer.</p> <p>In the <u>muted colours of the rippling submarine glow</u>, Andreï’s face looked rested. Closed forever on the image of the</p>
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<p>l'image de la jeune femme et de son enfant, ses yeux accueillait sans ciller <u>le vide chatoyant des jeux de lumière</u> que le cerveau n'enregistrait plus. Son corps se déposa sur le fond rocheux avec une douceur qu'il n'avait pas connu de son vivant. Désormais il resta immobile, oscillant seulement au gré des courants de fond qui l'ancrèrent peu à peu entre deux rochers et un morceau de ferraille, restes rouillés d'un essieu de remorque qu'en des temps plus prospères on avait préféré jeter à l'eau plutôt que d'en récupérer le métal.</p> <p>[...]</p>	<p>young woman and her child, his eyes received without a flicker <u>the void of shimmering, shifting light</u> that his brain no longer comprehended. His body came to rest on the stony riverbed with a gentleness it had never known in life. And there it stayed, swayed only by the bottom currents that gradually anchored it between two rocks and an old piece of iron, the rusted remains of a trailer axle that, in more prosperous times, had been tossed into the water as no-one thought it worth the bother of selling for scrap.</p> <p>[...]</p>
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## **CONCLUSION**

The closer a translation [...] is to the original's date of publication, the more likely it is to be unduly deficient. (Graham 59-60)

This is only one of the many, many discouraging statements about translation, and it is particularly applicable to this project, which began very soon after the appearance of the novel. Most translators, especially literary translators, given that their creativity is involved, want to do the best work possible; that is true in this case as well. However, as mentioned above, the primary motivation behind this project, including the choice of text, was to explore the process of literary translation and to see how it worked out in practice. Although I acknowledge (and enjoy) my role as “a shaper of texts” (Wallace 66), my intent was not to intervene in a purposive manner in order to “shape” a new text. Nor do I believe that the novel itself suggests, without a strenuous exercise of the imagination, any radical departures from a fairly obvious interpretation resulting in a fairly straightforward translation, which made it ideal for my purpose.

This translation certainly has its deficiencies, the greatest being, perhaps, that I could not *not* try to produce the most fluid sounding/reading version I was capable of—a personal and professional deformation that likely covers Berman's entire list—though the result is meant to be a translation that is appropriating yet appropriate (Derrida 179).

There was also a hard-to-resist desire to plant my flag in this foreign territory, to say with Susanno Basso, “Yoo hoo, here I am – in this articulated preposition [i.e., di + la = della]” or in this particular shade of green rather than another (Basso 8)<sup>28</sup> though the goal was always to be relevant:

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<sup>28</sup> “Eccomi, sono lì, in quella preposizione articolata...” (Basso 8)

The measure of the relève, or relevance, the price of translation, is always what is called meaning, that is value, preservation, truth as preservation [...] or the value of meaning, namely, what in being freed from the body, is elevated above it, interiorizes it, spiritualizes it, preserves it in memory. (Derrida 199)

When writing of the translation of *Le travail de l'huître*, I use the terms “first draft” and “final draft” with some hesitation, the former in particular. There was no consistent first draft from opening to ending. Different sections were translated at different times for different purposes. Even when the decision was made to translate the entire novel, it was not, at first, done in a structured and methodical manner. This was largely due to lack of experience and/or discipline, so the translation process—even when begun at page 1—was, to start out, a rather disorderly to-and-froing as ideas and inspiration sent me back to previously translated sections and then leapfrogging forward to others. This resulted in, or was the result of, the lack of a coherent translation strategy and, more simply, a failure to track changes. As the process evolved, a measure of control was imposed, but it is impossible to recapture that opening movement, those initial, uncluttered, moments of excitement and frustration, of errors and corrections. It would be very useful, both for this commentary and for the translation process itself, to have kept from the outset a comprehensive translation diary (this would have started not with translation *per se*, but with, since the novel was specifically chosen for a translation project, organized research into all those paratextual features and events referred to by Genette and Eco) or at least a simple *sottisier*, which would not have lacked for examples. I would like to describe two simple but instructive cases of reading-in rather than reading. Very early in the novel, I had Andreï talking *to* rather than *about* his dead

mother and aunt; near the end of the novel, I had survivors of the “Maladie” throwing their clothes into barrels of *acid* instead of *steel* barrels—“tonneaux d’acier.” Both errors could be classified as “careless,” but not because I cared less, given that the former occurred near the start of the novel and the latter very late those passages received more attention rather than less. In fact, they are illustrative of the deeper mechanics of error-making. From what had come before, what I had been imagining, picturing, it seemed reasonable enough—even after repeated readings—for Andreï to talk to the dead: after all, Andreï is a sort of ghost himself, so I was merely—wrongly—fulfilling my readerly expectations. The same could be said for the second error: it appeared quite logical, from vague references and recollections, for the survivors to dispose of their disease-ridden garments in this way; however, in this instance the process was complemented by a more powerful factor—the instantaneous overwhelming of the denotation of a very common French word—*acier*—by its visual and aural similarity to the English “acid.” Neither of these errors, or others like them, involved complex semantic, syntactic or cultural challenges: if they had they likely would not have lain unnoticed, even approved, in the text until unearthed with a close eye and a red pen (and even then, it was rather a struggle to give up those hissing, steaming cauldrons).

Despite the difficulties and deficiencies in this project and in my experience with translation in general, I could not agree more with Susanna Basso when she says:

There have been moments in my life as a translator when I have felt that I really do have the best job in the world. (Basso 157)<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Ci sono stati momenti, nella mia vita di traduttrice, in cui ho pensato di fare davvero il lavoro migliore del mondo.” (Basso 157)

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## ***APPENDIX A***

*E-MAIL TO JEAN BARBE*

*QUESTIONS / ANSWERS*

1. Vous avez à plusieurs reprises souligné que vous désirez inscrire votre roman dans la grande tradition du roman français. Quelles œuvres ou écrivains spécifiques ont influencé l'écriture du *Travail de l'huître* ?

Non pas dans la tradition du roman français. Jamais dit ça. Je suis un nord-américain. Le roman français contemporain n'exerce et n'a exercé aucune influence sur moi. Je me réclame du roman du continent américain surtout : états-uniens, sud-américains, en particulier. Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, sont des auteurs que j'admire. Mais *Le travail de l'huître* est un roman différent pour moi, en ce sens qu'à mes yeux il en ressemble à rien, pas même à mes propres livres. Je pense aussi à Coetzee, la liberté qu'il s'est donné de changer de genre, de ton, de livre en livre.

Non, c'est faux. J'y pense. *Mémoire d'Hadrien*, de Marguerite Yourcenar. Quelque chose dans la pensée d'un homme qui en a beaucoup vu. Cela, je crois, a eu une certaine influence.

2. Le roman est écrit dans un style homogène et plutôt monocorde. Comment décririez-vous ce style et comment l'avez-vous élaboré ? Quels effets spécifiques visiez-vous auprès du lecteur ?

Le style est en fonction du sujet : un homme qui ne peut communiquer avec personne, avec qui personne ne communique : un fantôme. Grande difficulté d'écrire, puisqu'on ne peut se reposer sur rien : pas de dialogue, pas d'interaction. Un homme avance et pense. C'est à peu près tout. Reste la pensée. Voir Hadrien, encore. Mais je ne voulais pas d'un roman au Je. Comment cette confession aurait-elle pu être retrouvée par des humains, nous ? Andreï ne pouvait rien laisser comme trace de son passage. Il en est ainsi de la plupart d'entre nous, dont l'existence est vite oubliée, pour peu déjà qu'elle ait un peu comptée aux yeux de quiconque.

Je devais donc l'écrire à la troisième personne. C'est un roman d'apprentissage.

Que peut-on apprendre seul ? Comment ?

3. Sous certains points de vue, votre roman pourrait être considéré appartenir au genre du roman historique. Dans quelle mesure vous considérez essentielle à la compréhension de l'œuvre le cadre historique dans lequel se déroule l'histoire ?

La compréhension du cadre historique n'est absolument pas nécessaire. Ce n'est pas de cette époque-là qu'il s'agit. Apprendre à vivre a toujours été et sera toujours criant d'actualité.

Socialement, dans *Le Travail de l'huître*, le monde change. Le changement est appelé par certains, combattu par d'autres, mais il se produit, se produira puisqu'il a été imaginé.

Ainsi va le monde : ce que nous réussissons à énoncer finira pas se produire. En l'énonçant, nous lui donnons vie.

La Russie pré-soviétique ressemble à notre époque en ce sens que les observateurs d'alors comme ceux d'aujourd'hui savent que les choses ne peuvent plus continuer sur leur lancée. La fatalité nous guette, c'est à dire la fin du monde, de l'humanité, du progrès, etc.

Or, au bord de la catastrophe, c'est ainsi, notre espèce cherche à survivre et accepte brusquement le changement qu'elle refusait jusqu'alors, et se lance dans une nouvelle direction dans des convulsions qui font beaucoup de victimes.

Mais le sujet du livre n'est pas là. C'est un roman sur la solitude, et sur la découverte de soi. Un roman d'apprentissage. Puisqu'il s'agit, n'est-ce pas, d'apprendre à vivre dans un monde en mouvement, et d'apprendre à mourir sans trop de regrets.

4. Soit au niveau de la langue d'écriture que de la matière traitée, le roman semble se distancier nettement du contexte québécois contemporain. Est-ce qu'il s'agit d'un choix délibéré? Est-ce vous voyez des rapports, peut-être peu évidents, avec cette réalité apparemment absente ?

Je suis un écrivain québécois. Quoi que j'écrive, ce sera le roman d'un écrivain québécois. Mais Coetze a-t-il seulement écrit sur l'Afrique du sud de l'Apartheid ? J'habite une planète de plus en plus petite. Rien de ce qui est humain ne m'est étranger. De plus, je n'écris pas des romans pour affirmer mon identité. J'écris des romans pour questionner, par les moyens de la fiction, le monde dans lequel je vis, et qui déborde de beaucoup les frontières du Québec.

Mon identité est pour moi une chose établie, réglée. Je suis un francophone habitant l'Amérique du Nord. Je tiens à ma langue, bien sûr. Est-ce que je tiens à ma culture ? Je cherche depuis toujours à en faire un vêtement qui me serrerait moins aux articulations. La culture qui était mienne au sortir de l'enfance, canadienne-française, blanche et catholique romaine est maintenant un sous-ensemble d'éléments parmi d'autres, collectionnés au fil du temps par tous ceux qui sont curieux de la manière dont vivent les autres.

Ma culture personnelle est celle que je me suis donnée en faisant des choix pendant 30 ans de vie adulte. Or je vis à Montréal, j'écris à Montréal, j'aime à Montréal et j'élève mes enfants à Montréal, ce qui devrait d'emblée me qualifier en tant qu'auteur québécois. Si vous posez la question, c'est en fonction d'une idée reçue selon laquelle les écrivains québécois sont ceux qui situent leurs fictions au Québec et utilisent un vocabulaire et certaines tournures syntaxiques propres à la langue parlée au Québec. C'est absurde. À ce compte-là, un écrivain japonais de Tokyo qui raconterait à sa manière la guerre des motards dans Hochelaga serait plus québécois que moi.

Faut-il toujours dire «Je suis québécois» pour l'être ?

Je ne ressens pas le besoin de sans cesse me définir, ni pour moi-même, ni pour les autres. Je suis.

5. Un des thèmes centraux dans le roman semble être la déchéance des idéaux révolutionnaires qui ont marqué l'histoire du 20ème siècle. Est-il effectivement votre intention de conduire une réflexion sur la fin de ce genre de projet politique ?

Pas exactement. Pas les idéaux révolutionnaires. Les idéaux tout court, qui me semblent toujours vecteurs des pires horreurs. Tout ce qui est systématique, appliqué à grande échelle.

Les idéaux des révolutionnaires russes ne sont pas tellement différents des idéaux démocratiques de ceux qui chantent la mondialisation du commerce et les beautés du libre marché. Quatre trente sous pour une piasse. Des laissés pour compte, des oubliés, des exclus, des blessés et des morts.

Cependant, notre époque est particulièrement cynique en ce sens qu'elle ne se sent même plus obligée de proposer un idéal commun ; la notion de progrès social est évoquée seulement pour les pays en voie de développement, censés bénéficier d'une économie de marché libre et souveraine. Comme si chez nous la job était faite.

D'autres ont jadis rêvé de changer le monde, radicalement, pour le bien du plus grand nombre. Il m'apparaissait important de le rappeler.

Il m'apparaissait tout aussi important de rappeler que l'inhumain est souvent le produit des idées.

6. Un thème très important dans le récit est celui de la communication et donc du langage. On relève ici une sorte de tension : d'une part la narration se penche sur les limites du langage comme moyen de communication (personne n'écoute Andreï même avant qu'il disparaisse) et cependant cette manque d'efficacité du langage nous est expliqué à travers le langage (notamment la langue littéraire qui produit le roman). Est-ce que vous avez peu de confiance dans la communication ordinaire et croyez-vous que seulement la parole poétique peut encore communiquer quelques vérités ? Comment le langage poétique réussit à colmater la distance entre les mots et les choses ?

Le langage poétique, parce qu'il ne procède pas de la seule intelligence, réussit parfois à entrevoir ce qui échappe à l'intelligence. Il ne s'agit pas de distance entre les mots et les choses, mais des distances entre nous, humains. La parole poétique et le langage romanesque utilisent des détours inimaginables pour rendre neuf ce qui était devenu usé, rendre brillant ce qui était devenu terne. Il s'agit de s'intéresser et d'intéresser le lecteur à des problèmes vieux comme le monde : la nature humaine, imparfaite et contradictoire.

Un écrivain n'accepte pas que la nature humaine soit une affaire classée.

7. Dans le cas d'Andreï, non seulement le langage s'éclipse mais aussi le corps ou, du moins, il est impossible au personnage de toucher les autres. Est-ce cet aspect du roman peut être considéré un élément dans une réflexion critique sur la sexualité ?

Non. Du moins ce n'était pas mon intention. Je voulais faire un roman sur le deuil. Tous les deuils, même le deuil de soi. J'imagine que cela inclut le deuil de la sexualité. Si par hasard j'avais voulu écrire un roman pour faire part au public de ma «réflexion critique» (ce qui n'est pas le cas), je crois qu'elle serait beaucoup plus radicale et beaucoup plus vaste. Comment peut-on «critiquer la sexualité»? Qu'est-ce qu'elle a, la sexualité, qui vous déplaît? Elle nous a permis d'être là. La façon dont elle s'exerce est affaire d'époque. Critiquons l'époque, si vous voulez. Mais la critique n'est pas affaire de romancier.

8. La fin du roman suggère qu'il n'y a de salut que dans le sacrifice pour l'autre, un sacrifice qui, en quelques mesures, rétablit une unité familiale d'élection sinon biologique. Quelles sont les valeurs ultimes que cette recomposition voudrait véhiculer?

La vie cherche à vivre. Si vous y voyez un rétablissement de l'unité familiale, libre à vous. Mais un enfant est toujours le résultat de la rencontre entre un homme et une femme.

La question que soulève mon roman sans vouloir y répondre est assez simple : peut-on aimer si on est pas aimé en retour?

Andreï se sacrifie-t-il? Je n'en suis pas sûr. Il se donne un but, une raison de vivre. Et de mourir. Seul le hasard a mis cette femme sur sa route. Il n'y a pas ici d'amour. Sa fin n'est pas une morale. La fin de mon roman n'est pas une conclusion, hop, emballé, merci.

Que feriez-vous si, demain, vous vous retrouviez dans la situation d'Andreï ? C'est ça, mon roman.

9. Vos romans ont été traduits ; quel a été votre rôle dans le processus de traduction et en êtes-vous satisfait? Comment décririez-vous l'expérience de se lire en traduction ?

J'ai répondu aux questions de ma traductrice sur le sens exact de certaines phrases.

Parfois, je ne savais quoi répondre. J'en ignorais le sens exact. L'exactitude n'est pas le propre de l'art (d'où l'expression : flou artistique). Mais il fallait choisir. J'ai choisi.

Me lire en traduction, c'est comme lire le roman d'un autre qui m'a tout piqué, sauf le texte.

## ***APPENDIX B***

### *EPIGRAPH: VERSIONS*

#### *THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT AN OYSTER*

The following translations represent a selection of the versions I received from a large group of “volunteers.” Regardless of the original’s literary merits, the point of the exercise was to give me an idea, having had no experience whatsoever in translating poetry, of what could be done with the poem since I had decided that it must be kept. The selections below come from a range of individuals including professional translators and literature specialists, a primary school teacher, a hospital administrator, a web-page designer and a Hong Kong banker. The non-language-professionals provided, in my opinion, the most interesting and successful examples. The last one of all came from a machine. Most tried to keep some rhyme, usually in the final couplet. In one version, the writer chose to end each line with a word beginning in “s” so as to signify waves or “the slopping of the sea” (to borrow from Wallace Stevens). Metre depended on the style chosen.

1

L’huître se referme longtemps sur sa douleur:  
Elle se cache et attend, au sein des profondeurs.  
Nous sommes comme la chair et le sable incrusté:  
Nous sommes ce qui blesse et ce qui est blessé.  
Où tu vois la beauté, je ne vois qu’un massacre;  
Nos vies sont misérables mais enrobées de nacre.  
(J.B. / G. de M.)

2

The oyster enfolds and long nurses its pain:

It hides and waits in the depths of the sea.

We are like flesh in a sandy domain:

Where you wound me you will wounded be.

Where you see beauty, I see but slaughter;

In our wretched lives enveloped in nacre.

(D.M.)

3

Wasn't I hiding in the snug all day

To avoid this very conversation

Stop my self indulgence you say

An' me with all my pain and sufferin'

Why don't you jus' feck off and leave me be to enjoy my pint and the misery

But no, you won't leave well alone

I hear you say "it's not as bad as all that"

I keep my gob shut an' know it's a lot worse

(E.M.)

4

The oyster fur an age closes aroun its pain,

It hides an' it waits, deep doon in the main.

Like flesh and incrusted sand are we:

Thae wha' wound and thae wha' wounded be.

Whaur ye see summat bonnie, I see only the cull;

Tho' claided in mother-of-pearl, oor lives are gey dull.

(J.Y.)

5

There was a young oyster from Fife  
Who said you have only one life  
So do not be a bore  
Try to get out more  
Til he was ope'd up with a knife.  
(T.J.)

6

The oyster, for a long time, wraps itself round its pain,  
It hides and it waits, in the heart of its bane.  
We are like flesh and incrustated sand,  
We are those who land wounds and on whom those wounds land,  
You see beauty, I only see massacre,  
Our lives are wretched, but coated in lacquer.  
(P.S.)

7

Closed around its pain,  
The oyster hides and waits;  
We are like armoured flesh,  
And flesh unarmoured,  
Where the beauty's in the butcher  
Finding comfort in the mother  
    of pearl.  
(J.K.)

8

The oyster shuts tight around its pain  
It hides and it waits, in the depths  
The flesh and the sand bound together in us  
We hurt and are hurt  
Where you see beauty, I see misery alone  
In our wretched lives, haloed in pearl.  
(I.B.)

9

The oyster closes over its sorrow  
She hides and waits in the bed of the sea  
We are like flesh and stone  
We strike and are struck  
Where you see beauty, I see slaughter  
In our sorrowful lives in search of a saviour  
(R.S.)

10

The oyster, in pain, keeps to itself  
Hides and waits in the depths  
Like flesh and sand  
We feel pain and bring pain  
Where you see beauty, I see devastation  
In our miserable lives compassed in beauty  
(M.T.)

11

There was an old oyster in terrible pain  
Sunk to the depths never seen again  
A lump of raw flesh irritated by sand  
Opened up with a knife by another's hand  
The beauty you see I do not behold  
You just want my pearl and care not for my soul.  
(P.J.)

12

The oyster retreats into itself:  
Hiding in the depths, it waits.  
We are as flesh inlaid with sand;  
We hurt; we give pain.  
Where you see beauty, I see death unfurl;  
Our piteous lives are plated in pearl.  
A.L.

13

Oyster closes long on his pain:  
She hides and waits, in the depths.  
We are flesh and inlaid sand:  
We are what hurts and what is injured  
Where you see the beauty, I see that a massacre;  
Our lives are miserable but coated with nacre.  
(Babelfish)

## *APPENDIX C*

### *BI-TEXTS*

These bi-texts are meant to provide context for the examples taken from the four passages examined in detail in the thesis as well as a greater basis for comparison of the translation as a whole.

### *BI-TEXT 1*

<p>pp. 13-18</p> <p>Au moment de sa disparition, Andreï Léonovitch proposait encore une fois d’assassiner le tsar.</p> <p>C’était un tout jeune homme grand, fort et brun, partagé entre une colère qui ne le quittait jamais et la timidité qui l’empêchait de l’exprimer. Grandi trop vite, il avait des maladresses de chiot qui le faisaient rougir. Il enviait l’assurance de ses aînés, mentait sur son âge et portait une barbe pour cacher la rondeur de ses joues, mais au lieu de le vieillir, sa de lui donner un air étrange, pas du tout à la mode de la capitale, dont il ignorait d’ailleurs les subtilités.</p> <p>Sa mère était morte en lui dominant la vie. La tante qui l’avait recueilli le lui avait souvent reproché. C’était une femme acariâtre et mesquine qui avait plus ou moins vendu la sœur d’Andreï à un maquignon de passage. Quant à son père, c’était un ivrogne invétéré, bucheron de surcroît, que la hasardeuse</p>	<p>At the moment of his disappearance, Andreï Leonovitch was once again proposing the assassination of the Tsar.</p> <p>He was a very young man, tall, dark and strong, torn between an anger that never left him and a shyness that kept him from expressing it. He had grown too quickly and his puppyish clumsiness still made him blush. He envied the confidence of his elders, lied about his age and wore a beard to conceal his round cheeks, but instead of aging him, these wisps gave him an odd look not at all fashionable in the capital, whose subtleties completely escaped him.</p> <p>His mother had died giving birth to him. The aunt who had taken him in often blamed him for it. She was a sour, miserly woman who had as good as sold Andreï’s sister to a travelling horse trader. As for his father, he was a confirmed drunk and a woodcutter into the bargain. This unwise combination of</p>
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<p>combinaison du maniement de la hache et de l'ingestion d'alcool avait laissé paralysé après un accident en forêt. Bien qu'il ait perdu l'usage de la moitié inférieure de son corps, ses bras étaient restés musclés et noueux, ce que ne manquait pas de vérifier le jeune Andreï des qu'il avait le malheur de passer à sa portée.</p> <p>Dans un si petit village de Sibérie, à peine quelques dizaines d'habitations frileusement autour d'une scierie, tout le monde vous connaissait, pas moyen d'y échapper. Fils de Léon vous étiez, fils de Léon vous resteriez jusqu'à la fin de vos jours, ce qui n'était guère reluisant quand ledit Léon ne savait que boire jusqu'à l'abrutissement. Andreï était parti sans dire adieu le jour de ses seize ans; dans les brumes de l'alcool qui lui tenait compagnie, son père ne s'était probablement pas encore rendu compte de la disparition de son fils.</p> <p>Andreï avait la ferme intention de s'inventer une autre existence que celle qu'il avait vécue jusqu'alors. Mais à peine débarqué dans le tourbillon pétersbourgeois, il fut tour à tour dévoré d'envie et profondément dégoûté par l'étalage des richesses de la haute société. Cette ambivalence ne s'arrangeait pas dans les bas quartiers où croupissaient ses semblables, alors qu'Andreï ressentait à la fois le désir d'aider les pauvres, et l'envie de les fuir.</p> <p>Bien nulle part, il vivait à la journée en exécutant des tâches ingrates qui ne sollicitaient que ses muscles, laissant à son</p>	<p>axework and alcohol had left him paralysed following an accident in the forest. But though the lower half of his body was dead, his arms were as knottily muscled as ever, which the young Andreï often learned to his regret whenever he had the misfortune to pass within reach.</p> <p>In such a small Siberian village – a few dozen houses at most huddled around a sawmill – everyone knew everyone, there was no getting away from it. Son of Leon you were born and the son of Leon you would remain until the end of your days. Hardly an enticing prospect when the Leon in question was good only for drinking himself into a stupor. The day he turned sixteen, Andreï left without a word of goodbye. From within the fog of alcohol which constantly enveloped him, his father had probably never noticed his son's disappearance.</p> <p>Andreï's fixed intention was to invent for himself a life different from the one he had lived up to now. But no sooner had he arrived in the maelstrom that was Saint Petersburg then he found himself consumed by envy and overwhelmed by disgust at the display of wealth put on by the upper classes. In the poorer parts of town where he and his kind were left to rot, Andreï was unable to reconcile this ambivalence: he wanted both to help the poor and to flee them.</p> <p>Nowhere at home, he spent his days doing menial labour that was physically demanding but which left his mind free to</p>
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<p>esprit toute la latitude requise pour s'égarer à la poursuite de désirs contradictoires. Il fendait du petit bois pour un bordel et charriait une fois la semaine des légumes au marché. Les quelques pièces ainsi gagnées ne lui permettaient pas de manger à sa faim.</p> <p>Un soir qu'il se demandait ou dormir, quelques semaines à peine après son arrivée dans la capitale, il avait vu s'écrouler à la sortie d'une taverne un étudiant trop soul pour marcher. Andreï s'était avancé; le jeune homme l'avait engagé sur-le-champ pour l'aider à rentrer chez lui. Si l'étudiant n'avait plus de jambes, il lui restait de la voix. Juché sur les épaules d'Andreï, il gueula pendant tout le trajet des slogans politiques qui devaient être drôles puisqu'il riait beaucoup en les prononçant.</p> <p>L'étudiant habitait une chambre dans une bonne pension. Il pilota Andreï jusqu'au troisième étage, lui tirant les oreilles et lui criant des ordres comme à un bœuf. Devant sa porte, il retrouva comme par enchantement le plein usage de ses membres et congédia son porteur d'une poignée de piécettes et de quelques feuillets politiques qu'il lui fourra dans la poche avec un clin d'œil.</p> <p>Plus tard cette nuit-là, à la lueur d'une chandelle de suif, appuyé contre un mur humide, à l'abri du vent dans une ruelle du quartier des tanneries, Andreï avait tenté de les lire. Comme il tombait de sommeil, il n'avait retenu des pamphlets anarchistes de Netchaïev et de Proudhon que cette grande idée qui</p>	<p>wander in pursuit of any number of contradictory desires. He chopped kindling for a brothel and once a week hauled vegetables to the marketplace. The few coins he earned were never enough to allow him to eat his fill.</p> <p>One evening just a few weeks after his arrival in the capital, he was wondering where he could spend the night when he saw a student, too drunk to walk, collapse outside a tavern door. Andreï went over and was immediately hired by the young man to help get him home. Legless he may have been, but the student still had a voice. Perched unsteadily on Andreï's shoulders, he shouted political slogans all the way home; they must have been funny because he laughed his head off the entire time.</p> <p>The student rented a room in a respectable boarding house. He guided Andreï to the third floor by pulling on his ears and shouting commands as if he were an old horse. When they reached his door, he magically found the use of his legs once more and dismissed Andreï with a handful of coins and some political pamphlets, which he stuffed into Andreï's pocket with a wink.</p> <p>Later that night, sheltered from the wind in an alley in the leather-workers' quarter, Andreï tried to read them by the light of a tallow candle fixed to the damp wall. But since he was half asleep, he retained only one thing from these anarchist pamphlets by Nechayev and Prudhon, but it was an idea so powerful</p>
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sembla soudain éclairer son obscure existence : de même qu'il faut déplacer un obstacle quand la route est bloquée, on devait éliminer le tsar pour l'avancement du peuple russe.

La simplicité de la démonstration l'enchantait.

Il en rêva, cette nuit-là, entortillé dans sa pelisse, grelottant, affamé : il rêva du Grand Incendie. Il se vit en rêve tirer une balle dans l'œil du tsar et il vit la foule nombreuse scander son nom pour l'en remercier.

C'est à ce moment précis que la révolution devint pour lui la promesse confuse d'un dénouement des tensions du social et de l'intime confondus. Il avait toujours eu une conscience aiguë son insignifiance. Pauvre, ignorant coupable, piétiné, se torturant lui-même quand, distrait ou distant, le Pouvoir cessait pour un temps de l'accabler, Andreï était le peuple russe. Athée, peut-être, mais alors avec une ferveur bien orthodoxe, gelé en hiver, persécuté par les moustiques en été, crotté toute l'année, et pourtant pur, si pur ! Un enfant naïf et cruel, effrayé par ses propres cauchemars, émerveillé d'un rien, toujours assoiffé, toujours affamé... Et c'était à ce sort qu'il souhaitait échapper en éliminant celui qui avait pour nom Alexandre II, tsar de toutes les Russies. En le tuant, Andreï délivrait son peuple de la tyrannie, certes, mais du même coup, il devenait quelqu'un. Son nom serait écrit dans les livres d'histoire. On publierait son portrait dans les gazettes.

that it seemed to illuminate his futile existence: just as an obstacle blocking the road must be removed, so the Tsar had to be eliminated for the Russian people to advance.

The simplicity of the logic enchanted him.

That night, rolled up in his fleece coat, shivering and hungry, he dreamed of it: he dreamed of the Great Fire. In his dream, he saw himself fire a shot straight into the eye of the Tsar, and he saw thousands upon thousands chanting his name in gratitude.

From that time on, revolution became for him the muddled promise of a resolution not only to society's problems but to his own as well. He had always been acutely aware of his insignificance. Poor, uneducated, guilty, downtrodden, he punished himself in those moments when a distracted or distant Authority ignored him for a time. Andreï *was* the Russian people. Atheist he may have been, but with a fervour that was highly orthodox. Frozen in winter, tortured by mosquitoes in summer and filthy all year long, yet still so pure! A naïve and cruel child, terrified by his own nightmares, wonderstruck by a trifle, always thirsty, always hungry... This was the fate he wished to escape by eliminating the one called Alexander II, Tsar of all the Russias. By killing him, Andreï would unquestionably deliver his people from tyranny, but by the same stroke he would become *someone*. His name would be written in the history books. His picture would be published in the newspapers.

<p>Le lendemain matin, il guetta l'étudiant à la sortie de la pension, le suivit puis l'accosta discrètement afin de lui offrir ses services. Le jeune homme rit longuement puis accepta de le mettre à l'épreuve. Des lors, Andreï Léonovitch se présenta chaque mercredi après-midi dans l'arrière-salle d'un tripot avec sous le bras quatre bouteilles de bonne vodka, dont on l'avait assuré qu'elle était le premier ingrédient de toute révolution réussie, et tout ce qu'il avait pu chiper de tabac anglais.</p> <p>Ses camarades acceptaient ses offrandes mais discutaient interminablement sans jamais passer à l'action. Ceux-là étaient fils de bourgeois promis à de belles situations; ils avaient beaucoup plus à perdre qu'à gagner d'une révolution, et ils le savaient. Conspirer suffisait à les titiller. Dans vingt ans, ils écraseraient une larme au souvenir de cette dangereuse époque de leur jeunesse, l'une des meilleures assurément, à classer au même rang que les beuveries universitaires et les premières visites aux putes.</p> <p>Cela faisait treize mois qu'ils échafaudaient des plans sans les mettre à exécution. Andreï Léonovitch sentait l'impatience le gagner. Né pauvre, il craignait de le rester, et il ne pouvait oublier qu'il était vierge comme une peau de fesse, un puceau que le parfum d'une dame terrorisait plus que la police secrète d'un tsar. Sans argent et sans terres, sans éducation mais pas sans rêves, il n'avait aucune chance d'exister aux yeux de</p>	<p>The next morning, he waited for the student outside the boarding house. He followed him and then approached him to discreetly offer his services. The young man laughed heartily before agreeing to put him to the test. Thereafter, Andreï Leonovitch reported each Wednesday afternoon to the backroom of a pub, bringing with him four bottles of good vodka – which, he had been assured, was the first ingredient of any successful revolution – and all the English tobacco he could lay his hands on.</p> <p>His comrades accepted his offerings, held endless discussions and never once lifted a finger. These golden sons of the bourgeoisie had much more to lose than to gain in any revolution, and they knew it. Playing at conspiracy gave them a little thrill. In twenty years, they would wipe away a tear at the memory of this dangerous time of their youth, indeed one of the best times of their youth, along with the drinking bouts and the first time with a whore.</p> <p>For thirteen months they had been sketching out plans that led nowhere. Andreï Leonovitch felt a growing impatience. Born into poverty, he feared that was where he would remain. Nor could he forget that he was as chaste as the driven snow, a virgin more terrified by the scent of a woman's perfume than by the Tsar's secret police. Though not without dreams, he possessed neither money nor land nor education and so had no hope of</p>
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<p>ceux et de celles qui faisaient tourner le monde, à moins que ne se produise très bientôt un événement extraordinaire</p> <p>C'est pourquoi, ce soir-là, lorsqu'il en revint à son idée d'une bombe sur le passage du tsar, Andreï Léonovitch tapa si fort du poing sur la table que la bouteille de vodka vacilla sur son cul, tomba sur le côté en répandant son contenu et roula en glougloutant avant d'aller se fracasser sur les dalles de pierre. En se penchant pour rattraper la bouteille, Andreï s'était cogné la tête contre le bord de la table en bois de noyer. Il hurla de douleur et de colère, puis secoua la tête pour chasser les étoiles qui avaient envahi son champ de vision.</p> <p>Les autres membres de l'assistance, eux, avaient suivi des yeux la trajectoire de la bouteille sans penser un seul instant à intervenir, comme s'il s'était agi du Destin en marche. Et ce n'est qu'une fois le Destin accompli qu'ils parurent reprendre leurs esprits : deux d'entre eux se penchèrent pour ramasser tandis qu'un troisième se levait pour prendre une autre bouteille sur le buffet. Quelques minutes plus tard, tout était rentré dans l'ordre et la réunion put continuer. Mais sans Andreï Léonovitch, car s'il y était toujours, on faisait comme s'il n'y était pas.</p> <p>Mes amis, mon projet, le tsar... dit Andreï.</p> <p>Personne ne lui répondit. Personne ne le regardait. Les conspirateurs parlaient entre eux à voix basse, élaborant leurs habituels plans timorés ponctués de blagues salaces.</p>	<p>existing in the eyes of the men and woman who made this world go round – unless something extraordinary were to happen, and soon.</p> <p>Which is why, that evening, when he again brought up his idea of a bomb along the Tsar's route, Andreï Leonovitch brought down his fist with such force that the bottle of vodka wobbled then toppled, sloshing its contents over the table before rolling off and smashing on the stone tiles. As Andreï lunged to catch the bottle, he knocked his head against the edge of the walnut table. He howled in pain and anger then shook his head to clear the stars dancing before his eyes.</p> <p>The other members of the group had followed the course of the bottle without once giving a thought to saving it, as if this were an illustration of the inevitability of Fate. Only once Fate had played itself out did they come to their senses: two of them stooped to gather up the glass while a third rose to fetch another bottle from the sideboard. Within a few minutes, everything was back to normal and the meeting picked up where it had left off. But without Andreï Leonovitch because, though he was still present, everyone behaved as if he were not.</p> <p>“Comrades, my plan, the Tsar...” said Andreï.</p> <p>No-one answered him. No-one looked at him. The conspirators spoke quietly amongst themselves, working out their usual timid plans laced with dirty jokes.</p>
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<p>Ce n'est pas le moment de rire, dit encore Andreï Léonovitch, avec la même absence d'effet.</p> <p>Jamais encore on ne l'avait traité avec autant d'indifférence. Il eut beau insister, devenir tout rouge à force de colère et de frustration, il dut bientôt se rendre à l'évidence : ses camarades préféraient l'ignorer plutôt que d'envisager sérieusement l'assassinat du tsar.</p> <p>Puisque c'est ainsi, dit-il en se dirigeant vers la sortie.</p> <p>Mais la dignité ne faisait pas partie de ses attributs, pas encore. Il se retourna sur le seuil, les yeux emplis de larmes, sa voix tremblait d'un mélange de suppliques et d'imprécations. Pourtant rien n'y fit et la colère l'emporta : il sortit en claquant la porte et un miroir se décrocha du mur.</p> <p>Sept ans de malheur, ricana Andreï Léonovitch, qui y croyait encore un peu.</p>	<p>"This is no laughing matter," repeated Andreï Leonovitch, but he may as well have been talking to the wall.</p> <p>Never before had he been treated with such indifference. However much he insisted, flushed with anger and frustration, he soon had to face facts: his friends preferred to ignore him entirely rather than seriously consider assassinating the Tsar.</p> <p>"Well, if that's how it is..." he said as he headed toward the door.</p> <p>But dignity was not yet to be counted among his attributes. He turned on the threshold, his eyes welling with tears and, his voice trembling, pleaded and cursed in turn. But it was all in vain. In the end, carried away by anger, he slammed the door on his way out and a mirror fell from the wall.</p> <p>"Seven years of bad luck," sniggered Andreï Leonovitch, who still believed it, a little.</p>
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*BI-TEXT 2*

<p>pp. 45-50</p> <p>Le corps du vieil homme se refusait à mourir. Les mains décharnées s'agrippaient au grabat. Sous le rideau de ses paupières baissées, plissées et fines, les yeux affolés s'agitaient dans tous les sens et roulaient dans les orbites creuses, profondément enfoncées dans le crâne</p>	<p>The old man's body refused to die. His wasted hands clung to his pallet. Beneath the veil of his wrinkled translucent eyelids, panic-filled eyes darted and rolled in the shadowy hollows of his white downy, skull.</p>
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recouvert d'un duvet blanc.

Il râlait. Il gémissait. Il combattait, presque immobile, des démons par lui seul perceptibles. Cela faisait plusieurs heures qu'Andreï attendait ce moment.

Regarde-moi, dit-il doucement.

La poitrine était une cage de peau et d'os dans laquelle se débattait un cœur affaibli, erratique : le chef avait perdu le rythme et les musiciens de l'orchestre jouaient chacun pour soi une ultime partition chaotique. Les intestins lâchaient un liquide verdâtre ; la peau cireuse se couvrait de taches noires ; le menton piqué de barbe blanche tremblait ; les jambes s'agitaient pour une course sans but tandis que le torse s'enfonçait lourdement dans la paille du matelas.

Regarde-moi, suppliait Andreï.

Mais le vieil homme ne réagissait pas plus en ses derniers moments qu'il ne l'avait fait les jours précédents. Sa respiration se précipita tout en s'amenuisant. Andreï se pencha sur lui et, délicatement, il souleva de l'index la paupière fripée.

Regarde-moi, demanda-t-il encore.

L'œil se révulsait, jaune, strié de sang, la pupille dilatée au maximum pour combattre l'obscurité qui l'envahissait déjà.

Andreï murmura: Re...Gar...De...Moi.

Mais c'était fini. Un dernier souffle imperceptible s'était échappé des lèvres desséchées. Le vieil homme n'y était plus. Où qu'il fût allé, il avait abandonné derrière lui sa carcasse épuisée.

He gasped. He groaned. Almost motionless, he fought off demons visible only to himself. Andreï had been waiting for this moment for several hours.

"Look at me," he said softly.

The chest was a cage of skin and bone within which fluttered an exhausted, erratic heart. The conductor had lost the tempo and the musicians in the orchestra were now playing each to his own tune, following a last dissonant score. The man's intestines released a greenish liquid. Black patches covered his waxen skin. His white whiskery chin trembled. His legs jiggled about in a pointless race as his hips sank heavily into the straw mattress.

"Look at me," pleaded Andreï.

But the old man gave no more sign of having heard in these, his last, moments, than he had in the preceding days. His breathing quickened even as it dwindled. Andreï bent over him and, with his index finger, gently raised one papery eyelid.

"Look at me," he asked once more.

The eye rolled up, yellowed and blood-streaked, the pupil expanded as far as possible to fight the inflooding darkness.

Andreï whispered, "Look. At. Me."

But it was over. A last imperceptible breath escaped through the withered lips. The old man was no more. Wherever he was now, he had left behind him his exhausted carcass.

<p>Andreï rabaissa la paupière puis se redressa lentement. Des larmes coulaient sur ses joues. Il était fourbu, comme s'il avait lui aussi combattu toute la journée. Mais le vieil homme ne l'avait pas entr'aperçu au moment de quitter sa vie. Le vieil homme n'avait pas vu, aux franges du monde visible, le fantôme nommé Andreï penché sur lui.</p> <p>Si, dans la fièvre qui l'avait presque terrassé, le petit Grigori avait réussi à percevoir la présence d'Andreï, ne serait-ce qu'un instant, ne serait-ce que son ombre, ce n'était pas le cas de ceux qui mouraient de tuberculose, de phtisie, de consommation, de syphilis ou de vieillesse dans les salles communes et humides de l'asile Saint-Pierre. Depuis des semaines, Andreï Léonovitch cherchait son reflet dans les yeux des mourants, mais jusqu'alors il n'avait pas aperçu la moindre étincelle de reconnaissance.</p> <p>Avec un long soupir et des gestes pesants, il se détourna du vieil homme et entreprit de traverser la longue salle aux arc-boutants de pierre où s'entassaient les paillasses des êtres échoués là au bout de leur vie. Ils étaient une bonne centaine qui avaient eu la chance, si c'en était une, d'être recueillis pour mourir à l'abri, alors que des milliers d'autres s'écroulaient dans le ruisseau. Chaque matin, la charrette des morts sillonnait les quartiers pauvres pour ramasser les cadavres qu'on jetait en après-midi dans une fosse commune à l'extérieur de la ville. Ceux de l'asile avaient droit à une modeste tombe à eux ainsi qu'à une prière générique ânonnée par le pope de service. Cela ne</p>	<p>Andreï lowered the eyelid and slowly stood up, tears running down his cheeks. He was worn out, as if he too had spent the day fighting. At the moment of death, the old man had not glimpsed him. The old man had not perceived, on the margins of the visible world, the phantom Andreï bowing over him.</p> <p>If it was true that little Grigori, during the fever that had almost killed him, had noticed Andreï's presence, even for an instant, even his shadow, this was not the case with those dying of tuberculosis, phthisis, consumption, syphilis or old age in the damp common-rooms of Saint Peter's Asylum. For weeks, Andreï Leonovitch had been searching for his reflection in the eyes of the dying, without discovering the least spark of awareness.</p> <p>Sighing heavily, Andreï moved slowly away from the old man and, beneath the stone-arched ceiling, walked the length of the long room among the crowded pallets of those who had found their way here at the end of their lives. A good hundred or more had had the luck, if so it can be termed, to be taken in to die with a roof over their heads, while thousands of others simply fell over into the gutters. Each morning, the dead-cart wound its way through the poorer neighbourhoods collecting the corpses that would be thrown into a common pit outside of town that afternoon. Those from the asylum were accorded a modest grave of their own as well as a stock prayer mumbled by</p>
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semblait guère les rassurer. Sous les hauts plafonds, les gémissements s'entrechoquaient en échos lugubres, traversés par les vrilles aiguës des cris des femmes. C'était le vacarme de la peur dans l'antichambre de la mort, et malgré la présence des nombreuses icônes sur les murs, nul ici ne trouvait de réconfort.

L'asile Saint-Pierre était une vaste construction de pierre, ancienne forteresse reconvertie dont l'enchevêtrement de couloirs et la prolifération des salles formaient un labyrinthe exclusivement dédié à la douleur, à la maladie et à la mort. Dans une aile un peu moins humide, sur des lits un peu plus confortables, l'Église accueillait ses vieux popes revenus de mission pour mourir en son sein. Mais partout ailleurs régnait la puanteur des chairs qui se décomposent à l'abri des regards et dans l'indifférence des bien-portants qui se gardaient de pénétrer en ces murs.

Andreï obliqua à gauche et longea un très long corridor, puis tourna encore à droite et suivit un passage étroit au bout duquel s'alignaient de part et d'autre des stalles séparées par des murets de pierre qui s'élevaient à hauteur d'épaule.

Les anciennes écuries étaient le centre secret de l'asile. Alors que, partout ailleurs dans ces murs, on venait pour mourir, ici on venait pour se cacher de vivre. Les gémissements étaient d'un autre ordre. À peine articulés, ils ressemblaient parfois à des rires d'enfants. Et c'en étaient.

On y avait parqué les rejetons difformes

the duty priest. They seemed little reassured at the prospect. Below the high ceilings, moans echoed and re-echoed dolefully across the room to be pierced by the spiralling shrill cries of women. It was the din of fear in Death's waiting room, and despite the numerous icons hanging on the walls, there was no comfort to be found here.

The vast stone construction that was Saint Peter's Asylum had been converted from an ancient fortress. Its confusion of corridors and countless rooms formed a labyrinth dedicated exclusively to suffering, disease and death. On somewhat softer mattresses, in one slightly less damp wing, lay priests at the end of their pastoral missions come to die in the bosom of the Church. But everywhere else was the pervasive stink of flesh left to decompose, sheltered from the indifferent eyes of the healthy, who warily refrained from setting foot within the walls.

Andreï turned left and walked down a very long corridor, he then turned right and followed a narrow passageway, at the end of which, on either side, were two rows of stalls separated by shoulder-high stone walls.

The old stables were the secret heart of the asylum. While everywhere else within the walls one came to die, here one came to hide away from living. Here the cries were of a different order. Unclear and indistinct, they at times recalled the laughter of children. And so it was.

This was where the bourgeoisie shut

que la bourgeoisie avait enfantés. Des contributions annuelles à la fondation de l'asile garantissaient de ne plus jamais entendre parler de ces enfants aux têtes énormes, aux membres en forme de nageoire, aux colonnes vertébrales tordues comme des tire-bouchons. Certains vivaient jusqu'à l'âge adulte, et il fallait leur lier les mains pour les empêcher de se masturber jusqu'au sang.

Andreï ralentit le pas pour traverser le couloir des damnés. Des siamoises attachées par la hanche traçaient dans la sciure qui recouvrait le sol des figures vaguement géométriques. Elles chantaient un air triste à l'unisson.

Un peu plus loin, un gamin au visage plissé et au dos courbé comme celui d'un vieillard frappait convulsivement son front démesuré contre la paroi de pierre de sa cellule en y laissant une trainée de sang. Son bras droit, cassé près de l'épaule, s'était ressoudé en formant un angle aigu au bout duquel ballottait une main devenue inutile et qui commençait à pourrir.

Dans la stalle juste en face, un nouveau-né mourait doucement de faim. Son corps et son visage étaient entièrement couverts de poils noirs et soyeux. Sur toute cette noirceur, seuls ses yeux se détachaient quand un instinct quelconque le poussait à les ouvrir.

Parfois, Andreï en avait été témoin, de jeunes décadents soudoyaient les employés pour venir contempler le spectacle. Ils riaient bruyamment des contorsions faciales que les idiots utilisaient en guise de sourire, et ils jetaient des

away their misshapen issue. An annual contribution to the asylum foundation ensured that not another word need ever be heard of these monstrous-headed children, children with flippers for arms, children with corkscrew spines. Some survived into adulthood, when it was necessary to bind their hands to keep them from masturbating to the point of drawing blood.

Andreï slowed his pace as he crossed this corridor of the damned. A pair of Siamese twins, joined at the hip, drew vaguely geometrical shapes in the sawdust covering the floor as they hummed a sad melody to themselves.

A little further on, a young boy with the wrinkled face and bowed back of an old man convulsively pounded his over-sized head against the stone partition of his cell leaving a smear of blood. After he had broken his right arm near the shoulder, it was reset at an almost 90° angle. His hand now flapped about uselessly and was beginning to rot.

In the facing stall a newborn was quietly dying of hunger. Body and face were entirely covered in black silken hair. In all that blackness only the eyes stood out when, in obedience to some instinct, they were opened at all.

Occasionally, as Andreï had witnessed, decadent young people would bribe the staff into allowing them a view of the spectacle. They laughed noisily at the imbeciles who contorted their faces in an attempt at a smile.

morceaux de sucre à des êtres en forme de têtard qui rampaient dans leurs propres excréments pour attraper les friandises avec la bouche.

Andreï s'obligeait tous les jours à passer par là. Les monstres ne lui prêtaient pas plus d'attention que les autres, mais il se trouvait avec eux une certaine parenté, une ressemblance sinistre. Il était, comme eux, non pas une erreur de la nature, mais une manifestation de sa folie et de sa malveillance.

L'asile Saint-Pierre garde au secret ce que le monde extérieur ne veut pas voir, pensait Andreï, ce qu'il ne peut pas *accepter* de voir. La même pâte dont tous les humains sont fabriqués était ici pétrie par une main folle qui n'était pas celle d'un Dieu bon. Passe encore qu'il faille mourir, mais vivre ainsi ?

Sur le chemin de Saint-Pétersbourg, Andreï avait pris la mesure de ce qui lui était dorénavant interdit. La véritable nature de son mal n'était pas d'être invisible, mais d'être condamné à n'exister que par lui-même, en lui-même, sans jamais l'aumône d'un regard ou d'un geste. Point d'amour ni d'honneur. Les monstres dans les stalles recevaient par cruauté des morceaux de sucre : même un regard de mépris était un lien qui vous rattachait au reste de l'humanité. Si les mourants, au moment de sauter le pas, avaient vu en lui un fantôme, Andreï aurait été heureux d'au moins les effrayer.

À quoi servait-il ? Il n'en avait pas la moindre idée.

They threw lumps of sugar at tadpole-shaped creatures, who slithered through their own excrement to catch the sweets in their mouths.

Each day Andreï made himself walk through this corridor. These freaks paid him no more attention than any of the others, but he felt a certain kinship with them, a grim likeness. He, like them, was not one of nature's mistakes but rather a manifestation of its madness and malevolence.

Saint Peter's Asylum kept hidden that which the outside world had no wish to see, thought Andreï, that which it would not *consent* to see. The same clay out of which all humans were fashioned was here moulded by an insane hand which could not belong to a benevolent God. Bad enough one had to die, but to live like this?

On the road to Saint Petersburg, Andreï had been able to gauge what was, henceforth, forbidden to him. The true nature of his misfortune was not that he was invisible but that he was condemned to live in isolation, within himself alone, without even the charity of a glance or a gesture: without love, without honour. These freaks in their stalls were given sweets out of cruelty: even a scornful look was a link to the rest of humanity. If the dying, at the moment of crossing over, had taken him for a ghost he would have been happy at least to terrify them.

Of what use was he? He hadn't the slightest idea.

<p>Devant la dernière stalle, Andreï hésita longtemps. Ici, un monstre souffrait un peu plus que les autres. Quand on l'avait amenait, trois jours auparavant, il venait à peine de célébrer son premier anniversaire. À cette occasion, son père l'avait saisi par les poignets pour le mettre debout et lui apprendre à marcher. Les os des bras et des jambes de l'enfant s'étaient aussitôt pulvérisés, plus fragile que le verre. En s'abattant sur le sol, c'était sa colonne vertébrale et sa cage thoracique qui s'était brisées en miettes. Depuis, l'enfant gisait là, immobile, incapable même de crier. On le nourrissait d'eau sucrée. Son apparence était tout à fait normale, mais sa peau était un sac empli d'éclats d'os qui frottaient les uns contre les autres en déclenchant des douleurs inimaginables.</p> <p>Andreï ouvrit la barrière de la stalle et s'approcha en tendant la main vers le petit visage crispé. En le touchant, pensa-t-il, il abrègerait les souffrances de l'enfant; une simple caresse sur la joue, et il se viderait de son sang. Andreï deviendrait alors une sorte d'ange de la mort. Cette idée aussitôt lui fit horreur. Si c'était là son destin, il le combattrait pas à pas. Il retira sa main et secoua la tête. Il voulait vivre et prospérer. Il voulait aimer et rire.</p> <p>La fréquentation assidue des mourants et des monstres lui avait appris une seule chose : il n'était pas l'un d'eux. Pas tout à fait. Mais alors qu'était-il ? Il lui restait à le découvrir.</p>	<p>Andreï stood for a long time in front of the last stall. Here was a freak that suffered a little more than the others. When they had brought him in, three days before, he had just celebrated his first birthday. On that day, his father had taken him by the wrists to stand him up and teach him to walk. The bones in the child's arms and legs, more fragile than glass, had immediately shattered. When he fell to the floor, his backbone and rib cage splintered. Since then, the child lay here, motionless, unable even to cry. He was fed sugar water. He looked completely normal, but his skin was a sack filled with shards of bone that rubbed against each other causing him unimaginable pain.</p> <p>Andreï opened the gate to the stall. As he approached, he stretched out his hand toward the little crumpled face. I could end this child's misery with just a touch, he thought, simply caress his cheek and the blood would pour out of him. And Andreï would become a sort of Angel of Death. The image instantly filled him with horror. If that was to be his destiny, he would fight it every step of the way. He let his hand fall and shook his head. He wanted to live and thrive. He wanted to love and laugh.</p> <p>The company of the dying and the freakish had taught him one thing: he was not one of them. Not entirely. But then, what was he? This remained for him to discover.</p>
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<p>Il adressa une prière silencieuse à un Dieu hypothétique, lui demandant d'abrégé le martyre de l'enfant. Puis il remit son chapeau et ses gants et rentra au palais pour la nuit.</p>	<p>He sent a silent prayer to a notional God, asking him to shorten the child's agony. Then he put on his hat and gloves and returned to the palace for the night.</p>
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*BI-TEXT 3*

<p>pp. 144-147</p> <p>Les camions de l'unité médical arrivèrent dans le port de Rostov pour séparer les morts des vivants et brûler les premiers et soigner les seconds.</p> <p>Un à un les survivants quittèrent le périmètre de sécurité et on le fit défiler jusqu'à une tente à l'entrée de laquelle ils durèrent entièrement de dévêtir et jeter leurs vêtements dans les tonneaux d'acier, puis ils pénétrèrent sous la tente et on les doucha avec un antiseptique. On leur donna une couverture et un bol de soupe chaude, et ensuite les survivants attendirent dans d'autres tentes qu'un des deux médecins puisse les examiner. Ils étaient encore craintifs et se demandaient ce qu'on allait faire d'eux, mais ils savaient qu'ils avaient été malades et qu'ils ne l'étaient plus, et c'était un soulagement.</p> <p>Les vivants nécessitaient les soins spécialisés des infirmières et des médecins, mais n'importe qui pouvait s'occuper des morts. Ils étaient deux. Un vieux qui ne parlait pas beaucoup et un jeune avec des lunettes cerclées de métal. On ne savait pas ce qu'ils avaient fait pour qu'on leur</p>	<p>The trucks from the medical unit arrived in the port of Rostov to separate the living from the dead, to treat the former and burn the latter.</p> <p>One by one, the survivors left the security perimeter and were marched in single file to the entrance of a tent, where they had to strip naked and throw their clothes into steel barrels. Then they entered the tent and were showered with antiseptic. They were given a blanket and a bowl of hot soup; they then went into other tents and waited to be examined by one of the two doctors. They were still fearful and wondered what would be done with them, but they knew they had been ill and no longer were, which was some reassurance.</p> <p>The living required the specialised care of doctors and nurses, but anyone could take care of the dead. There were two of them, an old man who spoke hardly a word and a youth with wire-rimmed glasses. They had no idea what they had done to deserve this assignment,</p>
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<p>confie ce travail, mais ils le faisaient sans rechigner.</p> <p>Ils actionnèrent la pompe et, avec le tuyau et la lance à incendie, ils arrosèrent le pavé et les cadavres, chassant les mouches et noyant les asticots. Un camion recula sur la place et déchargea de sa benne un monticule de chaux vive. Les deux hommes prirent chacun une pelle et étalèrent un peu de chaux sur les cadavres. Le jeune avec des lunettes portait des gants et un masque de chirurgien sur le nez et la bouche. Le vieux portait seulement un masque.</p> <p>Vers midi ils prirent leur déjeuner à l'écart des cadavres. Le jeune tentait de faire la conversation, mais le vieux se contentait la plupart du temps de hocher la tête, alors ils finirent leur repas en silence puis essuyèrent leurs mains sur leur pantalon et se remirent au travail. Le jeune prenait les cadavres aux épaules et le vieux agrippait leurs chevilles et ensemble, dans un geste très bien coordonné par l'habitude et la répétition, ils balançaient les corps et les projetaient dans la benne du camion qui avait transporté la chaux jusqu'ici. Quand ils eurent fini, quand ils eurent chargé les cadavres, le vieux donna une grande tape sur le côté du camion et le chauffeur partit avec sa cargaison et traversa la ville en direction de la fosse qu'avaient creusée les soldats dans le sol meuble d'un champ de patates abandonné.</p> <p>Merde, dit le vieux une fois le camion parti.</p> <p>Quoi ?</p> <p>On en a oublié un.</p> <p>Tu blagues.</p>	<p>but they set about the work without complaint.</p> <p>They worked the pump and with pipe and fire hose sprayed the pavement and the corpses, driving away flies and drowning maggots. A truck backed onto the square and tipped out a load of quicklime. The two men each took a shovel and scattered a little lime on the corpses. The young one with the glasses wore gloves and a surgeon's mask over his mouth and nose. The old man wore only the mask.</p> <p>Around noon, they ate their lunch at some distance from the corpses. The youth tried to make conversation, but the old man, for the most part, merely nodded, so they finished their meal in silence, wiped their hands on their trousers and went back to work. The young man took each corpse by the shoulders while the old one lifted by the ankles and together, in one smooth, well-practised motion, they swung the body up and threw it onto the back of the truck that had delivered the quicklime. Once they had finished, once they had loaded all the corpses, the old man banged on the side of the truck and the driver left with his cargo, crossing the city to the pit the soldiers had dug in the loose soil of an abandoned potato field.</p> <p>"Shit," said the old man after the truck had driven off.</p> <p>"What?"</p> <p>"We missed one."</p> <p>"You're joking."</p>
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<p>Regarde.</p> <p>Qu'est-ce qu'il fait là ?</p> <p>Le vieux ne répondit pas.</p> <p>Comment on a fait pour l'oublier ?</p> <p>Le vieux se grattait le crâne.</p> <p>Le jeune haussa les épaules. Il regarda dans la direction qu'avait prise le camion.</p> <p>Qu'est-ce qu'on fait ?</p> <p>Le vieux s'approcha du corps. Il ne semblait pas particulièrement abîmé bien qu'il fût maigre et vêtu de haillons taillés. Il était couché sur le ventre et c'était un homme aux cheveux gris et noirs. Le vieux se pencha et retourna le corps sur le dos, mais le visage ne lui disait rien.</p> <p>Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça ?</p> <p>Le plus jeune se pencha à son tour et tendit la main vers la poitrine de l'homme et la plongea dans l'échancrure de la chemise. C'était un petit miroir pas plus grand que la paume d'une main, encadré de baguettes de noyer joliment sculptées. Le miroir était attaché au cou de l'homme par un lacet de cuir.</p> <p>Le jeune homme à lunettes fit passer la courroie de cuir par-dessus la tête du cadavre. Il se redressa et lut l'inscription gravée au fer rouge dans la baguette de noyer.</p> <p><i>Juste moi.</i></p> <p>Tu y comprends quelque chose ?</p> <p>Le vieux ne répondit pas. Il regarda alentour. Ils étaient seuls, le jeune et lui. Les soldats étaient partis, le camion était parti.</p> <p>Aide-moi.</p> <p>Il pris le cadavre par les chevilles et</p>	<p>“Look.”</p> <p>“What’s he doing there?”</p> <p>The old man didn’t answer.</p> <p>“How could we have missed him?”</p> <p>The old man scratched his head.</p> <p>The young man shrugged. He looked off in the direction the truck had taken.</p> <p>“What do we do?”</p> <p>The old man went up to the corpse. Though thin and dressed in ripped and ragged clothes, it didn’t look to be in bad shape: a man with black, grey-streaked hair, lying face down. The old man stooped and turned the body over, but the face told him nothing.</p> <p>“What’s that?”</p> <p>Now the young one bent over the body, stretched out his arm and reached under the collar of the man’s shirt. He pulled out a little mirror no bigger than the palm of his hand. It hung from a leather strap around the man’s neck and was framed in finely sculpted rings of walnut wood.</p> <p>The young man slipped the strap from around the corpse’s head. He stood up and read the inscription burnt into the walnut frame:</p> <p><i>“Myself alone.”</i></p> <p>“That mean anything to you?”</p> <p>The old man didn’t answer. He looked around the square. They were alone, himself and the young man. The soldiers had left; the truck was gone</p> <p>“Give me a hand.”</p> <p>He took the corpse by the ankles and</p>
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<p>attendit que le jeune mette le miroir dans sa poche et remette ses gants et glisse ses mains sous les aisselles du cadavre, puis ensemble ils le soulevèrent. Le vieux indiqua le fleuve du menton. Ils transportèrent le corps jusqu'au quai puis, après avoir vérifié encore une fois qu'ils étaient seuls, ils laissèrent tomber le corps dans le Don puis retournèrent vers le périmètre de sécurité, car il fallait encore étendre de la chaux sur le sol puis tout nettoyer avec la lance à incendie.</p> <p>Le corps coula en tournant lentement sur lui-même. Des rubans de bulles s'en dégageaient et venaient crever à la surface, longs chapelets d'oxygène qui étaient les ficelles gazeuses d'une marionnette abandonnée par son manipulateur.</p> <p>Dans la mouvante lueur sous-marine aux couleurs effacées, le visage d'Andreï semblait reposé. Refermés pour de bon sur l'image de la jeune femme et de son enfant, ses yeux accueillait sans ciller le vide chatoyant des jeux de lumière que le cerveau n'enregistrait plus. Son corps se déposa sur le fond rocheux avec une douceur qu'il n'avait pas connu de son vivant. Désormais il resta immobile, oscillant seulement au gré des courants de fond qui l'ancrèrent peu à peu entre deux rochers et un morceau de ferraille, restes rouillés d'un essieu de remorque qu'en des temps plus prospères on avait préféré jeter à l'eau plutôt que d'en récupérer le métal.</p> <p>En le voyant arriver, les goujons s'effrayèrent et allèrent se réfugier plus loin, sous des rochers et derrière les piliers du quai. Au bout d'un certain temps, comme il ne se passait rien, ils reprirent</p>	<p>waited while the young man put the mirror into his pocket, put on his gloves and slid his hands under the corpse's shoulders, they then lifted together. The old man jerked his chin toward the river. They carried the body to the wharf and, after checking once again that they were alone, dropped it into the Don. Then they returned to the security perimeter as they still had to spread quicklime over the pavement and wash everything down with the fire hose.</p> <p>The body sank in slow somersaults, uncoiling, in its descent, ribbons of bubbles that burst on the surface of the water, long rosaries of oxygen – the airy strings of a puppet discarded by his puppeteer.</p> <p>In the muted colours of the rippling submarine glow, Andreï's face looked rested. Closed forever on the image of the young woman and her child, his eyes received without a flicker the void of shimmering, shifting light that his brain no longer comprehended. His body came to rest on the stony riverbed with a gentleness it had never known in life. And there it stayed, swayed only by the bottom currents that gradually anchored it between two rocks and an old piece of iron, the rusted remains of a trailer axle that, in more prosperous times, had been tossed into the water as no-one thought it worth the bother of selling for scrap.</p> <p>The gudgeon took fright at the descending body and sought refuge behind the rocks and wharf pillars. After a short while, seeing nothing amiss, they calmly returned to</p>
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<p>tranquillement leurs activités de poissons.</p> <p>Certains d'entre eux s'enhardirent et goûtèrent la chair quand elle commença à se décomposer. Ils frétilaient, arrachant des petits bouts visqueux qu'ils devaient parfois abandonner aux crustacés qui les leur disputaient. Puis d'autres poissons vinrent, plus gros, qui chassèrent les petits en périphérie, et il furent de plus en plus nombreux à se bousculer pour se repaître du corps. Bientôt il n'en resta que des ossements qui, avec le temps, se pétrifièrent.</p> <p>Encore quelques années, et plus rien ne les distinguaient du fond rocheux.</p>	<p>their fishy activities.</p> <p>Some, growing bold, tasted the flesh once it began to decompose. They wriggled about, tearing off small, slimy morsels, losing them on occasion in fights with crayfish. Later, other, larger, fish arrived and chased the smaller ones to the edge of the circle. As their numbers grew, they jostled to feast on the body. Soon, all that was left were the bones, which calcified over time.</p> <p>Within a few years, nothing would remain to distinguish them from the stones of the riverbed.</p>
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***APPENDIX D***

*THE OYSTER'S WORK*

This appendix contains the complete translation of *Le travail de l'huître*. The page numbers within the text represent the pagination of sections in the original French-language edition of the novel.

**JEAN BARBE**

**THE OYSTER'S WORK**

**A Novel**

Translated from the French by  
Dennis McKearney

*For my living,  
and my dead.*

*The oyster closes for a time on its pain  
It hides and waits within the depths  
We are like flesh and crusted sand:  
We are what hurts and what we hurt.  
Where you see beauty, I see only slaughter  
In our wretched lives limned with nacre.*

*Geoffroi de Malbæuf, La légende du siècle.*

## ***THE SOLITUDE OF MIRRORS***

pp. 13-16

At the moment of his disappearance, Andreï Leonovitch was once again proposing the assassination of the Tsar.

He was a very young man, tall, dark and strong, torn between an anger that never left him and a shyness that kept him from expressing it. He had grown too quickly and his puppyish clumsiness still made him blush. He envied the confidence of his elders, lied about his age and wore a beard to conceal his round cheeks, but instead of aging him, these wisps gave him an odd look not at all fashionable in the capital, whose subtleties completely escaped him.

His mother had died giving birth to him. The aunt who had taken him in often blamed him for it. She was a sour, miserly woman who had as good as sold Andreï's sister to a travelling horse trader. As for his father, he was a confirmed drunk and a woodcutter into the bargain. This unwise combination of axework and alcohol had left him paralysed following an accident in the forest. But though the lower half of his body was dead, his arms were as knottily muscled as ever, which the young Andreï often learned to his regret whenever he had the misfortune to pass within reach.

In such a small Siberian village – a few dozen houses at most huddled around a sawmill – everyone knew everyone, there was no getting away from it. The son of Leon you were born, the son of Leon you would remain until the end of your days. Hardly an enticing prospect when the Leon in question was good only for drinking himself into a stupor. The day he turned sixteen, Andreï left without a word of goodbye. From within

the fog of alcohol which constantly enveloped him, his father had probably never noticed his son's disappearance.

Andreï's fixed intention was to invent for himself a life different from the one he had lived up to then. But no sooner had he arrived in the maelstrom that was Saint Petersburg then he found himself consumed by envy and overwhelmed by disgust at the display of wealth put on by the upper classes. In the poorer parts of town where he and his kind were left to rot, Andreï was unable reconcile this ambivalence: he wanted both to help the poor and to flee them.

Nowhere at home, he spent his days doing menial labour that was physically demanding but which left his mind free to wander in pursuit of any number of contradictory desires. He chopped kindling for a brothel and once a week hauled vegetables to the marketplace. The few coins he earned were never enough to allow him to eat his fill.

One evening just a few weeks after his arrival in the capital, he was wondering where he could spend the night when he saw a student, too drunk to walk, collapse outside a tavern door. Andreï went over and was immediately hired by the young man to help get him home. Legless he may have been, but the student still had a voice. Perched unsteadily on Andreï's shoulders, he shouted political slogans all the way home; they must have been funny because he laughed his head off the entire time. The student rented a room in a respectable boarding house. He guided Andreï to the third floor by pulling on his ears and shouting commands as if he were an old horse. When they reached his door, he magically found the use of his legs once more and dismissed Andreï with a handful of coins and some political pamphlets, which he stuffed into Andreï's pocket with a wink.

Later that night, sheltered from the wind in an ally in the leather-workers' quarter, Andreï tried to read the tracts by the light of a tallow candle fixed to the damp wall. But since he was half asleep, he retained only one thing from these anarchist pamphlets by Netchaïev and Prudhon, but it was an idea so powerful that it seemed to illuminate his futile existence: just as an obstacle blocking the road must be removed, so the Tsar had to be eliminated for the Russian people to advance.

The simplicity of the logic enchanted him.

That night, rolled up in his fleece coat, shivering and hungry, he dreamed of it: he dreamed of the Great Fire. In his dream, he saw himself send a shot straight into the eye of the Tsar, and he saw thousands upon thousands chanting his name in gratitude.

From that time on, revolution became for him the muddled promise of a resolution not only to society's problems but to his own as well. He had always been acutely aware of his insignificance. Poor, uneducated, guilty, downtrodden, he punished himself in those moments when a distracted or distant Authority ignored him for a time. Andreï *was* the Russian people. Atheist he may have been, but with a fervour that was highly orthodox. Frozen in winter, tortured by mosquitoes in summer and filthy all year long, yet still so pure! A naïve and cruel child, terrified by his own nightmares, wonderstruck by a trifle, always thirsty, always hungry... This was the fate he wished to escape by eliminating the one called Alexander II, Tsar of all the Russias. By killing him, Andreï would unquestionably deliver his people from tyranny, but by the same stroke he would become *someone*. His name would be written in the history books. His picture would be published in the newspapers.

The next morning, he waited for the student outside the boarding house. He followed him and then approached him to discreetly offer his services. The young man laughed heartily before agreeing to put him to the test. Thereafter, Andrei Leonovitch reported each Wednesday afternoon to the backroom of a pub, bringing with him four bottles of good vodka – which, he had been assured, was the first ingredient of any successful revolution – and all the English tobacco he could lay his hands on.

His comrades accepted his offerings, held endless discussions and never once lifted a finger. These golden sons of the bourgeoisie had much more to lose than to gain in any revolution, and they knew it. Playing at conspiracy gave them a little thrill. In twenty years, they would wipe away a tear at the memory of these dangerous days of their youth, indeed the best days of their youth, along with the drinking bouts and the first time with a whore.

pp. 16-17

For thirteen months they had been sketching out plans that led nowhere. Andreï Leonovitch felt a growing impatience. Born into poverty, he feared that was where he would remain. Nor could he forget that he was as chaste as the driven snow, a virgin more terrified by the scent of a woman's perfume than by the Tsar's secret police. Though not without dreams, he possessed neither money nor land nor education and so had no hope of existing in the eyes of the men and woman who made this world go round – unless something extraordinary were to happen, and soon.

Which is why, that evening, when he again brought up his idea of a bomb along the Tsar's route, Andreï Leonovitch brought down his fist with such force that the bottle of vodka wobbled then toppled, sloshing its contents over the table before rolling off and smashing on the stone tiles. As Andreï lunged to catch the bottle, he knocked his head against the edge of the walnut table. He howled in pain and anger then shook his head to clear the stars dancing before his eyes.

The other members of the group had followed the course of the bottle without once giving a thought to saving it, as if this were an illustration of the inevitability of Fate. Only once Fate had played itself out did they come to their senses: two of them stooped to gather up the glass while a third rose to fetch another bottle from the sideboard. Within a few minutes, everything was back to normal and the meeting picked up where it had left off. But without Andreï Leonovitch because, though he was still present, everyone behaved as if he were not.

“Comrades, my plan, the Tsar...” said Andreï.

No-one answered him. No-one looked at him. The conspirators spoke quietly amongst themselves, working out their usual timid plans laced with dirty jokes. “This is no laughing matter,” repeated Andreï Leonovitch, but he may as well have been talking to the wall.

Never before had he been treated with such indifference. However much he insisted, flushed with anger and frustration, he soon had to face facts: his friends preferred to ignore him entirely rather than seriously consider assassinating the Tsar.

“Well, if that’s how it is...” he said as he headed toward the door. But dignity was not yet to be counted among his attributes. He turned on the threshold, his eyes welling with tears and, his voice trembling, pleaded and cursed in turn. But it was all in vain. In the end, carried away by anger, he slammed the door on his way out causing a mirror fell from the wall.

“Seven years of bad luck,” sniggered Andreï Leonovitch, who still believed it, a little.

pp. 18-21

Outside in the street, he muttered to himself in the last, warm rays of an autumn sun. Pedestrians, numerous in that part of town, paid him no heed; several jostled him without apology, but Andreï Leonovich had been so upset by his comrades outrageous treatment that he was insensible to the vexations of the world around him.

As always when he was in such a state, he wanted Eva's company, and it was toward her that he turned his steps. Eva: hair that defied all order, eyes that were mines of coal and a voice that was no more than a whisper. Finding her in a city of over 800,000 had seemed a miracle to him. A vast modern capital city where it was all too easy to fade unnoticed into the crowd. What might be an advantage to a would-be assassin of the Tsar was not without its drawbacks, made worse by poverty, solitude and a feeling of counting for nothing.

Eva was the child of peasants. Like him. And like him, she had sought some sort of refuge in Saint Petersburg, a way to reinvent herself, a means of escape from the misery that had been the lot of her kind for generations. She was a prostitute. And so? Not quite the new life she had dreamt of, but it kept body and soul together, and she managed it with such gentleness, such innocence, such feeling, that it was difficult to think of her as a lost woman. She quite simply gave herself away. She had a gift, and this gift was herself.

Whenever Andreï had a little money, he offered it to Eva so that she could rest for a time in his company. This noble gesture made him especially proud, though, in his heart, he longed for her to reach out to him since he was incapable of taking the first step. But until then, seated on her bed, he spoke to her of things he had never before spoken of:

his dead mother, his sour aunt, his bartered sister and his drunken father. He spoke to her about everything, everything but his political ambitions because he feared her disapproval. And besides, he had been sworn to secrecy.

She would listen patiently to his litany of woes, looking at him with coal-black eyes and gently scold him in her soft voice. Then, when the hour was up, he would be on his way, his youthful heart momentarily released from the miseries of poverty and dreams, ignorance and scorn.

The moment he arrived, he pounded again and again on the brothel door with the flat of his hand without obtaining the least response. He thought perhaps that it was too early, that they were washing the sheets, but when he stepped back he could see through an open curtain that there was movement on the floor above.

Just then, a boyar out slumming walked up to the door, knocked twice with the knuckle of his forefinger and was immediately admitted by Micha, the doorman. After ushering the client in, Micha craned his neck out of the doorway and glanced up and down the street. He then closed the door without appearing to give even a second's thought to Andreï standing directly in front of his face.

Too shocked to react straightaway, Andreï Leonovich was building up to an earthy curse when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a carriage bearing down on him. The street was wide but neither the horse nor the coachman seemed bothered to avoid a collision. Waving his arms, Andreï turned to face them. Not a second too soon he threw himself sideways smashing his shoulder into brothel door, which crashed open.

Andreï landed on his hands and knees on a Persian carpet as the door bounced off the wall and slammed shut. His brain took in the scene: five or six women in varying

states of undress and three men openly evaluating the merchandise. On a stool near the door, the porter, Micha, was calmly reading his newspaper. Something was not right. No reaction at all to his untimely arrival, not a cry, not a shout, not a single startled movement. Everyone went about his or her business without paying him the least attention.

Andreï rushed to the stairway and flung himself up three steps at a time. He ran past one, two, three doors and threw open the fourth. He saw Eva, stretched out on her bed. He felt immense relief even though she was naked, lying on her back with her legs pulled up and her knees spread wide giving him a view a patch of pubic hair as dishevelled as the mass on her head.

“Well,” said Eva, looking toward him.

There was no gentleness in this voice; these brash, grating tones were not like her at all.

“I’m coming,” answered a man’s voice from the corner of the room behind the open door.

Andreï took a step into the room. And saw that the man had removed his socks and was moving forward: a paunchy middle-aged man whose half-erect penis beat time as he walked toward the bed.

“Oh, my big, bad wolf!” whispered the woman.

This was not *his* Eva. This was some other, not the Eva of his desires but rather the Eva of this old man’s fantasies. Andreï Leonovitch understood it all in an instant, just as he understood that the other Eva, *his* Eva, would never have let him see this side of her trade if she had known he was in the room. He turned his back on the opening scene of

this act (sighing, grunting, limbs entangling and wetness), terror-stricken, he went up to the little dressing-table and chair on which the client had hung his clothes. He saw the clothes – stockings, shirt, trousers, braces, vest and jacket – he saw them reflected in the dressing-table mirror, just as he saw the bed over his shoulder, but the mirror showed no trace of those he heard panting and rutting just behind him.

What he saw was himself, Andreï Leonovitch, alone, completely alone, standing in his peasant's coat and boots, his thick, curly beard, his two dark eyes as large as saucers – two terror-filled eyes looking back at him as if they were staring at a ghost.

pp. 21-27

He felt he was suffocating. Gasping for air, he ran from Eva's room, and as much as threw himself down the stairway; he crossed the entry hall, with neither whore nor client taking any notice of him, and found himself once again in the street where he had been standing only moments before unaware that anything was amiss. He ran like someone possessed or, rather, like someone dispossessed since he was now aware of the signs of his non-existence. He lunged through the crowd, and the inhabitants of Saint Petersburg formed a sea of indifference, which parted before him and drew together behind him showing no trace of his passage.

The child still lived in the man's body. How many times had he run through fields and forests to escape blows and bullying? How many times had he hoped that, if only could he ran fast enough, he would outrun his despair, outrun himself and leave behind him his troubles and his tears? Perhaps now he ran with the hope that the physical effort would return some substance to his body and return him to the reality of the world. But he was, as usual, left with only burning lungs and cramped thighs. He ran onto Foundry Bridge over the Little Neva, and slowed, sweating and grimacing; he was more than halfway across when he had to stop, unable to take another step.

An old man was throwing some stale bread to the gulls, which scattered feathers as they flew about fighting over the pieces. The old man took the crust, crushed it in the palm of his hand and threw the crumbs high into the air. They rained down onto Andreï Leonovitch's back and shoulders as he was bent over trying with difficulty to catch his breath. The flock of gulls surrounded him – a swirling mass of beak and claw digging into his back, neck and face. Panic-stricken, Andreï straightened up into a white and

black chaos of piecing cries. He waved his arms wildly trying to defend himself against the flapping horror, but the birds paid him no attention as they fought fiercely over the crumbs of bread.

As Andreï backed away under the assault, his lower back struck the guardrail of the bridge with such force that he toppled over the side and into the cold waters of the Little Neva. He sank into the water under the combined weight of his drenched sheepskin and his heavy-soled boots.

At first, he had the impression that he had slipped into a silken silence. The cold soothed his injuries and numbed his senses. After a moment, he was aware that he had touched the bottom. The water was crystalline. Everything was calm. He wondered why he should make the immense effort to return to the surface.

But something up ahead was moving, swarming. Something awful and shifting that scattered and reformed with nightmarish logic. Andreï Leonovitch opened his mouth and let out a great bubble of air in a splutter of panic. A vast school of tiny silvery fish slim as blades bore down on him with the clear intention of going right through him.

For years afterwards, this nightmare of fish would return to haunt him from time to time. One young man fell into the Little Neva, but a different man emerged. Every time he resigned himself to boarding a boat to cross a river, a lake or the sea he would have to fight back nausea. Even in the heart of the great African desert, when his beard was already threaded with grey, the vision of that quivering, compact mass would come to disturb his sleep, each mouthful of brackish water drunk from his goatskin gourd recalled the sensation of hundreds of tiny limp, slimy, cold bodies against his face and naked torso. Everything began there, he decided later. Even if his actual disappearance

had occurred sometime before, his awareness of his fate was revealed to him only in that moment, in that school of fish which had wanted to slice through his body.

For the fish were unconscious of both his mass and his form. They encountered an obstacle that did not exist for them and saw no reason to change direction. They slid over his body searching for a way through. They pressed around him until they enveloped him like a slimy writhing suit of armour. They were in his eyes, ears, beard and mouth; they were in the folds of his clothes. It was both horrible and, from an educational point of view, very instructive.

His lungs were bursting from the breath he had been holding all this time. Andreï began to struggle at the bottom of the Little Neva. He struck out wildly trying to chase the fish from his eyes and mouth. Beneath his feet, he felt the stone and silt of the riverbed. He struggled to free himself from his fleece-lined coat, and then crouched down to push himself off the bottom... and burst free of the water up to his waist. This section of the Little Neva was fairly shallow, while he was standing on the bottom, his hair had been waving on the surface of the river. He leapt onto the riverbank to breathe, pushed now by the cold which was seeping into him.

Later, Andreï could never remember clearly what happened next. He broke a window in one of the well-to-do houses facing the quay; he must have taken off his wet clothes because when he awoke he was lying naked in a soft bed under a mountain of furs and duvets. He was feverish and very weak, which explained why he reacted without surprise to the presence of an old woman snoring peacefully beside him. He had become delirious and, though shivering from cold, he had soaked the sheets with sweat. At some point he became aware that the woman had got up to squat over the chamber pot for a

long, leisurely piss and then got back into bed. When he finally woke up, the old woman was no longer there, and he was ravenous.

He draped a blanket over his shoulders and went in search of the kitchen, when he found the pantry he ate his fill standing up. At the same time, the old woman was heating some water for tea showing no awareness of the presence of an intruder.

It was a strange intimacy. Andreï Leonovitch could not prevent himself from closing the blanket around him as he watched the old woman who, with eyes half closed, produced a variety of little noises in her throat as she stirred her tea. That she could not see him was now a clear though bizarre fact. But nor did she seem disturbed at the sight of a blanket floating in the air. He decided to experiment a little. He hung the blanket over the back of a chair and stepped back. A moment or so later, the old woman reached out, took the blanket and spread it over her skinny thighs. Andreï dropped a spoon onto the floor and moved several objects around the table without attracting any attention; he banged a pot with a ladle and still she did not react.

She had picked up the spoon as if she herself had dropped it, but she started in horror when she went back to the bedroom and saw the pile of wet and reeking clothes that Andreï had left on the floor. He rushed over to pick them up before she could throw them in the rubbish. The old woman rubbed her eyes as if she had been hallucinating. She looked again and then went round the room trying to sniff out the odour that had mysteriously disappeared.

Andreï went up to the woman and placed his hand on her shoulder, but immediately withdrew it with a cry of terror: she was as cold as death, and her skin was as unyielding as that of a corpse.

Andreï stepped back and bit his knuckle until he drew blood, taking pleasure in the pain. He was alive. But so was the old woman, who now returned to the kitchen. She rinsed her teacup, placed it on the draining board and left the room, scuffing her slippers on the floor as she went.

He tried to think about what had happened to him. His childhood fears rose up like the contents of a stomach after a rancid meal. Without knowing why, he wanted to smother his tears. The only words that came to him were: phantom, spectre, ghost, and though he struggled to drive them away, it seemed that only these old folk tales were able to explain what was happening to him.

He put on his clothes, which now smelt of the sea. Three dead fish fell onto the carpet. They were still there an hour later, when the old woman found them. She bent over them wondering how they could have got there. With a twinge of regret, she decided to throw them out since they were no longer fresh enough to fry.

pp. 28-30

The wind had swung round to the north during the night, and the dew was frozen to the pavement making each step precarious. In exchange, the cool air was clear as glass giving everything a surreal clarity. The light glinted from the windows in the facades of buildings stained ochre by the rising sun. The sky was such a deep blue that it made Andreï dizzy and forced him to lower his eyes. A horseman passed by. Andreï could see each hair of horse's glistening coat with such mad precision that he no longer thought "horse" but rather *shoulder, nose, nostril, fossa, withers, neck, fetlock*. The thing called "horse" had vanished behind its constituent parts. Andreï's brain was astray in a labyrinth of detail as if the world had lost all cohesion.

Taking small careful steps, he searched the eyes of passers-by in vain for some acknowledgement. With each exhalation, a thick cloud of vapour rose from his mouth to disappear instantly. As his leather soles slipped on the icy pavement he watched his breath vanish, he carefully examined the eddies of steam. He breathed more and more slowly, more and more deeply. He stopped walking in order to see more clearly his breath fade away in to the air, just as he had done as a child in the first cold of the winter. He leaned his elbows on the stone wall bordering the Neva. He could feel the contest of sun and cold air against his cheek. What was behind the keenness of his sensations? What did it have to do with his strange condition? He had never heard of such a phenomenon. The ghost stories his aunt used to tell him always came with a moral. One became a spectre because of some sin. As for his father's hallucinations, they were the result of alcohol: his visions were peopled with figures long dead, whose vengeance, to judge by his cries and shouts, the drunkard feared. Bewildered, Andreï asked himself what he had

done to merit such a punishment, but he was unable to reason it out, his thoughts flew off in all directions leaving him unable to hold onto a single one before it vanished just like his breath in the cold morning air.

What had happened when he had struck the table with his fist? Had some miraculous event lit up the moment? a bolt from the sky, an eclipse, a rain of frogs? He could remember nothing in particular, nothing extraordinary, nothing stood out, except, of course, for the fact that he had knocked his head against the table. But he had received more than his fill of blows over the years, with nothing out of the ordinary happening. Or else he had gone mad.

However, apart from the drawback of being invisible, he felt well. His lungs took in cold air easily enough and sent it out warm. He clenched his hands in his pockets and felt tendons and muscles working. He felt his knuckles crack. The rumbling of his stomach told him that he was hungry. Were these the impressions of a madman? Did a madman have an appetite? Did a ghost's mouth water at the thought of pickled herring or salted cucumbers? He must think calmly.

The meeting of conspirators had taken place the previous day. At the day's end, he had fallen into the water. He had slept the entire night at the old woman's house. He no longer felt feverish. His youth had got the better of the chill. That made it a little less than twelve hours since he had disappeared. Too early for anyone to worry about him... But who was there to worry in any case? At the meeting, his absence had not surprised his fellow conspirators. One moment, Andreï was there and the next, he was gone. One might have expected a reaction of some sort as with the magician's trick when the bird

suddenly disappeared under the silk handkerchief. One of the conspirators might at least have asked, “Hey, where did Andreï Leonovitch go?”

They had continued the meeting as if Andreï had never been there. So it was not just his body that had disappeared but his very existence and all memory of him? A terrifying prospect opened up before him, one which he was not yet capable of exploring. Was it conceivable that all memory of him had been erased from the minds of men?

pp. 31-34

The sun had warmed the paving stones enough to melt the thin layer of ice that covered them.

Andreï continued walking. He must see Eva again.

She alone, in all Saint Petersburg, knew him well enough to notice his absence. The intangible bonds they had woven over the months could not be so easily broken. This was love, though he had been far too timid to admit it before.

But now, from the bottom of the abyss into which he had been flung, Andreï raised his face toward the glimmer of hope whose name was that of the first of women. The only caresses Andreï had ever known were the blows he received whenever he wandered too close to his father's bed, and he now wished with all his heart to curl up in the cradle of Eva's arms.

Andreï no longer ran, and as he walked, he wept. He wept over his harsh and meagre life, a life stripped bare of tenderness, the pitiless life of a whipped dog. Never before had he felt such an urgent need for another to confirm his own existence. This was love he thought: to dissolve like a breath of air into warm skin softer than his own; to lose oneself and be reborn. Oh Eva, Andreï thought. He understood what it would cost if he could never see her again and, worse still, to never again be seen by her. His salvation lay in her eyes.

He found her still asleep, in the same room which served as her workplace. At rest, her face now bare of make up, and her hair tied in two braids gave Eva such a childlike air that Andreï took pleasure in just looking at her. He hesitated to wake her

before asking himself if he even could, and in fact, when he finally made up his mind to try, he failed.

As the house slowly stirred awake with the servants cleaning up after the excesses of the previous night, and as the sun began to light up lands farther west, Andrei searched through Eva's belongings. He found neither pen nor paper. He finally decided on some kohl eyeliner and a nightshirt. With a trembling hand, he wrote in large, badly formed letters:

*Eva*

*im here you cant see me but im here something happened im in the room  
please beleve me im here with you in yor bed i love you.*

*Andrei*

So that his message would be easy to find, he draped the nightshirt over the mirror facing the bed; that way it would be impossible to miss. Then he returned to the young woman, and with a boldness he would never had exhibited when he was visible, he slipped in beside her under the quilt.

As with the old woman's, Eva's skin felt cold and thick, leathery like overcooked meat from the day before left in the icebox. But this was better than nothing. He hoped that, given time, Eva's coolness and the heat from his own body would balance each other.

He wrapped his arms around her, his chest against her back and his knees nestled behind hers. At the very least, the scent of her freshly washed hair reached him

unhindered. With his eyes closed, he could dream of her, and this was how he fell briefly asleep as he waited for her to wake.

He woke after a few minutes and felt something cold and sticky under his fingers. He jumped out of bed and as he looked at the young woman he covered his mouth with his hands to smother the cry that tried to force its way out of his throat.

Still half-asleep, Eva rolled onto her back. Her eyelids fluttered and opened wide. Her pupils adjusted to the daylight as she stared at the ceiling. Her mouth opened over her little white teeth and she let out a cry of terror. Blood was streaming from her nostrils and her ears. Screaming, she flung off the blankets: the sheets were splashed with the blood that pulsed from between her legs as if she had been cut open with a knife.

Andreï recoiled from this horrific vision until he backed into the wall. Eva sat up in bed screaming, howling, hardly breathing. She placed her hands between her legs and brought them up stained in brownish blood. The odour of cold steel filled the room. There was the sound of steps on the other side of the door, which burst open. Roused by her cries, the girls were coming to her aid.

Someone shouted to fetch a doctor. Three or four woman in nightgowns crowded about Eva, working themselves up as they tried to calm her down. A plump blond whom Andreï knew as Natacha snatched the nightshirt from the mirror, balled it up and stuffed it between Eva's thighs to staunch the blood.

For over an hour, they did what they could for her. The doctor arrived after the haemorrhage had stopped and did no more than have the patient drink a potion intended to restore her strength. After a perfunctory examination, he prescribed rest and left the room with a shrug. For years, his specialisation had been whore's pox, which had to be

diagnosed to protect the clientele He would inform the madam of Eva's strange ailment; the girl would doubtless be turned out. It was no concern of his; he was paid by the brothel-keeper.

One by one, the girls left the room. Their workday was starting. Eva had fallen asleep, more pale than ever. Andrei did not doubt for an instant that he had caused her blood to flow. Only a few steps separated him from the woman in whom he had placed all his hopes, and he had almost killed her with an embrace. Tears streamed down his cheeks, but he also felt a measure of relief to know without a doubt that his old suspicion had become a certainty: he was not made to know love, or at least to know only the suffering that came from it. Throwing a last glance at Eva's now quiet silhouette, he had the feeling that he was leaving forever the land of his childhood and stepping straight into the adult world, filled with bitterness and regret.

He left the room, turning away from the mirror, which returned his solitary blood-soaked reflection.

pp. 35-38

He wandered for a long time, eating and drinking his fill, too dazed to think. When he was drunk, he tried and failed to get into fights. He caused several men to bleed by embracing them, and one pretty woman by kissing her hand. All human warmth was denied him, and despite the soft elegant clothes he stole to replace his own, he shivered with cold that was not of this world.

When he could stand no more, he would collapse indifferently into an unoccupied room in a mansion or onto a straw mattress in a building site dormitory. He took his food from the plates of others, and spent most of his energy keeping a relentless, nameless fear at bay.

One afternoon, he climbed onto to a moving cart to sleep for a while. As he slept he left the city and awoke in a country of lakes and forests which stretched all the way to the East.

No matter how hard he tried to banish it, the memory of Eva in agony haunted him day and night. The vision returned to him when the setting sun lit up the countryside and nausea overwhelmed him. The odour of blood never left him. He could picture no future. Dazed with suffering, it took him five days to realize that he was retracing the journey that had taken him to Saint Petersburg nearly two years before. This at least gave him the impression that he was heading somewhere.

He climbed aboard vehicles that bumped along muddy roads, and stopped when they stopped in the miserable little villages where his own kind lived: a few ramshackle dwellings huddled at the intersection of two rutted roads, which the falling snow would render impassable. The miserable inhabitants loved to complain about the brutality of

their masters but did nothing at all to improve their lot. And if fortune were to smile on them, they would fall over each other in their rush to ape their tormentors with an eagerness that would have been comical were it not even more tragic. Andreï had believed that all of that was behind him. But nothing here had changed in centuries.

He passed through grasslands and crossed mountains ranges worn down with the passage of time. Now and again, under the snow that now blanketed the land, he could make out the regularity of cultivated fields that told of a village nearby. Such a vast country! And there lay the tragedy. The country was so vast that one felt small, crushed by this immense land, isolated by unimaginable distances. At the speed of the plough horse, Russia was indeed eternal since it took an eternity to cross. And this was how Andreï passed much of the winter, snatching black bread from peasants and stealing eggs from under the chickens.

Andreï did not understand the reasons that pushed him toward the East. He may have believed that in returning to his origins he would regain some of his substance. Or he may have vaguely felt that the great city was responsible for his condition. For country people, Moscow and Saint Petersburg were sinks of disease, the mouths of Hell. This was exactly what had attracted him at first. Perhaps there was some truth to it.

When blizzards did not hold them up, they were delayed by the state of the roads, which sometimes disappeared entirely beneath the unbroken snow. There was also the occasional attack by bandits, with little harm done apart from those who lost their meagre possessions. Most of the time Andreï rode on the carriage roof, behind the coachman, buried under furs. Despite the cold, he slept often. He watched the sky when the stars were out and shrunk from any form of contact with the other travellers.

Once, blocked by heavy snowfalls, he spent six days living in a coach inn. He took advantage of the long days of confinement to put some order into his thoughts, to try and understand a little better the nature of his misfortune. With some difficulty, he managed to produce a list representing what he had learned up to that point:

1. *no living things humans animals and insects can see me or smell me*
2. *if i carry something it disappears with me*
3. *im invisible for other people but for me nothing is different im the same im hungry im thirsty i feel pain*
4. *if i try to let someone know im there it doesnt work*
5. *if i touch another person i make them bleed and maybe kill them*

After hours of unaccustomed concentration, Andrei shook his head as he contemplated the sheet of paper covered in childish writing. Everything he had written, he knew already. The words taught him nothing new. The words did not tell him *why*. The words did not tell him how to *undo* what had been done. The words did not tell him how to return to his old life, which perhaps had not been quite so miserable as he had thought. Or perhaps it truly was, but there was worse, as he now knew. He crumpled the paper and tossed it away, just missing the hearth. Andrei imagined that if one of the other travellers tried to read it, he would see nothing but a blank sheet of paper. He stooped to pick it up, smoothed it out, folded it carefully and put it in his pocket. And he kept it with him always. He was careful to put it in his pocket when he changed clothes. He kept it for

years until it fell to pieces, stained and torn at the folds, the ink faded to invisibility, like him.

pp. 39-41

He soon recognized the countryside: this hill, that field, the strange egg-shaped boulder... the edge of the forest had noticeably retreated under the assault of axe and saw. The village was hidden round a bend in the road, but Andreï could already smell the fresh sawn lumber from the mill. Against the motionless panorama, a few columns of smoke rose up, straight and thick, as if frozen in place before they could reach the sky.

Andreï got down from the still rolling carriage. He wanted to return to his home on foot. These thirty or so dwellings were all his youth. He had not thought about what he would do once he arrived, believing that something would come to mind, but nothing did.

He had wanted to escape this misery, this imprisonment within walls of distance and emptiness. These were the mental barriers he had exploded with the help of the shapeless bombs of anarchist rhetoric.

He searched his past for happy memories of his childhood, convinced that there must be some. He walked into the village. Half buried in snow, the houses seemed low. Every visible surface was covered in ice. A narrow path walled with snow led the front door of each house. All was still and quiet, but a pale light shone from these snowy caves. Even the dogs were inside. It was an early February morning.

He stopped in front of his aunt's house, which seemed even smaller than he had remembered. In the tiny windows with their uneven panes still hung the same heavy cotton curtains discoloured with pipe smoke. Andreï fought to control his breathing and calm the wild beating of his heart. He did not expect his entrance to be noticed. Ties of blood would not make him visible. But in this house, he hoped to find evidence of his

own existence, the reality of which he had begun to doubt. He quickly crossed the few steps to the door and went in.

In front of the stove, a woman, who was not his aunt, kindled the fire. Seated at the table in the weak halo of an oil lamp, a man, who was not his father, drank tea from a large glass.

“Who are you?” asked Andreï.

“Good tea,” said the man.

“Hmm. You want some bread?” the woman asked.

The man grunted. The woman added a small log to the now-crackling fire.

“We’ll have to buy some grain,” the man said. “Ivan’ll give us credit.”

“And how’ll we pay him back?”

“We’ll pay him back.”

“You say that every winter, and every winter we sink deeper in debt.”

“You’d rather leave the cattle to starve?”

Andreï walked farther into the house to look into the bedroom, but it was empty and the bed was made.

The woman sighed. The man ignored her.

The furniture was the same, and the icons on the wall were familiar, but the smells he associated with his father were not to be found in this place: piss and vodka, cold tobacco, frustration and hard luck.

He asked himself, Did I live here?

He could not convince himself. Had he even existed?

Am I some ghost dreaming he once lived?

“Where is Leon Denissovitch?” he asked aloud. “Where is Clara Ivanovna? Who are you?”

He left without waiting for an answer that could not come. He ran to the next house and threw open the door, and then the next and the next and every house in the village without finding any trace of his parents. Everything looked smaller than he remembered: people, objects, distances and time. He wanted to check the parish records for evidence of his birth and his parents’ marriage, but the church had burnt down and the only remaining village archives were the gravestones in the cemetery...

Andreï took a shovel from the gardener’s shed and began to shovel snow away from the headstones. He searched for the names of his relations in the vague hope that they were dead and so at least give him proof that he himself was alive, but though he thought he recognized many of the names carved into wood or stone, nowhere could he find the stone where he had so often as a child read his mother’s name with tears in his eyes.

Sweating in spite of the cold and leaning on the shovel among the now snowless wooden crosses and stone slabs, Andreï thought that his father and his aunt might have left the village to live elsewhere. But how could he know?

Was his past life only an illusion? Had he ever been a child? Or was he now simply the invisible offspring of the union of a fist on a table and a smashed bottle of vodka?

pp. 42-44

Spring had turned the road into a river of mud in which the carriages sunk axle deep. For a while, Andreï chose to continue on foot. At night, he lit fires and in the ashes cooked the potatoes that he carried in a sack slung over his shoulder. He slaked his thirst with rainwater.

He slowly returned to Saint Petersburg, since that was where the road led, but having lost all his bearings, his mind sometimes went round in circles like his steps.

He had just passed through Pokrovskoïe, a hamlet no different from thousands of others at the intersection of two roads which stretched to the horizon. He walked along a river whose swollen waters surged around immense moss-covered boulders. He paused to watch two children fishing. He thought of innocence and his heart filled with a painful longing. One of the boys slipped and fell into the river. The other immediately jumped in to help him. The two boys struggled together uselessly against the powerful current which was sweeping them away. Acting out of instinct, Andreï lunged toward the boys to pull them out, but the current was even stronger than he had thought, and the water was so cold it took his breath away. He had to fight to keep his own footing. He caught one of the boys by the hair and heaved him, barely conscious, coughing and spitting, onto the bank. The second boy, swept along by the flood, fought to keep his head above water. He soon disappeared under the waves.

Andreï could do nothing for him. He knelt next to the first boy, who was now unconscious. His lips were blue, he was breathing with difficulty and his lungs whistled like a kettle. If Andreï did nothing, the boy would die. He threw him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and strode quickly up from the river. He had not gone many paces

before the child began to bleed profusely. Andreï started running. He could not say whether he ran to save the child's life or his own or to save his soul, but he knew he had to run. He was spattered with the child's blood when he reached the edge of the village. In the centre of the village, he laid the boy gently on a bench and stepped back. The boy moaned. A villager turned his head and called for help when he noticed the injured child.

The boy opened his eyes. He was ten or twelve years old with an angular face, a bony nose and greasy black hair. He opened his eyes and looked at Andreï. At least, he seemed to look at him. Two black piercing eyes. Andreï took a step to the left. The eyes followed him. He took two steps to the right. The eyes stayed with him. It was unexpected and shocking. But the first villagers were arriving. The child closed his eyes and sank into unconsciousness as they carried him home.

Andreï could not leave the village until he knew for certain. He stayed by the child's bedside as he was nursed. Two days later, the body of the second boy was found, caught in the branches of a tree also swept away by the flood.

The following day, burning with fever, the boy opened his eyes and stared straight at Andreï. But that evening, his fever broke, and despite all Andreï's gestures and words the boy no longer seemed to see him.

Andreï lingered for several more days, but whatever it was that had happened, whether real or not, was now finished. After a week, little Grigori Iefimovich was standing quietly crying before the grave of his bother. As he set off on his way, Andreï bade the boy farewell, but the child did not answer.

pp. 45-50

The old man's body refused to die. His wasted hands clung to his pallet. Beneath the veil of his wrinkled translucent eyelids, panic-filled eyes darted and rolled in the shadowy hollows of his white, downy skull.

He gasped. He groaned. Almost motionless, he fought off demons visible only to himself. Andreï had been waiting for this moment for several hours.

“Look at me,” he said softly.

The chest was a cage of skin and bone within which fluttered an exhausted, erratic heart. The conductor had lost the tempo and the musicians in the orchestra were now playing each to his own tune, following a last dissonant score. The man's intestines released a greenish liquid. Black patches covered his waxen skin. His white whiskery chin trembled. His legs jiggled about in a pointless race as his hips sank heavily into the straw mattress.

“Look at me,” pleaded Andreï.

But the old man gave no more sign of having heard in these, his last, moments, than he had in the preceding days. His breathing quickened even as it dwindled. Andreï bent over him and, with his index finger, gently raised one papery eyelid.

“Look at me,” he asked once more.

The eye rolled up, yellowed and blood-streaked, the pupil expanded as far as possible to fight the inflooding darkness.

Andreï whispered, “Look. At. Me.”

But it was over. A last imperceptible breath escaped through the withered lips. The old man was no more. Wherever he was now, he had left behind him his exhausted carcase.

Andreï lowered the eyelid and slowly stood up, tears running down his cheeks. He was worn out, as if he too had spent the day fighting. At the moment of death, the old man had not glimpsed him. The old man had not perceived, on the margins of the visible world, the phantom Andreï bowing over him.

If it was true that little Grigori, during the fever that had almost killed him, had noticed Andreï's presence, even for an instant, even his shadow, this was not the case with those dying of tuberculosis, phthisis, consumption, syphilis or old age in the damp common-rooms of Saint Peter's Asylum. For weeks, Andreï Leonovitch had been searching for his reflection in the eyes of the dying, without discovering the least spark of awareness.

Sighing heavily, Andreï moved slowly away from the old man and, beneath the stone-arched ceiling, walked the length of the long room among the crowded pallets of those who had found their way here at the end of their lives. A good hundred or more had had the luck, if so it can be termed, to be taken in to die with a roof over their heads, while thousands of others simply fell over into the gutters. Each morning, the dead-cart wound its way through the poorer neighbourhoods collecting the corpses that would be thrown into a common pit outside of town that afternoon. Those from the asylum were accorded a modest grave of their own as well as a stock prayer mumbled by the duty priest. They seemed little reassured at the prospect. Below the high ceilings, moans echoed and re-echoed dolefully across the room to be pierced by the spiralling shrill cries

of women. It was the din of fear in Death's waiting room, and despite the numerous icons hanging on the walls, there was no comfort to be found here.

The vast stone construction that was Saint Peter's Asylum had been converted from an ancient fortress. Its confusion of corridors and countless rooms formed a labyrinth dedicated exclusively to suffering, disease and death. On somewhat softer mattresses, in one slightly less damp wing, lay priests at the end of their pastoral missions come to die in the bosom of the Church. But everywhere else was the pervasive stink of flesh left to decompose, sheltered from the indifferent eyes of the healthy, who warily refrained from setting foot within the walls.

Andreï turned left and walked down a very long corridor, he then turned right and followed a narrow passageway, at the end of which, on either side, were two rows of stalls separated by shoulder-high stone walls.

The old stables were the secret heart of the asylum. While everywhere else within the walls one came to die, here one came to hide away from living. Here the cries were of a different order. Unclear and indistinct, they at times recalled the laughter of children. And so it was.

This was where the bourgeoisie shut away their misshapen issue. An annual contribution to the asylum foundation ensured that not another word need ever be heard of these monstrous-headed children, children with flippers for arms, children with corkscrew spines. Some survived into adulthood, when it was necessary to bind their hands to keep them from masturbating to the point of drawing blood.

Andreï slowed his pace as he crossed this corridor of the damned. A pair of Siamese twins, joined at the hip, drew vaguely geometrical shapes in the sawdust covering the floor as they hummed a sad melody to themselves.

A little further on, a young boy with the wrinkled face and bowed back of an old man convulsively pounded his over-sized head against the stone partition of his cell leaving a smear of blood. After he had broken his right arm near the shoulder, it was reset at an almost 90° angle. His hand now flapped about uselessly and was beginning to rot.

In the facing stall, a newborn was quietly dying of hunger. Body and face were entirely covered in black silken hair. In all that blackness only the eyes stood out when, in obedience to some instinct, they were opened at all.

Occasionally, as Andreï had witnessed, decadent young people would bribe the staff into allowing them a view of the spectacle. They laughed noisily at the imbeciles who contorted their faces in an attempt at a smile. They threw lumps of sugar at tadpole-shaped creatures, who slithered through their own excrement to catch the sweets in their mouths.

Each day Andreï made himself walk through this corridor. These freaks paid him no more attention than any of the others, but he felt a certain kinship with them, a grim likeness. He, like them, was not one of nature's mistakes but rather a manifestation of its madness and malevolence.

Saint Peter's Asylum kept hidden that which the outside world had no wish to see, thought Andreï, that which it would not *consent* to see. The same clay out of which all humans were fashioned was here moulded by an insane hand which could not belong to a benevolent God. Bad enough one had to die, but to live like this?

On the road to Saint Petersburg, Andreï had been able to gauge what was, henceforth, forbidden to him. The true nature of his misfortune was not that he was invisible but that he was condemned to live in isolation, within himself alone, without even the charity of a glance or a gesture: without love, without honour. These freaks in their stalls were given sweets out of cruelty: even a scornful look was a link to the rest of humanity. If the dying, at the moment of crossing over, had taken him for a ghost he would have been happy at least to terrify them.

Of what use was he? He hadn't the slightest idea.

Andreï stood for a long time in front of the last stall. Here was a freak that suffered a little more than the others. When they brought him in, three days before, he had just celebrated his first birthday. On that day, his father had taken him by the wrists to stand him up and teach him to walk. The bones in the child's arms and legs, more fragile than glass, had immediately shattered. When he fell to the floor, his backbone and rib cage splintered. Since then, the child lay here, motionless, unable even to cry. He was fed sugar water. He looked completely normal, but his skin was a sack filled with shards of bone that rubbed against each other causing him unimaginable pain.

Andreï opened the gate to the stall. As he approached, he stretched out his hand toward the little crumpled face. I could end this child's misery with just a touch, he thought, simply caress his cheek and the blood would pour out of him. And Andreï would become a sort of Angel of Death. The image instantly filled him with horror. If that was to be his destiny, he would fight it every step of the way. He let his hand fall and shook his head. He wanted to live and thrive. He wanted to love and laugh.

The company of the dying and the freakish had taught him one thing: he was not one of them. Not entirely. But then, what was he? This remained for him to discover.

He sent a silent prayer to a notional God, asking him to shorten the child's agony. Then he put on his hat and gloves and returned to the palace for the night.

pp. 51-54

The grey light of dawn entered the palace through every opening, subduing the gilded frames and furnishings. The Tsar was still asleep in his large bed and dazzling white sheets. His head was resting on the shoulder of the young woman he had just secretly married, a German commoner he hoped to raise to the level of Empress against the advice of his advisors. Since she would never be accepted by the Boyars, the Tsar had decided to make her the people's favourite. In his own name, he was preparing to publish a series of decrees that favoured the low-paid, and to embark on a long-term liberal policy that would allow all Russians to catch up with the century before it came to an end.

Stretched out on a soft divan beneath the windows, Andreï Leonovitch watched over the peaceful sleep of the Tsar, whose slowly moving toes could be seen poking out from under the covers.

The first time Andreï had entered the bedroom of the Tsar, he had a loaded pistol under his coat. He wanted to fulfil his old ambition of assassination, but he was unable to make up his mind to shoot. What good would it do? Andreï no longer sought to make a name for himself. He simply wanted to exist. The possibility of having his picture published in the newspapers had turned into a cruel joke. He put away his gun as he felt all the strength drain out of him. Since then, he had taken to sleeping in the palace. They had the best food in the country, and more than enough of it.

The first rays of sunlight lit up the dust floating in the air. Andreï turned to the window to watch the light consume the towers and turrets of the capital. The dead could see him no better than the living. Might he stay here forever and become a true phantom of the palace? At best, he would become a whisper, a legend, a warning to children to

behave. The palace staff would blame their own petty thievery on the phantom. Andreï sighed as he got up from the divan. If sleep brought rest to his body, it brought no peace to his spirit. His thoughts went round in ever-faster circles. He was paralysed by a feeling of powerlessness. His only respite came from gluttony. And now he had to see about finding new clothes since these were starting to pinch under the arms.

He was still lost in thought, leaning on the windowsill, when the servants came to wake the Tsar and his wife with trays of food. Andreï shared their meal, taking food from each dish. Breakfast *à la française*, Eggs Benedict and croissants with thick lashings of wild berry jam and strong too-sweet coffee.

After the meal, the autocrat dressed in his ceremonial uniform. Andreï followed him into the courtyard where a gilded carriage drawn by six white horses was waiting. He stood on the running board as the escort started off. The procession left the palace, passed in front of the Cathedral and then turned onto the quay of the Catherine Canal, where a crowd was awaiting the extraordinary privilege of seeing the Tsar attend the Sunday Changing of the Guard.

His face whipped by the wind, Andreï studied the crowd with the impassive eye of a melancholy giant. The crowd consisted neither of poor nor rich but rather of those between the two who got enough to eat to enjoy the luxury of boredom but not so well-off to fear showing their good fortune in public.

Suddenly, the crowd was in turmoil. Andreï saw an incomprehensible cloud of smoke appear next to the Tsar's carriage. A fraction of a second later the sound of the explosion reached him, joined by a chorus of terrified cries. A wave of panic spread through the crowd creating a scramble that left children trampled underfoot. From the

corner of his eye, Andreï saw the Tsar's coachman lashing the horses to get away from the quay, but the Tsar ordered him to stop and got down from the carriage calling the guard to reform. He walked over to the bodies lying on the ground, victims of the bomb that had been meant for him. He spread out his hands, his face twisted in grief. He turned and spoke in calming tones to the crowd. Here and there, among the cries of the wounded, Andreï heard shouts of "death to the tyrant" which led him to fear the worst. Sabres drawn, the Cossacks prepared to charge.

"Stop," shouted the Tsar, his cheeks wet with tears.

In the crush, Andreï recognized a head of wild black hair. Pushing her way through the crowd, Eva was headed straight toward him! She looked thinner, and her threadbare clothes gave her the air of a beggar. Her staring eyes were black with kohl, and her lips were twisted into a witch's grimace. Overjoyed at seeing her, Andreï failed to notice the pistol in her hand. Pushing the Tsar out of the way, he moved toward her shouting her name.

Eva had time enough to get off two shots. The first bullet hit Andreï in the shoulder. The second came within a hair's breadth of the Tsar. The Imperial Guard immediately fired back.

Andreï had fallen but remained conscious. His face against the paving stones, unable to move for the pain, he saw Eva's body thrown back by the hail of bullets that pierced her body. The young woman collapsed to her knees and then fell forward. Her right hand was still clenched around the butt of the pistol, but from her left hand dropped a small bomb whose fuse threw off its last sparks.

“Death to the Tsar,” she said in a final whisper. Andreï saw the bomb roll toward him and bounce off an uneven paving stone before rolling out of sight.

A few seconds later, he had the impression that his entire body had been swatted by a giant, then the world went black and silent. When he came to, he seemed to have four arms and four legs so entangled was he with the body of the Tsar, whose dead eye was fixed on him reproachfully for all eternity. Andreï Leonovitch tried to free himself. He was a mass of pain. With his last strength, he managed to roll to the side.

He wondered if all of this blood was his or the Tsar’s. Just before he passed out, he told himself that in the end it really didn’t matter at all.

*JOURNEYS OF AN INVISIBLE MAN*

pp. 57-60

Ears twitching, the hare turned its head, first left, then right. Its whiskers trembled, on the lookout for the least sign of danger. It hopped timidly forward before stopping to repeat each motion. For an animal capable of great speed, it was maddeningly slow, but as he had nothing better to do, Andreï sat down on a tree stump, crossed his legs and waited.

His black beard was now grey-streaked. Had he looked at himself in a mirror (something he had gone out of his way to avoid for many years now), he would have searched in vain for any trace of the softness of youth. He was 52 years old. What he had lost in weight, he had gained in solidity. What he had lost in brute strength, he had gained in stamina. Eating little and drinking no alcohol, he led a simple life, withdrawn from the world of men.

Should the hare at last consent to move up the path and strangle itself in the snare, it would become Andreï's lunch. It was plump enough for at least three meals. And with the help of some carrots and turnips, he would get a soup out of the bones.

Andreï let his eyes wander to the steppe and once more noted with modest satisfaction that his house was all but invisible. He had built it into the side of a small mound in no way different from the surrounding hills. The house had no windows and he had pasted branches to the door with a brown wash. It was nothing more than an earthen hollow shored up with boards, but in the three years he had lived there he had come to consider it a haven. A double chimney released the smoke at ground level, which the ceaseless wind then dissipated in the tall grass. One would almost have to walk bang into

the door to know that the house existed at all. In the vastness of the steppe, it was the last thing one would expect to find.

On the edge of the birch forest, he had sown squash, potato and corn Red-Indian fashion in little circular patches. Stored in a little hollow next to the house, his harvest would keep through the winter. This allowed him to spread out as far as possible his trips to the little town of Kirilian, three leagues off. He had learned long ago that he could not live in complete autonomy. He saw no advantage in putting himself to the trouble of making such things as nails, but he was now able to put off for several months any project which required them: it took him days to recover from every visit to the town. The blessing of his solitude was also its curse: all seemed normal. By choosing to live on the margins of history and time, by choosing to exile himself from the life of others, he was sometimes able for a time to forget his condition. But when delay became necessity, when the lack of nails pushed him toward the town, the journey seemed to him a slow descent into Hell, where he would find only desolation, failure and unbearable longing.

Carefully scenting the air, the hare passed near the tips of Andreï's boots. Its head slipped into the sliding steel-wire noose, which closed around its neck. Panic-stricken, the hare, in bounding forward to flee, strangled itself. The animal thrashed about a few moments, every movement serving to tighten the loop, which quickly cut through the skin. Drops of blood splashed red petals in the snow. The hare's struggles finally came to an end. Andreï waited as the last convulsions quietened, then got up, stretched the kinks out of his body, stooped to loosen the noose from around the animal's neck and stood once more, holding the hare by the ears. He placed the still-warm body in his game-bag and started up the path to the house. Snare-hunting demanded many hours tramping over

a vast territory and not a little patience, but he had no choice: passive hunting methods alone produced results. He positioned the snare, but the hare brought about its own strangulation.

*The invisible man shall kill no living creature* was the seventh of the commandments which ruled Andreï's personal universe. For a long time he had been puzzled by his shoddy marksmanship, up until the moment he gave the *coup de grâce* at point blank range to a wounded mare. Only then did he understand that he had not been given the power of life and death. Each time, something intervened to spare his target: his powder failed to ignite or a twig snapped causing his prey to flee. It took Andreï years to understand that the universe was conspiring to keep him apart. Even had he wanted to, he would not have been able to kill the Tsar. He was a passive spectator only, whether the scene pleased him or not.

His was the slow steady pace of one used to walking. Still low on the horizon, hung an orange-coloured sun foretelling a day somewhat warmer than the ones just past. Winter was reluctantly settling in, but there would be no escaping it. He stopped to observe a far off troop of cavalymen who formed a string of small nearly motionless points. Despite the distance, he knew that they were moving at a gallop and heading roughly in his direction, probably coming from Kirilian. Perhaps they were a group of looters who had just raided the town? Andreï was not unaware that the country was going through a time of turmoil; many were taking the opportunity to enrich themselves. Be that as it may, he continued on his way, his mind untroubled. It was no concern of his.

pp. 61-63

The death of Alexander II had changed nothing. Another tsar took his place, and repression became all the harsher. The world was just as unfair, perhaps a little more so. And Andreï turned away from the fate of the Russian people to face his own. But what was he to do? He had no-one to go to for advice. Following a difficult recovery from his injuries, he read many books and even enjoyed several of them, but none was of much use. He had begun to browse scientific journals frowning over the jargon. He wondered if his condition had somehow been caused by some trick of electricity. He had gone to Moscow and spent a few months haunting the laboratory of a certain Bourinski, but the shocks he gave himself with the help of a complicated machine did no more than cause his heart to race and his hair to stand on end.

At the Institute of Medicine, he thought he could learn more about the internal workings of the human body by attending a class in dissection. A professor in a frock coat flourished a scalpel as he held forth before an assembly of overexcited students. The scalpel plunged into the abdomen, and the professor magically produced metres and metres of intestines to the students' bravos. When Andreï regained consciousness, the cadavre was gone and a man was mopping up the blood from the floor of the deserted auditorium.

For a while, he lowered his sights and settled for the corpses of rats and frogs. He had got as far as pigs when he realised he would have to slice open his belly to see what had gone wrong. He abandoned his medical studies and turned instead to mesmerism.

This science was all the rage in the salons of Moscow. Those who prided themselves on being modern organized mystical séances under a new vocabulary, which

Andreï soon saw to be a swindle. He simply had to remain behind after the guests had left to witness the ghost- and voice-producing mechanisms being dismantled: accomplices pulled invisible wires to move furniture about or hid in an adjoining room and produced noises as required, paper cut-outs were slipped into the lamp flues.

But in the laboratories, serious research was being done on magnetic fields. Many kinds of measuring tools were demonstrating the omnipresence of an invisible force that could pass through bodies and objects. For several months, Andreï visited a spare, disagreeable little man who stooped over his magnets with the patience of a monk. From over the little man's shoulder, Andreï spent many hours observing a series of phenomena that had to be repeated *ad nauseam* in order to begin to be understood. Together, they worried about the fall in funding and the indifference of a government which saw no practical or military application to this highly abstract research. When, in the end, the researcher had to discontinue his experiments and accept an assistant lecturer's position at a Jesuit college, Andreï concluded that Russian scientific culture had not yet reached the threshold of maturity, and he would have to look elsewhere for the causes of his invisibility.

Since French had replaced Latin as the language of intellectual exchange, Paris seemed like the obvious choice. He accompanied a diplomatic mission, which was actually composed of tsarist spies charged with reporting on the latest military innovations. Since the time of Peter the Great, it had become an odious Russian tradition to take what might be taught. It was a surprise to Andreï that he even had an opinion on the matter.

pp. 64-65

Now the sun now shone higher in the sky. He felt the snow softening as he walked. The horsemen were coming his way. Out of the corner of his eye, Andreï kept watch on them because, though they were no concern of his, he had no wish to find himself under the hooves of horses that would trample without even realizing it. He decided to wait some three hundred metres from his house.

The horsemen numbered about fifty. Some were still brandishing their sabres, flashing sunlight. Armed to the teeth, chests criss-crossed with cartridge belts, they were dressed in a filthy muddle of mismatched uniforms and civilian clothes and were trailing several heavily-laden packhorses. Andreï looked toward Kirilian. He thought he could see a plume of smoke. Was the little town burning? The townspeople would rebuild. What else could they do? He took a deep breath. The crisp air braced him. He was not quite so indifferent as he would have liked.

The horsemen let out savage cries. When done with their atrocities, men seemed to feel a need to bay and howl like wolves. Tonight, laughing, they would dismount and drink themselves senseless. In the morning, they would wake, heavy and silent, and joylessly get back in the saddle. Only the next scent of blood would quicken them to life once more.

They were close now. The hooves of the galloping horses tore clumps of sod from under the thin layer of snow. Whose side were they on? Andreï suspected that chance encounters had counted more than political opinions in their choice of faction.

One of the packhorses, swerving to avoid some obstacle, lost a bundle that must have been poorly secured. No-one seemed to notice anything amiss. The horsemen

passed Andreï by and their cries soon faded away. Andreï approached the fallen bundle. Perhaps it contained something he could use.

It was a woman, if only to judge by the soiled and torn skirts covering the body. She lay face down on the ground. Her shoulder-length, blond hair was clotted with blood. A covering sewn together from sacks served as a coat. There was a boot on her left foot. Where her skirts flapped open, he could see white thighs covered in bruises and a series of small cuts, from a knife by the look of them. Andreï bent over her and saw that she was still breathing. He stood up and looked at the sky. The horseman had lost this night's plaything. Perhaps it was better for the woman to die here, peacefully, numbed by the cold? Andreï turned slowly, searching the horizon. As far as the eye could see there was no help for her. He bent over her again. He heard her moan. He straightened once more. Against his hip, through the leather of his game-bag, he felt the cooling body of the hare. Turning quickly, he picked up his pace and continued along the path to his refuge.

He cooked the hare on his little cast-iron stove. When it was ready, he ate a portion of the saddle but found little pleasure in it.

pp. 66-70

Conversation was one of the essential spices of a good meal. During his first stay in Paris, he soon abandoned the vodka and champagne-soaked Russian delegation to their fate and spent his time in some of the Ville Lumière's great restaurants, where he pretended to join in the conversation around the tables of the city's wits. He ended up understanding French very well and speaking it abominably since there was no-one to correct his errors or his accent. Sad yes, but with a good burgundy he sometimes managed to fool himself in to believing he existed.

For many years, he followed the latest scientific developments in the desperate hope of at least discovering the causes of his condition even if he could not reappear. In truth, he would have been immensely satisfied simply to make his presence known. Science did not answer his questions. Undoubtedly, the world was influenced by invisible forces whose mysteries remained to be solved – and many were hard at work in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London. But in all his wanderings, Andreï had never come across a scholar whose field of research touched on his own concerns.

He took ship for Boston and visited the laboratories of Alexander Graham Bell, who dreamed of giving the mute a voice. He next went to the Kodak workshops in Rochester, where George Eastman had worked out the principles of modern photography. But neither his voice nor his body would take the circuitous paths of technology and bear witness to his existence. He taught himself English from the books in the Library of Congress, in Washington, whose shelves he had ransacked in the search for a phenomenon similar to his.

Andreï then crossed the continent in short stages. He sweated copiously in the overheated tents of Indian shamans, and discovered the pleasures of tobacco. He travelled for the most part on foot since horses refused to obey him and stood stock-still whenever he mounted one. Occasionally, a mule would carry him, but in general animals were reluctant to obey what they could not see.

Andreï was fascinated by the spiritual life of the Blackfeet Indians, who believed in invisible forces and imagined that the spirits went freely about their business under the very noses of the living. They did not know how right they were. But Indian culture was already slipping into folklore. The young men only took it up for political purposes, which, against the advice of the elders, usually led to a war of skirmishes. In some of the tepees, Andreï listened to discussions that were strangely similar to the debates of his youth, and when one warrior proudly offered to go to Washington to kill President Cleveland, he burst out laughing.

A few days later, the young Indian rode out at the head of band of seventeen warriors whooping and flexing their muscles. They burnt several farms, believing they had dealt a mortal blow to the Whites. A cavalry troop armed with the new Hotchkiss machine gun exterminated them to the last man in one minute and forty-eight seconds, which set a new record in the domain. To hail the feat, the colonel allowed the slaughter of the women, children and the elderly who had stayed behind in the village. If all those Blackfeet had become pure spirits, Andreï did not meet any of them as he fled into the trees. An errant ball grazed his upper arm. Invisible he may have been, but this was no protection from a volley aimed at no-one in particular and anyone at all. The temper of the times tended toward efficiency.

He reached San Francisco in time for the 1894 World's Fair. He walked among the dense crowds with a mirror in his hand searching for a reflection other than his own. The more time passed, the less he believed in the possibility of again becoming visible, but he kept alive a faint hope that there were others like him in the world.

He returned to Europe the following year for the Amsterdam World's Fair. It was here he heard talk of the extraordinary work of Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen, who had succeeded in taking photographs of the interior of the body, a process he had christened "x-rays." Jostled by the crowd in the science pavilion, Andreï stood for a long time gazing at the ghostly image of a hand. It was the hand of Röntgen's wife. The skin and muscle were shadow over dark bone, the wedding band seemed to float around the index finger. He boarded a train for Bavaria and the University of Würzburg. When he stepped over the threshold into the laboratory where Röntgen worked alone, he found himself in the presence of someone who could have been his brother. The same hair and beard, almost the same height, the same melancholy eyes, as if contemplating the invisible had produced in Röntgen a profound sadness. This was troubling, and Andreï had yet again to fight against what seemed like the call of destiny, a baseless feeling that there was a reason for everything.

He attached himself to this patient, cultivated man, who was too humble to profit from his burgeoning celebrity. As much in love with his wife as the day they first met, he had x-rayed her from every angle as if he would possess the heart of her, all the while unwittingly exposing her to lethal doses of radiation.

Andreï lingered for months in Würzburg, spending every minute with Röntgen, standing beside him in his laboratory, accompanying him to his dinners in town and

joining him on his frequent mountain walks. Through this man, who was like him in so many ways, he examined the life which his invisibility had robbed him of. He came to dress like him and emulate his gestures, eating what he ate, adopting his opinions and assuming his moods. He even had the audacity to spend several nights in the couple's bedroom, weeping silently as his *alter ego* gently made love to his now cancer-ravaged wife.

The gentleness which infused the couple's relationship was an exercise in early mourning. Rather than put it off, they embarked upon a ritual of adieux which lasted as long as there was a spark of life, though there was not a glimmer of hope. As death approached, Röntgen left his wife's bedside only to fetch ether and cyanide from his laboratory at the university. She died without pain, and Röntgen sank into an inalterable solitude composed of relentless work and mountain treks.

X-rays had revealed no sign of Andreï, not even as a shadow among shadows, yet he stayed. It took a mountain accident to show him the dangers of this connection. Röntgen may have been an experienced mountaineer, but Andreï was not. He broke his leg jumping over a crevasse as he trailed Röntgen across the northern hills. He shouted in pain and called for help, but Röntgen moved off hearing nothing.

Andreï had to crawl for twelve hours until he reached a village where, through gritted teeth, he set his fracture before sinking into a dreamless sleep. He had not seen Röntgen since, but he was pleased when he was awarded the first Nobel Prize for Physics a few years later, though he doubted that these honours lessened the man's sorrows in any way.

pp. 71-72

In the afternoon, he went to fetch an armload of wood from one of the hiding-places he had dug into the hill. The trail of blood immediately caught his eye. The woman had moved. She had crawled a good hundred metres, leaving behind her, in the snow, a line of red splashes leading directly to his house. Andreï felt annoyance. For the moment, the woman's body was still. He went up to her. She was breathing with difficulty, sobs choking in her throat. She began to moan louder and louder. This was her version of a cry of rage. Digging in with her elbows, she dragged herself forward fifty agonising centimetres. The life in her simply refused to go out. The sun's warmth fought the cold, which threatened to overcome her. Andreï wondered just how far this young woman could get before the night stopped her for good. What was she hoping for? He had seen thousands of deaths: men, women, children. Some cultures welcomed death without flinching; others rejected it as unnatural. He no longer asked himself why. This woman could not be more than twenty years old. The fortunes of her life had led her here, not fate but a succession of accidents and decisions with unforeseen consequences.

The young woman abruptly rolled onto her back and turned her face to the sun. She was gasping. She took a little snow in her hand and brought it up to melt in her mouth. Andreï saw that she found swallowing painful, but she repeated the motion several times. She was going to die, yet she felt her thirst. She was going to die, yet she drank as if for her there would be a tomorrow. Cleaned up, she might have been pretty. Her eyes closed, her breathing slowed. Andreï stood over her for a long while watching her sleep.

pp. 73-76

His leg took a long time to heal following his accident in the mountains. Even now, it played up in damp weather. There had been complications, infection. A few weeks after the accident, he was forced to reopen the wound with a knife to scrape away the pus that clung to the bone; he then emptied an entire bottle of alcohol over it. He passed out three times during the operation. He spent the winter in the snowbound mountain village.

He celebrated his restored health by returning to Paris and limping his way up all three levels of the Eiffel Tower. From the top, he gazed at the city for a long time in the mirror that he always kept with him. It was already the year 1900. The third World's Fair welcomed fifty million visitors, not one of whom was reflected in Andreï's mirror. It was hopeless. Andreï hobbled to the Gare de l'Est and boarded the Orient Express.

Three days later, he was in Istanbul. Two more weeks by sea and he reached Shanghai, then Peking, which was just recovering from the war against the Boxers. The city had been sacked, the Empress had fled, and coalition forces, British, French, Russian and German were taking vengeance against the Boxers, but as these were impossible to identify, they shot at anyone with slanted eyes, including their Japanese allies.

The older he got, the more vague his memories of a normal life became. One reality was replacing another in an inexorable rebalancing. More and more often, Andreï forgot to take the mirror out of his pocket, settling for being a spectator in a world that went on without him. He continued west, into the mountains. In Tibet, there were monks who seemed to belong to the world no more than he did. Andreï could not understand this desire for effacement, an effect which seemed ridiculous to him in that they worked hard to produce it whereas in his case no effort was required. He left the mountains and

headed north towards Mongolia. He found that the vast grassy plains crossed by sturdy little horses brought him peace. Under their yurts, the Mongols drank mare's milk and laughed a great deal. Their fine-looking children, dressed in richly-coloured clothes, learned to ride before they learned to walk. The wind was constant, at times gentle, at others a stinging slap, never predictable. The climate sculpted both the people and the countryside. Andreï realised that he was, in fact, not very far from his home, but that he had taken a very long detour back. And with this realisation came the fear that he was going in circles. He turned around and headed south.

He stayed among men only long enough to develop an understanding of their language. He would notice that the conversations, here as elsewhere, were concerned with survival and money. Andreï despised their pettiness, and envied them their shared meals and the drowsy late-night talk between husband and wife by the glow of a simple lamp.

Variety alone was still able to enchant him. The surprising range of countryside led him to believe that the world was host to an infinity of forms, including his own. Invisible, he could wander where he liked among wild animals without frightening them. He saw enormous hairy birds, their heads topped with large bony bumps which they used to turn over the earth in search of food. He saw kangaroos carrying their offspring in their belly pouches. In the Dutch East Indies, he grew attached to a band of orang-utans that seemed to devote the bulk of their time to eating, sleeping and meditating. These large apes with dangling arms moved about unhurriedly, like old philosophers, and constructed roofs for themselves in the trees to keep the rain off. Their eyes expressed such sadness that Andreï wondered what sorrows they brooded over. When mating season came

around, their ferociousness soon convinced him that man was indeed descended from the ape, as an English biologist had it.

He returned west via the Red Sea and Madagascar, and then slowly ascended the coast of Africa. Sometimes he stopped for months, captivated by a charming landscape or a gentle climate. But the closer he got to Europe, the more he felt the pull of winter, which he had not seen for several years. His dreams were filled with snow-covered fields, all things frozen and still.

But he awoke into a steaming sauna and wondered where he was. It was taking more and more time to answer that question. Streaming with sweat in an African downpour that evaporated as soon as it touched the scorching earth, Andreï realised that his travels had not so much enriched his knowledge as stripped him of his illusions.

It was in the Cairo papers that he saw for the first time the photo of the now grown-up little Grigori. Perfectly recognisable though even more skeletal, the child he had saved from drowning had become the Tsarina's special advisor. The article dwelt in detail on this yokel's – this Rasputin's – demonic reputation as a seducer. It was said that he talked to spirits. Andreï read the article a dozen times before running to the station.

p. 77

The sun was sinking below the horizon. Twenty times already, the young woman had tried to rise. Twenty times, she had fallen. Andreï marvelled at a courage he did not understand. Throughout the afternoon, he had not been able to keep himself from going to the door to see if she had reached the point of death or had regained her strength. The scene troubled him. This young woman that chance had chosen to throw across his path interfered with his plans. Seated near the stove, Epictetus' *Discourses* open in his lap, he could not manage to focus on the timeless wisdom which only yesterday had been able to bring him peace. And now he found himself outside yet again.

He crouched down and wrapped the young woman in a thick woollen blanket, being very careful not to touch her. After a few seconds, she shivered, and her face seemed slowly to relax. Andreï stood up. The first stars were beginning to appear in the sky. He looked at the woman once more, then walked back to his house reproaching himself.

On the threshold, he paused again. Despite the cold, and with some reluctance, he left the door ajar to leave a sliver of lamplight visible from the outside.

pp. 78-81

Russia had changed a great deal, but the youthfulness of new century that the country so swaggeringly displayed was nothing more than a facade. Behind the flashy new machines, behind the sleekly gleaming metal and glass, behind the western finery that high society draped itself in, was still the stink of potato and vodka, sour wine and poverty.

For the Tsarina, Rasputin symbolised the old Russia, mystical and Asiatic, a rabble born in the bogs and steppes, and now raised up to the level of humanity. His hair was long and greasy, his nails were black with filth and he stank of alcohol and sour sweat. He dressed invariably in a sort of cassock, dirty but made to measure out of fine cloth. He embodied the vastness of the country, its primitive strength, uncontainable. He wore nothing but his boots beneath his cassock, which subtly hinted at a sexual organ of above average dimensions; this also explained the fascination of the ladies of the court, several of whom had seen it for themselves and later shared their experiences with the others.

Andreï had rushed back to Saint Petersburg as fast as possible, cursing the slowness of the transportation and the inexplicable vagaries of railway schedules. In America and in France, men flew about like birds in cloth-covered contraptions of wood and wire.

To get to Rasputin, he looked for the Tsarina, and found her at the palace, which had hardly changed in thirty years. Gold was gold, whatever form one gave it. When Andreï found them, Rasputin and the Tsarina were talking together. The mad monk was speaking in a low, intense voice, which cut off in mid-sentence.

“What’s wrong,” the Tsarina asked.

But Rasputin did not answer; he raised his eyes to Andreï, who said, very carefully,

“You see me?”

“A vision?” asked the Tsarina.

“It’s gone,” said Rasputin as he turned toward her. “I don’t know. A memory, perhaps.” He rubbed his eyes. “Where were we?”

Strange, thought Andreï, whose heart was pounding painfully. But over the following hours, nothing out of the ordinary occurred. That evening, he accompanied Rasputin back to his apartments, where his little court of gutter whores and drunkards awaited him. A while later, members of the imperial court arrived incognito to join the never-ending party.

The more Rasputin drank, the more his eyes blazed. Four, vaguely Gypsy, musicians arrived with their instruments, and the monk began to whirl like a dervish to the pounding music. This went on and on and it was something of an exploit in itself that he was able to keep his balance. He whirled faster and faster, drops of sweat flew about the room, splattering the guests, who had stopped dancing and now gazed in rapt observance on the spinning figure. After fifteen minutes or so, the dancer and the musicians, in obedience to some law of their own, gradually slowed their rhythm. When the dance finally came to an end, Rasputin was face to face with Andreï and, his eyebrows rising, looked him straight in the eyes. For a few seconds, nothing happened, then a little blood began to trickle from Rasputin’s ears and nose before he collapsed unconscious to the floor.

All of the women and a few of the men rushed to the monk to lick at the blood, smacking their lips in delight. His erect penis stood up like a tent-pole under his habit; a woman threw back his cassock and impaled herself on Rasputin's cock, her eyes rolling back in her head. Soon, everyone was naked; the monk awoke and delightedly threw himself into the tussle, of which he had till then been the object.

Andreï was torn between disgust and fascination. Rasputin had spun like a crazed compass needle before finding his North in Andreï. Was there some link between them as strong as that between the poles?

Over the following months, Andreï witnessed many similar evenings that inevitably ended in an orgy. But he was disappointed. There were moments when Rasputin seemed to be aware of his presence, but if this was so, he took it no further, and waiting through these debauches for a few glances that led nowhere was a high price to pay. Now well into his forties, the only pleasures of the flesh Andreï had ever experienced were those he had witnessed or imagined. The cold meat of the living was, in his eyes, singularly lacking in erotic possibilities. But Rasputin, no matter what good advice he gave the Tsarina, spent the better part of his time at what he termed redemption through sin. For Andreï, who knew how vast and various the world and its peoples were, it was surprising that something could be considered universal that obviously was not. Among the Red Indians, physical love was a simple exchange of pleasure uncomplicated by mysticism. The idea of sin was not so widespread as the priests would have one believe. Despite all of his qualities and his undeniable gifts, Rasputin was the product of one culture among the many that made the mistake of taking the part for the whole.

All the same, the sight of all those bodies rolling about in pleasure was painful for Andreï. Rasputin seemed to see him, then saw nothing. But Andreï saw everything, and saw too much.

After a year, as nothing had changed with Rasputin, Andreï decided to leave Saint Petersburg temporarily. His idea was to build a haven somewhere far from the large cities, a place of solitude where he could rest and meditate and rebuild his strength. A place of his own, where he would not constantly have to deal with the unpleasant sensation of being an aberration.

There was another reason drawing him away from the capital. A single gunshot in the streets of Sarajevo had been enough to set Europe ablaze. War was coming. The effectiveness of modern weaponry foretold a bloodbath which would not spare the innocent.

pp. 82-83

He woke while it was still dark and found her there curled up on the floor in front of the hearth, where a few embers still smouldered beneath the ash. It was cold in the little house hollowed into the hill, yet not draughty. Under the floorboards, Andreï had packed half a metre of dry pine needles, and the floor itself was covered with a rug stitched together from the pelts of thirty-two hares. This was where the girl now lay, her chest rising and falling at regular intervals. Though relieved to see that she was still alive, he could not ignore what this meant: he would have to leave, begin again somewhere else and leave his house under the hill to the young woman, the house he had spent the first four months of the war building.

The simplicity of the task had brought him peace. It was a place for himself alone, now suddenly they were two.

Nothing good could come from the cohabitation of the visible and the invisible. His pity for the young woman would cost him dear, a rush of the heart he had not quite succeeded in stifling. He could leave now, but perhaps he was being hasty? He decided to wait awhile to see if she would live.

The next morning, at dawn, he went out to erase the trail of blood that led directly to his door for fear that the raiders would turn back in search of the woman.

pp. 84-88

Since his move to the countryside, he alternated between long periods of time under his hill and short excursions to the capital, which, in the meantime, had become Petrograd since “Saint Petersburg” sounded too German in Russian ears. Germany was now the enemy. The continent was mired in war. The trains and roads were flooded with soldiers fleeing the front, exhausted and bloody, shattered, missing arms, legs, blinded, with filthy wounds and ragged uniforms. To them this incomprehensible struggle did not seem worth the sacrifices the Tsar demanded of them. Deserters spread over the countryside trying to get home. Rasputin, who had his finger on the pulse of the people, daily warned the Tsarina of the dangers of this mood.

“They are losing faith,” he said.

“There is nothing I can do,” she answered. Being of German origin, she was already hard put fighting the slanders regarding her own person. Some went so far as to call her a spy. It was true that she opposed her husband’s policies and was caught between those advocating a return to the old order and those calling for a republic. In the end, the Tsar ceded power to a constituent assembly, which was splitting at every seam. Strikes further weakened a now ungovernable country.

“The people’s faith is not what worries me most at the moment,” she said.

“Tell the Tsar that nothing is more important than the people’s faith,” Rasputin answered.

In the end, Andreï had come to love this man, who was foolish enough to believe that he was invincible, but cunning enough to watch his back. Rasputin had taken great

care to fall publicly into a mystical trance, from which he emerged to announce that so long as he remained alive, the Tsar and his family would be safe.

In the vipers' nest of Russian politics, one had to admire the fraud even while condemning it. The coolest and most calculating minds recognized that the mad monk had dark powers of which they had learned to be wary. Hadn't he saved the Tsar's haemophiliac son three times by a simple laying-on of hands where the doctors had proven powerless? Andreï had often asked himself if he was the cause of Rasputin's power, having caused him to bleed as he carried little Grigori in his arms when he was a child. The ebb and flow of blood through our veins held the secret of life. Any courtier who killed Rasputin would also, in the public's mind, be responsible for the eventual death of the Tsar and his family. A great deal to bear.

While millions died in the trenches of the West, Rasputin sought a political middle way. He was pacifist and liberal, but his behaviour was closer to that of the decadent aristocrats and the religious obscurantists, so much so that both camps detested him. This did not appear to worry him overmuch, and he continued as before his life of debauchery.

Rasputin did not sleep. For an hour or two, he would collapse, unconscious from exhaustion and alcohol, onto the hard little bed he had had moved into a red-painted alcove. These were the moments Andreï cherished, when he could be alone with him.

When Rasputin's eyelids fluttered just before he awoke, he seemed especially receptive to the presence of the invisible. His eyes took on a questioning look, and once he had murmured, "Who are you?" but gave no sign of having heard the response. Andreï

had received these simple words with immense gratitude, as if the dark universe in which he was imprisoned had opened slightly to let in a sliver of light.

The second year of the war was coming to an end. Andreï went to the palace, but the Tsarina had joined her husband near the front, where, isolated in the imperial wagon of a train reserved for his exclusive use, the Tsar lost all touch with reality. With the Tsarina gone, Rasputin was welcome nowhere. Andreï thought he would find him at his home but found the door shut. He returned to the palace to listen in on conversations. Evening was falling. Everything was calm, but with an unsettled, tense calm. In closed rooms, people whispered to each other in coded language, shaking their heads grimly.

Andreï rushed out of the palace and ran to Prince Yusupov's. Settled in an armchair, Rasputin, in the company of three other guests, listened politely as their host played the guitar. A servant entered carrying a tray with a bottle of good wine and three glasses already filled. The Prince stopped playing.

“Don't drink it,” said Andreï concentrating all his strength. “Don't...Drink.”

“The Tsar!” said the Prince.

Andreï snatched the glass from Rasputin's hands just as he was raising it to his lips. He threw the contents behind the armchair and refilled the glass with the harmless wine from the bottle.

The Prince stared and rubbed his eyes.

“The Tsar,” repeated Rasputin before swallowing the wine in one draught. He smacked his lips. He drank like a peasant.

The Prince began to play again, but badly. Smiling stupidly, everyone looked at Rasputin uneasily. They squirmed in their seats. Noticing nothing out of the ordinary,

Rasputin emptied the bottle. For a clairvoyant, he was not very observant. After an hour, the Prince began blundering through the same tunes. He was sweating profusely.

Mumbling something incomprehensible, he put down his instrument. One by one the guests left the room under various pretexts.

“Please excuse me a moment,” said the Prince as he left. Andreï was unsure of what to do. Should he stay with Rasputin and try to protect him or find the plotters in order to learn their plans? He decided to stay.

The Prince returned alone. His left eye twitched spasmodically, twisting his face. He began a conversation about nothing in particular, in which Rasputin obligingly took part. The evening seemed endless. If he had not been on his guard, Andreï would have dozed off. But despite his vigilance, he was not in time to react when the Prince, in the middle of a sentence, took out his pistol and fired three times.

A hole appeared in Rasputin’s forehead, slightly above the left eyebrow. His expression did not change and the smile never left his face, but the hole in his forehead gave him a sarcastic air.

At the sound of the gunshot, the others returned the room. They looked from the Prince to Rasputin and back. Andreï rushed to the monk’s body and tried to lift it. To the others, it looked as if Rasputin was still moving.

“Shoot! Shoot him!”

“He’s dead,” said the Prince, “I shot him in the head.”

“Shoot him again!”

The body was large and heavy. Andreï could not manage to lift it completely off the floor. He held it by the waist, and put Rasputin’s arm around his neck.

The Prince and his companions wrung their hands. “The curse!” said one.

“Impossible,” whispered another.

They stared at Rasputin’s lurching figure as it crossed the threshold.

“I killed him,” said the Prince. “What have I done?”

“Look at him! He’s not dead.”

“We’re all dead.”

Andreï struggled under the weight, blinded by tears. “Can you hear me?” he commanded the monk to breathe.

The assassins circled Rasputin like vultures, kicking him and striking him with sticks. The Prince still had his gun in his hand and might shoot at any moment. Andreï saw the canal ahead, whose partially frozen waters provided an escape route. He headed straight for it and together with his burden dropped onto a sheet of ice, which cracked under their weight.

Beneath the stars, Andreï dragged the body for three hundred metres before he gave up. He fell to his knees in the shadow of a moonlit bridge. He caressed Rasputin’s hair. All these years for nothing. What he had taken from the river, he would give back to the river. He slipped Rasputin into the stream, which carried him away.

Several days later, the authorities found the body downstream caught up in a tangle of branches. The scandal caused an inquiry to be set up. There was an autopsy. Despite the evidence of bullet wounds, the presence of water in Rasputin’s lungs led the pathologists to render a verdict of death by drowning.

pp. 89-92

Andreï sighed. He added another log to the stove telling himself that he was cold. Who am I trying to fool? If chance had led the young woman to his door, it was not so that he would keep it closed and refuse to act. Even invisible, he still belonged to the human race. Despite all his attempts to keep himself apart, he had longed to return to his own kind from the start. He had not understood how fortunate he had been to be alive, solid and heavy, he had been unaware of how miraculous it was to have a body that could cast a shadow or reflect the rays of the sun. Even the unhappiest creature could hope to improve his lot. Many succeeded, though their choice of methods was not always wise.

When will you stop thinking about yourself? Why could he not manage to forget himself? Many times he had thought of putting an end to his life. The temptation had been great and the methods numerous. Poison. Rope. A simple step off a cliff—for a few seconds it would have felt like flying, he would have heard the wind whistling in his ears, and the rocks below would have rushed up to meet him.

But there was always a scraping of hope left at the bottom of the pot. It was this that stopped him from killing himself, this half-burnt scrap. He toyed with the idea of death. It comforted him, knowing that he could do it, but would not. It was not a matter of opinion. It was not a moral issue. He had seen old men and women give in to death to avoid becoming a burden. But they were dying for others. To die for oneself was as futile as living for oneself. Every time he contemplated the possibility, he ended by untying the noose or stepping back from the edge. This was one liberty which he could not bring himself to exercise.

He need only stretch out his hand to possess all the riches he could desire. He had travelled the world. He knew well the labyrinthine corridors of the palace. He had mastered the basics of so many languages that his dreams were sometimes a Babel of tongues. Uneducated, he had read more books than many scholars. Yet everything he had learnt, everything he had seen, everything he had thought would vanish with him. A wasted existence, an aborted life was what he amounted to. This was no game. It was a question of his very life, not some experiment. He was not a laboratory rat, or was he? A guinea pig in the glass maze of some mad scientist. He was tired. He had only his own strength to rely on. Despite everything, instinct pushed him to seek a way out of the maze. Giving up the quest was more difficult than it seemed.

While the young woman slept, he could move about as he liked. He made himself some Turkish coffee. He took cautious sips of the sugary liquid, and this succeeded in taking him out of himself. He looked at the young woman. What was her name? Did she have any family, a lover? One day, she also had vanished. Was there anyone to worry about her? Perhaps she was lucky enough to have an anguished father or mother somewhere hoping she was still alive. If so, she had not entirely vanished. With a little luck, she might even find her people and somehow manage to pick up the threads of an existence Andreï knew nothing at all about.

Colour had returned to the young woman's lips. She would live. He would not touch her for fear of making her bleed, but her wounds looked superficial. Those on her body, at any rate. Who could say what she had endured at the hands of the raiders? Such a shock could break a mind just as irrevocably as shattering a mirror; each piece reflected the complete image, but together they presented a picture of indescribable confusion and

chaos. Andreï was curious to see how she would come through it, if she ever did. He was curious to hear the sound of her voice.

He mustn't frighten her if he could help it. People believed in ghosts because so many corners of life remained hidden to them. Being ignorant was one thing, knowing it, quite another. Ghosts, spirits, gods were ways of putting the unexplainable to one side, away in a Pandora's box. There was a time when Andreï would amuse himself by opening the box when he liked. He took some pleasure out of the terror he could cause moving objects about. Once, exasperated by yet another sham spiritual séance, he flew into a rage and sent furniture sliding across the floor and dishes sailing through the air. The fake gypsy running the séance had been so terrified that she immediately closed up shop and found less lucrative employment with a rope-maker on the outskirts of Moscow. Never again did she boast of communing with the spirits. She became pious, reassured by the clear, clean walls of an orthodoxy on which she could hang her icons.

His living space had shrunk. He did not want to cause her to bleed. He was worried. How would she feed herself? Did she know how to trap hares? Perhaps he could leave his snares lying about and she would get the idea. He had left a pot of soup simmering on the stove to satisfy her hunger. And if her wounds became infected? Would she have the strength to nurse them? What would go through her mind when she awoke? She would probably think that the owner of this earthen cave was away for the moment. She would fearfully await his return. She was not up to putting her faith in chance.

Too many questions. Andreï became impatient. He went out to check his snares, taking longer than necessary. When he returned, she was still asleep. He put more wood on the fire, took up his book, installed himself in his armchair and settled down to wait.

At the corner of the young woman's lips, a bubble of saliva shimmered with all the colours of the rainbow.

pp. 93-96

When she regains consciousness, she thinks she is still with Magyr-the-Wolf and his gang. She unconsciously clenches her thighs, though this never stopped anyone. She does not want to open her eyes, it is so good to sleep. She feels the warmth on her skin. The floor is hard but flat and covered in something that feels caressingly soft against her cheek. True, she hurts all over, but pain has been her companion for so long that she has grown used to it. It is her normal condition. The silence, though, has something unusual about it. No snorting horses. No grunting or snoring. No drunken shouts. No rough voices barking orders. Silence envelops her, and she gathers it close around her for a time. But after a while, the silence frightens her. Without moving, she carefully opens one eye, then the other. She does not recognize this place and has no memory of how she got here. Is it possible she is alone? She sits up with a groan. Her muscles ache. Her stiff joints protest. She sees a stove and on the stove a pot and in the pot something that smelled oh so good. She is hungry. There is also a large kettle filled with hot water, and next to it, on a shelf, a pail of cold water and a basin, a large bar of soap and some clean towels, some bandaging and a bottle of vodka. Everything she needs. This worries her. And what if it's a trap? Some sort of test? A way to finally break her? She need only take one step toward the soup, and they'll thrash her, pin her down and rape her. No. No desire, no movement, no sound. Stony-faced. No tears. They beat her when she cries because it gets on their nerves. She will show nothing. She feels weak, she will stay where she is. Still seated, she brings her knees up under her chin and wraps her arms around her legs. She waits. She waits for hours. She waits through the day and into the night. She saw that night had come when she got up to open the door a crack to look outside. But there is nothing

outside. She really is alone. She does not believe it. She looks again. Nobody. Not a sound apart from the wind. She begins to remember: being thrown onto the back of a horse, a vague memory of galloping, of falling. She remembers the cold and perhaps, though she is not certain, the feeling of snow melting in her mouth. How she came to be here, she does not know. The stove has gone out and the night is chilly. She risks adding a piece of wood, two pieces, to rekindle the brands. Something she has often done, before. Not recently. She helps herself to a bowl of soup. No spoon. She gulps the contents, then slowly chews the bits of meat and vegetables which have been reduced almost to paste. Her teeth hurt, her jaw hurts when she chews. A memory comes back of being kicked in the jaw. She helps herself to a second bowl of soup, then a third. The relit stove has warmed up the soup and she now has to blow on it before drinking. It is good. Better than good. Later, she is dropping from exhaustion. She must lean on the back of the armchair. There is a rather narrow, comfortable-looking bed against the back wall. But she wants to wash. She has not washed since... She does not know how long it has been. All that filth on her. In her.

She takes off her clothes. She would like never to put them on again, but she has no others. She pours some hot water into the basin and slowly washes herself, shivering from the cold, but also from the wounds on her thighs, her breasts, everywhere. Her sex is an open sore. She felt the first tear but not the ones that followed. As she washes, she sees her ribs standing out. She has lost a lot of weight. The three bowls of soup make a little paunch stretching the skin of her belly. She notices this with no particular satisfaction. She is too tired for that. She dries herself off, adds wood to the fire and slips into bed. She has forgotten to blow out the lamp. She gets out of bed to put it out. She gets back into

bed. She falls asleep at once. She wakes and it is daylight. She does not open the door to see if the sun is high in the sky, she is afraid to open the door. She gets up, puts her clothes to soak in the water she washed in, relights the fire, drinks two bowls of soup, gets back into bed and falls asleep again. When she wakes, she wrings out her clothes and hangs them up to dry, adds more wood, finishes the soup and returns to bed to sleep once more. She would do this always. Or perhaps not always, but for a long time, only, there is no more soup and she is hungry. When she wakes again, she stays in bed singing to herself, though it is not really a song. There are no words. She simply hums a tune without opening her mouth. It is dark. She is afraid. They will come back, there is no question. Perhaps she is singing to bring them back? Finally, she falls asleep again.

She wakes up. It is daylight. She is hungry. She goes to the door, opens it and looks outside. It is snowing. She looks through the falling flakes into the distance. She walks out a few steps, barefoot, naked. She hastily goes back in. There is no-one outside. None of it makes sense to her.

Niches had been carved into the walls of the little house to serve as cupboards. She finds some worn men's boots, far too large for her but warm. She also finds a woollen blanket. She takes a knife, cuts a hole in the middle for her head and ties it around her waist with some rope. She adds some wood to the fire. There is quite a lot in the box next to the stove. She had thought there was little left. Searching around, she finds some pickled eggs and bolts down two. She finds something that looks like woodchips, but which are in fact strips of dried meat. It is not very good, but pleasant to chew and, at the end, there is a real taste of meat. There is also flour, salt, potatoes, some wizened but still sweet carrots, onions, tea and sugar. She heats some water and drinks

some sweetened tea. Her hands remember gestures she had thought forgotten. She moves slowly, quietly. She moves as if to avoid drawing attention. She remains motionless for long minutes between sips of tea, thinking of nothing. She feels the warmth of the tea, tastes its smoky flavour. She goes back to bed and waits for them to return.

pp. 96-99

There's a lot of snow outside, but she has everything she needs to cope with winter. She found a large store of wood dug into the hill, and another hollow filled with food: potatoes, carrots, onions, packages of tea and coffee; a small cask of oil, sacks of flour, rye and dried beans; a hundred or so smoked fish hanging by their gills on a wooden rail. She found fabric, needles and thread, and so she spent several evenings making herself some clothes. Nothing fancy, just a few smocks to wear over a pair of men's trousers she discovered in a chest along with other, more elegant, garments and even a few silk shirts.

A man lived here, before, though it doesn't smell of man. She wonders what happened to him, why he left, though she's happy he's not around. She doesn't want to think about him, though sometimes she can't help herself. Why should a man bury himself under a hill unless he's mad? But his madness is now her gain, and everything is so easy. Everything is there for her, and everything is so easy that she sometimes thinks that she has died and gone to Heaven, such ease, such peace. She does not ask herself what she has done to deserve this place in Heaven: she knows. She would rather forget but rarely succeeds, that is something she manages to do only by losing herself in her little chores. It was much the same, before, and different. She had to lose herself, to withdraw. It wasn't that she thought of other things; she thought of nothing at all; she closed her eyes and saw only white as one or more of them ground away at her pulling her hair.

Every evening and morning she nurses her wounds, they're almost healed now. Between her thighs, she is healing as well, but long walks still leave her aching. Near the

house she found a dead hare, a wire loop around its neck. She took the hare and left the wire. Now, she checks everyday. Strange how stupid hares can be. Two or three times a week she finds another of them strangled in the snare.

She brings the hare back to the house and lays it on the table to thaw. Once it's thawed, she hangs it up by the hind legs from a hook fixed into the wall, she takes a knife and slices into the skin of the paws and draws the skin down over the head as if she were pulling off a shirt. Then she opens the belly and pulls out the guts. She's seen this done before. Everyone's seen this before. It's just one of those things that everyone has seen. The first time, she didn't quite know how to do it, there was blood everywhere. But she was hungry, she needed fresh meat, and so she continued to hack into the flesh any way she could, though it reminded her of other things, things she would rather forget. But with time she learned. It's something one gets used to. One gets used to anything.

She sleeps much less well since the dreams returned. The dreams had stopped long ago, there was no other way for it. But now they are back. Troubled dreams, nightmares, full of blows, cries. Now that everything is easy, she dreams of Magyr-the-Wolf, dreadfully ugly, with his reeking mouth and hobnailed boots, with the sabre he wipes clean of blood only when it will no longer fit into the scabbard. Each time, with laughing regret, he shows her the glinting blade saying, "too clean, too clean," and he cuts her a little to bloody the edge. She wakes screaming in the dark, and she cries without seeing her tears. Then she lights the lamp and finds something to keep her hands busy, anything, sewing, peeling potatoes, tidying up, just to keep from thinking, to think only with her hands. She sleeps better in the afternoon. She has nightmares in the

afternoon as well, but when she wakes, she has only to go outside and see that she's alone to feel reassured. You can see far into the distance on a winter day when it isn't snowing.

One morning, as she washes herself, she notices that her belly is still a little round, as if she has eaten too much soup, which wasn't so. She knows right away. She focuses all her attention on her belly and understands clearly that it is not the same. She doesn't cry, nor does she smile. She doesn't know, between the two, which to do. She takes it in. She thinks of Magyr-the-Wolf, she thinks of other members of his gang. She strikes her belly softly, then harder, then pounds it with her fist. She rains blows on her belly. Then she stops. She relaxes her fist. She rests her hand on the roundness of her belly, thoughtful. Though she's not really thinking. Not thinking at all. Slowly, she sets to washing herself again. Her hands move of their own will, the way she's learned, starting at the top and moving down, finishing with her feet before rinsing with clean, warm water. Then, to dry herself, the same movements, face and hair first, then arms, torso, back, legs and finishing with her feet. It's a habit.

Outwardly, there's no change. Deep down something stirs, but on the surface, nothing is settled. It takes time to rise. Does the body have its own wisdom? This body has died a hundred times, but look: this same body is peeling an onion for the stew. She does not try to understand what it means. She prepares the stew, knife in hand, and she sees that she has been looking at the knife for a long moment and the knife fills her with horror. She drops it, and the knife drops point down onto the table without standing in the wood. It falls onto the table and the blade glints. She is unable to finish preparing the stew. She acquiesces. For now, she can do no more. Later, perhaps, it may be different. It is only a stew. And not only, yet it is.

For now, it's unthinkable, but she knows she will be hungry.

pp. 100-104

He did not know where she came from, what her life had been like or what she had suffered. To learn what she had gone through, he had to settle for reading the evidence of her body, her gestures and, from time to time, her tears, but these were only guesses, one interpretation based on very little evidence, an approximation of the truth, but not the truth itself. Andreï understood that he would never know the whole truth about the young woman, but this did not stop him from trying anymore that it stopped him from trying to learn the whole truth about himself. He suspected that truth, if truth there was, was inconstant. It varied under the impact of time and events. It changed colours with the seasons.

For him, she was a woman without a past. But this did not mean that she was a blank page on which he could write any story he fancied. She would resist. She held surprises, so many that, even if he had wanted to write her story, he would have had to start again each time from the beginning. He had often felt that he could understand someone simply by observing him close enough for long enough. But this was presumptuous, how could it have been otherwise? He had read many books whose authors claimed to have discovered a gateway to the soul, but there were no gates; there were windows at most, like the windows in his aunt's house, full of flaws, bubbled and rippled, which gave onto the night. Could one understand night by looking at the darkness through such windows? Could one understand sorrow by watching someone cry? One could understand the process behind tears, how tears ducts and sinuses worked, but sorrow? Tears were not the cause of tears.

She was a woman without a past A wounded stranger at his door. A shattered enigma. He could not grasp it all. This was not failure. She eluded him.

Her silence did not help matters. One did not confide in a void, and he was a void. The only times she produced any sounds at all was when she hummed to herself without even parting her lips. He did not know the tone of her voice; he had never heard her say a word, not even in her sleep. He did not know her name. He had seen her naked. He had been living with her for months in a space so small he had only to stretch out his hand to stroke her cheek. But he did not know her name. She was *she*. He had not sought her out; he had not wanted her. She had happened.

He had always found some reason to get close to people, to live with them a while, be near them. He was searching for something; usually, he wanted something from them. He stayed with Röntgen for his own benefit not Röntgen's though he thought differently at the time. As for Rasputin, he had been expecting something from Rasputin. Perhaps he was too hard on himself.

He did not desire her, but he could not keep himself from looking at her. Thin and dirty, covered in scabs when she had arrived, she was not desirable, even if there had been any place for desire. And he was too angry with himself to pity her. So why could he not look away from her? He watched her eat, he liked to watch her eat as she stared into space, her mind elsewhere. Where was she as she chewed her food, her saliva flowing, her tongue pushing back bits of meat torn off by her incisors and then reduced to pulp by her molars, where was she? Her brow furrowed, her tongue, pink and remarkably agile, slipped out to catch an errant scrap before hastening back into its warm moist

cavity. No, he did not feel desire; it was something else that approached curiosity but was not quite that either.

The days and nights came and went following an unchanging routine, and in truth, rather remarkable for their very ordinariness. Before her pregnancy became obvious, her passivity surprised Andreï. She gave him little to ruminate on. She slept and ate a lot. And since he could not read her dreams, he watched her eat, trying to work out a grammar of mastication, a vocabulary of deglutition. This game was open to any and all interpretations, made easier by the limited variety of the fare on offer. Of course, he also watched her sleep since he did not get tired until long after she had gone to bed, and he woke well before she could drag herself from her warm blankets. For Andreï, this was less about uncovering the mystery of her origins (where was she from? who was she? what was her name?) than about trying to understand the minute variations in her present mood: what was she feeling *now*? What at first was simply a way to pass the time became a constant obsession. The difficulty lay in the contradictory signals the young woman sent out despite herself. Her appetite was no proof of serenity. She might wolf down an egg with sorrow-filled eyes, not quite crying but misted over with tears and unfocused, while her mouth moved as if following the dictates of another mind. Her quick fingers were never still, they drummed the wooden table or toyed with objects or with themselves like a litter of weaning kittens as the rest of her body remained perfectly motionless.

In many ways, she was a disturbing presence even though she caused little fuss, put everything back exactly where it belonged and never spoke. What unsettled Andreï and even caused him to worry was a potential, a reserve of untapped energy that he

sensed simmering and stirring under her smooth skin. She was the cover of her own kettle, but he was unable to discover what was brewing within.

Andrei blamed his own tiredness to justify this cohabitation which he had not wanted but which had now taken over his life: he did not have the strength it would require to recreate somewhere else what he had built here. His youth was long past, and though he was in excellent health he could not honestly take seriously the long-term projects that sometimes occurred to him. His days were counted, as the woman's youth constantly reminded him: her smooth skin stretched over tight muscles, the whiteness of the whites of her eyes, her body's unbelievable ability to heal, her golden hair that grew like thatch. Though she had no past, she had a future, which he did not. He made do with her present, which opened in him the doors of memory, and with them, those of nostalgia for the hope that he had felt when he was her age.

To shake off these old man's thoughts, he watched over her every need. While she slept, he filled the kettle, brought in wood, set snares, repaired what needed mending, emptied the chamber pot. A raised eyebrow sufficed to tell him when he had gone too far: too much wood beside the stove, too much water in the kettle. He did not want to frighten her by causing her to think the house was haunted. He had to restrain himself where he could have made things easier for her: a helpless spectator, he watched her do badly what he could do well, he watched her struggle where he had had no difficulty. This was the price that had to be paid for her to believe that she was in control of her own life.

For many weeks, he had wanted her to leave. Once she had returned to health, he had thought that she would be in a hurry to return to her home and her family. But she stayed on, and Andrei's impatience had more to do with his uneasy feelings than with the

problems of sharing his home. He wanted her to leave; he feared her leaving. The first signs of her pregnancy had changed everything. He understood then that she had made her nest in his home, and she would not leave before she had given birth to her child.

The weather was turning colder, snow fell in abundance, changing and softening the countryside, burying the house under successive layers. Winter became a cocoon within which a slow metamorphosis was occurring.

## ***FLIGHT***

pp.107-109

The newborn was sleeping, bundled up in cloth, its round cheek pressed against its mother's back. Andreï was amazed at such sleep, which nothing from without seemed to disturb but which could end in screams from gas or hunger. The mother was walking at a steady pace despite her fatigue and she had stopped trembling some time ago. They had left Kirilian behind, but Andreï was still aware of the smell of burning.

Their feet stirred up dust from the road, and Andreï hoped that no-one watching from afar would be alerted. He was impatient for night to fall. He would have liked to tell the woman that she should walk at night and rest during the day, hidden from watchful eyes, but he merely followed her without knowing her destination or even if she had a destination. They were headed south, though they would not reach anywhere for quite a distance. Perhaps there was somewhere only she knew about?

Toward the end of the afternoon, she stopped to feed the child and could not get to her feet to continue on her way. She looked exhausted, but she sang as she fed the child, who soon fell asleep against her white breast, his hunger satisfied.

She held her baby tightly to her, her eyes haggard. This was not the time to sleep, but she fell asleep anyway, her stomach empty and her mouth dry. They had drunk nothing since noon. Andreï had a full gourd, but he did not want to drink while she went thirsty. There was, of course, enough water in the forest, but she simply had not thought of it. Or else she had thought of it, but had not had the strength or the courage to leave the road to search for a spring or a stream. Perhaps she did not even realise that she was thirsty. Too afraid to be thirsty.

Andreï watched over the sleeping woman and child as night fell. He watched the road ahead and behind, alert for the least sound that did not seem natural, even the creaking of the trees made him jump. He had a knife in his belt, a little dried meat in his bag and his gourd. The woman had nothing. She had taken nothing with her. This was not a problem for the child. She was its source of food. Andreï thought about all of the things they should have taken before setting out on such a journey, and which had been left behind in the little house under the hill. He started making a list in his head and then shrugged. There was no point in thinking about it. He watched over the sleeping woman and child, he heard the leaves rustle under his body and felt the pine needles prick his cheek. His mind was restless, unquiet. His mind wandered, searching out the source of sounds. He waited.

The following day was cloudy, the woman took to the road again, carrying the baby on her hip. Toward the end of the morning they came across an army column in flight, a hundred soldiers on foot, only a few carrying arms. Their cartridge belts were empty. For many, their rifle served as a crutch.

As she saw them approach, the woman was unsure whether she should flee. The sight of the uniforms seemed to reassure her, though they were dirty, torn and mud-coloured. They hung off the thin bodies of the soldiers, who moved forward slowly in disorder, confused, like children returning from war. Those with shoes plodded through the dust. The others had feet wrapped in bloody rags. The woman stood on the side of the road and watched them pass, still frightened, ready to flee into the woods. She clasped her baby and kissed his hair. The soldiers marched past her, their eyes fixed on the ground, beaten, exhausted, with a look of what might have been shame.

At the end of the column, the wounded, who had been piled onto a carriage, stretched out their hands.

“Food?”

The woman shook her head.

“No. Nothing.”

She watched the column disappear towards Kirilian. Perhaps she should have told them that there was nothing left in Kirilian, that there was nothing left of Kirilian, but no-one had asked, so she said nothing.

pp. 110-113

After the first contraction, she stood up, holding her belly with both hands, and got herself back to the house. With hurried, nervous gestures she lit a lamp, her hands shaking from impatience and pain. In the pauses between lancinating contractions, she put some water on the stove and set some cloths to boil. Her face wracked with pain, she resembled nothing more than some generic version of humanity, a face distinctive only in its suffering.

Her labour lasted all night. The young woman had been silent for months, but now she was unable to bite back her screams. Andreï listened to the sound of her voice and discovered in it strange inflections. More husky, more guttural tones than he had expected. Animal. All this suffering that preceded birth merely presaged what would follow. This was true for everyone of us, he told himself.

When the head appeared she bent forward and pulled. The infant slid out with a sucking sound. A second before, he had not existed. And now, here he was, visible. Andreï smelt blood, which for once was not the smell of death. She wrapped the child up in clean cloths. Then she held him close to her breast and allowed herself a moment of rest.

Her sweat-soaked hair was pasted to her forehead. She smiled a strange, exhausted smile. She was speaking to the child and her voice was no longer the one that had produced her cries of pain. It was a deep caress that came in loving waves of soft and meaningless words which seemed to free something within Andreï. The quality of the air seemed changed, the walls seemed closer, the little house under the cliff had become a

womb, soft and warm, where Andreï breathed in something sacred and intimate. She bent over the child and kissed his forehead.

“My darling,” she said.

Yes, said Andreï.

“You’re so beautiful, so small.”

Yes, said Andreï.

“You’ll see. Everything will be all right.”

Yes.

“Everything will be all right. I’m here.”

Yes, said Andreï. And me. I’m here.

Then she bathed the child with movements so gentle that she had to do it twice over to remove all the blood and other matter that covered the all but transparent red and violet skin.

Following the birth, she rarely set foot outdoors until spring. Was she aware of the things that were done for her? Andreï bustled about happier than he had ever thought possible.

He was outside checking the snares when she decided to go out with the tightly bundled child. Last time, she had set her snares anyhow, anyway without a chance of catching anything. Andreï rushed to put his hares into her traps so that she would find them. These were rather scrawny spring hares, but it hardly mattered. This was meat to build strength, to grow.

Fortunately, she moved slowly; with her precious bundle in her arms, bending down to pick up the hares by the ears was a complicated manoeuvre and getting up again even more so. She laughed at herself.

Andreï had to keep checking where she was, to see if she was continuing in a straight line or had decided to go off in another direction. He did not want to lose sight of her. He delighted in seeing the woman and child in the sunlight. He was like a big dog running great circles around his mistress, constantly confirming her location and guessing at her intentions: a dog! It was good to be outside with the sunlight dappling the wild flowers and lighting up the treetops after spending the winter months cooped up in the little house carved into the hill! The vast sky gave the impression that one need only step into the air in order to fly.

He became aware of a buzzing loud enough to drown out the birdsong and the water trickling over the rocks. He stepped around a boulder and saw a swarm of flies. He went closer waving his hands about to chase away the insects that paid him no attention. It was a hand, sliced cleanly off at the wrist, blue and green and stinking. A man's hand, with dirty blackened fingernails, crawling with maggots. The flies stayed where they were. Andreï looked around. Other body parts were scattered here and there, clearly defined, thawed by the spring, eaten away by ants, gnawed by scavengers: a foot, a leg, what might have been a bit of torso, and some little bones too cleanly picked over for Andreï to identify.

He raised his head, suddenly on the look out. This could have happened anytime during the winter, but the danger seemed immediate. He scanned the forest edge for movement, a glint of light, anything out of the ordinary, but saw nothing.

He stood up and watched the woman approach. There was nothing he could do to change her direction. Try as one might to forget the world, the world did not forget us.

Holding his breath, he bent over and carefully picked up the blue and green hand with his thumb and forefinger. He thought he would vomit. The flies seemed puzzled; deprived of their meal, they buzzed around in circles. Andreï did not have time to gather all the pieces before the woman found them. He felt sweat running down his forehead. He took a couple of steps toward the stream and then turned back unsure of what to do.

When he looked back at the woman again, she was clutching her child to her chest and screaming. Then, turning her back on the little house hidden under the hill, she began to run toward Kirilian.

Andreï threw the hand into the tall grass and wiped his fingers on his trousers. He took a deep breath and ran off after her.

They had been walking ever since.

pp. 114-117

It was raining. Torrential, ceaseless. Enormous drops, with hardly space between them, struck the puddles with such force that they threw up drops of their own so that it rained from above and below making it impossible to stay dry.

The saturated earth made walking difficult. After the soldiers, they had not seen anyone either living or dead. The rain was warm but the young woman shivered now and again. She protected her child as well as she could and stopped often to wring out the shawl that covered him. Unless one looked closely, it was impossible to tell that she was crying.

The rain at least drove away the smell, the memory of the smell. Before you knew the origin, the smell of burning flesh was inviting; however, once you discovered the source, you only wanted to vomit.

Kirilian was in ashes. Looters allied to the White forces had taken the trouble to throw hundreds of books from the library windows and used them to light a bonfire in the middle of the street. Bodies were still smoking when Andrei and the young woman found them, curled up and blackened, shrunken in death as if they had returned to the size of children. To save bullets, the victims had been splashed with oil before being thrown into the fire. A few had managed to escape, burning, and tried to flee or hide, but had succeeded only in setting other fires. The expressions of those who still had faces showed the extent of their suffering.

The looters had gone. If there were any survivors, they were hiding somewhere. The young woman did not dare call out. She wandered here and there, senseless, lost, as if she were searching for an exit in invisible walls, clutching her baby to her, shielding his

eyes, which were closed in any case. Since there were fewer bodies toward the south, she chose to run that way without looking back, as if the devil were at her heels. That was two days ago. She had been walking ever since.

The young woman sheltered under a tree as she waited for the rain to stop. She curled over the child to protect him from the rain and tried to feed him; he was cranky at first but then settled down for a long feed. Andreï was leaning against the tree trunk; he took off his jacket and, holding it at arm's length over the woman and child, offered them some poor cover from the rain. Water blurred his vision and he shook his head to see better, but there was nothing to see; the drenched countryside closed in around them.

They felt rather than heard a dull rumbling vibrating through the ground, and suddenly they saw four tanks tear open the curtain of rain and turn onto the road with an infernal racket and then disappear again toward Kirilian, swallowed up by the storm. These were not looters, Andreï told himself. The young woman had never seen tanks before: enormous murderous insects, giant beetles, nature gone mad.

The rain finally let up and they started walking again. At the next crossroads, a fatherless family was pushing a handcart piled high with all their belongings. Throughout the day, more refugees emerged from the abandoned fields and smoking ruins: women and children, old men, cripples, they joined the tightly packed human herd shuffling along the road. When the rain stopped completely and an uncertain sun began to dry their clothes, clouds of mosquitoes rose up, attracted by the warm blood, and beset the refugees day and night.

At first, only the sound of swatting broke the silence. The refugees moved along, casting furtive, suspicious glances at their fellows. But soon, some of them began to talk.

From them, Andreï learned that the Tsar had been killed – executed – by someone, somewhere. Him and all his family. The others spoke about it without emotion, another detail, something of no concern to them. They spoke about the White Army, the Red Army, the Green Army that were requisitioning provisions to feed their troops. They talked of those who had disappeared. They counted their dead like misers counting coins, making neat little piles, precise rows of bodies stacked one on top of another. Four years of war against the Germans, four lean years with the men gone and the harvest rotting in the earth, and now this war, this new one, against whom? Against ourselves.

They did not pity themselves. They had done with that a long time ago. They caught up with a grandmother who was moving forward in tiny steps. She looked at the baby, produced a toothless grin and asked,

“Girl?”

“Boy.”

“What do you call him?”

“I don’t. He’s just there.”

The young woman was suspicious. The grandmother shared her crust of black bread and bit of onion. The young woman nodded her thanks. She chewed slowly to stave off her hunger; the juice of the onion flowed down her chin, her eyes reddened and you might have thought she was crying.

They were about thirty now, moving along the road, and they seemed reassured by their numbers. They began to talk more freely, some even found the strength to joke. The sound of a single gunshot scattered them into the fields and bushes. Silence followed.

Three hundred feet ahead, a dozen men on horseback armed with rifles slowly emerged from the forest, stopped to look them over and then turned back in contempt – not worth wasting bullets.

The column of refugees reformed, but there were no more jokes, and at nightfall they kept well clear of the road to sleep in little groups, without fires. Those with food ate noiselessly, turning their backs to the others.

pp. 118-120

Andreï walked without thinking and without losing sight of the young woman. He kept a step behind her, slightly to her left. He saw her chin tremble. He saw her right hand supporting the baby that she now held against hip. He saw her fear.

He did not know what he was doing here, walking along this road among these fleeing people. He should not have been here. He had nothing to do with them, and yet here he was, day after day. One morning, he set down the gourd and a little dried meat in the grass for the young woman to find when she woke. She had drunk and then slowly chewed the meat to soften it before swallowing it without pleasure. Andreï walked, his empty stomach rumbling unpleasantly, but after three days even his stomach stopped complaining. He gathered mushrooms that he ate raw along with the clinging soil, which grated between his teeth. The little house under the hill, his invisible shelter, had less reality than this long walk south, surrounded by women, old men and children. The past did not exist, nor the future, only this dirt road which twisted its way through unseen dangers, an eternal present.

He could walk to the ends of the earth; he already had. He tried to think as he used to, but could not manage it. He saw himself flying above the road, as if the air could hold him up. He shook his head to banish this vision and returned to earth.

The refugees came in sight of a village and, without exchanging a word, stopped a moment to look the place over, wary of any danger. The village looked undamaged but deserted, as if the inhabitants had just left.

The refugees began moving forward. They saw the doors of the little wooden houses resolutely shut and the curtains drawn. They sensed the fear. The gardens were

well-tended and had recently been weeded and watered. The refugees stopped at the well to drink. The young woman filled her gourd.

Andreï saw the curtains twitch; he pictured the peasants, terrified of the refugees, not of what the refugees could do to them but of what they represented: the fragility of their own existence. It was easier to close ones eyes than to contemplate the fate that awaited them if one or another of the armed gangs came through.

The refugees took the closed doors and windows as an insult.

“What? Are we plague-ridden?” asked one old man.

The refugees knocked at the doors to no response. They asked for bread and received no answer. A woman raised her fist. A child threw a stone. A window shattered.

Their anger emboldened them. Their hunger justified them. Their hunger. Their suffering justified them. They had lost everything. They were owed something.

Without a word to each other, without thinking, they moved as one. They rushed into the gardens and tore carrots no larger than a finger-nail from the ground and ate them as they were; with yellowed teeth, they tore at the bitter lettuce that would later give them cramps.

Then the doors opened and the villagers set the dogs on them. A dozen growling, snarling animals rushed toward the refugees and leapt at the throats of old and young alike who rolled over the young plants with their arms wrapped around their heads to protect themselves from bites. The dogs trampled the gardens they were meant to protect, and the refugees watered the beet shoots and potato leaves with their blood – and when everything was smashed up, when the refugees had fled and the dogs had been called in by their masters, the only thing left to chew over was the shame of it all.

Because she was carrying her baby, the young women had kept to the side. She hurried away in terror as soon as the dogs were loosed. When the others – dirty, bloody – caught up with her, they avoided her as if she were a reproach. They walked for ten minutes or so, the silence becoming increasingly uncomfortable. She stopped to feed the baby. The refugees continued without slowing down and without giving her a backward glance.

The young woman sat down in the shade of a birch tree and took her time feeding the baby though she had little milk left. She cradled the child to lull him to sleep. The refugees were far ahead before she took to the road again.

pp. 121-123

They arrived at the outskirts of Moscow a week later. The flood of refugees heading south met the waves of refugees heading north. The road was littered with abandoned furniture, broken carriages and threadbare clothes which fell from wasted bodies.

They lay down to sleep where they could; some did not get up again. They fought over shrivelled apples. When they could catch them, they killed and ate the dogs and cats, but most of these had turned wild and only appeared at night to prowl around the corpses.

Andreï had no scruples left. At night, he roamed the makeshift camps on the lookout for anyone who appeared better fed than the others. By the glow of the campfires, which stretched as far as the eye could see, he straddled the sleeping bodies to steal a bit of sausage or a few wilted cabbage leaves and brought them back to the young woman. She woke to these offerings set before her and accepted them without question, too dazed to be surprised, too weakened by hunger and fatigue and the madness of the world.

The rumour spread that the Whites were about to attack the Reds, who still held Moscow. In order to feed his 200,000 men, General Denikin loosed them on the countryside, battalion after battalion; their mission was to return well-fed and ready to fight. This also meant raping women for relaxation and killing Jews in lieu of pay. No-one quite knew what was coming, except more trouble.

Among the refugees, gangs began forming, the stronger preying on the weaker. One night, a young man crept up to the young woman and lifted her skirts revealing in the moonlight a golden triangle of pubic hair and milky white thighs. The man held a knife in one hand and with the other undid his trousers. This was the state in which

Andreï, back from his thieving, surprised him. The man never learned what power it was that took hold of him. When he came to, blood was streaming from his nose and ears and especially from the end of his penis, neatly sliced off by the knife that he still held in his hand.

Neither the young woman nor the baby had woken, but from then on Andreï was reluctant to leave them alone even for a moment and consequently they suffered a little more from hunger. The young woman chewed handfuls of grass, but soon this too became harder to find, besides it was hardly worth the bother of eating and gave her cramps and diarrhoea.

This place was a trap. The roads were reserved for military vehicles and coal shipments under heavy escort trying to reach Moscow. No-one gave the refugees a second thought, but occasionally shells landed in the cauldron of their improvised camp. Poor aim by the gunners, or just the fun of setting off a panic. From afar, they looked like insects that one would crush underfoot without a thought.

It was on one of these occasions that the young woman left the road in a panic and rushed into the relative safety of the forest where, heart pounding, she hid among the ferns, frightened her baby would start crying from hunger. The time was long past when the sight of a uniform brought reassurance, the concrete symbol of an order one could rely on. Three shells had fallen near her. Her dress was blood-spattered. She set the baby down in the grass and loosened his coverings to look for wounds, but he was unhurt. Only then did she check herself. But the blood was someone else's, someone less lucky.

A few dozen of them, haggard and thin, had gone into the woods. They wanted to keep going and she joined them, but they did not walk together and did not form a group,

and there was not one among them who would think twice before sacrificing another to save his own life. In this, they were all the same.

pp. 124-127

Surprised by the sudden surge of refugees fleeing the clearing, Andrei had stumbled and fallen; he had no choice but to curl up and wrap his arms around his head for protection as the crowd trampled him. It was like a nightmare. It was everything he had fled for nearly forty years. But he had not turned away, he had plunged in. From the start, he had known. He had guessed what would happen if he opened his door to the young woman; he had sensed it, and he had surrendered to it.

The refugees scattered. He got up at last, exhausted, aching. His filthy clothes were the colour of earth, through the rips he saw his skin, scratched and scraped, red from dozens of cuts. Where was she? He turned in circles searching for her. He had lost her. He thought he might go mad. He clung desperately to the image of the young woman and her child, this baby he had seen born into a springtime of corpses, the child he had watched grow while everything familiar collapsed around them.

For a long time, he had preferred to be alone. He had loved more than was good for him the tranquil flow of time and the endlessly repeated motions of his own survival, but he had not understood that it was his own grave he was digging a little deeper each day, burying himself alive in his little house under the hill. Then she came. He had cast his soul together with the young woman's and now she had stolen it away from him, and without her he was lost.

He circled the clearing, avoiding the soldiers, like a dog trying to pick up a scent, bewildered by all the different odours. He felt something warm on his face. He raised his hand to his cheek and found it covered in tears. He tried to think. After Kirilian, she had

headed south. It seemed reasonable to think that she would continue in that direction, bypassing Moscow and the opposing armies. So he also plunged into the forest.

He wanted to be where they were, the young woman and her child. She was not Rasputin, she had no hint of his presence, she never looked toward him, she never stopped, suddenly alert, as if she had heard his voice. For the young woman, Andreï did not exist, had never existed, would never exist.

She believed she was alone. And she was, in a way, at least until her son was born, and yet she was not. Andreï was there. He watched over her like a guardian angel, powerless, without wings, unable to fly. He wondered: did we need to be aware of another's presence not to be alone? He would never have a satisfactory answer to his question, but asking it was like a prayer addressed to an absent God, sent with little hope into space, against the blind walls of his personal universe. He walked through a world that was not his, that did not know him. And Andreï did not know himself.

The passing years had succeeded in erasing his memories. He was left with a past stitched together from the discussions, arguments, caresses and countless hours of his youth spent in asking himself what others thought of him. He had tried to reconstruct his visible past after the fact in order to keep hold of the images he needed to survive, but he could never be certain that they were real. The birth of the child had unearthed others that seemed truer, more raw and more cruel. These were not, strictly speaking, memories but evocations powerful enough to hollow within him tunnels and fissures so that after years of slowly turning to stone he felt himself becoming porous, light and fragile. Fragments of a buried past re-surfaced. Childhood caresses, the brush of lips on his forehead, endearments whispered into his ear. A tiny hand holding onto a large finger. He did not

know why these images were at once so painful and so beautiful. Following the birth, he had observed the woman and child from so near that he could feel their breath on his face, giving off the milky scent of new life.

While they slept, cradled together, the baby nestled against his mother's breast, Andreï would kneel beside the bed and lay his head on the pillow next to the young woman's. He would raise his hand as if to caress the baby's head but without touching, and he would hold his arm there until it ached with an unbearable pain that was not only in his muscles.

The following days turned hot. The sun filled a cloudless sky. Andreï went on through the heat without pausing. He continued on his way doggedly, cutting through the countryside that rippled away to the horizon. His legs ached. His feet were bloody in his boots, and sometimes he felt like his bones were rubbing leather.

He chewed leaves to stave off his hunger and sucked pebbles to ease his thirst. When he passed through a village, he drank his fill and stole what food he could without a second thought. He took a rock-hard piece of bread off a rotting corpse and ate it because he had to, to give himself the strength to continue. He headed east then south. Whole villages had emptied out to follow the same route. Columns of fugitives move forward following the line of least resistance, leaving behind them the pittance that was their life. Andreï scoured them searching for a familiar face. He had a single goal. He was no longer himself, or perhaps, now, he was completely himself.

pp. 128-129

The bridge which straddled the Volga tributary had been destroyed. The refugees massed on the steep riverbank in a crush which ended in more than a few drownings. The fighting further north had sent swollen bodies floating downriver. A crow rested on the belly of one of them to feast on the eyes. Andreï was sitting on a rock, off to the side, shaking his head and laughing. He did not know how to swim. He had never learned. He had been afraid of water ever since the school of fish in the Neva. He was laughing because he knew that this would not stop him. This would not stop him, and if he had to drown in these greasy waters that were sweeping away the human waste of civil war, so be it, he would go in all the same.

He shook his head as he laughed, this laughter came from far away in time, laughter in the face of the end of the world, laughter in the face of the appalling irony of it all. How often must we undergo the same sufferings, and why? Was there even anything to be understood? He had endured more than fifty years of a loveless existence to find himself laughing at the prospect of a lonely death by drowning.

A large branch floated by; the mass of bright green leaves that topped it seemed out of place, a splash of colour on the swirling muddy waters. Andreï climbed down from the heap of shattered rock and steel and leapt into the water without even taking the trouble to properly hold his breath. He came to the surface spitting water and splashed his way through the eddies. He reached for the branch just missing it, went under again and re-emerged to grab a handful of leaves and haul himself halfway onto the branch. He kicked his feet and let the current carry him away in a long diagonal toward the opposite bank. When he got there, he was exhausted. He dragged himself up the riverside and

wondered how far the current had taken him. Far, it seemed; the current was strong and the banks had swept by in a confused blur.

He was too tired to take to the road now. He rested on the riverbank in his wet clothes and let the sun dry him. He was both hot and cold; every wound on his body had been cleaned by his spell in the water and were now white-lipped. He slept a little and then stood up painfully. His old leg injury hurt him, his entire body ached, and at first he walked slowly, but his blood began to flow and he picked up his pace. He thought to himself that he still did not know the young woman's name. But it was toward her that he walked, wherever she was.

pp. 130-133

He arrived in the port city of Rostov-on-Don at the end of August. Many refugees had converged on the city in the hope of leaving the country by river, buying passage on one of the many cargo vessels or tramp steamers bound for the Black Sea and Turkey. The river was a channel into the continent and a conduit to the rest of the world; it seemed logical that the overflow would pour through and spill into the other regions of the earth; this at least was the hope of those who still had the wherewithal to maintain hope.

They had spread themselves out everywhere near the quays, on every available surface, on every bench, on the pavement, on the lawns, or they sat on the crates waiting for any ship that would take them. Many were ill or exhausted and were reluctant to move, if they did they would have had to fight to find another spot to lie down and rest a little. It was an enormous chaotic queue, which extended in every direction. There were thousands of them, and the city authorities had so little idea of what to do with such a number that they did nothing at all and let them be, simply forbidding them to leave the perimeter or to trespass on the quays, given that the priority was to keep the road free for the movement of goods.

Attracted like vermin, merchants of misery sold mouldy bread or withered vegetables for their weight in gold, and since there were no toilets the entire area smelt like a sewer, and clouds of flies swarmed ceaselessly above it all. People soon fell ill; they vomited and relieved themselves were they were. The flies moved from one shit-stained victim to another, spreading disease as they went. It was the end of August and the fierce heat settled like a lid over the sprawling mass, which broke down a little more each day.

Once a week, the port authorities extended pipes into the river, started the pumps and hosed down everything at once, people and shit together. Those who could not stand up remained where they were and choked on a putrid mix of water, faeces and rubbish. This was also an opportunity to count and carry off the dead. Whenever a boat berthed, those who could massed outside the gate to buy passage. But the captains only let aboard a handful of the well dressed, clean and healthy who, guarded by sergeants-at-arms, arrived directly from the shipping company's warehouses.

The refugees were piled one on top of the other, and Andreï had no choice but to walk over them to look for the young woman, crushing hands, legs, bellies under his heels. Sweat stung his eyes. He carefully examined the faces of the living and the dead. It was odd, he was afraid he would not recognize her, and yet, when he did find her, seated on the ground, back resting against a wall, eyes closed and her baby at one thin and flaccid breast empty of milk, they were all he saw: the woman and her baby, everything else immediately ceased to exist, as if in finding them he had returned home.

The child seemed asleep as he fed. Andreï crouched down beside them, pushing aside a man who was doubled over coughing up his lungs. Andreï waited for her to wake. He had come all this way to find her and he waited for her to wake, this was all he could do for the moment.

He bent over the child's head and breathed in the scent of his hair. He was afraid to leave them now that he had found them, but they were sleeping soundly, and he had to find water and something to eat.

There was not much of anything in the well-guarded warehouses but guns and ammunition. But there was one room filled with grain, wine and milk for export to cover

the cost of the revolution, while on the other side of the wall those for whom the revolution had been made were dying of hunger. Andreï took his knife and cut a piece out of a round of cheese as large as a carriage wheel. He filled his pockets with almonds and emptied out a bottle of vodka in order to fill it with milk. He then went back to the young woman.

She had not moved, but her eyes were open. She mechanically caressed her baby's head and gave him her other breast to suck, which was just as flaccid, empty and sad. The young woman's cheeks were sunken and her skin waxen. Night fell. Andreï placed several almonds on the young woman's thighs. She did not see them even after Andreï had taken away his hand. Andreï then broke off a piece of cheese. Being careful not to touch her, he pushed the cheese between her lips with his thumb and index finger. Her tongue trembled when she noticed the flavour of the saliva-moistened cheese. She moved her jaw and the cheese disappeared behind her teeth and she swallowed. Andreï spent the night feeding her like a chick, and in the morning when the sun rose, she seemed to have regained some colour, or it may simply have been the rising sun that reddened her cheeks.

pp. 134-135

Those too weak to walk no longer even tried to find a place on board the ships heading south after they had been unloaded.

Before anything else, the young woman first had to regain her strength if she wanted to leave this place. She had to regain the desire. This took time and Andreï was worried because the Sickness had arrived on the quays of Rostov-on-Don.

The Sickness fell upon them, and in three days half of those infected were dying of it. More than half. First came fatigue, then fever, then a dry and painful cough, then death. There was no treatment apart from leaving, finding somewhere else to board a ship. The only way to avoid infection was to leave, already refugees were coughing all around them, their lungs spreading an unseen microscopic death. But Andreï could not explain any of this to the young woman or to anyone else. She had to decide on her own to leave and try her luck elsewhere. She had to get stronger.

He continued to feed her, and when he had no more cheese or almonds, he returned to the warehouses, but the doors had been locked and he came back empty-handed.

From then on, he stayed near the young woman. Anyone who came too close to the woman and her baby was pushed roughly aside. He defended their territory with kicks and blows. He had a plan. He saw exactly what needed to be done. With enough money, anything was possible. You could escape from traps and even microbes, any and all sorts of dirty invisible little beasts.

While she slept and slowly regained her strength, he watched the great rusty ships, which continued to unload goods and take on others. Sail had given way to coal a

long time ago, which left the sky smeared with long black trails resembling Chinese writing. From time to time the baby cried softly and the young woman gave him the other breast without completely waking. He seemed too weak to get very cranky or to cry the way he had in the week after his birth when he had colic and his face had turned scarlet. That had given Andreï quite a fright, but the young woman had laid the baby on his back and sang to him as she massaged his belly, after a few minutes the baby expelled a greenish lumpy diarrhoea; his normal rosy glow returned and he fell asleep soon after, while the young woman washed his wrappings, and Andreï had seen the baby smile in his sleep, his first smile.

pp. 136-138

The refugees had stopped coming. They were likely being sent elsewhere, but for the time being, no-one arrived and no-one was allowed to leave. Andreï had watched without moving as the dockers built a sort of palisade to block the exits; armed soldiers patrolled the perimeter. They wrapped scarves around their mouths and noses and they carried wine spirits in their tunic pockets to moisten their handkerchiefs. Many of the refugees became anxious at being enclosed in this way. A doctor approached to explain that they were under quarantine, just a precaution. But the doctor did not enter the security perimeter to speak to the refugees. He stayed carefully away from the palisade, and stood perched on a wooden farm-equipment crate, or so said the stencilling on the side. Following the doctor's visit, some of the healthier men had tried to leave, but shots fired over their heads made them see reason, and they returned to sit and wait.

At nightfall, Andreï went around to examine the palisade. It was not a very serious affair, and he would have had no trouble getting over it, but for the young woman carrying her baby it would be a different matter. They could also pile crates one on top of the other to get onto the roofs. Or they could jump into the Don, swim into the middle and let the current carry them down river. He could just picture the three of them, he who could not even swim. He laughed at the idea. He shook his head, returned to the young woman and gave her the last of the cheese. He woke several times during the night. Silent shadows moved among the sleepers, searching pockets for something to eat or for money. Andreï kicked at them, and when this was not enough, he made them bleed by taking hold of them. When he let them go, they disappeared into the night bewildered and dazed.

More than half of the refugees seemed to have caught the Sickness and those that had not complained and cried and tried to flee. Some were pushed back with rifle butts. They called for the doctor and when he appeared, perching on his farm-equipment crate, he seemed anxious and nervous, and told them briefly what this Sickness was. He told them that it had gone round the world, that it had come from Asia and had crossed the Americas before arriving here. He said there was nothing he could do to help them. "I'm sorry," and he looked sorry. He looked very young, and had probably only just finished his studies before being drafted. He had baskets of bread and barrels of water delivered to them. Soldiers kept their guns trained on the refugees while the barrels were opened and then withdrew and put the barricade back in place. Those refugees who were hungry rushed to the bread baskets, and in three minutes there was nothing left. Fights broke out because the strongest had taken all the bread for themselves, but since they were the strongest they did not have to fight for long. They gave up a few loaves and the others fought over the crumbs.

As for water, one needed to be strong enough to get up and drink directly from the barrels or have someone bring handfuls of water back to those too weak to move. This was not a very efficient solution, and mothers filled their mouths with water and returned to pour it into the mouths of sick husbands and children, men did the same for their wives and the elderly, and all the water very quickly became contaminated. Those with fever were terribly thirsty; they called constantly for water, and how could one refuse them?

pp. 139-141

The heat had soured the milk in the bottle, so they had nothing left to drink. Andreï feared that if he left the young woman alone for too long she would make her way over to drink from the barrels. He took his knife and cut thin strips from the cloth of his trousers and jacket. This was not enough, so he took clothes from the people nearby, who in any case were sweating with fever. He cut them into strips and tied them together to form a long rope, which he knotted around the neck of the bottle. Then he went over to the barricade that blocked the entrance to the quays. He would have to throw the bottle quite far for it to fall into the water rather than smash on the paving stones. He could easily have climbed the barricade and gone over to the quays to lower the bottle into the water, but he did not want to lose sight of the young woman. He succeeded in his first attempt and carefully pulled the bottle back hoping that it would not get stuck anywhere along the way. When he got it back, it was half-filled with cloudy, rust-coloured liquid, but this was better than the contaminated water in the barrels. He went back to the young woman and poured a little into her mouth. She swallowed without reacting, then choked and coughed. Well after she had cleared her lungs of the water, she continued coughing. Andreï placed his palm a hair's breadth from the young woman's forehead. She was burning up. He let his hand fall and bit his lip.

Taking care not to touch the child, he took his knife and cut through the young woman's dress and uncovered her down to the waist; he poured a little water over her torso and her flaccid, shrunken breasts. Then he blew on her and fanned her with his hands to create a slight breeze of cooling air. As soon as the water had dried from her skin, he splashed on a little more, continuing to blow on her and fan her with his hand.

He blew as hard as he could, keeping his lips pursed so that the air would be as cool as possible. He took off his shirt and waved it over the young woman as fast as he could. He splashed her with water and blew on her. He brought his palm up to her forehead, which burnt with fever.

He took no rest. The sun was high in the sky, and he continued fanning her. He welcomed with relief the shadows of the day's end. When he became dizzy, he stopped blowing, waited for it to pass, and then began again. He also stopped to run over and refill the bottle, trying to avoid slipping on the corpses, vomit and puddles of shit for fear of falling and breaking the bottle.

The child had also become very hot, so Andrei undid his wrappings and splashed water on him as well. He blew on him and fanned him to create a little breeze to dispel the feverish vapours and chase away the demons that had taken possession of the bodies' of the young woman and her child. And this was what he was doing: he chased demons away with his mouth and his hands and the dirty rag of his shirt. He chased away demons with his breath. He chased away demons by fanning the woman and her child for many long hours. For three days. For four nights.

pp. 142-143

He threw the line over the barricade and heard glass smash on the paving stones. He pulled on the rope until the bottle appeared, broken off at the neck. He stood staring and blinking at it for long moment. He licked his dry lips, dropped the rope and turned his back on the barricade. He wanted to go back to the young woman and her child, but they seemed so far away. He stopped because he was tired and looked up into the air. The sun was very high and shone out of a bright blue sky. The buzzing was deafening. He saw a bird gliding way up high, so high that he could not tell whether it was a vulture or a bird of prey. It took some effort to lower his gaze and to watch where he was stepping.

All the survivors were gathered next to the walls and barricades; they had pushed the bodies into the centre. They kept their eyes closed to avoid seeing the flies laying their eggs in the flesh of their children, sisters, mothers and grandparents. Millions of flies and millions of maggots swarmed in the eyes of the newly dead and in the flesh of the older corpses, which had burst open from the built up gases.

Andreï placed one foot in front of the other. It was difficult. These were the most difficult steps he had ever taken. He was thinking that he had walked all his life, that for all those years he had been walking to get someplace, and he was thinking that that place was here. This exact spot. He had arrived. All those steps. But no, there was no goal. The important thing was to walk, just walk. Until one could no longer walk. It was that simple.

He raised his hand to wipe away the sweat running into his eyes. He saw her in the distance. She was standing up straight, in her patched up dress, holding her baby on her hip. The child was waving his tight little fists every which way. Andreï smiled at him

and waved his hand. The baby shouted. The young woman raised her child to her shoulder and with one hand supporting his bottom gently patted his back. She whispered into his ear.

Andreï felt the blood pounding in his temples. He took another step. The young woman set her child on the ground, holding him by the hands. She seemed to be encouraging him to walk. Then she crouched down, took him in her arms, hugged him tightly and, smiling slightly, stared straight into Andreï's eyes, but he could not be certain because the swarming flies blurred the image of the young woman. When she moved her lips, he thought he could read a soundless thank you, but he could not be certain of this either. He took another step forward, one more step, and smiled himself, then he collapsed onto the slimy ground.

pp. 144-147

The trucks from the medical unit arrived in the port of Rostov to separate the living from the dead, to treat the former and burn the latter.

One by one, the survivors left the security perimeter and were marched in single file to the entrance of a tent, where they had to strip naked and throw their clothes into steel barrels. They entered the tent and were showered with antiseptic. They were given a blanket and a bowl of hot soup. They then went into other tents and waited to be examined by one of the two doctors. They were still fearful and wondered what would be done with them, but they knew they had been ill and no longer were, which was some reassurance.

The living required the specialised care of doctors and nurses, but anyone could take care of the dead. There were two of them, an old man who spoke hardly a word and a youth with wire-rimmed glasses. They had no idea what they had done to deserve this assignment, but they set about the work without complaint.

They worked the pump and with pipe and fire hose sprayed the pavement and the corpses, driving away flies and drowning maggots. A truck backed onto the square and tipped out a load of quicklime. The two men each took a shovel and scattered a little lime on the corpses. The young one with the glasses wore gloves and a surgeon's mask over his mouth and nose. The old man wore only the mask.

Around noon, they ate their lunch at some distance from the corpses. The youth tried to make conversation, but the old man, for the most part, merely nodded, so they finished their meal in silence, wiped their hands on their trousers and went back to work. The young man took each corpse by the shoulders while the old one lifted by the ankles

and together, in one smooth, well-practised motion, they swung the body up and threw it onto the back of the truck that had delivered the quicklime. Once they had finished, once they had loaded all the corpses, the old man banged on the side of the truck and the driver left with his cargo, crossing the city to the pit the soldiers had dug in the loose soil of an abandoned potato field.

“Shit,” said the old man after the truck had driven off.

“What?”

“We missed one.”

“You’re joking.”

“Look.”

“What’s he doing there?”

The old man didn’t answer.

“How could we have missed him?”

The old man scratched his head.

The young man shrugged. He looked off in the direction the truck had taken.

“What do we do?”

The old man went up to the corpse. Though thin and dressed in ripped and ragged clothes, it didn’t look to be in bad shape: a man with black, grey-streaked hair, lying face down. The old man stooped and turned the body over, but the face told him nothing.

“What’s that?”

Now the young one bent over the body, stretched out his arm and reached under the collar of the man’s shirt. He pulled out a little mirror no bigger than the palm of his

hand. It hung from a leather strap around the man's neck and was framed in finely sculpted rings of walnut wood.

The young man bespectacled the strap from around the corpse's head. He stood up and read the inscription burnt into the walnut frame:

*"Myself alone."*

"That mean anything to you?"

The old man didn't answer. He looked around the square. They were alone, himself and the young man. The soldiers had left; the truck was gone

"Give me a hand."

He took the corpse by the ankles and waited while the young man put the mirror into his pocket, put on his gloves and slid his hands under the corpse's shoulders, they then lifted together. The old man jerked his chin toward the river. They carried the body to the wharf and, after checking once again that they were alone, dropped it into the Don. Then they returned to the security perimeter as they still had to spread quicklime over the pavement and wash everything down with the fire hose.

The body sank in slow somersaults, uncoiling, in its descent, ribbons of bubbles that burst on the surface of the water, long rosaries of oxygen – the airy strings of a puppet discarded by his puppeteer.

In the muted colours of the shifting submarine glow, Andreï's face looked rested. Closed forever on the image of the young woman and her child, his eyes received without a flicker the void of shimmering, shifting light that his brain no longer comprehended. His body came to rest on the stony riverbed with a gentleness it had never known in life. And there it stayed, swayed only by the bottom currents that gradually anchored it

between two rocks and an old piece of iron, the rusted remains of a trailer axle that, in more prosperous times, had been tossed into the water as no-one thought it worth the bother of selling for scrap.

The gudgeon took fright at the descending body and sought refuge behind the rocks and wharf pillars. After a short while, seeing nothing amiss, they calmly returned to their fishy activities.

Some, growing bold, tasted the flesh once it began to decompose. They wriggled about, tearing off small, slimy morsels, losing them on occasion in fights with crayfish. Later, other, larger, fish arrived and chased the smaller ones to the edge of the circle. As their numbers grew, they jostled to feast on the body. Soon, all that was left were the bones, which calcified over time.

Within a few years, nothing would remain to distinguish them from the stones of the riverbed.

***THE END***