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INTRODUCTION

An anecdote that may be instructive to the reader of novels written under Oulipian constraint: in 1969, after Georges Perec published *La Disparition*—if not the most illustrative example of an Oulipian novel then certainly the easiest to explain¹—a critic named René-Marill Albérés reviewed it, lukewarmly, in the journal *Les Nouvelles littéraires*. Other critics reviewed *La Disparition* too, of course; what stood out about Albérés was that he plainly missed the central conceit of the book, namely that it had been written without any words containing the letter E.

I bring this up because, whatever grim conclusions we may reach specific to Albérés's deftness as a reader (and *La Disparition* takes place in a world from which the letter E has gone mysteriously missing, so it's not like there weren't clues), his gaffe points out a pitfall with the potential to trip up even the most meticulous litterateur: reading an Oulipian novel without knowing the precise way in which it is Oulipian.

Did I say pitfall? I might have meant windfall.

As types of vertigo go, after all, being in the Oulipian dark is not such a bad one. It can even be refreshing, given that most novels in this milieu are preceded at some distance by their reputations. But in any

¹ Speaking of explanations, the adjective Oulipian is retrofitted from the name Oulipo, which stands for *ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or workshop for potential literature: a collective established in Paris in 1960 with the purpose of exploring and exploiting the generative literary potential of linguistic, mathematical, and scientific structures—which, lots of the time, is a fancy way of saying the use of constraints as a writing aid. Perec became a member of the Oulipo in 1967 (and is still a member despite having died in 1982, according to one of the group's admittedly stringent bylaws). Anne Garréta, on whom more in a moment, became a member in 2000, and I became one in 2009.

case let's continue to treat the situation with gravity, so to speak, for a moment longer.

The first time I read *Sphinx*, Anne Garréta's first novel, I knew that it was Oulipian,² but not how. It took me about forty pages to figure out its conceit, and what I felt once I did was more than just relief, more than just satisfaction to have quieted that nagging sense of missing something: I was, well, still bewildered. But it was a refreshing, trees-to-forest kind of bewilderment, the kind that comes when, say, you've been so busy trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle that you're caught off guard by how strange and fascinating the resulting picture is. A bewilderment that asks not *what* but *how*. Like its namesake from Greek myth, *Sphinx* was that rare riddle that only makes you think harder after you know the answer.

Now, I assume that if you're here you already know the answer, such as it is: you know the unspoken constraint behind the novel you are about to read, or have maybe just finished. (If you happen *not* to know the answer yet, I urge you to do everything in your power to stay ignorant for a while longer: sheathe the front and back covers of the book in kraft paper, avoid discussing it with booksellers, and don't read any reviews unless you're confident that they were written by lousy, inattentive critics. One hint: Anne Garréta uses the letter E plenty of times herein—your quarry lies elsewhere.)

Here's the thing about *Sphinx*, though: it will bewilder you no matter which side of the riddle you enter from. The reader who knows what he or she is getting into from the outset loses nothing of the novel's

2 This is actually a much more complex and debatable statement than it seems. First of all, there is a longstanding debate within and without the Oulipo as to whether any work should be called Oulipian simply because its author is a member of the Oulipo. (Is this introduction Oulipian?) Second of all, even if you respond yes to the first point, there is still the technicality that Garréta published *Sphinx* in 1986, fourteen years before she became an Oulipian. In any event, at the time of my first reading the book had been commended to me as Oulipian by a trusted source, and I do not feel I was led astray.

true vertigo—the high-wire act by which Garréta, under the cover of a relatively conventional narrative, quietly dismantles various conventions in the way we think and speak about love and despair and need. It bewilders me still, less on the technical level than on the level at which the technical merges with the conceptual, the medium with the message. To read *Sphinx* already aware of its conceit is only to break the picture back into its constituent puzzle pieces, to reverse the sequence of the questions your bewilderment asks: to go in wondering how the novelist pulled off this one trick,³ but come out wondering what kind of reality you've been inhabiting.

Above and beyond constraint, that particular blend of readerly effort and figure-ground reversal is one of the best things an Oulipian novel can hope to achieve, and in that sense *Sphinx* is consummately Oulipian. It's worth noting, I suppose, that in other senses it is not remotely: stylistically, for one thing, it has none of the lightness, none of the gleeful air of structured play, found in most Oulipian fiction. Garréta's prose is heavy, drastic, baroque, at once ruthlessly clinical and deeply sentimental; her characters wage their struggles against language and its strictures not out of a desire to explore or make mischief, but based on stakes of life and death. Sometimes literally, depending on the book.⁴

Nonetheless, even if Garréta is an unusually ornate stylist for the Oulipo, and arguably the most deliberately radical thinker it has ever

3 To say nothing of the translator. If Garréta's composition of *Sphinx* was a high-wire act, then Emma Ramadan's task in carrying it over into a language with at least one crucially important constitutional difference is, near as I can figure it, akin to one tightrope walker mimicking the high-wire act of a second walker on a steeply diverging tightrope, while also doing a handstand.

4 The two other novels Garréta published prior to joining the Oulipo, *Ciels liquides* (1990) and *La Décomposition* (1999), are excellent examples of the class of modern French novel or film that sounds charming and fun when you hear its synopsis but turns out to be sort of existentially upsetting when you actually read or watch it.

counted among its ranks, she still belongs in those ranks, and *Sphinx* shows why. Like the best of the workshop's productions, it is animated by a drive to use language to question language, to manipulate and master and subvert the mechanics of everyday expression. In doing so it creates a subtly but sometimes chillingly different world, one that arises not so much within the narrative as within our experience of reading it. And it leaves us to sort out the implications, mostly, once we learn to recognize them: the arbitrariness of our assumptions; the flimsiness of our institutions; the difficulties of knowing another person, oneself, anything. Pitfall, wind-fall. The vertigo changes but does not disappear.

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Remembering saddens me still, even years later. How many exactly, I don't know anymore. Ten or maybe thirteen. And why do I always live only in memory? Soul heavy from too much knowing, body tired from feeling pensive and powerless at the same time, so riven by this obsessive ennui that nothing, or almost nothing, can distract it anymore. Back then, if I recall correctly, I used to describe the world as a theater where processions of corpses danced in a macabre ball of drives and desires. My contempt and ennui did not, however, keep me from observing how this dance dissolved into an amorous waltz. Languid nights at the whim of syncopated rhythms and fleeting pulses; the road to hell was lit with pale lanterns; the bottom of the abyss drew closer indefinitely; I moved through the smooth insides of a whirlwind and gazed at deformed images of ecstatic bodies in the slow, hoarse death rattle of tortured flesh.

But I was slipping and could only keep falling; I couldn't cut myself off or break from my destiny with a mesmerized flight. Is it blasphemy to insist that my lucid crossing to hell was a direct road to redemption? "You would not look for me if you had not found me; you would not long for me if you had not once held me in your arms."

Those arms, the intense sweetness, a series of scenes that still ignites a carnal flame in my memory. A*** was a dancer. I would spend my nights waiting for A*** to appear on the stage of the Eden, a cabaret on the Left Bank. And who wouldn't have been enamored of that svelte

frame, that musculature seemingly sculpted by Michelangelo, that satiny skin far superior to anything I had ever known?

In those years I was the resident DJ at the Apocryphe, a fashionable nightclub at the time.

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I've been trying unsuccessfully to remember the first visions I had of A***. Without a calling, I drift through the world with no control over my explosions of delirious happiness or my collapses into despair. I am easily distracted, ready for the most random deviations. So I must have first spotted A*** during a melancholic, disinterested contemplation of a succession of bodies I wasn't trying hard to distinguish, on the stage of a cabaret where some obliging alcoholic had decided to drag me, coming from a club where we'd mingled our disappointments. Asking myself afterward what had made the place so appealing, I couldn't describe it. In that blur, something must have struck me: something started operating underground, a digging, a tunneling in my mind following the blinding impact of a fragment on my retina. A body, just one, that I hadn't identified, surreptitiously had filled the place with a seduction that permeated so deeply I couldn't discover the cause, I couldn't uncover the root of it.

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Not long after that first outing at the Eden, Tiff, one of my friends of the time who had recently become an exotic dancer after her stint as an acrobat, dragged me along on her usual tour of cabarets. I was finally being granted what I had been after for a long time: the chance to be the shadow of a body whose own is stolen by the spotlight. She had agreed to meet me around ten one night, in one of the big cafés on the Place Pigalle. It was autumn. On my way there, I was walking against the current in a flood of hurried men, watchful men with a careful step—where were they going to in such a rush? A streetwalker crossed my path,

harnessed in garters and leather straps. Her joints, limbs, and torso were bound in black leather fastened with metallic buckles. On the edge of the sidewalk she began her fiery ballet. She looked like a gladiator, some kind of beast of burden. All along the boulevard these stores—half sex shop, half erotic lingerie shop—offered the elements of such ensembles. A little farther along, I stopped in front of one of the half-curtained storefronts. Were there really women who wore these blood-red bodices, purple garter belts, and sheer lace thongs? I was continuing on my way when, passing through the halo of light projected onto the pavement from the entrance of a cabaret, I suddenly recalled the spotlight cast on that body dancing the finale on the stage of the Eden. The desire to go back pulsed through me—the fleeting feeling that I had left something behind there.

I sped up until I reached the café on the northwest corner of the Place Pigalle. Some working-class men in tired suits were packed tightly together along the bar. The neon dripped a muggy light on this anxious sampling of humanity. Tiff was standing near the cash register talking to one of the servers. I recognized her thanks to the shimmer of her rhinestones and sequins shining dimly through a thick cloud of cigarette smoke. Tiff would always start yelling out to me as soon as she saw me. Her shortsightedness, which she refused to correct out of vanity, thankfully limited the range of her shouts—a hello accompanied by so many affectionate names that it had made me blush at the beginning of our friendship. In this café filled with the lingering stench of anxiety and brutality, hearing myself called “my love” and “my pet” sent shivers of nervousness and dread down my spine. In the clash of Arabic sounds and the servers' shouts, I thought such an outburst would make the world stop spinning. But no one seemed to have noticed—to have heard—what was worrying me so much. It was as if I was acting as a sound box,

The Eden held a certain power over me; I was helpless against it. Before I went to work at night, I would spend two hours there, from ten to midnight. The troupe very quickly adopted me: they asked for my opinion on their makeup and confessed to me all their little dramas. I liked to let myself be brushed by naked skin, by boas and feather fans. I liked to watch as a face transformed under the stroke of a pencil and the touch of a brush, the line of a drawn eyebrow, the shape of an accentuated cheekbone. This living exhibition turned me off of antiquities; the odors of perfume and sweat were missing at all the museums I visited.

Out of all the dancers, A*** showed the most enthusiastic fondness toward me. Our relationship was very ceremonious at first. I would follow A*** into the dressing room, often bringing along a token of my affection: flowers; a photograph taken surreptitiously as A*** entered onto the stage; a fashion etching from the 1930s. My attempt at courtship was like something out of a book from the 19th century.

After the kiss on the lips that everyone there was rewarded with upon arrival, I would listen to the details of A***'s day. I would settle deep into the red velvet couch in the dressing room, stretching my legs over the armrest, and silently contemplate the slow process of applying makeup and arranging a costume. I noticed ironically that the dancers spent more time adjusting these little delicate nothings that elude nudity than one would dressing oneself from head to toe for a gala at the Opéra.

There are a thousand details to consider when putting on a simple long gown or the man fastening a bow tie on the wing collar of his shirt. A thousand details in order to show off a behind, leaving the thighs and hips free and visible, but without revealing the crotch. I was amazed at the time it took for a body always to appear smooth, hairless, supple, and flawless: in a word, angelic. I learned that black skin like A***'s demands makeup of a completely different hue and variety than white skin. I learned how fragile the body is, how much care is required to maintain the suppleness of the limbs and joints. Before leaving the dressing room, A*** always performed a few dance steps for my selfish pleasure; then we would separate. The last image I had before going to work was of the shimmering golden reflections on skin lit up by dim hallways lights and soon devoured by the shadows of the wings. I would linger for a few moments in the dressing room, contemplating all the tools of metamorphosis, the street clothes lying around. Often I would dreamily put back an object that had fallen on the floor, or leave a little note slipped between the mirror and its frame. It wasn't the show that brought me to the Eden, I would hurry toward the exit while the audience applauded the opening, sitting with their champagne. Once outside, I would make my way on foot to the Apocryphe, progressively sobering up over the fifteen-minute walk that I always took, regardless of the weather or the season.

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The Apocryphe! Dark nights light up with red. Somewhere between brothel and butcher shop, its ambiguous essence was never revealed except to those who knew how to decipher mirrors' reflections. One had to guess at everything, trying to grasp words on lips, fugitive gestures, events captured in the mirror, while pretending to stare at oneself. A macabre masked ball, people tripping over streamers that snaked down from the

ceiling and coiled around the supporting pillars. To distill music, to set bodies in rhythm, was to be the priest of a harrowing cult. Once I realized that, all I could do was drift, asking myself why I was there, besides the chance that had brought me and the poisonous ease that had ensnared me. Then again, why leave? It was so easy to think of this crossing over as a trial of purification through the mud. I would have had to pretend to look all over again for some kind of calling, knowing full well that there was nothing to find, and that it would all end in horror and silence.

The moment I started there coincided with my decision to abandon what could have been an honest intellectual career. I had wasted four or five years on the benches of my school's theology department. Had I really imagined entering into a religious practice? I was about to launch into a thesis when, for some strange reason, a profound refusal began to bubble up in me. Not a refusal of faith or of metaphysics, but of the inanity of the scholarly discourse the university required me to use. The incomprehension of my fellow students, their constant tendency to relate every idea to some troubling personal decision and thus to consider the slightest original thought as the expression of an individual vice, only added to my melancholy and disgust. I was put on trial for everything I said, and so I adopted a seemingly contemptuous silence. I deserted my courses and avoided the cafés where the new inquisitors gathered and instead took refuge at my house, reading the books left behind long ago in the apartment my grandmother had bequeathed to me. For six months, from October to March, I succumbed to my natural tendency for reclusion, living between my bed and my desk.

I avoided going to the university as much as possible; the idea horrified me. But I went to the lectures on the Incarnation given on certain Thursdays by Padre***, a Spanish Jesuit. One day as I was leaving his class, he called me over, suggesting we have dinner together. The invitation

was so casual, even bordering on nonchalant, that it seemed only natural to accept. Padre*** practiced his faith in the strictest orthodox, though some people accused him of violating its core commandments in his private life. Apparently he didn't flee from worldly activities with sufficient horror. Because he wrote a column on culture for one of the larger evening newspapers and was the cofounder of a gastronomic circle, the students considered him a scandalous hypocrite, a deviant of decadent habits, which, I confess, made him pretty interesting to me. And so without hesitating I accepted his invitation for the next day.

Over dinner we vaguely alluded to the path it seemed I was about to quit. I think he understood my reasons for defecting and approved of them, but didn't want to admit it. When I entered into the world of theology, I had aroused hope in many of the priests and professors, due as much to my own intellectual merit as to the overall intellectual weakness of the sons and daughters of well-established families who had devoted themselves to these studies. I inexplicably wasn't living up to their hope that if I didn't take the vow I would at least become a respectable doctor in theology who might bring back a bit of luster to the discipline, devalued as it was by the mediocrity of its traditional followers; the Church pines for these lights of Reason as much as it fears them. Young Catholics born, raised, and nurtured in the accepted family faith tend to lack audacity. Restricted by tight-laced morals, they retreat from thought as soon as a question comes beating too furiously against the flanks of their fortified certitudes. Doomed to inbreeding according to hallowed rituals, they shrink from all secular currents that aren't weighed down by dogmas. The young girls, sensible and stupid, reserving their virginity for their husbands; the young men of old France, equally timid and crude under the contradictory effect of a suppressed sensuality that finds its outlet in military endeavors or during religious charity trips.

conversation were simply a pleasure, like the contemplation of A***'s body or A***'s dance, an aesthetic pleasure that I could attribute only to a lightness of being that never dipped into inanity. I can't define A*** as being anything other than both frivolous and serious, residing in the subtle dimension of presence without insistence.

Our arrival together at every locale and the attention we paid to each other started to incite gossip. Our encounters, which took place only in public, aroused suspicions of a private affair that, at the time, didn't exist. At the Apocryphe and everywhere we went, people made remarks about our striking dissimilarity. They teased me over the contrast in color between our skins, they stressed the difference in our manners: the impulsiveness of A***'s voice and gestures, that wild exuberance and openness to the world, which by comparison underscored my moderation and reserve. A*** in turn had to bear the incessant prattle about my religious and social background. They painted a picture of my incomprehensible oddities: my isolation; my taste for solitude strangely coexisting with a sudden dive into this world; an unheralded abandon of a university career for the improvised post of DJ. For want of any intelligible coherence, they assumed I must have been harboring some kind of vice or perversion.

What did I get out of spending all my time with someone with whom I shared no social, intellectual, or racial community? That was precisely the question troubling them. Black skin, white skin: our looks were against us. Our intimacy went against the mandate dictating that birds of a feather flock together. And this impossible clash of colors produced the general opinion that this was an unnatural union.

In order to stop the scandal, we diluted our dissimilarity by always hanging out in a group. But the people in this crowd tried to detach me from A*** by attempting to convince me that we were fundamentally

incompatible. I couldn't care less that my attachment to my seeming perfect antithesis was provoking worry and alarm. They complained A***'s numerous affairs, highlighted A***'s notorious fickleness and capriciousness that would make any real attachment impossible. They charitably forewarned me that I wasn't A***'s "type," that we weren't even of the same species. That if my intention was to turn this friendship into something more, it was best to give up now, and that if, by some misfortune, it had already become something more, it was just as well to break it off now before it dissolved into unpleasanties and pain.

I thoroughly did not care about their opinions, their advice and warnings, their slanders and denigrations. I was well aware of A***'s fickleness, capriciousness, and quickly changing tastes, for I had witnessed all of these traits myself. As for this concert of well-intentioned deceit and charitable denunciations aimed at discouraging me, I was deaf to it all.

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One morning at the Kormoran, that final stopover for night owls, an old mobster whom I knew and liked rather more than his congeners saw me enter with A***, called me over to his usual spot at the bar, and, after the customary ceremonious greetings, imparted this strange speech, interspersed with knowing winks:

"You know me. I like you. So listen up. All those idiots, they don't know anything. Because they see us chatting fairly often and because I seem to know you pretty well, for a week now they've been coming to me to complain that you're mucking around, that you're out of your mind. That you're foolishly running after that attractive animal there [gesturing toward A***]. You know what they say to me? That it could never work between whites and blacks.... And that, furthermore, you two aren't compatible... That one's always dancing, you're always hitting the books. They come to me desperately seeking an explanation....

[He paused to finish his whiskey] But they've got it all wrong, I'm telling you...I've been observing your conquest for two weeks now...And I know what blacks are like...For ten years I've been watching them pass through here...Listen to me: if you keep at it, you will succeed...All those assholes are talking bullshit...Saying that you're lowering yourself! That's what they've been saying to you, right? When you talk to them, they don't absorb anything, and so they can't understand what you see in A***...[He ordered another drink and relit his cigar] But I get what you see...Come back to me in a month and we'll discuss it again. Because it's not at all a lost cause, it just takes a bit of time. Yeah? Turn on the charm! Bring out the violins and *tutti quanti*...It takes time, but you can handle it...Have patience, and by God, you will succeed! And they'll have to eat their words."

He firmly grasped my hand after finishing his speech, pronounced in his eternally hoarse voice, rolling the gravel of an accent that rendered him incomprehensible to any ear unaccustomed to the deformations he inflicted on his syllables. The high-end escort keeping him company winked while watching me with a slightly alarmed air. Ruggero, as he called himself, was studying me paternally, a cigar wedged between his teeth, gauging my surprise. "Persevere or you'll have me to deal with... When you achieve your victory, the champagne is on me. Don't let yourself be intimidated by the blathering, the scandals, and the bullshit... Now go tend to your love affair."

I went and found A***, who had no clue about the sermon I had just endured. No doubt others had taken advantage of those ten minutes I had spent with Ruggero to make remarks about how I seemed to want to capture A***'s attention, and more still, at any price. They saw us everywhere together, but no act or gesture allowed them to definitively conclude it had turned into an affair. They didn't know what to believe, and for them that was insufferable. They would have excused

a brisk adventure, without consequence and without tomorrow—what was called in this milieu "getting some ass." But an attachment that appeared to stem from something other than sex was intolerable.

Ruggero had, however, clumsily formulated what I had been struggling to express myself, without it being, on my part, a conscious project or concerted maneuver. His soliloquy had clarified and simplified the ideas floating around in my head. Indeed, I'm sure that had been his aim. What I was feeling for A*** needed its own embodiment; the pleasure I took in A***'s company demanded its own fulfillment. I wanted A***, it was true, and all my other desires, needs, and plans paled in comparison. Suddenly, the obsessive clamor for amorous possession took hold of me.

I was surprised to find myself desiring, painfully. In a sudden rush of vertigo, I was tantalized by the idea of contact with A***'s skin. I wanted to dismiss, destroy all those who were thronging around A***, keeping this presence from me. I wanted to wrest A*** from their company, from the intrusive glances clinging to us there, and hide us both away. With an unknowingly crazed look, I was always watching this irresistible body. But my gaze was narrowing and stiffening under the tension of carnal desire. That night, A*** was wearing a black silk shirt and white pleated leather pants that showed off a firm behind. A***'s hair, shaved not long ago for the show, was beginning to grow back, materializing as a light shadow. That face, thus restored to its pure nudity, appeared without interference, without anything that could deceptively modify its proportions or veil its imperfections. Its features had retained nothing of A***'s African origins, except for a barely perceptible, sensual heaviness of the mouth.

I don't know what more to say about this body, although I spent hours contemplating it. But that night, my contemplation was exorbitant, quickly twisting into a desire to take possession...A*** noticed my unusual comportment. I made excuses; I didn't dare reveal the reason for

I want, therefore I am; I need, I breathe. I spend money, they must grant my desire, considering my demands in light of the value that I offer. I pay to exist; the tribute, delivered in kind or in cash, buys the recognition of my right.

My strategy was to inspire incertitude; I derived pleasure in imbuing these souls with doubt by not playing into their pathetic ruses. *Che vuoi?* I was leading them to the brink of an essential anxiety. My reply was always "maybe." It was a dangerous game that exposed me to the disapproval, disrespect, or insidious resentment of the people to whom I denied the assurance of being a subject. Each night I would have to confront this great panic of individual desires that were in reality desires for individuation, for furious revindication. Sometimes I would try—utterly in vain but with a perverse pleasure—to make them understand that the sum of individual desires does not add up to the happiness of all. That when it comes to the music in a club the law of the majority is ineffectual; that neither democracy nor aristocracy, nor even oligarchy, is a possible regime for a coherent musical set. I would argue that a good DJ is one who, rather than simply responding to repetitive wishes that are consciously formulaic and elementary (such and such a record, such and such a song), subconsciously manages to fulfill an unknown desire by creating a unity out of something superior to adding up so many records, so many requests. To appease is not the same as to fulfill.

Each night I made such observations that I would occasionally articulate to myself when pedantic disquisition and contempt started to mutually reinforce each other. I had come to the end of this chapter of my *De natura rerum noctis* dedicated to the essence of the position of the DJ: when I noticed A*** standing near the bar, no longer accompanied by that new moronic lover, being served a glass of champagne by the barman. It was late, the Eden had already been closed for some time, and

I worried that A***'s arrival at the Apocryphe after our altercation meant trouble. I didn't know if I was supposed to leave my booth and go meet A*** or if I was supposed to wait for A*** to approach me. Fortunately, we both had the same reflex, and met halfway between the bar and the booth. There was no visible trace of what had happened a few hours before. A*** was drunk, which almost never happened, and from within that drunkenness asked me to dance. People didn't dance as a couple anymore in those days except during retro sequences when the DJ would revive old dance forms such as the bop, tango, or waltz. And that was absolutely what A*** desired: a waltz, nothing less. I was enticed by this extravagance, and besides, why not? At this late hour, only a small number of people remained on the floor. A waltz would serve as a charming exit, and, irresistibly outmoded, could assume the parodic allure that excuses all improprieties. So from the bottom of the crate I took out an LP of Viennese waltzes that I cued with no transition, following some nondescript funk track. Abandoning the turntables, and without any snarky retort this time, I went to dance this waltz.

A***, though drunk, was dancing divinely. A classic routine demonstrates one's sensibility just as much as the unruly improvisations of today's dance steps. While dancing these waltzes—for we danced many in succession—I had the impression that never until this day had I revealed in such a carefree lightness of being. There was no longer anybody but us on the dance floor; no doubt our perfect execution of the steps had intimidated all the amateurs. A*** had a naïve and clichéd fondness for the antiquated world of the aristocracy, an admiration for the bygone, the retro, the image of luxury that Hollywood associates with times past.

A***'s drunkenness, at once dissipated and concentrated by the dance, kept us moving. When the Apocryphe closed, we hurried to the Kormoran. Ruggero had a bottle of whiskey brought to my table that he insisted

on offering me for the New Year, and as a thank you for the cigars I had brought him back from Germany. And so I too started to drink. A*** and I talked for a long time about everything under the sun. We were drunk, A*** more so than me. There was a warmth, a hint of complicity between us, which soothed the constant tension of our unfinished business. And this happy understanding, permitted by our drunkenness, was further reinforced by the illusory intensity of perception brought on by the alcohol. Leaning toward me and speaking with more abandon than usual, A*** suddenly murmured the following question: "And if we make love, will you still love me after?" Abruptly, I caught a glimpse of what I had given up hoping for, without ever having written it off. It was finally being offered to me, in a whisper and under the extraordinary guise of a fiction, all that we had envisioned and elaborated, that which ultimately gave meaning to all of our stratagems. A*** repeated the query, making it sound like a supplication. I leaned toward A***, not knowing how to respond to the anxiety I sensed in the question.

My only answer was to wrest A*** from the chair and to take us out of this place. Once outside and without having discussed it at all, we hailed a taxi and A*** told the driver the address. Without saying a word, we took the elevator. The fear that I had forgotten suddenly returned and took me by the heart, the fear of flesh that accompanies those first adolescent excitements, an anxiety we attempt to combat too quickly with cynicism. I thought I was going to faint, standing there at last on the threshold of what I had so passionately desired.

I staggered as A*** moved to kiss me; I didn't know what to do except let it happen. The temporal order of events, even the simple spatial points of reference, all disappeared without my realizing it; everything is blurred in my memory. I have in my mouth, still, the taste of skin, of the sweat on that skin; against my hands, the tactile impression of skin and the shape of

that flesh. In a sprawling obscurity—either I closed my eyes or my gaze was struck with a temporary blindness—some vaguely outlined visions, and, in my ear, the echo of soft rustlings, of words barely articulated.

I don't know how to recount precisely what happened, or how to describe or even attest to what I did, what was done to me. And the effect of the alcohol has nothing to do with this eradication; it's impossible to recapture the feeling of abandon through words. Crotches crossed and sexes mixed, I no longer knew how to distinguish anything. In this confusion we slept.

of this narrative. The only thing that managed to subsist in my eyes—lost and blind to everything else—was a disposition that seized, embraced, and then released, without any more substance or intelligibility than that. It was an impossible task to set the boundaries of what I was, up to the edge where I blurred into the other—the indescribable other—so much did the meanings escape me, the words that others before me had uttered deep within an analogous attrition. I longed to reduce the impossible to the inessential, but I no longer had recourse to this principle of logic, which had suddenly become inadequate.

Inadequate, I would repeat the word to myself, my jaws clamping down on my breath, trying to choke it, to nip in the bud the inarticulate expressions that were surging and gnawing. Why give voice to the unarticulated? Because the inexpressible doesn't articulate itself in the least; it shatters into pieces before even taking form. I felt distinctly that something was breaking under a kind of assault; an obscure combat was taking place, syncopating my breath with its blows. At the impact of that secret confrontation, shuddering with a sadness only noticeable to myself, I pretended to be imperturbable.

Thus, forever oscillating between forced tranquility and irrepressible anguish, I was disconcerting those around me. And indeed, how was I to explain this apparent absurdity: that it is possible to have feelings, to suffer for them, and at the same time to be unable to cut oneself off from them or to have any contempt for them. These sentiments alone have wrested me from the inane inhumanity of my reclusive life spent between God, whom I wanted not to know, and an ennui that I could no longer break or abandon, as I had done too often by absorbing myself in unspeakable frivolities. These sentiments alone have been able to keep me from shamelessly abandoning myself to a life composed entirely of an empty and false legion of distractions.

What was I, truly? A drag queen of intellect, a gigolo of enamoration. A vile series of obscene appearances that had besieged my being without allowing it to escape the gradual stripping bare of its miserable suffering, despair obscurely making its way through my lonely soul. I was finally shedding my mask, my pride, through a fall and a superb defeat, a reduction to my most pure nothingness; such was my annihilation in those beloved arms.

I was swallowed up in the contemplation of this being, asleep, so close, seated and head drooping. I was looking at the bent neck, slender and dipped in shadow beneath a mass of hair. The slow rise and sure fall of breathing, the sudden jerks of consciousness that brusquely raise the oscillating head, which inevitably falls again, as if detached from the body.

I was struggling to discern in the shadows a bitter or desperate crease of the mouth. Arms crossed, folded in sleep over a resting heart, calm in its prison of ribs. That morning at the Apocryphe, while A*** was waiting for me to be able to leave the club, I was wondering what all the surroundings that besiege the sleeping senses—music, lights, voices—were becoming in A***'s dreams. What rhythmic effect was insinuating itself into A***'s sleep? I observed the circular and twitchy movement of the head, corrected in an effort of forced rigidity, straightened and then languid, surrendering to its own weight, straining the neck to the point of making me, watching, uneasy.

What did I get out of watching A*** sleep? I toyed with the desire to interrupt the fall of this head that, in an impulse of sudden tenderness, I could have encircled in my arms and pressed against my shoulder; I wanted to hold, to caress this face that a stray beam of light was illuminating miraculously, unveiling its bottom half as if it were detached, displayed separately from the rest of the body. A***'s legs were stretched over my knees. I didn't dare move, restraining the impulse of my muscles,

normally so restless, I realized then. I was nothing but pure heat, pure momentary contact, a living support frozen in the observation of the other's shudders, those waves that move through the abandon of sleep. A***'s head was resting on its side so that the plane of the cheekbone was visible, skull slowly slipping against the mirror upon which it was leaning. Never before had this beloved body been so perfectly abandoned to my contemplation.

It felt as if I had never been permitted such transparency with anyone—anyone but A***. Had I confided more in A*** than in anybody else? What had I revealed? Had I unmasked myself, or at least what I thought I knew of myself? No, more likely I had exposed my own collapse, the ruin of the edifice I had so painfully constructed out of rhetoric and made to stand in for an identity. I was forcing myself to forget this nudity. My soul was not retreating behind a multitude of appearances that it could have incarnated endlessly, but rather, hollowed from the inside, was being instilled with doubt over this cavity that it hadn't filled with anything. I was then forced to recognize what I had always secretly wanted others to discover: "I" is nothing. It was a painful triumph when, faced with this beloved being, I finally achieved what I had always been aiming toward: the ability to confess my own weakness, my nothingness. But the weight of this nothingness was revealed only to me; it remained unintelligible to A***, and I remained in the barrenness, the ruin, at last revealed as if by accident, following this confrontation with my own nudity and death. "What am I," I was asking myself, "other than what you do not know how to say about me?"

Even when I was embracing this body, I suffered as if I had never held it in my arms, caught up in a love that was always uncompleting itself. Returning home one night, I found a T-shirt that belonged to A*** on the sofa in the living room left out from the night before; I searched in

it for A***'s scent, for a trace that had not yet vanished. I closed my eyes and abandoned myself to a hopeless sweetness, head buried in the cloth as if it were a shroud, as if I were never to see A*** again. I constantly felt as though this body was lingering just out of reach, even when I was holding it in my arms. All I was ever embracing was the hopelessness of not being able to embrace; I was embracing an absence whose scent alone was penetrating me, breathed in from the folds of a T-shirt that had been forgotten and left on a sofa overnight.

I was blind, giving myself without a word, without a sign, existing as mere body heat. In my state of confusion I suddenly lost touch with reality. I was culpable, infinitely culpable for not having seen, for having been able not to see, for having sought a refuge that was too distant, inaccessible. Ever since, by achieving the coveted, powerful mastery of an indecent outward display of emotions, each more false and bitter than the next, I have fallen from betrayal into disgust, searching vainly for this love whose murder I never cease to expiate. What can I do, what can I give to escape from this morbid ennui, from the horrible clutches of this desire to embrace, from the stinging of tears I never managed to shed and from the hopelessness that seizes me so incessantly even while I seem to triumph. I travel; my work on the apophatic tradition has earned me some recognition within academia. They desire me, admire me, respect me... But of all those who will lament my death, how many will lament my life? The torture I endure from my inner thoughts plays out in a ridiculous drama—a tragedy of passion! How I love to mock myself. But I ridicule that which comes mortally to besiege me at those hours when I am unmasked, faced with my own abyss. I was remembering that face, the color of the air that winter day when we made love for the final time, not knowing that the bliss we were sharing then would be our last.

Since then, I have been able to discern only a carnal and obscene

root at the core of all my relationships, which horrifies me. A***'s death caused me to unlearn sensual pleasure; I became caught up in carnal affairs, and I was tortured by the indignity of it all. Thenceforth, flesh became obscene to me. To clutch someone in my arms took on, without fail, a singular sense of indignity, the taste of putrefaction. When I embrace someone I am submerged in a feeling of infamy, in the nauseating sensation of having an orgasm in a charnel house, among the noxious fumes of decomposing flesh. I am revolted by flesh, but this revulsion, failing to deaden the assaults of my libido, merely infects them with a cadaverous terror.

I exist in a morbid state, my body riddled by consumption, not knowing from where to vomit up the soul it has created. For all I have done since A***'s death is forge myself a soul, and I no longer know if I should deny its existence. When I close my eyes, I see my soul as a screen crisscrossed with flowing, intertwined lines; architectural straight lines of a volume uncertain of its limits, exposed on all sides; a fragile construction, by turns knocked down, invaded, uprooted, robbed of its foundations, mined by all those embraces in which it happily prostitutes itself. Gazes, hands, all that is outside comes to burn it, shake it... But I would like to drown out the noise of this tearing of silk that happens between physical bodies and mental architecture. I am assailed by indifference. I had thought that I would never be able to grow tired of loving, but one night I woke to an absence of love and felt no torture: it was the absence of this torture that truly scared me, that tortured me.