

memory of a person in the minds of people who never knew him personally. There are certain paths in life that from the very beginning place a person face to face with such great immortality, uncertain, it is true, even improbable, yet undeniably possible: they are the paths of artists and statesmen.

Of all the European statesmen of our time, the one who has most occupied himself with the thought of immortality has probably been François Mitterrand. I remember the unforgettable ceremony that followed his election as President in 1981. The square in front of the Panthéon was filled with an enthusiastic crowd, and he was withdrawing from it: he was walking alone up the broad stairway (exactly as Shakespeare walked to the Temple of Fame on the curtain described by Goethe), holding the stems of three roses. Then he disappeared from the people's sight and remained alone among the tombs of sixty-four illustrious corpses, followed in his thoughtful solitude only by the eyes of the camera, the film crew, and several million Frenchmen, watching their television screens from which thundered Beethoven's Ninth. He placed the roses one by one on three chosen tombs. He was like a surveyor planting the three roses like three markers into the immense building site of eternity, to stake out a triangle in the center of which was to be erected the palace of his immortality.

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who was President before him, invited a sanitation worker to breakfast in the Elysée Palace. That was the gesture of a sentimental bourgeois who longed for the love of common people and wanted them to believe that he was one of them. Mitterrand was not so naive as to want to resemble sanitation workers (no president can fulfill such a dream!); he wanted to resemble the dead, which was much wiser, for death and immortality are an indissoluble pair of lovers, and the person whose face merges in our mind with the faces of the dead is already immortal while still alive.

I was always fond of the American president Jimmy Carter, but I felt something approaching real love when I saw him on the television screen, jogging with a group of fellow workers, trainers, and bodyguards; his forehead suddenly began to sweat, his face became distorted with pain, fellow joggers rushed to his side clutching and

IMMORTALITY. Goethe was not afraid of the word. In his book *From My Life*, with its famous subtitle, *Poetry and Truth, Dichtung und Wahrheit*, he writes about the curtain in the new Dresden theater that he eagerly scrutinized when he first saw it at the age of nineteen. In the background it showed (I am quoting Goethe) *Der Tempel des Ruhmes*, the Temple of Fame, surrounded by the great dramatists of all time. In the center, without paying them any attention, "a man in a light cloak was striding directly toward the Temple; he was shown from the back, and there was nothing remarkable about him. It was supposed to be Shakespeare; without predecessors, unconcerned about paragons of the past, he walked alone straight toward immortality." Of course, the immortality that Goethe talks about has nothing in common with religious faith in an immortal soul. What is involved is the different, quite earthly immortality of those who after their death remain in the memory of posterity. Everyone can achieve immortality to a smaller or greater degree, of shorter or longer duration, and this idea already starts occupying people's minds in early youth. They used to say about the mayor of a certain Moravian village, which I often visited on boyhood outings, that he had an open coffin at home and that in happy moments when he felt well satisfied with himself, he would lie down in it and visualize his funeral. These were the most beautiful moments of his life, these reveries in the coffin: he dwelt on his immortality.

Naturally, when it comes to immortality people are not equal. We have to distinguish between so-called *minor immortality*, the memory of a person in the minds of those who knew him (the kind of immortality the village mayor longed for), and *great immortality*, which means the

supporting him: it was a minor heart attack. Jogging was supposed to be an occasion for showing the nation the President's eternal youth. That's why cameramen had been invited, and it was not their fault that instead of an athlete bursting with health they had to show an ageing man with bad luck.

A man longs to be immortal, and one day the camera will show us a mouth contorted into a pathetic grimace—the only thing we will remember about him, the only thing that will remain as a parabola of his entire life. He will enter a kind of immortality that we may call *ridiculous*. Tycho Brahe was a great astronomer, but all we remember about him today is that in the course of a festive dinner at the emperor's court he was ashamed to go to the lavatory, so his bladder burst and he departed among the ridiculous immortals as a martyr to shame and urine. He departed among them just like Christiane Goethe, turned forever into a crazy sausage that bites. No novelist is dearer to me than Robert Musil. He died one morning while lifting weights. When I lift them myself, I keep anxiously checking my pulse and I am afraid of dropping dead, for to die with a weight in my hand like my revered author would make me an epigone so unbelievable, frenetic, and fanatical as immediately to assure me of ridiculous immortality.

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LET US IMAGINE that in the time of Emperor Rudolf, cameras (such as those that immortalized Jimmy Carter) already existed and that they filmed the feast at the emperor's court during which Tycho Brahe writhed in his chair, turned pale, crossed and uncrossed his legs, and stared at the ceiling with glazed eyes. If on top of everything he had been aware that he was being watched by several million spectators, his torments would have been even greater and the laughter echoing in the corridors of his immortality would sound even louder. People would surely demand that the film about the famous astronomer who was ashamed to urinate be broadcast every New Year's Eve, when everybody feels like laughing and there is seldom anything to laugh about.

This notion arouses in me a question: has the character of immortality changed in the epoch of cameras? I can answer that without hesitation: essentially, no; for the photographic lens had existed long before it was invented; it existed as its own nonmaterialized essence. Even when no lens was aimed at them, people already behaved as if they were being photographed. No crowd of photographers ever scanned around Goethe, but the shadows of photographers projecting from the depths of the future did scamper around him. This happened, for example, in the course of his famous audience with Napoleon. The Emperor, then at the peak of his career, gathered in a conference at Erfurt all the European rulers who were to endorse the division of power between himself and the Emperor of the Russians.

Napoleon was a true Frenchman in that he was not satisfied with sending hundreds of thousands to their death but wanted in addition to be admired by writers. He asked his cultural adviser to name the most significant intellectual figures of contemporary Germany, and he

Beethoven that he wasn't even worth criticizing. Could he possibly be rediscovered one day and reevaluated, as was the case with Bach a hundred years before? Out of the question. Ridiculous! Janáček, too, confirmed that he had never been thrilled by Beethoven's work. And Ravel summed it up: he didn't like Beethoven because his fame was based not on his music, which is obviously imperfect, but on the literary legend built around his life.

Literary legend. In our case, it is based on two hats: one is pulled over the forehead with the giant eyebrows; the other is in the hand of a deeply bowing man. Magicians like to work with hats. They let objects disappear in them or they make flocks of pigeons fly from them to the ceiling. Bettina released from Goethe's hat the ugly birds of his servility, and from Beethoven's hat she caused to disappear (surely unwittingly) his music. She prepared for Goethe what was given to Tycho Brahe and what will be given to Jimmy Carter: ridiculous immortality. But ridiculous immortality lies in ambush for everyone; to Ravel, a Beethoven with his hat over his eyebrows was more ridiculous than the deeply bowing Goethe.

It thus follows that even though it is possible to design, manipulate, and orchestrate one's immortality in advance, it never comes to pass the way it has been intended. Beethoven's hat became immortal. The plan succeeded. But what the significance of the immortal hat would turn out to be, that could not be determined in advance.

YOU KNOW, Johann," said Hemingway, "they keep bringing up accusations against me, too. Instead of reading my books, they're writing books about me. They say that I didn't love my wives. That I didn't pay enough attention to my son. That I punched a critic on the nose. That I lied. That I wasn't sincere. That I was conceited. That I was macho. That I claimed I had received two hundred and thirty war wounds whereas actually it was only two hundred and ten. That I abused myself. That I disobeyed my mother."

"That's immortality," said Goethe. "Immortality means eternal trial."

"If it's eternal trial, there ought to be a decent judge. Not a narrow-minded schoolteacher with a rod in her hand."

"A rod in the hand of a narrow-minded teacher, that's what eternal trial is about. What else did you expect, Ernest?"

"I didn't expect anything. I had hoped that after death I would at last be able to live in peace."

"You did everything you could to become immortal."

"Nonsense. I wrote books. That's all."

"Yes, precisely!" laughed Goethe.

"I have no objection to my books being immortal. I wrote them in such a way that nobody could delete a single word. To resist every kind of adversity. But I myself, as a human being, as Ernest Hemingway, I don't give a damn about immortality!"

"I understand you very well, Ernest. But you should have been more careful while you were still alive. Now it's too late."

"More careful? Are you referring to my boastfulness? I admit that when I was young I loved to blow my own trumpet. I loved to show off

in front of people. I enjoyed the anecdotes that were told about me. But believe me, I wasn't such a monster as to do it on account of immortality! When I realized one day that this was the point of it all, I panicked. From that time on I must have told people a thousand times to leave my life alone. But the more I pleaded the worse it got. I moved to Cuba to get out of their sight. When I won the Nobel Prize I refused to go to Stockholm. Believe me, I didn't give a damn about immortality, and now I'll tell you something else: when I realized one day that it was holding me in its clutches, it terrified me more than death itself. A man can take his own life. But he cannot take his own immortality. As soon as immortality has you aboard, you can't get off, and even if you shoot yourself you'll stay on deck along with your suicide, and that's horrible, Johann, that's horrible. I was lying dead on the deck and I saw my four wives squatting around me, writing down everything they knew, and standing behind them was my son and he was scribbling too, and that old dame Gertrude Stein was there writing away and all my friends were there blabbing out all the indiscretions and slanders they had ever heard about me, and behind them a hundred journalists with microphones jostled one another and an army of university professors all over America was busy classifying, analyzing, and shoveling everything into articles and books."

HEMINGWAY WAS trembling and Goethe clutched his arm: "Calm down, Ernest! Calm down, my friend. I understand you. What you've just been telling me reminds me of my dream. It was my last dream; after that I had no more, or else they were confused and I could no longer distinguish them from reality. Imagine a small puppet theater. I am behind the scenes, I control the puppets and recite the text. It is a performance of *Faust*. My *Faust*. Did you know that *Faust* is at its most beautiful when performed as a puppet play? That's why I was so happy that no actors were present and I alone recited the lines, which on that day sounded more beautiful than ever before. And then I suddenly glanced at the seats and saw that the theater was empty. That puzzled me. Where was the audience? Was my *Faust* so boring that everyone had gone home? Was I not even worth booing? Bewildered, I turned around and I was aghast: I expected them out front, and instead they were at the back of the stage, gazing at me with wide-open, inquisitive eyes. As soon as my glance met theirs, they began to applaud. And I realized that my *Faust* didn't interest them at all and that the show they wished to see was not the puppets I was leading around the stage, but me myself! Not *Faust*, but Goethe! And then I was overcome by a sense of horror very similar to what you described a moment ago. I felt they wanted me to say something, but I couldn't. My throat felt locked tight; I put down the puppets and left them lying on the brightly lit stage that nobody was watching. I tried to maintain a dignified composure, I walked silently to the coatrack where my hat was hanging, I put it on my head, and without a glance at all those curiosity-seekers, I left the theater and went home. I tried to look neither to the right nor to the left and especially not behind me, because I knew they were following. I