

An enticing maze of bridges

*Tous les chevaux du Roi
Pourraient y boire ensemble...*

Indeed, as this old song your were fond of puts it, the fountain is large enough for the king's entire cavalry to quench its thirst therein. You have left so much behind, Alexandre, you who seemed to always forge ahead, never taking stock of anything until you left this world that was never truly yours – “*le grand monde mathématique*” as you would later derisively refer to it – ceaselessly wandering, planning, building, whether in the large, so it would be huge as the doomed cathedral in Beauvais, or in the small: accomodating, fitting out, polishing down to the last detail, only to leave everything behind, untiringly ready to soar up into the unknown, *l'inconnu, das Unbekannte*, your only love. What did you expect from life? More, of course, but more of what? You looked, you sounded so utterly different from Rilke, whom you once passionately translated; yet the opening lines of the eighth *Duino Elegy* could have been written for you:

Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur	The creature gazes into openness with all
das Offene. Nur unsre Augen sind	its eyes. But our eyes are
wie umgekehrt und ganz um sie gestellt	as if they were reversed, and surround it,
als Fallen, rings um ihren freien Ausgang.	everywhere, like barriers against its free passage.

Except that your way into the magical Open was not so much via the animal, but rather in your marveling at a very special creature: “*le petit d’homme*”. Perhaps it was a different time altogether, and you had had more opportunities to contemplate babies than Rilke had?! Perhaps tiny Moses – if not tiny Mowgli – could figure an approximation in flesh and blood? But were *you* really free of all those barriers? Oh, yes – or at least not far from being free!

Before you hid from the eyes of the world, you made the most of your fleeting moment on this miserable planet; after all, so many fairies hovered over your crib – except there was no crib really, only a dubious blanket. So much to experience, so much to enjoy, so much to endure... You did it all. Your three great discoveries, in chronological order (quoting you): mathematics, women, meditation:

*Dans le mitan du lit,
La rivière est profonde.*

The river flows deep in the midst of its bed, and you did drink from the fountains of our life, with no restraint, *goulûment*... Of making books there could be no end for you, but never did you become quite weary of the flesh. You always retained a soft spot for apples. As for mathematics, it was always with you, in you. Yet the gift of solitude was the only one you would openly claim. After all is said, there was one gesture that was yours, completely: pointing to the *obvious*, fearlessly. An affine scheme is the spectrum of a ring, *any* ring; why confine oneself to ‘geometric rings’ or weird *ad hoc* animals? Of that very definition you once wrote that before you no one had stooped low enough, stripping all the conditions. Sorry, Alexandre, but perhaps there remained a trace of complacency in this declaration, of *fatuité*, one of your most terrible inner

enemies, a hydra with innumerable heads. Perhaps also you forgot that your formidable technical powers made possible certain things that, for poor – fearful? – us, sadly are not. But let's not quibble; quibbling was not your thing, arguing was not your thing, dialectics was not your thing, mediation was not your thing, maybe gnosticism always was. And let us be honest: listening to your next of kin was not your thing either; too 'next', too close, too crowding. Perhaps again the gift – the curse sometimes? – of solitude. Perhaps... But you believed our minds are cluttered with knowledge, much like worldly possessions famously prevent the rich man from crawling through the eye of the needle. You would not quite say "come, follow me", but rather "come, look around you and listen to the silence", and the world of mathematics will open before your eyes. But in the end that world, or rather that strange paradise, could not fulfill you, you who wrote that the most daring mathematical innovation was still only "intellectual", not "spiritual".

You looked around, at *our* world, at *das Diesseits*, and what you saw simply horrified you. Look around! But how can you bear what you see?! Still pointing at the obvious... *There* was your mission, a word we cannot avoid, you simply had to discover it, and start prophetizing. But how can we bear it all? Gradually you became haunted by His pervading presence, the Evil within, *le Mal*, and it would slowly come to life, acquire dreadful features, those of Satan, *der Verfluchte*. In the end you wrote just as much on *Le Problème du Mal* as you did on mathematics. And yet you had also met G.od, and beautifully told us about these encounters. There were few of these, but they were so convincing, so inescapable. Satan exists; G.od does as well. They are at war, at every moment, everywhere. One day that war will end but for now, Satan has and will retain the upper hand – be it in an underhanded way, inside each and everyone of us: and this tune was heard twenty, perhaps thirty centuries ago, a whisper that will forever roam the streets of our cities. Inside each and everyone of us... Or almost. For you explicitly listed "mutants", these men (no woman in your list; why not Marthe, the one you once loved?) who, like you, had a mission to fulfill, mutants who were sent to this valley of tears in order to prepare for the great mutation, when Satan will loosen his grip. Men you admired, famous, from Darwin to Krishnamurti, from W.Whitman to R.Steiner and Freud, or less famous, from C.F.S.Hahneman to F.Carrasquer or Eddie Solvik. If I were in the mood for numerology, and I know for a fact that *you* sometimes were, I would note that you listed 18 mutants, one half of 36, the number of the hidden *tsadikim* your grandfather knew so much about, the anonymous pillars of our world. But then, could you possibly be added to the list?

So She – or should I perhaps write He, *der Tod?* – came to get you in the end; not the evil One, *le Maudit*, *der Verfluchte*, not He who, you said, turns down here into an accursed world, a swirling carousel of egos. In the end She quietly tiptoed, the way She always does and always will. Oh, but I forgot; "*le lyrisme*" – your word again – lyricism, was never your thing, in truth you positively hated any trace of it, like yet another mask to be torn off. Let me sober down then, the way you told Her to, the way you looked Her straight in the eyes, rejecting the last slippery, treacherous words. May you rest in a hard-fought and all too well-deserved peace:

*Et nous y dormirions,
Jusqu'à la fin du monde.*