WHY THE CLASSICS

I CHOSE THIS POEM* after some hesitation. I do not consider it the best poem I've written, nor is it one that can represent my poetic program. I think it does have two virtues: it is simple, dry, and it speaks of matters that are truly close to my heart, without superfluous ornament or stylization.

The poem has a three-part structure. In the first part, it speaks of an event taken from the work of a classical author. It is, as it were, a note on my reading. In the second part I transfer the event to contemporary times to elicit a tension, a clash, to reveal an essential difference in attitude and behavior. Finally, the third part contains a conclusion or moral, and also transposes the problem from the sphere of history to the sphere of art.

You don't have to be a great expert on contemporary literature to notice its characteristic feature—the eruption of despair and unbelief. All the fundamental values of European culture have been drawn into question. Thousands of novels, plays, and epic poems speak of an inevitable annihilation, of life's meaninglessness, the absurdity of human existence.

I don't mean to subject pessimism to easy ridicule if it is a response to evil in the world. However, I think that the black tone of contemporary literature has its source in the attitude its writers take to reality. And that is what I tried to attack in my poem.

The Romantic view of the poet who bares his wounds, relates his own misfortunes, still has many supporters today, despite changes in style and literary taste. It is universally held that the artist has a sacred right to ostentatious subjectivism, to a display of the tender "I."

If a school of literature existed, one of its basic exercises should be the description not of dreams but of objects. Beyond the artist's reach, a world unfolds—difficult, dark, but real. One should not lose the faith that it can be captured in words, that justice can be rendered it.

Very early on, near the beginning of my writing life, I came to believe that I had to seize on some object outside of literature. Writing as a stylistic exercise seemed barren to me. Poetry as the art of the word made me yawn. I also understood that I couldn't sustain myself very long on the poems of others. I had to go out from myself and literature, look around in the world and lay hold of other spheres of reality.

Philosophy gave me the courage to ask primary questions, fundamental, basic questions: does the world exist, what is its essence, and can it be known? If this discipline can be made useful to poetry it is not by translating systems but by recreating the drama of thought.

I do not turn to history to draw from it an easy lesson of hope, but to confront my experience with that of others, to acquire something I might call universal compassion, and also a sense of responsibility, responsibility for the state of my conscience.

It is an old dream of poets that their work may become a concrete object like a stone or a tree, that what they make from the material of language—itself subject to constant change—may acquire a lasting existence. One of the ways to achieve this, it seems to me, is to cast it far away from oneself, to erase the ties that connect it to its creator. This is how I understand Flaubert's recommendation: "The artist must be in his work as God is in nature."

1966?

* "Why the Classics": see Collected Poems 1956–1998, p. 266–267.

TO DESCRIBE REALITY

I FEEL AN INWARD panic coming on when I imagine I'm walking down the street in Periclean Athens (we all have our favorite historical period) and bump into—guess who—Socrates, who grabs me by the arm and begins, cunningly, as follows:

"Hello! It's good I ran into you. Yesterday some friends and I were talking about poetry: what its nature is and whether it speaks the truth or lies. But none of us, neither Sophro, nor Crito, nor even Plato, writes poetry. But you do, and you're even praised for it, so you must have knowledge of what poetry is."

I now know the game's up for me. We are surrounded by a thick crowd of onlookers. I share the fate of general Laches, who could not give a definition of courage, and Polos the sophist, who knows nothing about rhetoric, and the priest Euthyphro, who has nothing very intelligent to say about piety.

It will probably end like this: I will slink off in shame, pursued by laughter, the dialectician's voice ringing in my ears:

"How is it that you go off, leaving us in dark ignorance, you, you the one who could enlighten us? You carry your secret away with you and you'll just go on pulling the wool over our ears with your sorcerer's words. But we don't know whether to yield to your charms or defend ourselves from them."

With all my admiration for the great Athenian, it always seemed to me that in his dialogues, in the manner he conducted them, there is a certain amount of intellectual blackmail; for surely one can be courageous while not being able to give a definition of courage, and one can write pretty good poems while being a frankly miserable theoretician.

The language of poetry—a non-discursive process, a method of using images, metaphors, parables, an oscillation between what is clear and what is only sensed intuitively—itself offers arguments for its defense.

I am convinced that poetry in all its ambitious attempts strives to touch reality. It does so by other paths than science and it should not yield too much to the pressures of our all-too-rational age.

Technocrats prophesy the end of poetry. Cyberneticists say that its content is "noise," that is, devoid of information. What will the poet be in the coming age? A shaman festooned with amulets? One who summons the old myths of humanity? Or perhaps a jester at the court of science?

I read the reports of the Rand Corporation. This is an organization of American scientists, a little like a brain collective, concerned among other things with predicting scientific progress. From these documents we learn that in the course of the coming sixty years we will be using animals like monkeys, whose intelligence will develop to the extent that they will be able to occupy the place of unskilled workers; human life will become longer as a result of control of the chemical processes of aging; apart from space travel, we will be able to make journeys through time by freezing bodies and bringing organisms into a state of prolonged death throes.

A characteristic mark of the report is that it identifies human progress with scientific progress (the myth of the twentieth century) and places history outside the brackets of its consideration. As if the dull march of barbarians had never yet erased or exploded the radiant visions of reason.

My gymnasium instructors drummed it into us that "historia magistra vitae." But when history appeared in all its barbarous magnificence—as a real incandescence over my city—I understood that it makes a peculiar teacher. Those who lived through it consciously, with all that followed it, have more food for thought than readers of ancient chronicles. It is clotted and murky material. It requires the work of many consciences to illuminate it.

The medieval French astrologist Nicolas Flamel once saw an angel in a dream holding an open book containing knowledge of the universe, man, and the future. Nicolas Flamel's pilgrimage to the book he dreamed would take twenty-four years, only then could he open it.

Humanity will never abandon the dream of a sign, an incantation, a formula that will illuminate the meaning of life. The need for a canon, for criteria allowing us to distinguish evil from good, for a clear set of values—is presently as strong as ever.

When our fathers and grandfathers were asked about eternal values, their thoughts invariably turned to antiquity. Human dignity, gravity, objectivism radiated from the writings of the classics.

But for the ancient authors and lovers of antiquity, Greece and Rome

were a little like happy isles where virtue, harmony, and balance flowered under the sun of reason. Winckelmann's formula "edle Einfalt und stille Grösse" long held sway over our minds. Greek statues came to us cleansed by rains, stripped of the colors of life, pure as Platonic ideas. A deepening historical perspective has opened our eyes to the dark periods.

My philosophy professor, who taught the wisdom of the Greeks, infused us with enthusiasm for the Stoics. At the time that was going on, *amor fati* saved us from madness. We read Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and trained ourselves in the difficult art of *ataraxia* (ἀταραζία), driving all agitation and passion from our souls. Living in accordance with nature, that is, with reason, in a world gone mad, amid shrieks of hatred, was a difficult experience.

Some critics with an overly optimistic attitude to the world accuse me of pessimism. This has always seemed to me a misunderstanding. Even if a dark tone prevails in a poet's work, it doesn't mean that the author means to scoff at the world's imperfection and add his lament to the sum of real misfortune, increasing the despair.

Similarly, irony is not cynicism but a bashfulness of feeling. What on the surface seems pessimistic is in fact a stifled call for the good, for the increase of the good, for the opening of the conscience.

And it is certainly not a coincidence that authors of joyful odes have always hung around the courts of tyrants.

A dialogue with the past, harkening to the voices of the departed, touching stones that bear the half-erased inscriptions of ancient destinies, summoning shades to nourish themselves on our compassion . . .

A taste for the past can, but need not, signify a flight from the now, from disillusionment. For if we set out on our travels through time carrying the full burden of our experience, if we penetrate myths, symbols, and legends in order to extract from them what is alive, then surely we cannot deny that these doings require an active stance.

Paracelsus said that God's creation was unfinished, and that man was summoned to finish the work of creation. That is a very beautiful declaration of humanism.

A sense of the fragility and transience of human life may be less oppressive if placed in a historical chain of events that are a transmission of faith in the purposefulness of efforts and strivings. Then even anxiety will be nothing but a call for hope.

1966

MONSIEUR MONTAIGNE'S VOYAGE TO ITALY

Il est bon de voyager quelquefois; cela étend les idées, et rabat l'amour-propre.
SAINT-BEUVE

WHEN ONE HAS just enough strength left to shift the pillow under one's head, it will be time to write a work, a book, not a collection of essays, with the title *Introduction to the Theory of Travel*. To limit the vast topic one should abjure the description of many sorts of voyage and concentrate on the noblest genre, which the Germans call *Bildungsreise*, a pilgrimage to holy sites of culture.

It occurred to me that by analyzing travelers' accounts from the Renaissance, say to the nineteenth century (even taking into account only descriptions of Italy), we would gain interesting material on the artistic sensitivities of representatives of various ages, on changes in taste, aesthetic canons, the dawn and dusk of masterpieces.

From the rich literature on the subject I chose to start with Montaigne's *Voyage en Italie*, in the hope that this book by that marvelous writer and typical representative of his time would bring together everything that Italy and its art meant to a man of the Renaissance.

The manuscript was discovered late (in 1774) and by accident, by a canon looking for material for a history of the Périgueux in an old trunk in the castle of Montaigne. It is not among the works of his that are well-known and read. The manuscript, written in the hand of the author of the *Essays* and his secretary, is consigned to the margins of Montaigne's work. It is not styled in literary fashion (and was probably never intended for publication), but is on the other hand a sincere travel journal. This curi-

THE POET AND THE PRESENT

I HAVE TO ADMIT that I had a negative response to the theme of this encounter, the poet and the present, because of its rather stubborn association with the barren pseudo-discussions of the era of socialist realism, and with normative poetics as a whole, which is alien to me.

Fortunately there are not many people today (so at least I think) who would defend arrogant and compromised theses on a poetry as a force that transforms the world and brings about sudden upheavals in social consciousness, or whose task is engagement on the one correct side of the so-called barricade.

History does not know a single example of art or an artist anywhere ever exerting a direct influence on the world's destiny—and from this sad truth follows the conclusion that we should be modest, conscious of our limited role and strength.

This sounds like an aesthete's avowal, an encouragement to lock oneself up in an ivory tower, but that stance, too, is quite alien to me. My concern is to oppose the tyranny of dichotomies chopping up complicated human reality, and to draw the borders of poetry—as I understand them—without usurpation but also without an inferiority complex.

A few months ago I returned from America; the necessity of "engagement" came up regularly in private conversations with my American friends. The term itself is vague enough to put one off using it. The majority of young people in the West who dabble in film, art, or literature, loudly declare they are on the side of the "Left"—variously understood, or rather, read. And I often wonder why the work that results from this essentially noble stance is intellectually immature, as if the proclamation of humanist ideals led the artist into the realm of banality. I've often asked myself if it isn't too cruel a punishment that political kindheartedness should cancel out a work's artistic value.

In one of his essays Thomas Mann reflects on the paradoxical pluriformity and contradictoriness of the spirit and its relation to the problem of man. The spirit, says Mann, is mani-layered, and it may take any attitude to human matters, including a non-humanist and anti-humanist attitude. The spirit is not a monolith, a cohesive force intent on shaping the world, life, or society in its image. It is true there have been efforts to proclaim the solidarity of all intellectuals but, the author of *The Magic Mountain* argues, that is a completely impossible undertaking. There is no deeper antagonism or more contemptuous and hateful intolerance than that between representatives of particular forms of thought and spiritual striving. There is something arbitrary about the idea that the spirit by its very nature—to use a social-political term—stands on the "left," and that therefore it is inherently connected to the ideals of freedom, progress, humanism. This is a prejudice that has been toppled many times by now. For the spirit can just as well stand on the "right," and that with undiminished excellence. Of the brilliant reactionary Joseph de Maistre, author of the book *Du pape*, Sainte-Beuve said "of a writer he had only the talent," a very handsome phrase, which expresses not only the aforementioned view that literature and progress are identical, but at the same time that with the greatest talent, the most excellent wit and brilliance, one may become the bard of the inhuman, executions, pyres, inquisitions, in short everything that progress and liberalism call the kingdom of darkness.

Here I have slid—quite consciously—onto the muddy terrain of politics. For our world, our present time, is described in categories of politics and science, not in categories of art. Hence the complaint of poets that they are homeless—which is true (but was never otherwise)—and the attempt to flirt with politics and science—which is a punishable offense.

The poet's sphere of action, if he has a serious attitude toward his work, is not the present, by which I mean the current state of socio-political and scientific knowledge, but *reality*, man's stubborn dialogue with the concrete reality surrounding him, with this stool, with that person, with this time of day—the cultivation of the vanishing capacity for contemplation.

And above all—building values, building a set of values, determining their hierarchy, which means a conscious moral choice with all the consequences in life and art that it entails—this seems to me the fundamental and most important function of culture.

We cannot be relieved of this task by politics, which is a game of chance

and more and more merely a strategy, or an automatic mechanism unconnected to reality, instead of what it should be: the creation of a place for human initiative and courage.

Artists' attempts to enter into a dialogue with science more often than not yield lamentable results, simply because the physicist's image of the world is untranslatable into the language of art. Thanks to the avant-garde, the Futurists, we have gained one more disillusionment: the myth has collapsed that saw in the progress of knowledge a guaranteed solution of humanity's problems and troubles. The paradise of the Positivists turned out to be empty.

From these very general and, I realize, quite banal divigations I would like to move on to the art of poesy.

Now, without any pretensions to infallibility, simply stating my predilections, I would say that in contemporary poetry I like most those poems in which I observe something I'd call the mark of semantic transparency (a term borrowed from Husserl's logic). Semantic transparency is the characteristic of the sign that when used focuses attention on the signified object and does not draw attention to itself. The word is a window open on reality.

I like less (and sometimes not at all) poems thick with metaphors, with an abstruse syntax, "object poems," beyond which nothing can be seen, whose aim is to focus the reader's attention on the author's mastery.

Hence the simple postulate, beautifully expressed by Thomas More in his prayer; I'm surprised that it has not yet become an important part of a poetic manifesto:

Grant me a soul to which dullness is naught,
knowing no complaint, grumble or sigh,
and do not permit me to give too much thought
to that domineering creature called the "I."
My Lord, endow me with a sense of humor,
give me the grace of understanding jest,
that I might know the joy that life harbors
and were able to grant it to the rest.

1972

CONVERSATION ON WRITING POETRY

A. I'LL BEGIN with an issue that may seem banal. I've noticed that readers at poetry readings often ask about a writer's beginnings. They simply want to know how you become a writer. Have you been asked questions like that?

B. Sure I have. I think you put it very well, too, because I, also, think that those questions are always or almost always founded in a desire to discover a secret, a mysterious spell, a formula that would help those who dream of a writer's career to attain it.

A. So what is the secret?

B. I don't know, sometimes it seems to me there is no secret. Don't get me wrong: I don't like so-called inspired writers, ones who pretend to the public that they move in spheres inaccessible to the average reader. Nor do I like those who come up with all kinds of bizarre adventures in their lives that they then say contributed to their becoming artists. That kind of making yourself out to be extraordinary is Romantic and quite alien to me.

A. I'm not giving up so easily. Surely it would be hard to deny that some aspects of a writer's biography, let's say experiences, can trigger a writing ability.

B. I venture to say that everybody or almost everybody has an ability to write, just as they have an ability to paint or compose simple pieces of music. If it were any different, poets would be writing for poets, composers would be understood only by their professional colleagues, and painters would paint only for other painters. Luckily, it's not like that. The perfect audience is an artist too, and a rare one at that. It's someone who's able to recreate an aria, a painting's colors, a poem, in himself and with the same precision, the same disinterested joy, as if he were its author.

A. OK. Say you're right. Maybe a reader—or listener or viewer—is a potential author, that is to say, could make things, but neglected to, probably for lack of nerve. But you had the nerve. I'd like to know when and why.

B. All right, I'll say this: maybe it really is important. I started writing in the war. In this book, the poem "Two Drops" isn't the first I wrote, if I remember rightly, but it's the first I can sign off on years later. I was a teenager then. The war was on. During one of the heavy bombings I was running to a shelter and there on the steps I saw in passing—when I was being driven on by fear—a young couple kissing. It was truly extraordinary in that situation.

A. Why extraordinary?

B. Because in situations like the one I described terror takes people over completely, makes them forget about people they love. The survival instinct, awoken in moments of total danger, floods us with a rat-like fear, a single will to save ourselves alone. Whereas those two people opposed the raging cruelty around them with the frail power of love.

A. And you decided to describe it?

B. Not describe so much as express. You see, I didn't have the words to convey my revolt and opposition. I could have written something like: "Ah, you damned so-and-sos; you're killing innocent people, you bastards; you wait, you will be punished for this." I didn't say that, because I wanted to give the singular situation a broader dimension, or rather, show its deeper, universal human perspective.

A. But doesn't doing that make poetry something cold, abstract, cut off from life? Your explanation of the origin, the cause for "Two Drops" clarifies a lot for me, but what about the reader who doesn't know the explanation?

B. It's not possible, nor is it even necessary, to explain poems by describing the moment that inspired them. That's why at first I didn't want to talk about my life. A literary work, like any work of art, has to be independent, stand on its own feet, separate from the experiences that summoned it from the murky realm of images, emotions, intuitions. It has to be captured in language in a way that speaks to the imagination. I've just been writing an essay on Minoan culture, which was discovered on Crete seventy years ago and has been troubling scholars ever since. That culture's discoverer, Evans, and other archaeologists too, passed on to us the ruins of splendid palaces, frescoes, marvelous pottery from three thousand years ago; looking at those masterpieces, one feels admiration and wonder. But we know very little about the lives of the Minoans and how their minds worked, because their script (so-called Linear B and hieroglyphics) has not been deciphered. By that I want to say that only in language can man become fully manifest—his troubles and joys, the values he accepted, his beliefs.

A. I'd like to return to my question, though. What hampers readers in reading contemporary poetry is—it seems to me—its chilliness, abstractness, and excessive intellectualism. Have you never had that kind of reproach directed at you?

B. You're touching on a very crucial question and here in turn we have to clear up some misunderstandings that have grown up around contemporary poetry. I won't talk about all contemporary poetry, because I can't, it's made up of so many trends and for many of them I feel no sympathy. But I'll talk about how I see these things. However, let me turn our roles around for a moment and ask you a question. What do you think is most important to an author?

A. Being read, and being read with recognition, or even adoration.

B. Certainly, but even more important than that is that the reader accepts what I would call the rules of the game. The cardinal principle is understanding the author's intentions, his aims, his poetics, his world. This has nothing to do with an uncritical attitude to art, but you can't expect an author to be everything, simultaneously playful and sad, profound and easy, learned and a simpleton. A writer invites a reader to a game, a serious game, a game of the imagination, and he can only be judged on how he carries on the game, that is to say, how he fulfills his promises in the framework of the convention or contract he has proposed. That is the only way to criticize a book. But let's get back to that darn intellectualism of contemporary poetry.

A. Why darn . . . ?

B. Because it's based on a misunderstanding which I'll try to clear up. It's true that the majority of readers like poems that are—let's say—emotional, that is, poems in which we can easily recognize emotions we know. So you have the sunset and the melancholy feeling that accompanies it, or the mournful thought of someone who has passed away, or the joy of meeting someone dear whom we haven't seen in a long time. I don't at all mean to ridicule such feelings . . .

A. Especially since in the hands of a Słowacki or Kochanowski . . .

B. Exactly. *I am downcast, Lord, Lamentations*, etc. But returning to myself, I want to say that in my attitude to emotions there is a certain suspicion or reserve, because I've seen too many explosions of enthusiasm or explosions of hatred toward persons or things that didn't deserve them. And then the control of reason is invaluable.

A. So, you are an intellectual poet.

B. I don't like that label, because I don't know what it means. I only know that I haven't written a single line to dazzle anybody with my knowledge or erudition. And apart from that I had an experience that I will permit myself to cite here. In the days when I was studying philosophy we were supposed to observe selected children in kindergarten and note down on big sheets which activities were an expression of their will, reason, or emotion. I quickly came to the conclusion that you can't divide and separate these three spheres of the soul. That goes for adults, too.

A. But the subject of your poems is not direct experience but rather reflection on the world?

B. Even if that's the case, it doesn't in any way exclude an emotional attitude. After all, one can and even should think passionately.

A. All the same you'll agree that certain ideas, their predominance in poetry, can make reading more difficult.

B. Perhaps. But please understand me rightly: a poem that sounds like a record playing an old tango doesn't appeal to me. I'd like, and here is my faith in the reader, for him to be my ally, for him to work with me. I think that writers who offer easy entertainment have contempt for their readers. I treat a reader like a partner, with full respect for his difference, his powers of judgment and criticism.

A. Do you agree with the claim that in your poems content is more important than form, that is, that you put a greater emphasis on "what" is said than on "how" it's said?

B. School got us accustomed to a division into content and form; you no doubt remember how teachers used to torment us with exercises based on giving a paraphrase of a poem. Obviously that's nonsense. It's only in bad poems that you can separate content from form, noble thoughts from the clumsy expression of those thoughts. The idea that a poet is someone who pours his content in different little bottles of form is completely wrong. One bottle is a sonnet, another is an octave, another is so-called blank verse. In fact, content is inseparable from form from the very beginning of the creative act.

When I write I'm not trying to astonish a reader with a wealth of similes, with outlandish language or refined rhythms and images. In my poems I'd like words and their configurations to be transparent.

A. What does that mean?

B. That means that they shouldn't catch the reader's attention, they shouldn't prompt him to exclaim "What a genuis!", but they should show reality in the purest and most transparent way.

A. So your poetic ideal is objective poetry, otherwise known as classical poetry—as distinct from stormy, emotional, subjective Romantic poetry?

B. Some critics have been inclined to define it that way. But for me the question of the quarrels between various schools, tendencies, or poetics isn't the most important thing. There's a quarrel in poetry that's much more essential, namely that of attitudes.

A. Could you expand on that?

B. I think every beginning poet tries to give himself out to himself and to the people he's close to as an exceptional person, unlike anybody else, tries to demonstrate his incomparable talent. But if a writer persists in the trade or calling after he turns thirty, he is inevitably confronted with the thought—why do I write, in defense of what values, against what injustice? Talent is a valuable thing, but it goes to waste without character. What do I mean without character? I mean without a conscious moral attitude toward reality, without a stubborn, uncompromising borderline between what is good and what is evil. For that reason writers are valued not only for their skill but for being uncompromising, for their courage, their disinterestedness—which are extra-aesthetic qualities.

A. One of your volumes of poetry is titled *Study of the Object*. You've written many poems whose "protagonists" are a stone, a stool, a knocker, a chair—in other words, banal objects of everyday life. One could describe that as one of your spheres of interest. But then there's another, opposite, strongly contrasting group of poems, like "Elegy of Fortinbras," devoted to mythology, history, historical or literary figures. How do you resolve this contradiction?

B. One shouldn't resolve contradictions. But one should be conscious of them. A work of art isn't a scientific theory that has to be internally coherent. We live in a world of contradictions and we ourselves are the victims of contradictory ideas, impulses, imaginings. And I don't think moving between two poles is evidence of a weak personality at all.

A. But does it seem right to you to divide your poems—as I have—in a very general way into poems about objects and poems about culture?

B. That is a division according to themes, and so to some extent it helps in an initial orientation. But you're probably interested in knowing why I wrote both poems about a stool and about Hamlet, about the banal quotidian and sublime cultural figures?

A. Yes, because there must have been some reasons guiding you . . .

B. Then I'll try to explain it. I've lived through—if not personally then as a witness—more than one compromised ideology, many a breakdown of an artificially constructed image of reality, a capitulation of faith in the face of facts. At those times the domain of objects, the domain of nature seemed to be a point of support, as well as a point of departure for the creation of an image of the world that might accord with our experience. After the departure of false prophets, objects showed their innocent faces, so to speak, faces untarnished by lies. It's connected to an old dream of poets . . .

A. Of Arcadia . . .

B. Of a paradise, a place of human happiness. But poets do not have power over the world. Their only kingdom is speech. Only in that sphere are they sovereign rulers and legislators.

A. But language is a common medium of communication for all people.

B. That's exactly where the problem lies. Language is an impure instrument of expression. Tortured on a daily basis, made banal, subjected to base treatment. So the dream of poets is to reach the virgin meaning of words, to give things their proper names, as Norwid says. "Let words mean only what they mean and not against whom they are used." That's a quote from another great poet. For me the dialogue with objects was such an attempt to reach the pure sources of speech. It was also a rebellion against liars and swindlers.

A. And that other pole of your work? Poems about mythology, history? Critics say you are a poet of culture.

B. I don't take that as an insult, although from the lips of people who demand absolute innovation of artists it sounds like a reproach. This is a very serious problem, so I'll take the liberty of laying out what I have to say more or less systematically. It seems to me absolutely essential for every artist to work on evolving his own active relationship to tradition, if possible to tradition as a whole and not just one generation, as some young poets often do, sticking out their tongues at their predecessors, and forgetting about Homer, Aeschylus, Horace, Dante, and Shakespeare.

A. So you propose a flight into the past?

B. That's not what I'm proposing at all. I said "active relationship to tradition," a recognition that we are a link in a great chain of generations, which lays a responsibility on us. People often talk about a "cultural legacy." But culture is not inherited mechanically, like a house, let's say, left by someone's parents. We have to labor for it in the sweat of our brow, acquire it for ourselves, prove it on ourselves. And here the justification and explanation that we live in an extraordinary time won't help us, because every age of humanity has been extraordinary. It's also wrong to assume that culture lives and is sustained by itself, stored in libraries and museums. History teaches us that peoples and their achievements can be almost perfectly destroyed. During the war I saw libraries on fire. The same fire consumed wise and stupid books, good and evil books. I understood then that nihilism is the greatest threat to culture. The nihilism of fire, stupidity, hatred.

A. And yet you return to memories, to personal experience?

B. Yes, although I make an effort to be as objective as I can and not to talk about myself. I see I'm not very good at it.

A. So perhaps you could say in closing what culture is to you and why there are so many allusions to the Bible, to mythology and history in your poetry?

B. The basic function of culture is to build values worth living for. There's the old notion of the humanist, one dear and meaningful to me, though ridiculous and unfashionable to others. For others it means an aging gentleman who reads the classics but is lost in the modern world; a helpless relic of the past. But a humanist is someone who tries to assimilate, to make himself familiar with and make his own the widest possible area of reality. To create a world, or at least an image of the world, to man's measure—the measure of his capacity for understanding and feeling. Why do I return to Biblical or historical themes in my poems? I never do it to wow readers. Nor is it in my view a flight from reality. Fortunately the age which opposed mythology to realism is past. Ancient tales and legends contain essential human experiences. And when I write about Apollo and Marsyas, for example, I'm not just copying the myth from a handbook of Greek mythology, I'm trying to read an old tale about a cruel duel anew and answer the question what content, what truth is still current and alive in it. Not just for myself but I hope for my readers as well.

1973