

I was at the theater. I arrived among the first visitors in order to get a seat, I had it and I lost it anyway. I arrived an hour earlier, a certain young lady came five minutes earlier, and I ceded my seat to her. "Sir, she said, if only you could be so kind - only during the intermissions - you do understand..." Immediately I ceded my place to her both during the intermissions and the show, because she asked only for intermissions, and I, being a gentleman, had to give her more than she asked for. If I had remembered my manly duty before she had remembered her female prerogative, I would have a seat during the actual show, because I myself would have offered her a seat during the intermissions. She was pretty and that is, I think, enough. (To describe beauty is a thing of utmost pleasure and ease: a lie without counterevidences and a thief without witness - that's poetry! The artist reveals, i.e. sees that what others do not see, because he looks in such a manner, in which others do not look, and he writes, i.e. does what nobody else does). When a woman kisses you first, you can't stop just at the kiss if you're a gentleman. However, to put it fairly, that young lady had committed a *faute pas* - she was insolent. Firstly, by asking "during the intermissions", and secondly, by accepting my offer "during the show" as well.

I know gallantry is the virtue of men. Although the woman cult began when the blessed virgin Mary entered as a model into painters'

ateliers, and although a beautiful singer is worth more than a good one... Raffaello, Murillo and Sartro gave us magnificent Madonnas, Van Dyck gave us a homely Christ, Spagnoletto granted us actually disgusting martyrs. On the contrary, Greek sculptors have given us Apollos of divine beauty, which is not strange, if one takes into consideration Socrates, platonism and Sapho, and doesn't forget the rapture that Saint Theresa and Veronica had for Jesus. Every river has its source, and if art is creation, than it presumes woman, man and child. But I don't have to write about that, it is too vulgar and ordinary. For some time now I have been possessed by a virtual mania for revealing and artism. Three hundred trifles will leave three hundred pains inside me and three hundred times three hundred thoughts, thus lost I wander around the world and only rain can chain me to the chair.

Days - gloomy, drowsy, alcoholic; verdure turns yellow and rotten, the outlines of mountains, the stiff blue and dry of the gray-haired sun melt and dissolve as ulcers, a fever-like atmosphere, catarrh-like clouds, earth like unwiped offal on the body of the universe, and the colors and shapes of degeneration. Our sight doesn't swim anymore; it drowns; our thought does not fly, it falls; dawn cannot be discerned from the noon, nor the evening from the night. Skies just gray and black darkly and listlessly lay wrapped up in the cotton and a gauze of clouds, and when a ray of light looms there, it seems as if a gush of pus had blotted the compresses.

Only during the evenings and my strolls in front of the merry shop-windows and lights, where the crowd brings a spirit of autumn melancholy, of leaves and that certain intimate mood of the indoors restaurants, gazing through the window glass into the tumbler glass and smoke and thoughts swaying above smoldering, azure punch flame - only then memories and sleep arrive. And I discover. And when I return to my room, I like to release sneers, pitiful and yellow as leaves in our parks, sneers strewing dead past as flowers and soil do.

She's my friend's wife. She is not beautiful, but she was beautiful. Now she has grown thin, her cheekbones stick out as a pair of dry pears, and whenever she is ill-willed, her face suddenly becomes asymmetric, as if someone had given her a strong slap in the face. She is light, skeletal and dry as a bone. The black rings under her eyes sometimes get puffy, two dark lines incised obliquely on her cheeks, their shadow

being gentle, transparent and dreamy like an impression, her lips apart, and when she presses them, she looks as if she had a toothache. Sometimes in the morning she can be surprisingly beautiful - if you drop in abruptly, if you startle her, if she doesn't have her blouse on, if she is embarrassed, if her hair is undone, if her teeth are unbrushed, if she smells of the bed, if she knows that she is indecent... Namely, if you catch her in an illicit situation. Then she is beautiful.

Once I sat in a coffee-house, together with my friend and herself. The friend was talking about the obsolescence of materialism; I was accidentally drawing my thumb near to her fingers; then I touched her knee and saw that she is adorable, gorgeous, irresistible. This is how it goes: she loves her husband and respects me; she knows that her husband loves both her and myself; she knows I love her husband and respect her. And now she feels my thumb, then my knee - and she knows I can feel her small toes, tied too firmly inside her small shoes, and her small knee, wrapped up in a black stocking and linen skirt, to which the white lace of her bloomers barely reaches. She knows we are doing something - forbidden! That's why her eyes are smiling and crying; her face turns pale and blushes, her heart beats against her chest and her lungs, her breast bone and backbone. If only she could tell her husband: "You are the only one I love, and he just kissed me - I was always yours, and I only gave myself to him for five minutes - I am sinful, punish me - I'll do my humble penance, I'll sin again and I'll repent my sin!" Woman is needful of sin and punishment.

Now she is enjoying the touch of my knee as if being in a confessional: she loves Christ as Magdalene did, even though she may be more innocent than Aloisius.

That is how our love started. And, one could say, that is how it ended.

Then I ordered some chartreuse. Its lascive, greasy and sticky savor, smell and Colour is well-suited to an evening spent in the company of a friend and a delighted woman. It ties the company with a link of affinity, sweet-talk and wit. It seems to be a knee which touches every leg, a lip that brings every face close, a smile that touches everyone. Each of us had lips equally sweetened, noses equally caressed, eyes equally enraptured. She said: "I won't drink". Her husband begged her not to be

demure. He did not understand her. She said "I won't drink" in order to be really able to drink, she did not drink for her stomach, nor for her brain: female stomachs and brains are lower than ours are. She steadfastly claimed: "But I will get drunk!" And when the liqueur started dancing in her eyes, tongue, throat and entrails, she resembled a girl that shouts out of fear and confusion when you suddenly greet her or kiss her, although she was steadily watching you not to bypass her with either greeting or a kiss. One small glass cannot make her drunk; she knows it. But if she does not convince you that she will get drunk; i.e. commit something illicit, why then should she - drink?

My late mother was faithful to my father, not a single forbidden look is recorded in her sixty years long past. But she was prodigal; she made debts, because of us, children, debts and guilt, she made them secretly, hiding it from our father, although father had to learn about them eventually. Her life was full of such mysterious, illegitimate, small debts, she bought sugar, sweets, fruits... everything that was superfluous, so "her children would not be hungry", as she tried to convince everyone; truly though, she had to incur debts in order to be able to affect, lie, do something illicit - to have a sense of sin and the charm of guilt. And every time when I stared at the bared bosom of my friend's wife, her morning clothing with the smell of the bed, her demure of drinking the offered liqueur - I remembered my mother, the unknown young lady in the theater and those innocent appallings and detestations of blameless girls face to face with kisses, which - you yourself are being convinced - are something so innocent and - blameless...

We parted. I wrote her long letters on artism. "Your touch that evening, and - later - Your delicate shape led by your husband and my friend, a shape which resembled melancholic shadow departing towards his house. Your look that somewhat inebriately kept stumbling on the wet tarmac. Your neck that felt my eyes, which melted on the heated metal of your complexion, then your little hat that, frolicsome and awry, winked with its red ribbon on the breath of the big, thick, tearful night; your small shoes that pattered on the pavement as wantonness and dissipation of city kids, your waist squeezed by my friend and your husband; your stiff, thin and pale tiny hands that senselessly asked for alms of warmth and kisses, and all of that evening which like an icy fume dashed on the glass of your eyes and troubled the clearness of

your sight - all of that left an unforgettable impression on me. Since then you have entered the intimate circle of my thoughts and feelings; as a painting, a statue, music. Your apparition is thus slinking in the twilight, and it seems to me that always on my small room's walls your shadow shivers. And I cherish that shadow, I watch that shadow, I catch that shadow. Unreachable. Within that lies your grace - within that is my art. If that shadow turned alive, if you would have entered my room, all melancholic and brisk at once, and when my breath would clash with yours, my lips met yours, my look got immersed into yours - then the life would arrive. Life that kills by the explosion - not only of gunpowder! - kills the art ... Stay away -, my blue love - we are kissing the sunray - and the sun is life until we approach it ..... Here, dusk becomes gloom, I do not switch on the lamp, I light a cigarette...."

She did not reply. I understood she had to be terribly unhappy, because her life could be happy only in such a misfortune in which her upbringing could allow her to write back and to give herself to me, and then her husband learns about everything and forgives her. Here, she is convinced that her husband wouldn't forgive her, that he would simply send her away, that he would seek a divorce (he is a free thinker) and that she would find herself without any means for living. That is why - she is not beautiful! Those who have been seeing her more often told me that she is turning more and more listless, thin and ugly. I understand: in her nature, she is a complete, proper and cultured woman, and she cannot please her nature as she would like to and as our culture demands. That's why she is losing her charm, femininity: she is degenerating, and God knows whether she would become a pillar of feminism, if she doesn't become a mother timely, and starts cherishing her children so madly, vainly and passionately that she would feel guilty at least in front of her husband. This is what my friend has to realize. He has to give his wife either a lover, or a child.

I wrote him; I wrote about his wife and my artism, and I told him I was in love with her only up to a degree, and that he has to consider it the purest gush of my artistic soul and not become - jealous. Because, frankly, I feel sorry for his wife. I know she trembles even from the thought of having a lover; her upbringing and existence forbids it. The only salvation for her femininity lies in her husband's jealousy. I posted the letter and went for a beer with a friend. This friend was not married:

he was in love with the fiancée of an acquaintance of mine. She knew that this unmarried man loved her, that's why she was content and that's why she could wait with deliberate and unusual patience. The more she feels affinity for this unmarried friend of mine, the more will she be faithful to her fiancée. That is my deepest conviction.

That night I was in a great mood, partly because my friend was in love, partly because of the beer, partly because we had a conversation about the spring colors of the Bukovac canvasses, about the man-animal from Rubens' battles, about Michelangelo's muscles. All of these gave me a pleasant tickling and I said: "Let's visit - those!"

In the saloon, teeming with diverse women, all bearing the same somnolent gaze, making an impression of Arabian tales told by a gray-haired aunt, I started to sense a big luxury of childhood and playtime. One of the girls had sat in my lap. She was small, plumpish, with a complexion so soft that my hands appeared to be immersed in the snow. I grew an appetite. My saliva gathered on my lips as if I had seen ice-cream: cream, strawberry and lemon. In the paroxysm of alcoholism I thought I could bring to my tongue all of her, and let sweetness, love and youth melt, all of that cold, cheap woman for sale on my burning lips and palate of mine. I was not burning from love, but from alcohol. She was cooling me off. I got hold of her neck a few times, and I was thrilled. Snow! Then I started to be parched with thirst; thirst of hunger and not of satiety. And I got hold of her neck again. My hard, uneven, long fingers completely foundered in that tender, pudgy complexion: she was laughing. Her mouth widened, her lips tightened, grew thin. And only their verges delineated a thin, long, sharp line with almost a painted redness. It occurred to me how one woman, in jest, bandaged her lover's eyes, and how he, roaring with laughter yielded himself to the jest, while she shot a flint-lock into his throat. That idea presently wiped out, in one thin and arrow-like motion, all the colors of her face; her eyes were laughing. I began to be delighted with the gesture that was not a painter's and lyric's, but a sculptor's and dramatist's; to strangle her while she is laughing, in jest... I squeezed her throat ever more firmly. She was laughing harshly, until the tears came. But I didn't hear a single voice. Her inflamed eyes danced, drunk, like on thorns; I lost my sight. I stared at my knotty fingers and the wrinkles on her neck, and a great rapture of horror and oddness, of guilt and crime began to freeze me. :

laughed. She wrenched away from me. I laughed ceaselessly. I fancied that strangulation scene which was like a statue and dramatic effect; to strangle her in a jest for a jest. It seemed to me that we were acting. I got carried away with my role. Three times I got hold of her, three times she wrenched herself away from me. I had decided really to strangle her in jest; that is why I laughed and she didn't dream of me actually strangling her. My friend dragged me aside. Even he thought I was joking, we were acting wonderfully. I was turning pale from a chiseled-in smile, which widened my mouth as with pincers. Never, it seemed to me, never will I put my lips together. Solemnity had petrified me. To strangle her! That was to be an effective finale, and I deliberately started to delay the end. It appeared to me as if the public was watching breathlessly, impatiently. And that my procrastination, her resistance and my friend's thwarting could just bring the spectators' nerves to the culmination of a stretching. I got hold of her for the fourth time; as if the applause was hissing from the look and breath of the vain audience and I was becoming more and more icy; that ice of prostitution had stiffened me; the scene was immovable, chiseled in, eternal; one of the *strangulation in jest for the jest* - entrance of the effective, sudden, sharp death... To squeeze even stronger and the ice will break through all of these chests: of the audience, of the harlot and of the artist. And I did not strangle her. My friend dragged me away, benignly cachinnating. She laughed, a real giggle and somehow I did not succeed to press my lips together. We went to have a liqueur. I was drinking. That scene remained incised in the pupil of my eye, and when I began to stagger drunkenly, I felt as if my eyes were outside me, and I'm tied to them with a rope, like a dog and I follow them, buffeted, resisting, strangling myself against the firm arms of my master.

The next day I was awake, but not sober. I trembled as from deep emotion, ecstasy and passion. Again I went to have a beer. My own skeleton I did not feel; voice coarse and soft, eyes full and turbid, sun somber and pale; people dark and drenched through. Further away, crags helplessly and lonesomely struggled against flatteries of a bristling sea. And some greasy clouds, as peppered bacons, started to chase one another above mountains and circle around the sun, like moths around the lamp. And they melted. Again I went for a beer. I was thirsty.

Memories started to haunt me like unreachable smells, sighs, fairies and melancholic butterflies, mottled, transparent, pressed,

pinched, dying. The waitress, blonde, pale, blue-eyed and mute, stared at me, dimples scooped out on her cheeks and chin. I saw her teeth and pale, narrow lips, and then my friend's wife and my acquaintance's fiancée, and my last night's friend flirtishly began to strew me with their glances, black, blue, brown. "You have not strangled" - their hairs, dresses and their reticules rustled all around me. Tiredly and sadly they rustled. To me it was as if all of them were seeking guilt, sin and crime in me. They sought for the ideal of their reveries and femininity, but not repentance. Desperately and sadly they were searching for a man who strangles and doesn't feel remorse: one who kills a prostitute, an unfaithful wife and lost lover, and despises penitence... And I was thinking unclearly and foggily, moved by alcohol and drunk from being moved and from a feeling that unfortunately I am not a woman, a mother, and that love alone cannot be a source of guilt for me, if it's not connected to a crime. A married woman has a lover - it is another thing when a husband has a mistress; a woman will give herself to anyone who pays - it is again another thing if a husband has everything; the wife fails, sells herself, lies and her charm is redeemed - the husband has to rape and to stain with blood - he wounds his wife for the first time and the charm is already lost. Next time he has to kill, because, if the woman offers you a kiss, you can not stop just at that one kiss, if you're a gentleman. Our life is violence, theirs - ingratiating, we are executioners, they are liars, we are sin, they are penitence And my friend's wife steals in between lines... As if I didn't know! You were a little girl, and what was a look for you then, was a squeeze for your present husband. You gave a kiss like an angel. He gave it already being a man. But angels were before men... Read holy books, my blue paramour and my black shadow, my dead love and my strewn past. You women move ahead with progression of the life, we - with that of the animals. And by the time you are allowed to reach cigarettes, long trousers, parliament and violence, we will be already past that point where my hand and lip made a halt... You won't be women anymore... Because one reliable person gave me a word, and this person is well acquainted with the matter; that my friend, upon receiving my letter, gave his wife a good beating... And that reliable person added that my friend's wife seemed to acquire better shape; they say she is more and more beautiful, buxom and more piquant...