

A Female Scene: Three Plays by Catalan Women

Magnolia Café *by Àngels Aymar*

An Absent Look *by Mercè Sarrias*

Re-Call *by Araceli Bruch*

Edited by Dr Montserrat Roser i Puig

The three plays which make up *A Female Scene* are representative of a new direction in Catalan theatre, where women playwrights challenge the conventions of established drama. *Magnolia Café* is a subversive re-working of the comedy of manners whilst *An Absent Look* deconstructs tragedy, the bastion of theatrical dynamics. Similarly, in its divergent, empathetic idiom *Re-Call* — an evocation of the free-thinking intellectual Lou Andreas Salomé — underlines this dramatic challenge to the vision of previous Catalan theatre.

The plays and their writers have been chosen because they encompass dramatically different writing styles and can be seen as representative of the work that women playwrights are undertaking in Catalonia today.

Dr Montserrat Roser i Puig, who lectures at the School of European Culture and Languages at the University of Kent, contributes an introduction to the plays in relation to modern Catalan theatre.

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Re-Call
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An Absent Look
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Catalan Women Playwrights

In 1994, whilst looking at the historical overview of Catalan theatre up to the early 1990s, the vice-president of the Catalan Women's Institute (*Institut Català de la Dona*) Joaquina Alemany i Roca, remarked on the insignificant presence that women have traditionally had in this world.¹ She pointed out how women, in spite of having been the protagonists of countless plays written and directed by men dating back to the Classical Greek tragedies, had been denied access to roles of responsibility, such as direction and production. She acknowledged that women had found themselves in an environment which they had not created but which they had assimilated and were fully committed to; but that now they were finally ready to demonstrate their own talent in every one of those areas of expertise.

The difficulties faced by women playwrights are compounded by the fact that the world of theatre is extremely competitive. Becoming a successful Catalan playwright is just as difficult as becoming a director or a producer yet all these professions require much more effort when they are carried out by women rather than by men. However, in agreement with Alemany, Maria José Ragué Arias pointed out that by the early 1990s, their possibilities were starting to be within their reach "as a result of changes in [Spanish] society and, therefore, in theatre."²

In line with their counterparts from various Western European countries, Catalan women playwrights underwent three phases of development: imitation, protest and self-realisation. As is the case in other countries, they initially emulated male models and even took on male pseudonyms. Indeed, there was a time when being a female playwright and not hiding it was an achievement

in itself. Women subsequently strove to create their own genre and, following the French feminist model, they claimed back both their body and their writing.³ As Alemany also mentioned, this came as a reaction to women having been presented on stage as men had traditionally seen them. As products of the male gaze, women were not allowed to illustrate the needs and consciousness of the female collective and were unable to transmit their own values to the audiences as intellectual communicators.

An alternative style of writing

In order to make a success of the transmission mentioned above, women transformed the language created by men into a much more malleable form of communication suited to feminist discourse and strove for the creation of a truly non-patriarchal idiom, intrinsically different to the one used by men, which they perceived as having offered audiences a deformed representation of women and their world, revolving around the male-imposed social divide between a dominant and a subordinate culture.

In this process, Catalan women playwrights showed a marked interest in formal, structural, linguistic and aesthetic issues and, at an intellectual level, demonstrated an ambitious socio-philosophical line of enquiry which worked towards the recovery of concepts which were dear to them but which had traditionally been dismissed, forgotten or ignored. In spite of the scarcity of resources at the disposal of female playwrights and the reticence towards them still existent in the male-dominated theatre world, they volunteered their own vision of social issues in plays which placed intellectual feminine discourse into the mainstream.

The three works selected in this book are a sample of the very different and varied types of plays that women writers have been producing in Catalonia in the recent past in opposition to what might be termed generic masculine

theatre. *Magnolia Café / Magnolia Cafè* (2000) by Àngels Aymar starts out as a realistic play in which the spectator follows the conversations of a group of men and women dining out in a smart restaurant. While the piece follows the standard male convention of a comedy of manners, it simultaneously offers a female perspective on various social and cultural issues spanning several generations. However — and more importantly — thanks to a cleverly engineered turn of events, we discover that it is a play within a play. The characters step out of their roles and provide a perceptive comment on the inner workings of theatre as a whole thus undermining the very model of a conventional play and conventional theatrical values that we had been lead to believe we were watching.

As Maria Josep Ragué has explained, tragedy has been a traditional cornerstone of the male conception of drama. This most testosterone-laden of genres is, for the critic:

[A] theatrical form which replicates masculine sexual experience made up by an introduction, a climax and a catharsis — an exposition (complication), the crux (crisis) and a dénouement (resolution) — it is a focal form that they consider phallogentric. They counter that with a feminine theatrical form which is multi-focal with an organisation based upon “contiguity”, like the works in the US in the 80s such as the Women’s performance art pieces by Adrienne Kennedy or the age-long cyclical witchcraft rituals.⁴

And if tragedy is a legitimate target for feminist deconstruction, then *An Absent Look / Un aire absent* (1997) by Mercè Sarrias not only executes the job beautifully from a post-feminist angle but could even be seen as constituting a critical reaction to the genre itself from this perspective. Sarrias reinterprets, re-uses and re-invents several male heroic conventions by building up tension and retaining a degree of Brechtian distance but at the same time creating charmingly vulnerable characters. And their stories have no possible outcome, thus denying the usual closure and

offering instead a fresh female alternative to the conventional tragic model. In this way, the dramatist creates a thought-provoking dialectic at the centre of her art. It is not merely the female character who is fighting the battle against established procedure but also the female playwright who, in her authorship and creative dissidence, has the last word and scores a palpable hit in her immensely subtle subversion of dramatic convention.

Similarly, *Re-Call / Re-Clams* (1997) by Araceli Bruch adds yet another style to combat the rigid strictures of established genre. Unlike the standard fare of the male convention, action is virtually non-existent in this play but it is the psychological search, in the traditional form of a woman's life journey, which takes centre stage. The originality of the piece lies in the application of the notion of constructive Narcissism developed by the notoriously dissident Lou Andreas Salomé, which draws from Freudian psychoanalysis yet travels far beyond it. Bruch's characters reject the harsh narrative logic of the sublimation principle — according to which one overcomes and forgets each phase in one's life to become more sophisticated and therefore better — in order to privilege intuition, emotion and ritualistic experience with a well-earned recognition in area of the construction of the self. Thus, the avoidance of the conventional simplicity of plot and concentration on alternative considerations of a more female nature, complies entirely with Ragué's views that:

In the search for her identity, women also search for the ritual in theatre, which allows them to create a collective conscience amongst the spectators who, "transformed" by the ritualistic character of the spectacle, will modify their own reality.⁵

Women centre stage

In the last fifteen years women playwrights have consolidated their image as independent intellectuals, even

though their undervaluation still pervades and traditional gender-based attitudes can be quite frustrating.⁶ Nonetheless, it is women who give voice to women. They have organised themselves in collectives and they have given themselves the opportunity to transform and innovate, thus creating a new vision which is conducive to the experiences and inner desires of the female psyche.⁷ They have moved beyond emergency feminist theatre and into a phase of self-realisation. They have seen that it is impossible and pointless to create a single female theatre model devised to supersede the male original and have therefore created a theatrical genre which, by deconstructing the male model and decreasing its confrontational tone, has become much more flexible, tolerant and fluid. Here what matters is its ability to encompass both the differences and the similarities of those characteristics which define the two sexes. Their attitude, as Carme Monturiol says, is forward-looking: "One has to be educated in order to be able to face up to problems in life, the root causes being the same both for women and for men. They have to go along the same path, be friends and therefore, they need to understand each other and not trip each other up."⁸

Audiences today are starting to realise that the female perspective should not be underestimated. Women are now, at least intellectually, respected and feminine discourses have reached a more or less normalised status. The plays which we preface here have assimilated the best that modern male theatre has had to offer (the theatre of the absurd in Sarrias, Pirandello in Aymar and psychoanalytic theatre in Bruch) and added a crucial new and authentically alternative perspective. Going beyond the male approach to modern theatre, these women have made an enriching contribution of their own. Their *modus operandi* might vary considerably; but in all cases the solidity of the referents and the compelling effect produced by the socio-philosophical issues presented in their plays is nothing short of impressive.

Moreover — quite apart from the sexual discrimination

to which Catalan women have been subjected, they have also had to overcome the handicap of living in a country where their language, a powerful symbol of identity, was proscribed and is still very much a controversial issue. In this adverse environment — to which we could add the difficulties experienced in Catalonia by dramatists who, like those who appear in this collection, opted for writing text-based theatre at a time when text was perceived as outdated and performance-based theatre was booming — it is the current generation of women playwrights which has moved heaven and earth to recover both their language and their rightful place in the theatre and in society. We can only agree with the words of the critic Carme Pedra who states that at the very least theirs is indeed a “double achievement.”⁹

So who are these women? When looking at Spanish women playwrights at the end of the twentieth century Ragué identified a trend: they tend to be women who, having achieved acclaim as actresses and seen the profession from within, ventured into the more traditionally male-dominated spheres of direction and writing.¹⁰

Encouraging results started to show by the late 1990s, when women were increasingly being awarded prizes for their plays. Having them performed in main theatres and their texts published so they could be studied or translated and taken abroad was still almost unheard of. Since then it is undeniable that great strides have been made to promote the work of women in Catalan theatre, especially by women’s associations and organisations, and the plays by Àngels Aymar, Araceli Bruch and Mercè Sarrias are most welcome examples of their success. However, this is just the beginning. As Araceli Bruch reminds us, many hurdles still remain to be overcome:

In spite of the archaeological work which women’s collectives are doing in order to liberate our history from the chests of drawers where it has been kept under lock and key, the diffusion of our works is not anywhere near nor-

malised. When facing the flood of feminine voices claiming our participation in the canon, official culture opts for letting us move within a confined space in the strictest classical sense. [...] If it wasn't for the constant and systematic buckets of cold water thrown at us, we theatre women would be on to a good thing.¹¹

To this effect we are privileged to participate in this process with the present collection of plays. Not only does this initiative provide an opportunity to read the work itself but also to reflect upon what is involved in writing, translating and directing them. In other words, with this selection we offer a chance for the male and female reader of English to deliberate accordingly on those areas of the theatrical experience from which Catalan women have been conventionally excluded and are only now beginning to establish themselves with any degree of coherence.

Footnotes

- ¹ As cited in Ragué Arias, Maria Josep, Ed., *Dona i teatre: Ara i aquí*, Barcelona, Institut Català de la Dona, 1994, p. 11.
- ² Ragué Arias, Maria Josep, *El teatro de fin de milenio en España. De 1975 hasta hoy*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1996, pp. 261-262. Here and elsewhere our English version will render original quotations in Catalan and Spanish.
- ³ Cixous, Hélène, "The Laugh of Medusa" in Marks, E & Courtivron, I, Eds., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester, 1981.
- ⁴ Ragué, Maria Josep, "Comunicació entre gèneres: una mirada teatral cap als orígens i cap al ritu, una possible mirada cap al gènere femení", in *Dona i teatre: Ara i aquí*, Barcelona, Institut Català de la Dona, 1994, pp. 15-26, p. 17.
- ⁵ Ragué, Maria Josep, "Comunicació entre gèneres...", p. 18.
- ⁶ We are thinking here about the presentation of the woman along the lines of discredited stereotype, either as a subservient and passive character or as the incarnation of sexual danger.
- ⁷ The initiatives of many amateur organisations stand out here but, most importantly, the highly influential projects of the Institut Català de la Dona, and of organisations such as Teatre Dona and Projecte Vaca.

- ⁸ Monturiol, Carme, *Clàssiques catalanes. L'abisme. L'huracà. La sal*. Edicions de les Dones, Barcelona, 1983.
- ⁹ “[E]l mèrit és doble.” Ragué, *Dona i teatre...*, p. 93.
- ¹⁰ Ragué, *El teatro de fin de milenio...*, p. 262.
- ¹¹ Bruch, Araceli, “La llengua tallada. D’Aphra Behn a Elfriede Jelineck”, <http://entreacte.lesrevistes.com/ct/Cos/espaideldirector#9585,%201>

An Absent Look (1997)

Mercè Sarrias (Barcelona, 1966) has a background in journalism and is well-known as a script-writer, playwright and rock musician. In the plays that pre-date *An Absent Look* (*El tren / The Train*, 1996; *Àfrica 30*, 1996) she developed a very idiosyncratic style based upon communication between characters who suffer from an inability to express themselves with the fluidity required by the sophisticated and complex issues they face but who, somehow, manage to connect at an intuitive, ultra-verbal level.

An Absent Look is a play divided into eighteen scenes in five different settings which alternate via a random selection the lighting arranged in a circular trace. This haphazard circularity, which is loosely echoed by the repeated shootings in the opening and closing scenes, reinforces the disconnected imagery and dialogue of the play. The plot is disturbingly enigmatic and inconsequential as is apparent from the following synopsis. The Man, who owns a bookshop, hires the Young Woman as a sales assistant and falls in love with her. His friend, the Young Man, also falls in love her. Unlike the Man — whom she loves — the Young Man declares his love to her but to no effect. Finally, the Young Woman leaves them both to look for the love of her life elsewhere.

In contrast to the majority of Sarrias' plays, where psychological observation and character construction is considerable and the emotions and problems of women are closely monitored and exploited, in *An Absent Look* there is little female protagonism. One merely senses a loose level of congruity and logicity; and what prevails is a deep feeling of helplessness in the face of the absence of any firm ontological basis to existence. The three characters are all equally weak and are each, in their own way,

incomplete and inadequate. Their psychological development — if there is any — is not apparent on stage. We see merely their disjointed dialogue and actions. Even though their isolation and loneliness are poignantly present throughout, they are unable to articulate their experience and their actions become as disjointed as their language. There may still be a trace of the subliminal communication evident elsewhere in Sarrias' theatre in the oniric, mesmeric quality of some of the scenes although the positive nature of this in the context of a play where ontological indetermination is so prevalent must be open to debate.

In *An Absent Look* issues of significance are addressed only by default but their impact is undeniable. Sarrias does not delve conventionally into the psychological workings of the male and female minds but, rather, she shows her audience the absurdity and personal loss of those who act according to a given type. Inspired by cartoon strips and old black and white movies, Sarrias provides us with characters that incessantly revert to the limitations of convention. Despite their shallow nature a certain grotesque empathy is elicited, nonetheless, by the occasional idiosyncrasy. Such representation is particularly disarming in a play about pathetic non-heroes and enhances an awareness of their inconsequentiality: a watchmaker who is not interested in time, a bookseller who is not interested in books and a young woman who wanders aimlessly through life looking for romantic attachment only to flee rather than take concrete steps to achieve it.

Indeed, the Young Man, owner of a watch shop, has no business acumen whatsoever. He is hooked on his childhood comics, which he calls “pure literature”, even though he does not find them as exciting now as he did when he was a child. This in itself might constitute an indication of maturity. However, we soon find out that far from outgrowing these pictorial adventures he has become dependent on and trapped by the genre. Whilst acknowledging that gender

roles represented in comics are overly stereotyped he still models himself on virile super-heroes and, when lost for ideas, surrenders to their larger-than-life actions. Thus, his behaviour is repeatedly at odds with the reality of any given situation as is exemplified when, in a desire to retain the Young Woman, he inanely jumps over the counter in the guise of one of his super-heroes instead of trying to convince the woman he loves with more reasoned or romantic articulation.

In similar terms, he can assume the role of the likeable gangster and present himself as the black sheep of the family only to appear elsewhere as a charming, old-fashioned type and, lastly, as a romantic and nostalgic waster. What is more, his application of models is not limited to his own personal experience. He also responds to his customers according to the conventions of the comic as evinced by the anecdote of a man who came to sell him his watch which he then sold to a customer for next to nothing: "Just because she was a woman, just because of her mouth, just because I'm like that, so, so... so oh I don't know."

However, whilst an element of role-playing may be present in many reasonably well-balanced young people, the Young Man's personality has no individual foundation. He has no opinions of his own and is totally dependant on stereotypes. He has no personality but merely assumes a role depending on the day of the week:

On Tuesdays I'm a man with solid ideas, I love DIY. I want a terraced house with a garden and a really big television to watch football matches on. (*Pause.*) I suddenly realise I need a lawnmower, a three-size drill and an exercise bicycle. I run to the superstore, mainly to look at the special offers and other things needed for the upkeep of a superb fridge, self-defrosting, with three sections and an ice-machine. I immerse myself in the nails section, hardware third floor on the left and look for what would be best for that window I heard creaking quietly yesterday before I went to bed, Canadian bedcover, floral print pattern, radio alarm clock. (*Pause.*) On Tuesdays I'm

monogamous as well, I feel monogamy's something within me, like a desire to fall in love forever, an internal passion that's really hard to stop. I want to focus my whole life on one person, I want to devote myself entirely to that person, from the tip of my hair to my big toe, from the finger nails of my right hand to my tummy button and, especially, with the back of my neck alive to all these sensations. So, all it needs on that moment on a Tuesday, is for somebody to come in and I'll fall at their feet, gently, like the way lovers do in old films. (*Pause.*) As if somebody had shot me in the heart.

When he falls in love with the Young Woman, his expressive inadequacy reflects his incapacity to handle the relationship: "I love you (*Pause.*) I just wanted to tell you that. (*Pause.*) Just to tell you. (*Pause.*) Now I've told you." A counterpart to the Young Man, the Man is not the usual stock male of dramatic convention either. He happens to fit the standard picture of the lover but, according to the Young Man's description, his vagueness and indefiniteness of character is obvious. Significantly, the Young Woman falls in love with him by default: because of his "absent look".

He's got ideas and sometimes carries them out, but on the whole he doesn't. (*Pause.*) He vaguely accepts what he's got, but deep down he'd like to have something else. (*Pause.*) Even though he's not sure he could live properly with that something else and it's just that uncertainty that makes him pull back. So he's resigned to very small changes. Always very small changes. (*Pause. Looks at her.*) Anyway, he's extremely capable of acting merely on impulse, like everybody.

Once again, like the characters in gangster films and comics, the Man judges women by their looks and lives in a fictional world of his own: "Just by wearing that skirt that flaps about and smiling like nobody on earth. When she looks at me, I feel like telling her a story, making things up, imagining situations, recounting anecdotes that

have never happened.” He has no objectivity and lets himself be driven by whim without displaying any sound judgement. When he employs the Young Woman as a shop assistant he offers her too little money and later gives her too much, both decisions having been taken on impulse. And when she complains that she has done so badly at being a shop assistant, he cannot even acknowledge the obvious and replies instead: “But you did perfectly, really, it was... was perfect...” Like the Young Man, he sees everyone else in a stereotypical fashion as is the case of the customers who go into his shop.

I’ve got clients who come just to flick through books, they take a look at them, especially the photo on the cover, and if they like it a lot, once a year, they buy one and do the whole thing with a certain sense of ceremony. (*Pause.*) There are also people who’ve been reading since they were young, they’re often short-sighted and very often bald as well, besides sometimes being rather short; I affectionately call them the readers and try and have a little chat with them. (*Pause.*) Then they are some who buy them just because of the price and others who’d kill to buy a rare copy that’s happened to come my way and which I couldn’t care less about. The former are not always poor, but the latter are always rich. (*Pause.*)

Paradoxically, the Man shows no real interest in literature or in the book trade. He feels guilty about ruining his family’s business and to him books become props to help him get comfortable when he wants to rest in the same way that fictional characters help him get by without much discomfort when faced with unsavoury realities.

On the other hand, he is obsessed by time and by the desire to capture those little things that make life worthwhile. As he says, he longs: “For that hour, minute, second, to capture time and then forget it.” Always in a hurry he doesn’t want to face up to reality or take on any responsibility and, in fact, when he goes to the shop and meets the Young Man (who has bought a book from the

Young Woman and never one from him) instead of acknowledging that he feels hurt, he turns around and goes away. Ultimately, his inability to handle romance will dominate him and make him even more erratic than usual in his behaviour, as the Young Man states quite clearly:

Young Woman: That man's always running away.

Young Man: From what?

Young Woman: From everything. He's always about to go off.

Young Man: I don't think so. There's something wrong with him. He's never done that before. He doesn't usually go off, usually he stays for too long and then suddenly, he does that and leaves.

The Man does not know how to handle emotional issues. It is as if, in creating him, Sarrias had decided not to give him the necessary attributes to allow him to fend for himself and, indeed, even after his "unconventionally conventional" relationship with the Young Woman has settled, he does not listen to her questions or even attempt addressing any issues raised by her or felt by him. In this way he loses by default the chance of a relationship which, as we see from his discourse, would have been fulfilling and meaningful to his existence.

The Young Woman fits the typical image of the "babe" in American black comedies. She is taken at face value because of her looks and when the Man, having just hired her for "strictly commercial reasons", reinforces her stereotyped image by describing her as "a dark-haired shop assistant, about thirty years old, with a small mouth and a straight nose", she performs according to a script set by others and tries to act out the parts that she has been assigned (the assassin in Scene 1; the customer in Scene 2; the shop assistant in Scenes 6 and 8 and the lone woman looking for love in Scene 7) even though she does not actually succeed in playing any of these roles adequately. Sarrias has given her docility and obedience but no initiative and no depth.

Like many of the characters in Sarrias's other plays, the Young Woman struggles to explain things to herself and other characters feel prompted to supply her with the words that she cannot find. What is more, she seems to have no capacity for self-analysis. She is fascinated with characters of film and comics who wander aimlessly in a suburban context and pictures herself on a given Thursday wandering about in the rain. She is also gripped by the story about the man who returns home after many years:

He walks through the city; it's ages since he's seen it. He looks at the houses, goes into the shops which are still there and checks which ones have closed. He finds out that some ways of life have changed slightly, that there aren't big jars of sugar in the cafés any more, just sugar lumps and saccharine, those sweet pills which look like medicine; that the cod isn't done in ratatouille at that place he liked so much and that the caretaker's daughter from number thirty-three in that street ran away with a sailor.

The Young Woman is in love with the Man but, true to type, when the Young Man also declares his love to her, she is unable to take any determined stance and instead leaves, suitcase in hand, promising to send the Young Man her address, like in the finale of an old Hollywood film. She has no real determination, as evinced evocatively in Scene 17 where she is "letting herself be pulled along" whilst on roller-skates. She can take no decisive action and wherever she goes, "she is chased by the rain which is making her wet" — an image that reminds us of a standard comic vignette. She is trapped in her role of the wandering young woman in search of love and cannot move on to becoming anything else. Her closing reflection on her fate is pathetic in the empty absurdity of her lexis.

And on any corner on Thursday I'll find an open street again that leads me to a Chinaman, a conference or the zoo, giraffe section, exotic animals, crocodiles, and somebody will run by again in the rain.

The pervasive inconsequentiality of *An Absent Look*, as evident here, hints at the acute need for change, particularly in the area of individual ontology. Its pathetic dark humour constitutes a call for personal autonomy and freedom characteristic of the genre of black comedy in that it:

...displays a marked disillusionment and cynicism. It shows human beings without convictions and with little hope, regulated by fate or fortune or incomprehensible powers. In fact, human beings in an “absurd” predicament.¹

Significantly, the meta-theatrical dimension to the piece poignantly accentuates the indefiniteness of the characters. The Young Woman steps out of her role as a shop assistant and admits that she is not as stupid as she seems yet cannot do the job. Similarly, in Scene 6 the Man acts as a customer and the Young Woman as a shop assistant but they cannot get their act together. Such inability reinforces the absurdity of the play as does the complicity between the characters when, confronted with such incapacity, have laughing fits. This collusion gives these scenes the air of a rehearsal and the audience feel as though they are witnessing all that goes wrong behind the scenes.

This sense of unreality is palpable throughout and reinforced by Sarrias with the inclusion of openly absurd actions. The cartoon and comic strip dimension comes particularly to the fore as a drill works even though it is not plugged in; the Young Man gives a drinks order while pedalling on a static bicycle; the Man opens up an umbrella and it begins to rain on him alone; the Young Woman is followed by her very own rain cloud. This process of defamiliarisation reflects the theatrical techniques described by Viktor Shklovsky as outlined in his seminal essay “Art as Technique” where:

...perception becomes automatic once it has become habitual, and [...] the function of art is to challenge automatised and habitualised perception, and return a direct grasp on things to the individual perception.²

In *An Absent Look* actions are never logical, discussions between characters are often pointless (see Scene 4) and their actions bear little connection to their words or their context because the characters themselves are decontextualised, having next to no background and no life experience to speak of. Even though they seem to have resigned themselves to their own loneliness, they are unable to recollect things that have just happened to them. In Scene 12, the Young Man starts talking to the Young Woman yet she does not seem to recognise him as the person she sold a book to earlier in the play. Similarly, as they are discussing her love life, she seems to have forgotten that the Young Man had already told her about his friendship with the Man when they first met and that on that occasion she had already told him that she loved him.

Puzzlement might well be the dominant mood of the piece exemplified by standard images from the cartoon medium as in Scene 17 where the Young Woman appears on roller-skates being dragged across the stage or in Scene 13 when she is shown comfortably sleeping on a bed of books she has fashioned in the shop. The sensation ties in with a clear oniric quality of several of the scenes. In Scene 9 where the Man talks about a dream and, more interestingly, when the Young Woman tells us about a dream involving the Young Man at a bus stop in Scene 16, it makes us wonder if the action which corresponds to Scene 12 was, in turn, only a dream. Needless to say, the dream within a dream phenomenon is particularly reminiscent of theatrical convention. What is impressive in this case is its avoidance of any magnificent speculation on matters tempestual and, unlike Calderón, its application to the experience of ontological nonentities, which imbues the deliberation with a further element of pathos. In *An Absent Look* distinguishing the real from the unreal has been reduced from a matter of crucial philosophical and social significance to a mere commonplace incapacity of everyday existence. Each one of the three characters lives in an imaginary and insignificant world of their own and

seems quite happy to remain there undisturbed by anything of real importance.

The strong meta-theatrical presence underpins this modulation as absurd elements are given a sympathetic post-modern twist and re-incorporated into what is in the final analysis a contemporary, end-of-the-century play. As has been seen, there is a mixture of conventions not only adapted from the theatre but from a wide range of genres, each poignant in its superficiality. All of which elicits a subtle but well-defined allusion to the existential issue of freedom — a touchstone of contemporary European drama — which is left in the minds of the audience by the Young Woman when she describes how the Man:

...rushes in pleasantly with an umbrella. (*Pause.*) He smiles and gives me a character as a present, he laughs and walks among the books, gives away bookcases, coughs up an idea and then disappears. Like a breeze, like the wind.

The question raised here and repeatedly throughout the play is not so much as whether we are masters of our own destiny or whether we have been scripted like the characters in a drama. It is more about whether we really care. The playwright seems to ask us provocatively to consider whether we are happy to reject any notion of autonomy or determination as exemplified by the futility of the Man's pastimes. The constant re-construction of a puzzle merely denotes a wilful collusion with the status quo and acts as a warning to those who would sidestep issues of major concern to involve themselves in a comforting introspective re-assembling of personal fragments:

...and gradually reconstruct all of it, as if it were a puzzle. (*Pause.*) And afterwards, everything the same... everything remains as it always was. (*Pause.*) Identical, the same, as always. (*Pause.*) And then I feel good. Very good.

An Absent Look is populated by characters that amount to little more than walking ethereality. They behave according

to types, but types that are entirely fabricated or alien. Their experiences come from literature, popular culture and films but not from real life. What is lacking in them is the conscious effort of living, the building up of full existences: issues of poignant relevance for individuals from a stateless national minority exposed to the homogenising behavioural processes of rampant globalisation.

Nonetheless, the idiom in this play is neither as violent nor as despairing as in other works written by men. The anti-hero may have given way to the non-hero, as in Belbel or in Monzó, but Sarrias refuses to fall into the fatalism and the manic intensity which characterises much of the output of her male compatriots. Despite their failings these characters have not lost all possibility of a means of escape. They merely need to awake to the inconsequentiality of their behaviour and take the necessary action.

Footnotes

¹ Cuddon, J.A., *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, London: Penguin 1979, pp. 82-83.

² Cited by Hawthorn, Jeremy, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, London: Arnold 1997, p. 40.

Magnolia Café (2000)

Àngels Aymar i Ragolta (Barcelona 1958) falls into the category of those renowned actresses who have also become well-known playwrights and directors. And, as might be anticipated from one so involved in the theatre, there are three distinct aspects which are key to our understanding of her works, particularly as regards her scrutiny of the female condition: the creative role of the playwright, the role of the performers, and the role of the director as a mediator between the author and the actors.¹

Magnolia Café is a single-act, single-setting production which develops in the eponymous restaurant and which is, we are told, inspired by the original establishment that the owner of the restaurant once frequented in New Orleans. Here we witness the reunion of three friends (Elena, Martina and Hilde) in their late thirties and their interaction with the other diners at the restaurant. As the dialogue unfolds, we become aware of the deep preoccupations of these women: their search for a place in modern society, the loss of validity of old social models and their hopes for the future generation. Even though the play could be taking place anywhere, the social issues and behavioural patterns discussed and displayed are particularly Catalan in nature.

The welter of subjects considered in each conversation is highly pertinent and, given the protagonism of the female characters, can be seen as amounting to a collective portrayal of women in which Aymar combines the superficial with the profound. These extremes might be exemplified by the extent of the theatrical language employed. On the one hand, for example, we witness the clear idiom of meta-theatricality (Martina: “But here the ending is already written”) and, on the other, there is a concurrent recourse

to hyper-realistic dialogue which delves deep into popular culture with its indulgence in good-natured *culebró* (sit-com style) gossip.

As in Aymar's other plays (such as *Brainstorm* and *La rialla inacabada*), the social landscape that emerges here is "a tribute to memory and a desire to go over the past in order to resolve unresolved issues [...] follow[ing] different strategies in order to illustrate the personalities, the behaviour patterns and the generational differences of the eleven individuals involved."² In her portrayal of women and men, Aymar relies quite heavily on stereotypical models which reinforce the male/female divide. Unusually in this convention the male characters can be seen as quite inconsequential while, by way of counterpoint, the female characters cover a much wider spectrum and are more developed and better differentiated.

When evaluating their social and personal position, the women in the play show how, in the past, their life choices were very limited. The Wife, who has been enduring a conventional male-oriented and, therefore, submissive life has come to the end of her tether and suffers the pain of being trapped in a relationship ruled by a repetitive and imposed ritual. We witness how after endless years of silence, she can finally voice her frustration and tell her husband how enraged she is about "things that are miserable about you. Things that are utterly unbearable for me". The Photographer, on the other hand, coming from a more cultured background is shown as one of her generation's exceptions as she discloses how she managed escape social limitations by fulfilling her childhood dream of travelling. These two characters, together with the adventurous owner of the restaurant encapsulate the options open to women during the Franco regime and become role-models for their counterparts of the post-Franco era. They already see themselves as having achieved some self-identifying progress and attribute great value to the imagination as a way to move beyond the life of their predecessors and

contemporaries who were “working and doing the same tasks day after day” and “seldom laughed.”

Nonetheless, throughout the play all the women share feelings of loneliness and loss. The Photographer says that “There’s always someone missing [...] Or missing someone who’s no longer here” and this is similar to the mention made by Elena to Martina of Angela, who is also absent. The Photographer discloses the trauma caused by the murder of her father in front of her when she was a child while, similarly, Martina tells Hilde how tired she is of being alone and alludes to the ontological frustration current in the West in her belief that “it would be better if we were more open to Eastern philosophies here. On the subject of death, for example, I think we’d live better if we focussed on it in a different way.”

When Hilde states that:

We put so much of ourselves in a child before it’s born, even before conceiving it... it’s the same with the man we dreamed about as a girl...without knowing him you imagine how you’ll love him. It’s the same with all forms of love, as if you had few other options. We make them the underpinnings of our lives and we don’t accept the idea that anything could go wrong, that they could abandon us without fulfilling our expectations.

we can see the inevitability of female existential restriction as these women also perceive themselves as being lonely, in love and victims of emotional dependency.

In *Magnolia Café*, however, there is a compensatory undercurrent of female sexual imagery and themes which presents quite a detailed picture of the hopes and aspirations of modern women in their late thirties. Elena describes herself as very sexually active, to the extent that Martina calls her an “unmarried nymphomaniac”. On the topical discussion on why there is no Viagra for women, she suggests that taking occasional lovers would easily resolve this deficiency! And a different though related scenario is presented when they go on to talk about Martina’s

last fling and the emotional effect produced in this imminent forty-year old is considerable when she realises that such a recent experience could be as intense as her very first real kiss:

It's a relationship that's so passionate it scares me. Sometimes I don't know whether it's fear that it will end or that it will last... I also don't know if I can live with that anxiety much longer. The secrecy of it all feeds my uncertainty, and the passion doesn't give me room to think...

The foregrounding of the passionate relationship for the older woman is — and unlike the male — comparatively rare both in theatrical and social terms. As such, it constitutes a positive alternative which fills her with hope and makes her feel full of life. What is interesting however is that her lover turns up to be an illegal Tunisian immigrant whom she keeps locked up in her flat. Here, apart from the noted significance of the role reversal, the conversation acts as a reminder of the racial prejudices derived from recent immigration in Catalonia and we witness, for example, Hilde's alarm at her friend's imminent loss of professional and social status if she recognises the relationship properly when she says that "I don't think that's the best solution. You've fought enough to get where you are."

Martina and Elena's positive take on sexual activity, on the other hand, contrasts powerfully with the older generation's frustrations as seen in the Husband's complaint about the Wife's frigidity and, in general terms, hints at a further generational change. The gender implications are enhanced in turn by the ongoing flirtation between the waitress and the musician, apparent to all on stage despite the disapproval of the owner.

A further issue addressed by the play is that of maternity as choice, an alternative only available to women in the post-Franco age. On the one hand we have the comments made to Hilde in response to her obvious pregnancy

and on the other the conversation on the subject between Martina and Elena who offers the audience a sociologically modern approach as she ponders on the possibility of starting a single-parent family but hedges her bets, preferring to hide her misgivings behind the excuse of not wanting to throw away her successful career and wait for her Prince Charming to sort everything out for her. In the case of Martina, a similar lack of conviction is clear as, despite the opportunity, she as many other women of her time is still reluctant to take decisive action, and it is interesting that later on in the play when, asked by the Journalist if she has ever been pregnant, she replies by turning from her personal self to her professional self as a gynaecologist and replying: “Hundreds of times!”

The play also addresses the situation of women in the workplace. This is presented as precarious when the Photographer and the Journalist discuss women writers and artists in their respective worlds and it is obvious how they perceive a strong need to be extra-professional in order to achieve recognition by men. This legacy from earlier generations is, nonetheless, coming to an end even in the most reactionary couples, as can see when the Husband insults the Wife and she decides to break her complicity to his uncharitable behaviour and speak up. As she says, “Believe it or not, my friend, but women have been able to speak for themselves for quite a while now.” On the other hand, and despite the changes, the contemporary situation is still riddled with unfairness: Elena is worried about her career prospects since, contrary to what she has lead the others to believe, she has been forced to play at far less glamorous venues than she would have liked to; and Hilde reveals that she has been made redundant because of her pregnancy.

On a different level, *Magnòlia Cafè* has a clear carnivalesque subtext. The inspiration for the restaurant comes from the Mardi Gras celebrations, which the Photographer describes as “pure madness”. The major selling point of the place is the ritualistic throwing of the

Mardi Grass Beads onto the branches of the magnolia tree. These beads, traditionally purple, green and gold and presented into three spiralling strands to make a necklace, are attributed magic powers. They are described by the owner of the restaurant as originating from the Washo Indian tribe in California as witnessed by her when in New Orleans, who explains that, "According to the tradition, if the beads thrown on the Magnolia in spring are still there after two moons, by the third moon the man who threw them will meet the woman who will give him his first child" thus linking together the themes of hope, myth, fantasy and procreation discussed throughout the evening.

Magic is associated with Carnival and, according to the Photographer, the Woman set up the Cafe after being inspired by a premonition: a Washo Indian told her that when she got back home from New Orleans she would see a sign which the Woman duly found in the magnolia tree outside what would be her new restaurant. In this way, magic and superstition pervade the play. Martina, despite her professional scientific status, is taken in by her boyfriend's claim that when their eyes first met, he looked at the palm of his hand, saw her image in there and understood that she was his destiny. Hilde confesses to her wish coming true when she threw a coin in the Fountain of Trevi; and the Photographer who, while agreeing that everything depends on the faith that one puts into these things, explains that when she was a young girl a fortune teller told her that she would not have a long life and that, even if she had been proven wrong, her whole life was better because of it. Even Elena, who seems somewhat sceptical, joins in when the others throw their beads to the magnolia tree at the end of the play.

The point is not insignificant. In the male dominated world of Catalan post-moderism it is not unusual for human experience to be represented in terms of extreme — albeit amusing — negativity. Its most internationally famous creative artists (Belbel, Bigas Luna, Monzó, etc.)

are wont to display a world of individual repression and personal inconsequence, whose black humour underpins the contingent futility of life which offers not the slightest form of spiritual escape. One would only need to consider the enormous violence and indecency visited upon the body and language — so often subjected to a marginalisation indecorum which borders on the pathological — to indicate the abject despair prevalent in their deliberation.

By way of contrast, the plays of Aymar and her counterparts refuse to be dragged down into the facile despair of such speculation. Language and the body are never demonised or relegated to the level of bathos. Particular situations are exposed and analysed and, despite the ontological difficulties, the hope of deliverance is never excluded. Superstition and ritual may be recognised as limited but still allude to a possible spirituality which has been so comprehensively banished from the output of their male contemporaries.

However, that is not to say that the expression lacks the innovative exuberance which so typifies the work of the artists mentioned above. With its final twist, the play offers its most Carnavalesque element of all along the lines expounded by Bakhtin. Like Carnival, it allows for the possibility of the disruption of the social order giving the audience an opportunity to detach themselves from the tenets of everyday existence and view them afresh from a distance. In terms of what Pirandello called “the changing nature of man and the unchanging nature of the characters”, everything is turned upside-down and the whole premises of the drama are imbued with a new speculative dimension.

Magnolia Café adapts yet inverts the premise established by *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). In the latter the characters reveal themselves as characters from the very start of the proceedings but in *Magnolia Café* their revelation as such, coming as it does at the end of a fairly naturalistic work, not only takes us by surprise but also sheds a totally new light on the performance and

significance of the play as a whole. As the actors step out of their roles the audience's views of them and the validity of their deliberations change radically; and so does our assessment of their performances — especially after sharing the critical comments made by the actors (who are themselves characters) about their own contribution. Once again, then, the validity of modern and more progressive conceptions about the female condition is called into question.

As it transpires, *Magnolia Café* is a play which portrays its own first full rehearsal followed by an analytical discussion of the performance which assesses its weaknesses relating to the written text, the actors and the director so that it can be refined before it is performed commercially. In the same way that spectators analyse and judge not only the credibility of the actors but also the consistency or inconsistency of the argument and the dialogues of the piece. The characters in *Magnolia Café* reveal the play's weaknesses (not enough clarity, for example, and not enough "vibe") but, what is more, they also invite the audience to reflect on the acting profession and on the actors as human beings. They do so by giving them an inside view of what goes on at the rehearsal stage of this (and by extension any) play: how actors need to get in and out of their roles, which other personal pressures they may be suffering, the discomfort of the costumes, the shoes, their physical needs, such as thirst or smoking, their personal schedule, their transport arrangements, their anxiety at the possible failure of the spectacle, their perception of the precariousness of the theatre world and their inability to predict how long the play will run.

The meta-theatrical section in *Magnolia Café*'s final scene also addresses the issue of improvisatory moments or small changes within a scripted play (such as the cultural implications derived from changing the nationality of Martina's boyfriend from Algerian to Tunisian or the increase in the degree of resentment produced by the Wife calling the Husband "asshole" instead of "scumbag") and

how individual modulations in delivery and stage movement may affect others. It also introduces the debate as to how important it is to fix the dialogue as well as focussing on the importance of the play's fragmentary performance which reproduces only segments of several simultaneous conversations and the need for actors to continue with their lines no matter what.

All an all, the technique adopted is a subtle re-working — albeit in a less dramatic idiom — of a quintessential episode of meta-theatrical deliberation and achieves the same disturbing result. The detail of the actors' deconstruction of their performance in *Magnolia Café* recalls inevitably the precision of Hamlet's direction of the players in the prelude to the *Mouse Trap*. The intense specificity surrounding the analytical dismantling (or assembly in *Hamlet*) of the nuts and bolts of character projection calls into question not only the authenticity of the values which they come to represent but also the legitimacy of their promotion through the medium of the theatre. Firstly, we are offered a representation of the characters in their struggle against the limitations of social existence only then to be privileged with a view of the apparatus which establishes and controls their condition. As such, we could conclude by saying that the additional novelty and richness of *Magnolia Café* lies in its critical reflection on the function of the theatrical machine in itself with particular reference to the ideological implications emerging at the interface of the three perspectives (writer, actress, director) which Aymar has personally experienced and analysed in her own multifaceted career.³

Footnotes

¹ See “Àngels Aymar i Ragolta”, Participation in Cena-Coloquio n.150, Ambito de Investigación y Difusión María Corral, Barcelona 18/06/2002, <http://www.ua-ambit.org/libro150-1.htm> (accessed 01/08/2006).

² Holt, Marion Peter, “El poder de la imaginació”, prologue to

Aymar, Àngels, *Magnòlia Cafè*, Barcelona: AADPC, 2002, pp. 3-5, p. 4.

³ See “Àngels Aymar i Ragolta”, Participation in Cena-Coloquio n.150, Àmbito de Investigación y Difusión María Corral, Barcelona 18/06/2002, <http://www.ua-ambit.org/libro150-1.htm> (accessed 01/08/2006).

Re-Call (1997)

Araceli Bruch (Manlleu, 1953) is another woman of many parts. A well-known actress in theatre, TV, cinema and radio, playwright and cultural promoter, she is also involved in theatre in an academic capacity, lecturing in the University of Vic and the Institut del Teatre. *Re-Call*, which boasts the subtitle “A free evocation of the life and works of Lou Andreas Salomé” is an ambitious play which follows a conventional three act structure. Act 1, Lou’s Dream (1871-1881), focusses on the protagonist’s development from the age of ten to twenty. Act 2, Lou’s Journey (1882-1927), is divided into two elements: the first, Lou’s Freedom (1882-1901) traces the protagonist’s life-story from the age of twenty-one to forty and the second, Lou’s Call (1901-1927), from the age of forty-one to sixty-five. Finally, Act 3, Lou’s Gaze (1861-1937) moves from her childhood to her own death.¹

As can be gleaned from its structure, *Re-Call* involves copious biographical information and, as such, the creative presence of the playwright — though not insignificant — is minimised. What the spectator sees is the outcome of her painstaking research and an artistic hand which has turned what could have been a long biographical reading into a concatenated series of monologues arranged curiously in dialogue form. By splitting the play’s protagonist into five different characters played by four different actresses each one representing a phase in the development of the protagonist’s life, Bruch develops a dialectic which runs, chronologically, through the key events and relationships experienced by this remarkable woman. The piece ends with the scene in which Elder Lou is talking to the young Lyolya and re-calls the same anecdote about the two snow people from the start of the play. Although the

final story diverges slightly from the first in that it draws from the text of *The Hour Without God and Other Stories*, written by Elder Lou to show the “fear at the incomprehensible enigma of time slipping away,” the play becomes a representation of a full life cycle.

The central acts (which develop on a train) are modelled on Ulysses’ journey with a twist: here experience develops simultaneously with discovery:

Adult Lou: Every journey is an excuse that allows you to go over a small stretch of your path. In escaping the day to day, you look more favourably on things and deep down you appease an empty space you need to fill. Every time you board a train you leave behind an era of your life, consign it to the forgotten, and open a new era of hope. Don’t you find?” [...] Do you know what moves me most about travelling? Seeing people rushing up and down the aisles, getting on and off the trains, loaded with luggage. And then, finding them all of a sudden sat in front of me, marking out their space in relation to mine. To break the ice I usually start a conversation that will seem insignificant, but while I’m talking and thinking, I find myself involuntarily weaving a path around my own world. Sometimes, people who have at first seemed like strangers, transform into a mirror of my own unconscious. That’s exactly what’s happened with you, from the moment you boarded the train.

Young Lou: I’m not sure I understand. Do you mean, I remind you of when you were younger?

Adult Lou: I mean, that seeing myself reflected in you, the portrait of my youth takes on a novelistic air. Don’t be startled by my speculations. I’m a writer, and have a certain tendency towards fantasy.

In this process, the image of getting on and off the train appears many times and is directly linked to the journey of life by Elder Lou when she says: “My journey was invading me. In the end, I had learnt that a fixed path is only a mirage, and from the window, I continued to contemplate the desert.”² An element which further reinforces this

view is the circularity of the lighting as, paradoxically, the play starts in darkness and finishes with night-fall as if in observance of the Aristotelian unity of time.

The symbolism of the journey is further elaborated by Bruch's insertion of spectral appearances in the train scenes. These add complexity and variety to the play in that they break up the minimalism of the dialogues between Lou and her other selves even if the men thus presented remain evanescent and hardly interact with the character, other than with their insignificant gesticulations. Their visual appearance, however, evokes their presence in the characters' minds and thoughts thus providing the audience with a mental landscape rather than a realistic representation — hence the fact that, on occasions, one of the Lous sees them and the other does not. Indeed, we could appropriate Adult and Elder Lou's words in the play in order to explain the mechanics of Bruch's representation:

When I write, I like to work from the psychological development of the characters. [...] I bore into the mines of the human universe to extract a raw material that also needs analysing. There is a love relationship between author-public through the text, as there is a relationship of love between patient-therapist through therapy. You create imaginary worlds and I recapture them. They're different ways to make suffering more bearable.

The type of language used by Bruch in Catalan and translated here into English is intended to reflect the original autobiographical style of the subject. However, the playwright systematically places the questions that would have been asked by the reader of the biography into the mouth of one of the younger Lous so that an elder counterpart can reply with hindsight. To complete the picture, the dialogues are accompanied by a historical note at the end of Act 2, read out by Ernst Pfeiffer (to whom in real life Lou Andreas Salomé donated her unpublished works). This completes the picture but also alerts us to the peril of

the external imposition of male parameters. By placing Pfeiffer on his own on stage, not relating to any of the female characters, Bruch shows the stark contrast between the exterior voice of historicism and the intimate, confessional tone of the rest of the piece. Nonetheless, male discourse is not discarded altogether but rather adapted selectively. The play is redolent with intertextual reference and a significant number of other recognisable extracts have been woven into the dialogue (especially the fragments of poems by Goethe and Rilke). These have been scrupulously credited and referenced by Bruch in her notes. By taking the male discourse into the modern age on her own terms the playwright has recognised the impact of their works yet located them within an undeniably female world.³

The academic rigour employed in researching the character is also of the highest order. The names which appear in the conversations correspond to real people as creation of fictional characters is eschewed. This biographical precision, however, has little to do with filling in the gaps about Lou's relationships and obscure sexual life. Of far greater concern is the wider ideological polemic and the corresponding position which each of these individuals represents. In this way key debates on such crucial issues as feminism and psychoanalysis are woven into the dialogue to become main themes of the play.

Feminism is addressed in the discussion of Lou's book written in 1892, which discusses Ibsen's female characters. Bruch highlights Salomé's interest in Ibsen's treatment of women and parallels her own choice of character in this particular piece. As Adult Lou explains, what all the women have in common is "the conflict between their lives and their struggle for freedom. In every play, this conflict is resolved in a different way." This is followed by a comment by Young Lou who, explaining how the men she associated herself with felt that they had to propose marriage to her in order to save face, gives a poignant vision of the social constraints under which she

lived. And this, in turn, sparks a number of associated ideological surges, such as her desire to find out whether it was solely her “nature as a woman” which men were attracted to whether it was something deeper.

The inclusion in the play of the iconic figure of Malwida Meysenburg also underlines the ideological orientation of the piece. Introduced into the debate by the Lous in the context of social justice and women’s rights, Malwida is presented as “one of the most important figures of German feminism” who defended “the creation of a school where women would have the opportunity to study under the same conditions as men” and who “wanted to demonstrate that women were not men’s intellectual inferiors.” In this way, all concerned in both diegetic and extradiegetic terms are shown as wanting “to make the point of valuing the effort of women such as Malwida and the contribution they have made to the progress of feminism.”

Bruch’s psychological stylisation of the five different Lous is intriguing, especially when we consider the implications of the protagonist’s interests in psychoanalysis and Narcissism. The intention seems to have been to make the questioning in the play reflect the psychoanalytical strategies that Lou would have used (particularly her reputed gift for empathy) in her work as a psychoanalyst from 1913 until well into the 1920s. This same dialectic, also evinced by the fundamental dualism of her celebrated argument that “Love and sex are a reunion of the self with its lost half” is, in some way, also reflected on stage with two different women representing two simultaneous but different phases of the same character. In the greater scheme of things, however, attention focuses on the investigation of the concept of Narcissism and on Salomé’s contribution to the re-orientation of the ideas put forward by Freud who was to become her lover as well as her teacher.

In an effort to understand Lou Andrea’s Salomé’s theorems the article “Memory, Narcissism, and Sublimation:

Reading Lou Andreas-Salomé's *Freud Journal*" by Ban Wang is particularly enlightening. Wang argues that:

Salomé was concerned with delineating the creative potential of involuntary memory, the relation of art to memory and to the unconscious, and above all, to an all-embracing narcissism. Like Deleuze and Benjamin, Salomé construed memory as a way to access and retrieve the primal sources of pleasure embedded in past experiences. Refusing to leave the past behind, she repeatedly stressed in her own way Deleuze's idea of *l'être en soi du passé*, the existence of the past in the self. The substance of memory in her writing is not historical or biographical. Rather, it relates to a life-affirming notion of narcissism, which can be understood as an overflowing psychic energy, still undifferentiated into the dichotomy of ego and sexuality, self and the other. Memory's function is to place the "self" in intimate touch with this repressed and forgotten narcissism, the primal source of human hope and desire.⁴

This explains the centrality of recollection in Bruch's play as well as the importance of keeping this faculty alive by emphasising the need to prompt our powers of memory at random and let it flow. Wang points out that Salomé identified the artist as the agent of memory, hence the importance of literary activity in Bruch's play and of remembrance as a way of relating to oneself:

Adult Lou: As our memories surfaced, my past emerged in her face as though it were a mirror. And now you appear...

Elder Lou: Like a sort of ghost that laughs in the face of time, perhaps so that you can project the past, present and future onto the walls of this compartment.

Adult Lou: A fine image for a moment caught in flight.
[...]

Elder Lou: But right now, for you, I'm just a lure, a call that summons you back to your self, just as you were for the young Russian girl. We're different, but identical pearls, stringing together to complete a cycle, beneath the great call of one same firmament.

Thus, the existence of a remembrance-prompted cycle is also connected to Lou's psychoanalytical interests:

Adult Lou: Do you mean to tell me that you and I, and the young Russian girl are all the same person? That the jolts of this train have called me back to the precipice of my own life, to awaken the conscience of my unconscious world?

Elder Lou: [...] For me, however, all the leaves that I have patiently coloured in by each brush stroke of my days, are now being undressed by the wind. When I am completely naked, I will have to occupy myself with pruning all the branches, one by one. Only then will a new circle begin and my life will have served to allow another one to flower.

It was not only recollection and the ability to "regress to the infantile level" that mattered to Salomé, but also the importance of the imagination. This would therefore fully justify Bruch's subtitle to the piece: "A free evocation of the life and works of Lou Andreas Salomé." For Salomé the process of recollection went beyond repressive sublimation, a process by which generations of men and women had been encouraged to discard their childhood pleasures and progress towards a normalised adulthood. Salomé saw in women both the need and the ability to aspire to affirmative sublimation:

Affirmative sublimation is a self-duplication, and is the living application of the gifts of nature to their own purposes. Its archetypal figure, once again, is a Narcissus who constantly re-creates a reality of his own, "fully evolved, standing before his own images".⁵

The emphasis is on the revaluation of memory and the denial of sublimation can be seen in *Re-Call* when Elder Lou says: "If psychoanalysis looks for recordings in the first years of life, I look in infancy and more widely, in the infancy of the human race, the key of these states where the physical emotion and the psychic coincide in equilibrium,

before a scission is produced.” In consonance with what has been discussed above (and especially in Act 3), the return to childhood is not a painful process but a caring and constructive experience. The same approach is reflected in the psychoanalytical exercise proposed by Adult Lou, when she says: “Let’s do something. First, I’ll give you a brief overview of my book and then you can tell me all the things you think we have in common. That way, I’ll have the pleasure of listening to you, and delighting in the memories of my twenties.” The psychoanalytical perspective is seen further when Young Lou talks to Adult Lou and the audience obtains confirmation that the characters realise they are the same person or at least that they have something in common:

Young Lou: Do you know what? I’m discovering that what you mentioned earlier, about seeing the image of your youth reflected in me, is not so strange after all. Now it is I who is beginning to understand that we’re similar. Everything that you’ve told me corresponds, almost exactly, with what’s happened to me this year.

And later:

Young Lou: I love it! I’m more and more surprised. Now it’s not only my life that has things in common with yours. The characters Rudolf and Kuno remind me of my friends, Nietzsche and Ree.

The psychoanalytical practices proposed by Lou offer sympathetic methods through which “things we invent serve as a way of explaining to ourselves what we can’t see.” The creative impulse is thus glorified, the artist idealised and memories turned into the basis for such stories. Indeed, the repetitive cycle of the play’s structure with its re-discovery of tales and anecdotes and their repeated, irrepressible outwardgoingness crystallises the psychological position embraced by Salomé:

Elder Lou: They are only brief notes on all these experiences. I've tried to explain what the most essential things have been. I felt an imperious necessity to write from these memories. They've been imposing themselves on me so suddenly these days, like a volcanic eruption, that just when you least expect it, spits out the lava of its entrails. I assure you that it is not by chance that the forgotten doesn't return to us until the end of our lives. It's as though it were necessary to travel a long path before the eternal value of some memories can be revealed.

Lyolya: And the memories that come to your mind are of when you were little, and when you were a young lady, and of how you got older until you were elderly. I have my whole life in front of me, and a huge world to discover. I'll go on fantastic journeys that will lead me on a thousand and one paths. All the characters of my stories will multiply. I see it all so immensely, and I feel as though my arms are so very small to hold it all.

Elder Lou: [...] Now, it is your turn to taste this life by little mouthfuls. Believe me when I say that you mustn't devalue anything, because what seem to be the most dull and least decisive moments, can be the ones that bring us infinite riches, while the moments that seem most glorious and successful, can be impotent in giving us an overall view of life.

This reinforces the importance of literature in times of social crisis because, as Bruch's character says "I tell you things that happen to me as if they were stories, and you listen to me without saying a word, because the stories that I tell you, you already know them really." Both the book and portrait of the Russian revolutionary and Marxist writer Vera Zasulich are given to Lou as a present to celebrate the protagonist's entrance into the world of adulthood and "to remind you that, to fulfil your dreams you must possess a fighting spirit."

Through the words of Old Lou, the audience is made to face up to the inspiration derived from icons such as Zasulich or Tolstoi in the individual's process of self-knowledge: "We [Lou and Rilke] loved that single man,

because we realised that thanks to him, we had learnt so much about ourselves” and, likewise, Bruch uses Salomé as an icon for modern women. However, through the words of Young Lyolya the audience is warned about the dangers of letting themselves be misled by and of the dangers of looking at idols with an unquestioning mind. The protagonist immediately clarifies her own position by declaring, appropriating some verses by Goethe, that:

I can neither live according to models nor shall I ever be a model for anyone at all; on the contrary — I shall make my own life according to myself, whatever may come of it. In this, I have no principle to represent, but something much more wonderful — something that is inside oneself and is hot with sheer life, and rejoices, and wants to get out.

This creative volition provides a startling counterpoint to the wilful compliance with stereotype — so general in the contemporary world — which is so reiteratedly exposed as such a peril to ontological integrity in both the other plays. And, finally, the role played by rituals in Bruch’s play should not be underestimated as is also touched upon in *Re-Call*. Ritual may be taken as analogous to the repeatedly outward-going examination of memory and can likewise produce magic results. The rites performed by Lyolya Girl and Young Lyolya anticipate, for example, the episode of the fake confirmation in Holland which helps the young Lou re-gain her Russian passport and be admitted to University. Similarly, Bruch idealises the related concept of dreams when Young Lou declares that: “dreams are the motors of hope.” This speculation is, of course, totally in tune with the additions made by the protagonist to Freud’s ideas on Narcissism. Salomé believed that there was neither a need for sublimation nor any point in breaking away from childhood in order to progress as an individual. This is confirmed in *Re-Call* when Lyolya Girl states: “I will always be by your side, to remind you of the dreams and fantasies you had when you were little”; and

again when, declaring her wonder at being able to inspire dreams in someone else, Lou recalls how Nietzsche told her in Montesacro that the “most enchanting dream of my life, I owe to you.”

After viewing *Re-Call*, one can conclude that the skill involved in the constructive use of memory amounts to the act of creation, originally by Lou Andreas Salomé and subsequently by Araceli Bruch, of a new reality where priorities have been reworked and woman’s knowledge and self-understanding have been attained through fascinating, unconventional and unexpected ways which diverge enormously from the austerity, harshness and bombast so characteristic of contemporary male representation.

Footnotes

¹ Lou Andreas Salomé (1861-1937) was a Russian-born intellectual, author and psychoanalyst. She was a companion, colleague and lover to many of the most significant names of the period, including Rilke, Nietzsche and Freud. In the main her interests focussed on the interface between literature, psychoanalysis and the female condition.

² On the surface, the train scenes come across as very static and pose a challenge for any director to lift off the page. However, their emotional weight gives them a texture which might be argued as difficult to find in plays written by men, particularly in the spheres of emotion, intuition and ritual.

³ The same process is evident with the adducement of the *topos* of poetry as a window into the psyche (p. 8) with the reproduction of the “Hymn to Life”, a poem written by Lou and set to music by Nietzsche.

⁴ Wang, Ban, “Memory, Narcissism, and Sublimation: Reading Lou Andreas-Salomé’s *Freud Journal*”, *American Imago*, 57; 2 (2000) 215-234 (221).

⁵ Wang, “Memory, Narcissism, and Sublimation...”, p. 225 and p. 221.

An Absent Look

by
Mercè Sarrias

translated from the Catalan
by John London

A translation first commissioned by the Royal Court
Theatre, London November 1997

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Mercè Sarrias and John London. For permissions, write
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Characters

Young Man. About twenty-seven years old.

Young Woman. About twenty-seven years old.

Man. About forty-five years old.

Notes

The space in this play is fragments of two shops which appear and disappear according to the lighting. It should give the idea of a fragmented world and, at the same time, one which is common to all the characters. It should also give an idea of circularity, like the hands of a clock.

There is a contrast between an aesthetically old-fashioned stage design and aesthetically modern costumes.

The colour of this play is blue.

In this play there is no dark, only half-light.

Premiere Production

Selected sections of the text were performed at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, UK and at the White Bear Theatre, London, in November 2005, with the following cast:

Young Man	Edd Ward
Young Woman	Laura Melcion
Man	Robbie Humphries
Director	Ariella Eshed

Scene 1

An unspecified space. The YOUNG WOMAN is in the middle. She aims a pistol at the YOUNG MAN, as if she were a professional assassin in a film.

The YOUNG WOMAN shoots. The YOUNG MAN raises his hands to his heart.

Young Woman: Touché!

(The YOUNG MAN falls down dead in a spectacular fashion, as in a film. Just before falling, a red spot of blood emerges from his heart.)

Young Woman: *(tragically)* He's dead.

Scene 2

Watchmaker's shop. A mini-watchmaker's shop full of all sorts of watches and clocks: outdated, modern, old, new, for walls, wind-up or antique. On one side, a counter and behind it the YOUNG MAN, ready to serve customers. He is sitting on a stool, reading a magazine. On one side, there is a pair of old chairs that are not in very good condition, although they are not falling apart.

The YOUNG WOMAN enters.

Young Woman: Hello! Sorry to bother you.

Young Man: No, you're not, not in the least!

Young Woman: Yes I am. You were reading. I'll go.

Young Man: No, really, no. It's not very interesting, pure literature.

Young Woman: No, no, I'm going. (*Glancing at what the YOUNG MAN is reading:*) Probably the adventures of Tintin or something like that.

Young Man: Right first time. Yes. (*With controlled nostalgia.*) But I've grown up now, and I don't like them as much, you see? When I was young it was different. I could be wrapped up in them for hours, days, weeks, months. After a while these things lose their charm.

Young Woman: Goodbye.

(The YOUNG WOMAN turns round and goes straight to the door.)

Young Man: (*Urgently. He jumps over the counter and stands in the middle of the shop*) Stay!

(The YOUNG WOMAN stays fixed to the spot. She quickly turns round.)

Young Man: Excuse my impetuosity, I couldn't help it. If

you want, you can go. Go, go, if you want, go, go.
Goodbye, good morning, good evening, good night.

(The YOUNG WOMAN has not moved.)

Young Woman: No. I'm okay now.

Young Man: You can grab that door handle whenever you want.

Young Woman: I'm okay now.

Young Man: I don't want to force you to stay. That's not my intention.

Young Woman: No, you're not forcing me. Of course not.
Not at all.

Young Man: I couldn't help desperately shouting out like that. I didn't want to. Sometimes I'm too spontaneous. I'm sorry. I beg your forgiveness.

Young Woman: Don't. Don't worry. It didn't sound "so" desperate.

Young Man: Didn't it?

Young Woman: No.

Young Man: Well it did to me. To me it seemed desperate.

Young Woman: That was your imagination.

Young Man: I wouldn't want you to feel obliged to buy anything now, I...

Young Woman: *(interrupting him)* I was looking for a shop where they sell watches and clocks.

(The YOUNG MAN places himself behind the counter in his initial position.)

Young Man: *(very professionally)* Well you've come to the right place. I have all sorts of watches and clocks from all periods. A lot.

Young Woman: You really do have an awful lot.

Young Man: All sorts.

Young Woman: It must be a complicated business.

Young Man: It is, it is. Sometimes it looks as though I'm just here behind the counter reading old magazines and remembering things that don't matter, but it's much harder than people think.

(The YOUNG WOMAN sits down on a chair.)

Young Woman: Tell me about it, if you want.

Young Man: Do you really want to know?

(The YOUNG WOMAN nods.)

Young Man: Last week, for example, a little old man came in and said he wanted to sell a watch. I looked at him, the way I always look at people who come to sell second-hand things, differently, in a more observant way from how I'd look at you to start with. Do you understand? He looked like an interesting person. The sort of person who's been a chief of police or a hired assassin or an office worker in a bargain store, you know the sort. *(Pause.)* After speaking, him about this, me about that, we discussed things of no importance, politics, sport, the types of coffee we like, travel... I made up my mind and eventually I bought the watch from him. I don't do it often, I have my reasons, reasons of space and other reasons that are beside the point. It was an important moment. I told him: I'll keep it/take it. And he smiled as only new friends smile at you, like this, on one side, but meaningfully. *(Pause.)* After a few days, along comes a woman and she falls in love with the piece. I'm a master at mending watches, I'm not being arrogant. *(Pause.)* But there are some that shine with a special light. This was one of them. *(Long pause. He just thinks about the watch.)* So, coming back to the woman. She was a young, fine-

looking woman. She was wearing a fur coat and had a red lipstick smile on a big, generous mouth, the sort that's good at kissing. She looked at me with her sweet eyes and gentle voice, it was a little hoarse, as if she smoked a lot... She started buttering me up immediately: she said: How much is that watch, please? and she pointed to the piece of junk, arrogantly, imperiously, almost putting her arm behind the counter. (*Pause.*) I gave it to her for a few pence. An amount that was even lower than what I'd given the old assassin, when the watch was a rusty old piece of scrap incapable of tick-tocking in time to the second.

Young Woman: Incredible.

Young Man: Just because she was a woman, just because of her mouth, just because I'm like that, so, so... so oh I don't know.

Young Woman: Passionate?

Young Man: (*avoids answering*) And then there's something else worrying me, apart from putting an end to a shop going back generations and generations of great-great-grandparents, grandparents and uncles who worked themselves down to the bone so it wouldn't shut. I'm aware that I'm squandering a business gradually, like a hypocritical bloodsucker living without any kind of future. I'm the black sheep of the family, the one who couldn't cross over to digitals and "everything for a pound" which was what I should have done. A piece of junk, a disgrace. Where you see me now, in other circumstances and in another country, I could be a multimillionaire.

Young Woman: Please, don't do yourself down.

Young Man: It's just the truth. Perhaps one day I'll be able to live with it. Right now, I'm taking it very badly. I have nightmares when I go to bed and my girlfriend's left me.

Young Woman: That won't get you anywhere. You're doing yourself down.

Young Man: You're right. *(Pause.)* I've been waffling on about all this for half an hour and you still haven't told me what you want.

Young Woman: Me? *(Very determinedly.)* Okay. I want... I want a clock to go to work.

Young Man: You mean an alarm clock?

Young Woman: Exactly.

Young Man: *(elated)* I've got a lot of those.

(The YOUNG MAN happily points to his complete supply of clocks.)

Scene 3

We see only the YOUNG MAN holding a drill. The drill is not plugged in and its lead is hanging loose.

Young Man: On Tuesdays I'm a man with solid ideas, I love DIY. I want a terraced house with a garden and a really big television to watch football matches on. *(Pause.)* I suddenly realise I need a lawnmower, a three-size drill and an exercise bicycle. I run to the superstore, mainly to look at the special offers and other things needed for the upkeep of a superb fridge, self-defrosting, with three sections and an ice-machine. I immerse myself in the nails section, hardware third floor on the left and look for what would be best for that window I heard creaking quietly yesterday before I went to bed, Canadian bedcover, floral print pattern, radio alarm clock. *(Pause.)* On Tuesdays I'm monogamous as well, I feel monogamy's something within me, like a desire to fall in love forever, an internal passion that's really hard to stop. I want to focus my whole life on one person, I want to devote myself entirely to that person, from the tip of my hair to my big toe, from the finger nails of my right hand to my tummy button and, especially, with the back of my neck alive to all these sensations. So, all it needs on that moment on a Tuesday, is for somebody to come in and I'll fall at their feet, gently, like the way lovers do in old films. *(Pause.)* As if somebody had shot me in the heart.

(When he has stopped speaking, he stretches out his arm and switches on the drill, as if it were a pistol. Even though it is not plugged in, the drill works.)

Scene 4

The YOUNG MAN is sitting comfortably behind the counter. On the chair, the MAN is rolling a cigarette, very slowly, with cigarette paper and tobacco.

Young Man: Two of my clocks have broken down, two hands fell off and then an alarm went off and I didn't know what to do any more. I kept being reminded of her the whole day.

Man: I like her as well. I looked at her and I took a liking to her. I thought: I like her. *(Pause.)* You've got good taste. *(Pause.)* She's got a certain something. What could it be? She looks... looks different. *(Pause.)* Could that be it?

Young Man: It must be.

Man: I've given her a job. As a shop assistant. As a shop assistant, mornings only.

Young Man: *(very surprised)* What?

(Silence.)

Man: *(patiently)* It's for strictly commercial reasons.

Young Man: But she's...

Man: *(patiently)* I needed a shop assistant. A dark-haired shop assistant, about thirty years old, with a small mouth and a straight nose. I put up a poster in the shop, you know the sort: shop assistant required, male or female etc., and she applied. *(Pause.)* I recognised her straight away. I thought: she's the one. And I agreed straight away. *(Pause.)* She didn't haggle over the rate. You can see she's new. *(Pause.)* To tell you the truth, I gave her a rate that was too low expecting she would raise it and she didn't. Now I don't know what to do to raise her wages. They're too low. They're stupidly

low. (*Pause.*) If you give somebody wages that are too low, sooner or later they'll go and work for your competitors, but if you raise them in the first week, they think they're doing the job too well. Don't you think so?

Young Man: Definitely.

Man: The ideal profile for selling books.

Young Man: Definitely.

Man: She'll definitely sell a lot of them.

Young Man: Definitely.

Man: She will sell a lot of them. That's what it's about. Each book for a pound. And that's how I'll empty the storerooms and I'll put a discotheque in the biggest one.

(*Silence.*)

Man: I've got clients who come just to flick through books, they take a look at them, especially the photo on the cover, and if they like it a lot, once a year, they buy one and do the whole thing with a certain sense of ceremony. (*Pause.*) There are also people who've been reading since they were young, they're often short-sighted and very often bald as well, besides sometimes being rather short; I affectionately call them the readers and try and have a little chat with them. (*Pause.*) Then they are some who buy them just because of the price and others who'd kill to buy a rare copy that's happened to come my way and which I couldn't care less about. The former are not always poor, but the latter are always rich. (*Pause.*) I couldn't care less about rare copies. You just have to fix a high price and stare the client right in the face, without lowering your eyes. And slowly say an exorbitant sum. That's the secret. (*Pause.*) If he's an expert, he'll try and lower it and if he's not an expert he'll be pleased to spend his money. (*Pause.*) But I don't know what sort of

customer you are. I don't know. I don't know and I never have done. (*Pause.*) It's been years since we first met and I still don't know. I could give it some thought and...

Young Man: (*interrupting him*) I don't know. For me, books are...

Man: (*interrupting him*) You've always found them for yourself.

Young Man: It's as if they fell out of my hands.

Man: (*very harshly*) Then you're not a client, you never buy any. You never buy any from me. Ever.

(They continue looking at each other with a kind of total complicity. The MAN starts laughing and slowly the YOUNG MAN follows on from him. They crease up. The MAN cannot finish rolling his cigarette because of his laughing fit. His tobacco falls to the ground. He tries to pick it up, but stops. Both of them already knew that the YOUNG MAN did not buy books.)

Young Man: I wish you wouldn't do that to me.

Man: Just pointing it out always makes me sad: You've never bought a book from me. I think: he's never bought a book from me and my heart sinks.

Young Man: It makes you sad. I feel awful. (*Remembers what the MAN said.*) What sort of a customer are you? and I feel awful. Whenever you do that to me, I feel awful.

Man: (*very calmly*) I don't know. Perhaps it's your age. You go all sad just like that. You put the pressure on and attack for the sake of it. Spite. (*Pause.*) Then you feel like being sad and you start chatting. And then nothing. Not even a little tear. Just feeling like being sad and a bit of casual melancholy and a bit of spite. (*Silence.*) Are you offended?

Young Man: No.

Man: She'll only come in the mornings.

Young Man: I know.

Man: You are, it's obvious.

Young Man: You came to tell me.

Man: What?

Young Man: That you'd taken her on.

Man: No. I didn't come for that. (*They look at each other.*)
Just for a chat.

Scene 5

We can see just the MAN. He is holding up an umbrella.

Man: Just by wearing that skirt that flaps about and smiling like nobody on earth. When she looks at me, I feel like telling her a story, making things up, imagining situations, recounting anecdotes that have never happened. *(Pause.)* When she walks by, I feel she's walking close to me, although in fact she's far away. *(Pause.)* I always want her to start laughing or smile at me. *(Pause.)* It's just to capture that hour, minute, second. *(Pause.)* And then rush back, as if I'd never left those books, the pages, the lines, the words, the letters, the vowels. *(Pause.)* It's just by wearing that skirt that flaps about and smiling like nobody on earth. For that hour, minute, second, to capture time and then forget it.

(The MAN opens up the umbrella and it begins to rain just on him.)

Scene 6

The bookshop. We see only the counter and heaps and heaps of books, some, behind the counter, on shelves, the others piled up on the ground as if they were pillars. There are new ones and old ones. The MAN enters as if he were a customer. The YOUNG WOMAN is behind the counter. The MAN stops, as if he were very surprised by something. What surprises him is discovering the YOUNG WOMAN behind the counter and coming into his own shop as if he were a customer. In addition, he thinks the YOUNG WOMAN is very attractive as a shop assistant.

Young Woman: Good morning.

(The MAN is almost startled.)

Man: Huh? *(Just looks at her. The YOUNG WOMAN has a puzzled expression. The MAN recovers.)* I'd like...

Young Woman: *(as if she were giving him the chance to begin again)* Hello. Good morning. How can I help you?

Man: I'd like a book. *(Pause. Stops and looks around.)* A book... a book by an author like Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy... Bulgakov?

Young Woman: Now I understand: you mean a Russian author.

Man: Exactly. I'd like a book by a Russian author.

Young Woman: You want a book by a Russian author... you like Russian literature. *(As if she were thinking where the books by Russian authors are. She hasn't a clue.)* Books by Russian authors... a Russian... author...

Man: *(sees that he has baffled her)* That's enough. I don't know what I was thinking of. That's very difficult. A Russian author and all that. We'd better start again. *(Pause.)* It's just that... *(Looking at everything.)* It's a

long time since I came in here as a customer and I just stood looking at all this and got distracted. *(Pause.)* That's enough about Russian authors. *(Pause.)* Let's start again.

Young Woman: Don't worry.

Man: Oh no, please don't get familiar with me/be so formal. *(Pause.)* On top of/Besides everything else, that's the last thing I need.

Young Woman: I'm useless. I know. I knew it. I'm useless at selling. *(Pause. Very determined.)* I'm useless at selling, it's what they always tell me.

Man: Who?

Young Woman: I don't know. People, shop owners.

Man: *(ignores what she says)* Good. Let's start again.

(The MAN comes into the shop again as if he were a customer.)

Young Woman: Good morning, how can I help you?

Man: *(has not thought what he wanted. Just looks at her.)*
Errr...

(The YOUNG WOMAN starts laughing hysterically.)

Young Woman: Sorry sir, sorry... I'm sorry, you were so funny. *(Pause.)* How unprofessional. It's just that I saw you... you came in and you were so funny. It was so funny how you looked around. Looking around like... a customer.

Man: *(tries to sustain the situation. Looks at books. Makes a sign to her as if to say: let's carry on... It is the sign of a bad actor. The YOUNG WOMAN looks at him, but inside she is laughing hysterically)* Hello. *(He suddenly picks up a book as if he were very interested in it. Looks at the cover. Does not find it at all interesting. He continues to hold it as if he did not know what to do with*

it. He disassembles. Leaves it again. Looks at her. Apologising.) It's just that it's a very bad book. (Pause. Acts the customer again.) It's not that I want to criticise your merchandise or anything... (The YOUNG WOMAN tries to maintain her composure, but she finds the situation funny.) Okay. I'd like, I'd like a book by a French author...

Young Woman: *(interrupting him. Cannot think of a French author. They look at each other. Laughing hysterically inside herself)* Baudelaire?

Man: *(interrupts her. He is also laughing. His words slip out)* A contemporary author.

Young Woman: *(creasing up, deep down)* A French author who's a contemporary of who?

Man: *(splitting himself, deep down)* Me.

Young Woman: *(splitting herself, deep down)* A contemporary of yours? *(Looks at him as if wanting to calculate his age. Silence.)*

Man: *(very seriously. To help her)* Balzac.

Young Woman: *(puts herself in the situation again)* Balzac. Fine. *(To gain time, while she is thinking where Balzac is. She is looking amidst the stacks of books.)* Balzac. You've chosen a very interesting author: big stories, big landscapes and a lot of pages. *(As a falsely confidential remark.)* I also like books with a lot of pages. You get hooked and there you are wasting hours with books.

(The YOUNG WOMAN suddenly falls silent. She realises she is talking nonsense. The MAN follows her round while she shuffles amongst the stacks. It is obvious that he knows where Balzac is, but he does not say anything. In the end, the YOUNG WOMAN finds the stack where the books are.)

Young Woman: Here. You should find two or three by him.

Man: Great.

(They bump into each other. The stack of books falls down. The MAN behaves as if nothing had happened. He grabs a book from amongst all of them. The YOUNG WOMAN just stands looking at it as if the whole thing were a total disaster.)

Man: Great.

(They stand looking at each other.)

Young Woman: That's one pound.

(The MAN fumbles in his pocket, takes out a one-pound coin. Pays her ceremoniously. The YOUNG WOMAN picks up the coin.)

Young Woman: *(as if she were disappointed)* You don't need any change.

(She goes to the counter to put the money in the till.)

Man: I don't.

Young Woman: Don't you want a receipt?

Man: I don't.

(Pause. The whole thing is over. They stand looking at each other.)

Young Woman: *(annoyed)* You can sack me, but you've been pulling my leg. *(Pause.)* Do you think I don't know Balzac's dead? *(Pause. Exhausted.)* Why, why did you do this to me? You made me lose my concentration. From that moment on, I just talked... rubbish. All that business about long books... I did it so badly. *(Annoyed with herself.)* I knew I'd do it badly. But not so badly... *(Pause.)* Well, I suppose when it comes down to it I'm sacked. I'm sure I'm sacked. *(Pause.)* I

didn't manage to remember where the French authors were...

Man: (*interrupts her*) But you did it perfectly, really, it was... was perfect... (*Pause.*) If the customer is a contemporary of Balzac, that's his problem. It means he's dead. You sold him the book. (*Goes up to her and ceremoniously shakes her hand.*) Congratulations.

(Both of them continue shaking hands, without letting go, but at a sufficient distance from each other. The situation is faintly ridiculous.)

Young Woman: It was a terrible moment.

Man: (*accusing, but pleasant*) You were laughing.

Young Woman: I was laughing a bit before, about the business with the French author. I thought, where are the French authors? where are they? I thought I couldn't remember where on earth a French author was. I thought I don't like French authors. Sometimes, it's so... so complicated to think what another person wants.

Man: (*interrupting her*) I don't think anybody's ever come into the shop asking for a French author, just like that.

Young Woman: (*remembering*) There was a moment when I thought I'd kill myself laughing. Good old Balzac.

Man: Good old Balzac.

(He stands looking at her. They both stand looking at each other. Long silence. They let go of each other's hand.)

Man: Okay I'm going. I've got a lot of work to do.

Young Woman: Okay.

Man: (*leaving*) I think I'll raise your wages. Yes. I will. I'll pay you: (*Thinks up a figure, but none comes to him.*) double?

Young Woman: No, there's no need, really.

(The MAN has already left.)

Scene 7

We see only the YOUNG WOMAN. It is cloudy.

Young Woman: And if on that Thursday it rains, I know I'll get wet, because I haven't got an umbrella, a rain-coat, boots or an anorak; it's just that at that moment I forget the door number, the keys, the flat, the address where I live and I don't know the area where my home is or the buses, tube, taxis, cars, bicycles and roller-skates that normally take me there. *(Pause.)* It's raining and I'm looking for half-open doors, windows that don't close properly, wobbly tables and chairs with three legs. I walk slowly in the rain, my clothes soaking, my hair wet and with one of my feet that for a time has been touching the surface of the pavement through a hole in my shoe. *(Pause.)* I look at a pigeon, a bin, a lamppost, an advert for sweets and a smiling woman. I know I've been getting wet for some time and in some open street he might run past, stepping on those shining paving-stones, and I'll fall in love with a shadow, a hat or an umbrella forever. And I'll really do it, with all my strength, without parachutes, protection, helmets and other sporting equipment that's useless for love. *(Pause.)* And then I'll feel it's a love forever, for eternity... Until it starts raining again and I go out into the street again, into narrow streets, squares and houses looking for doors that don't shut properly.

(We hear the thunderclap before a storm.)

Scene 8

Inside of the second-hand bookshop. We see only a counter and a lot of books. It is morning and the YOUNG WOMAN is there as a shop assistant. The YOUNG MAN is in the middle of the shop, at a certain distance from the counter. For the whole scene, the YOUNG WOMAN keeps holding the book she is reading.

Young Man: (*points to the book the YOUNG WOMAN has in her hands*) I want to buy it.

Young Woman: What?

Young Man: The novel, the book, the story you're reading.

Young Woman: This one?

Young Man: Yes.

Young Woman: Oh.

Young Man: Is something wrong?

Young Woman: No. Nothing. It's just that it's... it's the only copy.

Young Man: Sorry. No, if it's not for sale, it doesn't matter. I didn't know. (*Pause.*) I just came for a walk round. Can I, can I look at the books?

Young Woman: Yes.

(The YOUNG MAN makes out that he is looking at books, but he is not really very interested. The YOUNG WOMAN just looks at him.)

Young Woman: It's just that if you take it away, I won't be able to finish it.

Young Man: No then. It doesn't matter. (*Pause.*) It doesn't matter. If it's the only copy... It doesn't matter. I don't want to take the only copy, I...

Young Woman: (*interrupts him*) It's got to a very interesting bit, a bit where... a bit where the hero... it's a special bit, it's not special for everybody, there's no reason it should be special for everybody, it's particularly special for me... (*Pause.*) It's really very hard to explain.

Young Man: Evocative.

Young Woman: That's it. An evocative bit.

Young Man: Interesting.

Young Woman: How did you think of that word?

Young Man: (*modestly*) I just did.

Young Woman: It's this man who returns home after many years. He walks through the city; it's ages since he's seen. He looks at the houses, goes into the shops that are still there and checks which ones have closed. He finds out that some ways of life have changed slightly, that there aren't big jars of sugar in the cafés any more, just sugar lumps and saccharine, those sweet pills which look like medicine; that the cod isn't done in ratatouille at that place he liked so much and that the caretaker's daughter from number thirty-three in that street ran away with a sailor.

(*Pause.*)

Young Man: It just makes me want to read it more and more.

Young Woman: (*looking at the book*) I should sell it to you, but...

Young Man: (*without moving*) No, no, no, it doesn't matter, don't worry.

Young Woman: Could you come back this evening?

Young Man: (*without moving*) This evening? No, impossible.

Young Woman: (*makes the gesture of giving the book to the YOUNG MAN, but does not end up giving it to him, even though what she says contradicts this*) Here. I'll give it to you. I have to sell it to you. I'm the shop assistant.

Young Man: (*staring at the book, but the book is still held by the YOUNG WOMAN*) It looks interesting.

Young Woman: (*dryly. Now she clearly does not want to give it*) Yes.

Young Man: Very interesting.

Young Woman: (*annoyed*) It is.

Young Man: (*excited*) I think... I'll take it. (*Pause.*) How much is it?

Young Woman: One pound. All the books cost one pound.

(*The YOUNG MAN pays. He slowly takes the coins out of his pocket: some are twenty-pence pieces, some are five-pence pieces, etc. He goes to take the book. The YOUNG WOMAN keeps holding on to it. They both hold onto the book, each pulling at his or her end. They struggle for half a minute in a rather explicit way. In the end, the YOUNG WOMAN lets go of the book. They are left looking at each other, both a little surprised by what has happened.*)

Young Woman: (*recovering her manners*) Thank you.

Young Man: Uh?

Young Woman: For buying it.

Young Man: Oh! Thank *you*. For recommending it.

Young Woman: Goodbye.

Young Man: Goodbye.

(*At this moment the MAN comes into the shop. He is very disconcerted to find the YOUNG MAN there.*)

Man: Hello.

Young Man: (*uncomfortably*) Hello. (*Pause.*) I came to buy... the book.

Man: Very good. (*He stops. Turns round and decides to go.*) I'm going, I'm in a hurry. Goodbye. (*To the YOUNG MAN.*) See you.

The MAN leaves. The YOUNG WOMAN is left looking at the door.

Young Man: He's gone.

Young Woman: That man's always running away.

Young Man: From what?

Young Woman: From everything. He's always about to go off.

Young Man: I don't think so. There's something wrong with him. He's never done that before. He doesn't usually go off, usually he stays for too long and then suddenly, he does that and leaves.

Young Woman: Do you know him? Do you really know him?

Young Man: Yup. I've known him for many afternoons now.

Young Woman: Then tell me what he's like, please.

Young Man: It's like when you've known somebody for a long time. Everything they do seems logical to you and every now and again they do something that isn't. (*Pause.*) It's that slight possibility of making a break. (*Pause.*) He's got ideas and sometimes carries them out, but on the whole he doesn't. (*Pause.*) He vaguely accepts what he's got, but deep down he'd like to have something else. (*Pause.*) Even though he's not sure he could live properly with that something else and it's just that uncertainty that makes him pull back. So he's

resigned to very small changes. Always very small changes. *(Pause. Looks at her.)* Anyway, he's extremely capable of acting merely on impulse, like everybody.

Young Woman: Aha.

(Silence.)

Young Man: Why do you want to know?

Young Woman: Just out of curiosity. It's just out of curiosity.

Young Man: Of course.

Young Woman: Okay: I think I love him.

Young Man: That's not true.

Young Woman: Why not?

Young Man: No reason.

Young Woman: *(offended)* It's true.

Young Man: *(destroyed)* Okay, okay. It's true then.
(Pause.) Why?

Scene 9

The MAN the YOUNG WOMAN and the YOUNG MAN are on stage, located in different positions. They speak one after the other, but they are not conscious of each other's presence. The MAN. He is holding a glass of champagne.

Man: Today I'm dreaming I've got very long hair. Long, white hair and you're combing it. You've got bigger, longer hands, you're gradually combing my hair and speaking, you're speaking as you spoke when we first met. Summer, beach, sea and you were wearing a blue dress.

(The MAN makes a toast with his glass. The YOUNG WOMAN is sitting on a very high stack of books.)

Young Woman: He pleasantly rushes in with an umbrella. *(Pause.)* He smiles and gives me a character as a present, he laughs and walks among the books, gives away bookcases, coughs up an idea and then disappears. Like a breeze, like the wind.

(The wind blows and her hair flies about. The YOUNG MAN peddles at top speed on a bicycle, but the bicycle is nailed to the ground and does not let him move.)

Young Man: Give me three martinis, three beers, two gin and tonics and a vodka and lime. Cut my hair. Short, short, short.

(Suddenly, the wind hits him in the face.)

Scene 10

Behind the counter of the bookshop. There are two stacks of books. The MAN and the YOUNG WOMAN, alongside each other, with their heads on one stack and their feet on the other. They have just curled up together for the first time. It is half-way through the afternoon.

Silence.

Young Woman: When... when I started falling in love with you.

Man: *(pulls a book out from underneath his head)* Dickens. Too thick. Long stories, but real stories. *(Pause.)* To rest your head on them, I mean.

Young Woman: When I started falling in love with you.

Man: *(as if he were very interested in the books under the YOUNG WOMAN's head)* Which ones have you got? I think it's... something comfortable?

(The YOUNG WOMAN looks.)

Young Woman: Penguin. Just from the Penguin series.

Man: That's better. They're not hardback.

Young Woman: *(looks at it)* There's a lot of Arnold Bennett.

Man: That's good.

(They look at each other. The MAN is still uncomfortable.)

Young Woman: Are you sure?

Man: The back of my neck. My neck hurts.

Young Woman: *(looking around)* Well under your neck...

Man: Is there a Picador there?

(The YOUNG WOMAN stretches out her arm and pulls one out from a stack.)

Young Woman: Here.

(She gives one to him.)

Man: *(puts it under his head)* They're quite good. The covers aren't so soft, but they still work. *(Pause.)* My head's harder than yours. Definitely.

Young Woman: Definitely is.

Man: Definitely. But not hard enough for Collins. Collins is not good for resting on.

Young Woman: It's because I've got long hair. It forms a cushion.

Man: You've got lovely hair.

Young Woman: Thank you.

Man: And lips as well.

Young Woman: Thank you.

Man: And ears.

Young Woman: Thank you.

Man: And nose.

Young Woman: Thank you.

Man: And...

Young Woman: *(interrupting him)* That's enough.

(Silence.)

Man: Okay.

Young Woman: Is it?

Man: So, what were you saying?

Young Woman: Nothing. I wasn't saying anything.

Man: You were saying something.

Young Woman: You don't want to listen to me.

Man: Okay. I don't want to listen to you. (*Silence.*) Don't you have any Henry James?

Young Woman: Stop it.

(*Silence.*)

Man: Okay by me.

(*Silence.*)

Young Woman: It was, was as if... as if something was happening to me... something... important. Something that was really... how can I put it? disturbing me. (*Pause.*) What a phrase. (*Pause.*) Do you understand me? Perhaps it's too long to explain.

Man: I haven't got... I haven't got very much time. (*Looks at his watch.*) I really haven't got any time. Impossible. I haven't got any time.

Young Woman: But it's not too long to explain.

Man: (*starts to sit up*) I think... I think I'm going. That's what I've got to do. Leave. What I've got to do is leave. It really seems incredible that at this time of the day... I should already be out. I should definitely be out. Sometimes we don't realise and... right.

(*The MAN gets up. He more or less straightens out his clothes.*)

Young Woman: Why?

Man: I've... I've got to do things. Business. Book business.

(*Silence.*)

Man: Can I leave?

(*The YOUNG WOMAN nods.*)

The MAN strokes her cheek and goes. We hear the door of the bookshop shut.

The light gradually fades away until the stage is left in a half-light and the YOUNG WOMAN speaks by herself, calmly, as if, not having been given time to explain herself, she had decided to give herself all the time she needed.)

Young Woman: Something very important, that's it. What I wanted to tell you was that I preferred something very important to happen to me than nothing at all. *(Pause.)* That I wanted, I'd prefer it to happen, than to see it pass me by or let it happen so I wouldn't suffer the consequences afterwards. *(Pause.)* That I was ready, if it didn't go well or if it only went reasonably well or if it went badly, to get out of it myself. To take a risk. *(Pause.)* That it wasn't so important, but that it was. In other words...

Scene 11

We see only the MAN. His hair is completely dishevelled.

Man: I run out. I step on letters. I look again for the peace of the bar, the corner with the stool in the shade and the familiar waiter, the usual one, my friend, the one who doesn't speak. (*Pause.*) We speak about the weather: the rain, the storm and strong winds, delicate clouds, sun and breeze, sun and drought, dry wind and autumn leaves. (*Pause.*) I drink a bit more and we speak about things that are important to us: football line-ups, the chess season and the erotic possibilities of the woman opposite: small waist-line, a ladder in her tights, breasts right up to the other side of the room. (*Pause.*) We smile and laugh quietly: total complicity. I know where his eyebrow moves when he serves the brandy and what makes him tick. Big nose, small eyes, round face. (*Pause.*) I point to the glass I want to take, I move my hand in a melancholy way, as if saying good-bye, it doesn't matter, carry on, yes, of course, yes, of course, just vaguely, just for a few seconds, just quickly. (*Pause.*) I like this bar, I like the stool, the stained wood, the little nail to hang my jacket on, the bits of paper on the floor and the old chairs. (*Pause.*) For six years we've known each other and said the odd penalties weren't fair and pointed out fouls, reported bad players. Usually we speak about the usual sorts of things, usually about the usual sorts of things. (*Pause.*) And that's how it gets dark. That's how I take refuge and look for the same old things. That's how I reconstruct sentences, words, syllables, accents. (*Pause.*) I breathe, I almost sigh, and I let myself go until the end of the day arrives. Quietly.

(An alarm clock rings.)

Scene 12

Bus stop. It is night-time. The YOUNG WOMAN is waiting for a bus. The YOUNG MAN is sitting beside her.

The YOUNG WOMAN sneezes.

Young Man: Bless you.

Young Woman: Thank you.

Young Man: A cold?

(The YOUNG WOMAN, surprised that somebody should speak to her at the bus stop, nods.)

Young Woman: Stomach ache, feeling sick and other... things.

Young Man: How are you sleeping?

Young Woman: *(a little offended that somebody should interfere)* Normally. I'm a normal person, I mean, normal, normally normal. I'm normal. Do you understand?, it's just a temporary situation.

Young Man: I'm trying to. *(Pause.)* Do you often have dreams?

Young Woman: Every night.

Young Man: How many?

Young Woman: Two or three dreams. *(Pause.)* Is that too many? I wouldn't want to seem...

Young Man: *(interrupting her)* No. Not at all. *(Pause.)* You get up very early.

Young Woman: Yeah.

Young Man: I can imagine.

Young Woman: What can you imagine? I get up very early to go to work. There are a lot of people who get up

very early like me. Millions of people who go to work very early every morning.

Young Man: (*incredulously*) Yes.

Young Woman: (*offended*) There's something about the way you said that.

Young Man: (*accusing*) You're in love and that's why you can't sleep.

Young Woman: In love?

Young Man: I know.

Young Woman: Is it so obvious?

Young Man: I've already told you I'm well acquainted with human nature.

Young Woman: You didn't tell me that.

Young Man: I'm telling you now.

(*Silence.*)

Young Woman: I'm only waiting for the bus.

(*Silence.*)

Young Man: Don't worry, it's not obvious to start with.

Young Woman: Are you sure?

Young Man: I'm a sort of specialist in human affairs. (*The YOUNG WOMAN looks at him rather surprisedly.*) He must have something. He must be a man who's got something.

Young Woman: Yeah. That's it. He's got...

Young Man: (*interrupting her*) Something that needs to be loved.

Young Woman: Maybe.

Young Man: (*interrupting her*) Maybe his hair is soft and his eyes are tired.

Young Woman: No.

Young Man: Maybe he's an idealist. A man capable of bringing dreams to fruition for moments, for instants, for seconds, until they vanish and leave nothing at all behind them?

Young Woman: Now that I wouldn't mind. But he isn't.

Young Man: He's an adventurer, a pursuer of pipe-dreams, a brave hero or that's what he seems like?

Young Woman: No. Not in the least, no, I don't see him as that.

Young Man: He's a wise man.

Young Woman: No, no.

Young Man: So?

(Silence.)

Young Woman: I don't know. I don't know what he's got. It's a distracted, absent look. He's got an absent look.

Young Man: *(in solidarity)* You fell in love because of an absent look.

Young Woman: Yes.

Young Man: They're the worst.

Young Woman: *(alarmed)* Really?

Young Man: Because they're not tangible. They're ethereal, transitory passions, that come and go and when they come and take root they stay too long, but they're also quite capable of going very quickly, without warning. All of a sudden they're off and there's nobody who can stop them. They're gone.

Young Woman: I don't think I can do anything about it.

Young Man: No. I can't either.

Young Woman: So you admit you can't do anything about it.

Young Man: I'm sorry. I can't do anything about it. Please let me offer you my condolences.

Young Woman: Thank you.

Scene 13

Bookshop. Early morning light. The YOUNG WOMAN is sleeping peacefully amongst heaps of books.

Scene 14

The YOUNG MAN is in the watchmaker's shop with all sorts of clocks and watches on the counter. The MAN enters. They look at each other.

Man: I've had a walk around the city, visited a couple of museums I hadn't seen for a long time, after that I saw three exhibitions and two films. It calms me down. It's relaxing. Don't you think so?

Young Man: Yeah.

Man: I've seen everything and I thought it was... I thought it was relaxing. I like this city. I've lived here for years but I like it. I think it's...

Young Man: *(interrupting him)* Relaxing.

Man: Exactly. *(Pause.)* I've lived here for years and I don't think I could ever have another view of it. Quite simply, it's just what I feel, I think it's, quite simply...

Young Man: *(interrupts him)* Relaxing.

(Silence.)

Man: Don't you want to know which films I've seen? Don't you want to know? I know you like films. You'll never be able to tell me you don't like films. I know you do.

(The YOUNG MAN does not answer.)

Man: *(continues talking, because the silence forces him to)* The exhibitions were quite interesting: one of contemporary art, the other of Egyptian art and the other was by a photographer... I can't remember his name now. I like making everything fit. I never spend more than an hour in an exhibition. If I spend more than an hour there I end up having a chat with the girl at the main entrance or discussing football with the security guard

or talking about football with the girl supervising the room and talking about a film with the boy at the main entrance. It doesn't matter. *(Pause.)* When I spend more than an hour there, if nobody talks to me, I always end up looking at the colour of the frames of the pictures or the colour of the carpet. If it's not a sculpture exhibition, obviously. *(Pause.)* That was a joke.

Young Man: Oh, sorry. I was miles away.

Man: That's okay. It was a very bad joke.

Young Man: All right. Then I won't laugh.

Man: Are you annoyed?

Young Man: No.

Man: I don't believe you.

Young Man: It's true.

Man: I'm glad.

Young Man: Thank you.

Man: Really. I'm really glad.

Young Man: Thank you.

Man: *(as if he had decided to speak)* I heard that... I heard that. *(He stops.)* I heard.

Young Man: What?

Man: Nothing.

Young Man: I don't want you to tell me anything. I don't want to hear.

(Silence. They deliver the following piece of dialogue in a very aggressive manner that is almost contrary to the words they are saying.)

Man: But we're friends.

Young Man: Acquaintances.

Man: Friends.

Young Man: (*impossible to tell if it is a question or a statement*) We are.

Man: Of course we are.

Young Man: And have been for some time now.

Man: Ages. (*Pause.*) I've always been here, certainly before you were.

Young Man: Of course.

(*Silence.*)

Man: (*trying to be natural*) I came because I need a clock

Young Man: What sort of clock?

Man: An alarm clock. The one I have is old. I need another one.

(*The YOUNG MAN starts hurling clocks at him angrily. The MAN dodges them as if he were a bullfighter. On one side, the other, above, and on the other side. Some of the alarm clocks bounce on the ground and start ringing. In the end, both of them stand looking at each other in silence. The MAN sits on the chair. The YOUNG MAN, just when he looked as though he had calmed down, hurls another one which hits the MAN on the head.*)

Man: I'm sorry. I'm very sorry, I'm really sorry. I'm sorry, really.

Young Man: (*referring to the clocks*) Sorry.

Scene 15

We see only the MAN. He is sitting in an old armchair smoking a cigarette. He lets a little time go by before starting to speak.

Man: *(with satisfaction)* Join fragments and gradually reconstruct all of it, as if it were a puzzle. *(Pause.)* And afterwards, everything the same... everything remains as it always was. *(Pause.)* Identical, the same, as always. *(Pause.)* And then I feel good. Very good.

(When he has stopped speaking, one of the legs of the armchair gives way and breaks. He ends up sitting in a very crooked position. He does not move, as if he did not want anything to disturb him.)

Scene 16

Watchmaker's shop. Some of the watches and clocks are lying broken, on the floor. The YOUNG MAN is very involved in fixing a clock. The YOUNG WOMAN, who is carrying a suitcase, is standing in the middle of the shop, with her back to him, looking at the main door, as if she were waiting for him to finish talking in order to leave. The YOUNG MAN is speaking in order to keep back the YOUNG WOMAN, as if his voice were a thread that kept her in the shop.

Young Man: Alterations. I'm packing it in. I'm leaving here and shutting up shop. That's that. *(Long pause.)* Well, first I'll shut up shop and then I'll go. *(Pause.)* To another country, another city, another area. *(Pause.)* I'll take it all out, I'll give it away and then I'll pull down the shutter and close the door. *(Pause.)* I'll go into the street in that direction and I'll never come back. *(Pause. Now that he has said it out loud, he does not think it is such a good idea.)* Or perhaps not. *(Pause.)* Perhaps I won't leave, perhaps not. *(Pause.)* I'm so used to this shop. I'm so used to it that... *(Pause.)* I can start again and change it all. Make some general alterations. A change for alterations. Put up a poster saying "Please excuse any inconvenience, we are at your service" or "closed for alterations: we are undertaking an important review of stock". *(Pause.)* There're a lot of things to be changed. *(Pause. He looks at the space.)* Putting different shelves in, for example. More solid, made with better wood, putting lots of a kind of little filing cabinet on them, watch cabinets, little square spaces where each watch has got its precise place, its own space, not like they are now, all in such a jumble, for example. *(Pause.)* This counter, the chair, the light. Change all of it. *(Pause.)* The window. *(Pause.)* I'll put a bigger one in so I won't have to put

on the light after five o'clock in the afternoon. *(Pause.)* And the walls, I'll paint them a colour, some colour... *(He cannot think of the colour.)* Cream. No, lemon yellow would be better. *(Pause.)* The counter as well and the door as well. *(Pause.)* I'll put varnish on the floor or I'll cover it with a kind of... wood... a warm wood, the sort that makes you want to walk on it. The sort you can walk barefoot on. *(Pause.)* And I'll change the sign on the entrance. I'll make it bigger.

(When he finishes, the YOUNG WOMAN begins to go. Her movement forces the YOUNG MAN to speak again.)

Young Man: I love you *(Pause.)* I just wanted to tell you that. *(Pause.)* Just to tell you. *(Pause.)* Now I've told you.

(The YOUNG WOMAN stops, turns round and looks at him.)

Young Woman: I had a dream yesterday and you were in it.

Young Man: And what was I doing?

Young Woman: You were at a bus stop, you were waiting for the bus and speaking to me. *(Pause.)* Forget me like a cold, an illness that goes away, the flu or a...

Young Man: *(interrupts her)* I won't be able to.

Young Woman: Just do it.

Young Man: It'll be impossible. It's not so easy.

Young Woman: I...

Young Man: *(interrupts her)* I'm a man with fixed ideas. I'm a person with fixations that last forever. I'll dream of you. Today, tomorrow, the day after, next month.

Young Woman: I only came to buy a clock, I...

Young Man: *(interrupting her)* Buy all the ones you want,

I'll give them all to you. You can take the ones you like most and if you want, you can also take the ones you don't like.

(The YOUNG WOMAN looks at all the watches and clocks.)

Young Woman: Goodbye.

(The YOUNG WOMAN leaves the shop.)

Young Man: I'll imagine that we live together, have perfect children, a perfect house with an incredible garden, and that we live in a perfect district, in a perfect city, in a perfect country. *(Pause.)* I'll send you a postcard from my house.

(The YOUNG WOMAN enters the shop again.)

Young Woman: I'll send you my address.

Young Man: Thank you.

Young Woman: When I get it.

Young Man: When you get it I'll make a note of it.

Young Woman: Goodbye.

(The YOUNG WOMAN makes a definitive exit.)

Scene 17

We see only the YOUNG WOMAN. She is wearing a yellow raincoat, without the hood up, and some roller-skates. She is at one end of the stage. From the other end comes a very long rope that crosses the stage. The YOUNG WOMAN, holding onto this rope which is driving her from the other side, crosses the stage by letting herself be pulled along. She is chased by the rain which is making her wet.

Young Woman: And on any corner on Thursday I'll find an open street again that leads me to a Chinaman, a conference or the zoo, giraffe section, exotic animals, crocodiles, and somebody will run by again in the rain.

(The YOUNG WOMAN disappears through the other side of the stage.)

Scene 18

Undefined space. The YOUNG MAN is in the middle. He aims a pistol at a precise spot, as if he were a professional assassin in a film. He shoots. We hear the smashing of the bulb in a spotlight. We hear the sound of glass falling to the ground.

Darkness.

THE END

Magnolia Cafe

by
Àngels Aymar

Translated from the Catalan
by Marion Peter Holt

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Characters

Martina. In her early forties, a gynaecologist.

Woman. Nearing fifty, manager and hostess of the Magnolia Café.

Waitress. Early twenties.

Man. About the same age as the Woman.

Elena. On the verge of forty, professional musician.

Photographer. A woman of seventy, a well-known professional.

Journalist — about thirty-seven, art specialist.

Hilde. Also turning forty, pregnant.

Wife. Age sixty-three, her husband's consort.

Husband. A bit older than his Wife. A business man, involved in politics.

Musician. Not yet thirty, A performer with experience in various musical styles.

Note: The actors portraying the two musicians may play instruments other than those suggested.

Time

Present. Evening, at the beginning of August.

Setting

The outdoor Magnolia Café. Stage right a large Magnolia tree with bead necklaces (New Orleans Mardi Gras beads) hanging from the branches. The characters should pass in front of or behind the tree when they enter or exit. Four tables at different levels.

Premiere Production

Selected sections of the text were performed at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge and the White Bear Theatre, London, in November 2005, with the following cast:

Martina	Enid Gayle
Woman	Montserrat Gili
Musician	Robert Lockhart
Elena	Pilar Orti
Hilde	Montserrat Roig
Waitress	Rachel Sternberg
Photographer	Victoria Seabrook
Journalist	Jeremy Tiang
Director	Pilar Orti

Martina: I called to make a reservation.

Woman (*Hostess*): A table for three, right?

Martina: Yes.

Woman: Is that one all right?

Martina: Fine, thank you. (*She looks around as she follows the WOMAN.*)

Woman: Would you like something to drink while you're waiting?

Martina: Hmmm. Maybe a beer?

Woman: The waitress will bring it.

(*MARTINA sits down. She look up at the sky. She takes a pack of cigarettes from her purse and lights one. She smokes. She decides to change chairs. The WAITRESS enters with the beer.*)

Waitress: Good evening.

Martina: Hello.

Waitress: (*Leaving a small plate of potato chips*) Can I bring you anything else?

Martina: No, this is fine. Thanks.

(*MARTINA nibbles on potato chips noisily. She drinks. She smokes. She glances at her watch, but not impatiently. The WAITRESS returns and lights a candle on the table with a large match she takes from her apron pocket.*)

Waitress: Would you like to see a menu?

Martina: No, later... I'd rather look at the tree.

(*The WAITRESS smiles. She exits. The MAN enters. He looks around to see if anyone is coming to seat him. He sees MARTINA.*)

Man: Good evening.

(MARTINA *simply nods. She attempts to put out her cigarette in the ashtray but the butt continues to smoke.*)

Woman: Good evening. Table for one?

Man: Yes. I called just a while ago.

Woman: This way, please.

(ELENA *arrives carrying a case with her musical instrument.*)

Elena: Martina! You've cut your hair!

Martina: How do you like it?

(*They embrace ostentatiously. ELENA hits a chair with her music case and knocks it over. She inadvertently touches MARTINA's head.*)

Elena: It's so short!

(*The WOMAN starts to pick up the chair. The WAITRESS enters and the WOMAN gives her an authoritarian look. The WAITRESS returns the chair to its place.*)

Martina: I'm so happy to see you.

Woman: Would you like for me to put it in the check-room? You'd be more comfortable.

Elena: No, there's no need. I'll keep it right here.

Martina: You can put it on the extra chair. There'll only be three of us...

Elena: Of course. It won't be in the way here, will it? Who's not coming?

Woman: As you wish. Can I bring you something to drink?

Waitress: (*At the MAN's table, lighting the candle*) Good evening, sir.

Elena: What are you having, a beer? I don't know. Sure,

another one for me.

Woman: (*She motions to the WAITRESS to bring another.*) Another beer for this table.

Elena: I'm really hungry! (*She eats some potato chips; little crackling sounds. The MAN takes out a note pad.*)

Waitress: Would you like something before you order?

Man: Do you have a wine list? (*Brief pause*)

Waitress: Yes, sir. I'll bring it. (*The MAN takes out an expensive pen, caresses it between his fingers and appears to be pondering something.*)

Martina: Where are you playing?

Elena: I'm rehearsing for an opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art. You should come. It'll probably be rather special... I think you'd like it. I could ask the others too... who else is coming?

Martina: There's only going to be three of us.

Elena: You and me... and Hilde? I don't know why I thought there'd be four of us ... I'll invite her too. I don't think she's ever heard me play. Are you sure she's coming?

Martina: She said she would.

Elena: We'll see... the last time she didn't show up, don't you remember? It ended up being just the two of us and Angela. You see, that's why I thought there would be four tonight.

(*They look at each other. ELENA squeezes MARTINA's hand which was resting on the table. A moment of thought. The WAITRESS comes over with the beer.*)

Waitress: Would you like to see the menu now?

Elena: (*Taking the one she has under her arm*) Yes, you can leave it...

Waitress: Pardon, but that's the wine list.

Elena: Wine... eh? It's the wine list. Then we'll select the wine. Take a look at it. I'm going to the restroom.

(The WAITRESS, annoyed, goes to get another wine list for the MAN. The JOURNALIST, accompanied by the PHOTOGRAPHER, enters upstage.)

Journalist: I've never been here...

Photographer: You can only get a table if you've reserved in advance. As you can see, it's very small...

Journalist: What a fantastic tree. What are those things hanging from the branches? Are they necklaces?

Photographer: *(To the WOMAN, who has just entered)*
Good evening, my dear.

Woman: It's a pleasure to see you again. It looks like you've picked a splendid night to visit us.

Photographer: Yes, it's not too warm. And there's no moon, and that makes night more exciting.

Woman: If you'll come this way. I've reserved your usual table. I hope you enjoy your meal.

Photographer: Could you bring us some water? Do you want a drink?

Journalist: Water's fine for now.

Photographer: Could you prepare some appetizers for us? How about the Magnolia tasting... with the house wine?

(The PHOTOGRAPHER nods. The WAITRESS brings the wine list to the MAN.)

Photographer: You eat everything, I suppose?

Journalist: I'm in your hands.

Woman: The waitress will bring the water.

Journalist: If you'll excuse me...

Photographer: You'll find the door over there. It's very unusual. You'll see it.

Journalist: Is it one of those where you don't know how to turn on the tap or pull the chain?

Photographer: You'll see for yourself.

(The JOURNALIST goes off laughing and, distracted, he bumps into the chair with the instrument case.)

Journalist: Oh! I'm sorry.

Martina: It's all right. I think.

Journalist: It didn't fall over.

Martina: Sometimes it gets out of tune just looking at it.

Journalist: What a sensitive instrument.

(ELENA returns.)

Elena: It certainly is.

Journalist: Ah, then it's yours?

Elena: Do you play an instrument too?

Journalist: Me? Not really.

Elena: But you'd like to...

Journalist: Very much... but I'm too old to learn. At least that's what I've been told.

Elena: Don't believe all they say.

Journalist: Fine. I'll remember that. If you'll excuse me...

(As he leaves, he bumps into the WAITRESS who is bringing the water.)

Journalist: I'm sorry.

(The PHOTOGRAPHER smiles.)

Elena: He was probably wondering what instrument it was, saw you alone and... used it as an excuse to start a conversation... It's happened to me lots of times, so I don't play again at such places. But I never tell them what instrument it is. That's very spiteful of me, wouldn't you say?...

Martina: Look, there's Hilde over there. Hilde!

Elena: Hilde!

(The MAN watches them from the island of his table.)

Hilde: Have you cut your hair?

Elena: *(Referring to what she has noticed about HILDE)* I can't believe it! *(To MARTINA)* Did you already know?

Martina: Sure I knew, but I hadn't seen her yet.

(They have got up from the table. HILDE is pregnant. As she goes to hug them, she bumps into the instrument.)

Elena: But what gives with that belly?

(The JOURNALIST returns from the restroom and is about to catch the instrument before it falls off the chair. As she is hugging HILDE, ELENA sees him at the moment he grabs it.)

Elena: *(Looking at him over HILDE's shoulder)* You've got a fixation, haven't you?

(The JOURNALIST returns to his table, shaking his head, with a fixed smile.)

Martina: Come, sit here. *(She offers her chair, takes her purse, and hangs it on her new chair.)*

Elena: How are you? How far along are you?

(The WAITRESS has brought them the menu.)

Photographer: Dear, could you bring us a menu?

Waitress: Right away.

(First she goes to the MAN's table with the wine she has brought. A MARRIED COUPLE in their seventies enters. The WOMAN goes to greet them.)

Woman: How are you? This way please.

(The MUSICIAN arrives in a rush. The WOMAN sees him come in.)

Woman: The waitress will bring your appetizers right away. Make yourselves comfortable.

(She goes toward the MUSICIAN. The HUSBAND pulls back his WIFE's chair as she stands waiting beside him. The WOMAN motions to the MUSICIAN who is on the other side of the tree.)

Woman: You're late.

Musician: I'm sorry.

Woman: You fell asleep again.

Musician: It's just that I've had a bad day...

Woman: Really. Go wash your face and make yourself presentable. You look a mess. *(The MUSICIAN starts to leave.)* When the patrons arrive, they should hear the music. There shouldn't be any background silence. *(She exits.)*

Journalist: Have you changed your mind? You're not having the Magnolia tasting menu?

Photographer: No, I just want to show you the menu. The owner writes it herself by hand, with letters that are somewhere between Gothic and script. Every week she changes the cover. She uses photographs that I made especially for her. They're all of the tree. Some in black and white, others in colour, from different perspectives, and tinted by hand... I must have taken hundreds of pictures of that tree.

Journalist: With the beads hanging from it?

Photographer: Yes, of course! Without the beads it wouldn't be the Magnolia Café tree. The first day I met her she told me: "When a string of beads falls off the tree, a love fades, like a flower when it wilts."

(The MUSICIAN returns from the restroom with his long hair slicked back with water. He meets with the WAITRESS who is bringing the wine for the MAN and a menu for the PHOTOGRAPHER, which she quickly puts under her arm, so that her hand will be free. Then, discreetly, she takes the MUSICIAN's hand. They look at each other and smile. They take a few steps together. MARTINA sees them. The JOURNALIST does too. They exchange knowing looks.)

Wife: We'll have to change. I'm sick and tired of coming to this restaurant.

Husband: What are you saying?

Wife: Now they'll bring you those onions you like so much... All these years I've been putting up with your onion breath.

Husband: Just what's this all about?

Wife: When we leave you'll clear your throat with that awful sound and spit.

Husband: How you carry on!

Wife: There'll be bread crumbs all over the table. Pieces of bread you've gnawed on. The sound of your teeth chomping on bread... Desserts that are disgustingly sweet... Raspberry seeds that stick in my teeth. On the way home I'll pass the time licking the remains from my mouth with my tongue, salivating, pressing hard with the tip of my tongue, trying to dislodge those tiny raspberry seeds.

Husband: What are you talking about?

Wife: Oh, shut up. Dreadful things. I'm talking about the

things that are miserable about you. Things that are utterly unbearable for me.

(The MUSICIAN has taken his place to begin to play.)

Martina: I run my hand through my hair to put it behind my ear, and my hand goes right on past to my shoulder... it's not there any more.

Hilde: Are you sorry you cut it?

Elena: No problem. It'll grow back. *(To HILDE)* Do you feel it when it moves?

Hilde: It feels like a big bubble that's moving through my whole stomach... sometimes it's smaller and moves faster.

Martina: You have a glow in your face.

Hilde: I feel so great! With so much inner peace... It's as if... I see everything that's lovely through a magnifying glass... I only have eyes for what's beautiful, as if I wanted to protect my child from all the sadness in the world... a feeling for the simplest things has awakened in me... I find tears running down my cheeks at the most unexpected moments.

Elena: My oh my! Hilde, you don't seem like yourself.

Hilde: I'm the same "me", Elena. Just pregnant.

(The WAITRESS has come over.)

Waitress: Have you decided? I'll tell the hostess. *(She hands a glass of wine to the MUSICIAN who holds it a few moments between their hands.)*

Photographer: It was always very clear to me — don't ask me why, call it what you will — but I knew I'd end up seeing the world through the lens of a camera. When I was still a child, I'd play a game of making a globe of the world spin — a globe my father had in his library — and with my eyes closed I'd put my finger on a spot

to stop it. Then I'd read the name that my finger was pointing to and I'd make a list of words that had similar sounds. Oh, for example, Seychelles. Then I'd write down seashells, egg shells, cow bells, things like that, and I'd start collecting the things I'd need to pack to take a trip to that place. When my finger hit the middle of the ocean, it would be a voyage by submarine.

Journalist: Quite an imagination, I'd say.

Photographer: We had it easier than your generation. Television didn't exist. Summers, especially, were very long. An imaginary trip could last a whole week. I lived surrounded by adults, you know. Most of them women, whom I saw working and doing the same tasks day after day. The women in my house seldom laughed.

Waitress: Here's the first dish of the "tasting."

Journalist: This is only the first part?

Waitress: Afterwards, come the hot dishes. I'll bring your wine.

Wife: It's obvious there won't be another heat wave this summer. The high temperatures are behind us.

Husband: You never know.

Wife: You never know anything.

(The WAITRESS lights the candle for them.)

Waitress: I'll be right back with your drink.

Man: Miss!

Waitress: Yes?

Man: I'll just have the sea-urchins.

Waitress: Very well, sir. I'll give the hostess your order. *(She passes behind the MUSICIAN just to get a whiff of him. Then she returns to the MAN's table.)* Pardon me for asking, sir, but did you order the sea-urchins

because you'd had them before or because you aren't very hungry? I'm asking because we have other dishes that aren't filling and are exquisite too. If you'd permit, I could recommend...

Man: Miss, I happen to like sea-urchins very much. And, if I'm still hungry afterwards, which is unlikely, I'll let you know.

(The WIFE looks at him out of the corner of her eye.)

Waitress: Of course, sir, I didn't intend to bother you. I'll bring your order.

(The MAN nods, closing his eyes.)

Photographer: There's always someone missing. Here, right now, don't you see? At every table there's an empty chair.

(The WOMAN goes over to the table of the two younger women to take their order. She looks at the MUSICIAN, who is licking a cigarette paper and ignoring her.)

Journalist: Do you mean that we're always waiting for someone who never comes?

Photographer: Or missing someone who's no longer here. *(Brief pause)* You still haven't told me what you think of the tree over there.

Journalist: My grandfather used to say that there's nothing like a good piss in a tree under the stars. He was from a town far from the coast... I don't know what he would have said about this place, maybe that "people can dream up anything." What do they do in winter?

Photographer: They close down.

(The WAITRESS leaves the wine for them. Then she serves the MARRIED COUPLE aperitifs.)

Martina: I was afraid that someone had seen me. I looked right and left... no, no one was watching... but what if I'd

missed someone? My heart was beating fast... it was just like when I got my first real kiss.

Elena: I don't remember that.

Martina: I do. I went home with my hand on my face, it seemed like the kiss had been painted on and everyone could see it...

Elena: It wasn't exactly a kiss on the cheek, was it?

Martina: He watched me until the subway car went around a curve in the tunnel... "Tomorrow, the same place" was the last thing he said to me. He kept on looking at me from behind the subway doors, with those eyes that made me breathe hard. I noticed that a drop of sweat was dripping between my breasts... until I went up to the street I didn't realise how it had turned me on.

Elena: I'm not surprised, down in the subway and in those conditions...

Hilde: And next day, did you go back? And did he show up?

Martina: *(She bites her lower lip before answering. Her eyes gleam, an involuntary mischievous smile crosses her face. She seems caught up in the mental image of her story.)* Indeed...

(The MUSICIAN begins to play his violin. MARTINA casts a glance in the direction of the JOURNALIST, who doesn't look away quickly enough. The WAITRESS brings the sea-urchins to the MAN who watches her attentively. Her HUSBAND coughs as if clearing his throat. The PHOTOGRAPHER turns her head to listen to the music. The WOMAN is also listening from behind the tree.)

LIGHTS DOWN

(Only the candlelight at each table. The WAITRESS comes and goes, bringing plates and carrying them away.)

Everyone is eating and talking under the strains of the music. The WOMAN oversees things and goes about her duties. The LIGHTS COME UP with the final notes of the violin. The WAITRESS puts down what she has in her hands and applauds. The DINNER GUESTS follow suit almost apathetically. The MAN doesn't applaud, he is taking notes. The WOMAN looks askance at the WAITRESS, but she doesn't admonish her during her enthusiastic applause. The MUSICIAN lays down his violin, takes his smoking essentials and a glass and goes toward the tree.)

Waitress: *(To the MARRIED COUPLE)* If you've finished, I'll take the plates.

Wife: *(Ignoring her)* Who observes Lent these days? Forty days without eating meat, and a Friday for breaking the fast...

Husband: Who expects me to do those stupid things now?

Wife: What you call stupid things... everybody used to do them.

Husband: Only your family, and I don't know what got you off on that subject, which has nothing to do with what we were talking about.

Wife: It has a lot to do with it. Weren't you talking about moderation and self-denial?

Husband: *(Raising his voice slightly)* Sexual self-denial!

Waitress: *(Turning around, plates in hand)* Did you say something to me?

Wife: No, dear. Not to you. *(To the HUSBAND)* You see?

Husband: Sexual denial. It's clear that you don't remember what "sexual" means.

Wife: You don't have to shout it to the world.

Husband: And I'm sure that in your house you were all

born nine months after Lent, because if they didn't eat, they must have fucked, they must have passed the time amusing themselves, considering the fact they were never known to put in a full day's work.

Wife: When you talk that way, with a full mouth, you belch like a frog, with onion on your breath. I'm going to the restroom. *(She makes a move to get up and waits. The HUSBAND pulls her chair back for her.)*

Husband: *(Whispering in her ear)* Be careful you don't get a chill up your ass. It's not used to being exposed...

Wife: *(Between her teeth)* I'll vomit to your health. *(She goes over to the MAN, who is writing in his notebook.)* It drives him up the wall when I call him a "frog." He doesn't consider it proper language.

(HILDE also goes toward the restroom. The WAITRESS moves agilely among the tables.)

Elena: I didn't want to say anything in front of her, but I don't understand why you aren't her gynaecologist.

Martina: When I called her about dinner, she told me she was pregnant, and that she was sorry but she was seeing a gynaecologist who's a friend of her family. It surprised me, however, but some women prefer a doctor who isn't a close acquaintance, to avoid responsibility in case of problems.

Elena: Surely that's not the reason... If I were expecting, I'd go to you without a second thought.

Martina: I don't know, dear, maybe she'll explain it to us... And what about you, what are your thoughts on having babies?

Elena: I haven't given it much thought recently... there was a time when I did... but, I don't know... it's hard to make up my mind. I'm doing well with my music now and having to go from one place to another a lot...

I suppose those are just excuses... I don't dare have a child alone, and I still hope the perfect man will come along one day to be the father... well, I don't really know if I'm still hoping... Look, I haven't thought it out and that's that.

(The WAITRESS slips behind the tree where the MUSICIAN is smoking quietly, propped against the tree.)

Musician: Come over here. *(He tosses the cigarette away and snuggles up to her.)*

Journalist: And why don't you agree with what he's written about you?

Photographer: That washout hasn't written a line with any real value. He's more concerned with being considered one of the literati than giving meaning to what we were doing in those years.

Journalist: If a woman had written it, do you think it would be different?

Photographer: Not necessarily, but he didn't know how to convey the shattering import of the fact that we were demanding rights and not only in the artistic sphere, since we weren't all artists... Look, it's not whether a man or a woman did it, it's more about the sensibilities of the eyes with which each one views the world.

(HILDE returns to her table.)

Journalist: I may be wrong, but I find in your photographs an added element... an element of investigation. I'm referring strictly to the photographs of those years, but there's also...

Photographer: A bit of conscious effort, you mean? Yes, we wanted to lend a sense of professionalism to what we were doing.

Journalist: It couldn't have been easy, considering the mentality of the time.

Photographer: Look, even now I find people, people who've known me all my life, who say to me: "You're still making your pictures... great, if that's what you like... it's something to keep you amused." We think we've made a lot of progress but so much remains to be done. The other day I was reading that some women, in the Himalayas I think, had tied themselves to trees to keep them from being cut down and to save their mountains. Here I am at fifty-eight, and I've led a group who chained themselves to cork trees to save land they wanted to take for some project or other... My home town depended on cork trees for survival, it was a town that smelled of cork. Now it's been years since I've know what it's like to embrace a man, or a woman, or a cork tree. (*Laughs*)

(The WOMAN enters. The WAITRESS sees her, extricates herself from the MUSICIAN's arms, and follows her. He runs his fingers through his hair like a comb. With his other hand he rearranges his crotch. The WIFE sees him on the way to her table.)

Woman: (*Turning around*) Oh, here you are. Where did you run off to?

Martina: (*To the WOMAN*) Would you be able to prepare us a "Cremat?" [*coffee, rum and cinnamon drink that is lit before serving*]

Journalist: (*From the side table*) That's a great idea.

Martina: If you'd like, we'll share it.

Journalist: (*To the PHOTOGRAPHER*) Would you like?

Photographer: The "Cremat" here is always good.

Woman: (*Raising her voice so that everyone can hear her*) The house invites you all for "cremat." (*To the WAITRESS*) Put a table there in the centre.

(The MUSICIAN has picked up his violin again.)

Wife: You can't even imagine how I found out. I'll bet you thought I never knew, that I was stupid, that I'd be at your beck and call whenever you fancied... I kept it to myself all these years.

Husband: What have you ever kept to yourself? You've never done anything but chatter and gossip. Just an empty-headed chatterer, with no serious interest in anything. What a world of banalities have come out of that mouth!

Wife: Sure, we know you're the educated one in the family, you've never missed a chance to throw that in my face. If you'd shared some of that wisdom of yours maybe it would have been of some good to you. A brilliant man with a useless wife... a choice that doesn't put you in a very favourable light. But if I didn't turn out to your satisfaction, I never made you look ridiculous in your circle of educated, pot-bellied, cigar-smelling friends.

Husband: Now you come out with that. I've never seen you interested in anything I do... and, anyhow, what can you understand with that bird-brain of yours, where there's only room for examining every move I make... if I've damaged the crocheted headrest on the armchair after I took a nap, or if I've spilled something on my shirt. I suspect you've noticed that I have a big stain right now, a souvenir of the fish I so eagerly devoured as I dined in your company.

Wife: You talk to me that way because you think I'm harmless. Anyone could see that I've spent my life chattering away, but I also like to listen... I have a fine-tuned ear, and it's one of my qualities you surely never noticed, just like my capacity for observing. But you're going to see how your bird-brained wife is going to give you a few surprises...

Husband: When we first got here, you said something that made you seem even more thoughtless than usual.

(The WAITRESS prepares the table for the “cremat” with the table cloth, the earthenware cups, the coffee spoons... The MAN crosses the dining area. Everybody watches him without stopping what they are doing, just as when ambulance goes noisily down the street and we watch it without interrupting our walk.)

Martina: Even though it can be more satisfying, women become less and less interested in sex after they’re forty.

Elena: Then I must be an exception

Martina: Are you forty?

Elena: Almost.

Martina: I’m talking about those who have stable relationships, not unmarried nymphomaniacs like you, or those who’ve separated and, in a moment of wild passion with a new guy, get themselves pregnant.

Hilde: Or those who have quickies with boys who ride the subways.

(Laughter)

Elena: What a bunch of trashy people.

Hilde: Go on, Martina, explain it all to us.

Elena: Look how quickly we’ve deflated your theory. I don’t know how we’ve done it, but we’ve always been exceptions to the rules. *(She puts them down with her broad, resonant — but not strident — laugh.)*

Hilde: Elena, let her continue. It interests me.

Elena: Go ahead, go ahead.

Martina: No, truly, at the office, the majority of women over forty who come, at one time or another, comment on this.

Elena: But does that mean they don't have sex, that they've lost the desire to?

(The MAN, who returns at that moment, passes by their table as slowly as he can.)

Martina: They have children, they have someone to show affection to, they feel better... they have other needs, in any case they don't hate the love game, but they don't have the need to consummate the sexual act as frequently as men.

Hilde: The love game? There can't be anything like that in marriage. Orgasm, getting it off, that's the point. I had that with my ex: the minute we were in bed he got aroused.

Martina: But was that happening when it was still good, or near the end, when you began to see the other one?

Hilde: Especially the last two years.

Elena: When the couple doesn't function in bed... what do your male patients have to say about it?

Martina: They aren't used to discussing it in front of others. But I've talked with some male friends of mine and... the other day a colleague at the hospital told me that his patients had discussed it with him, and he believes that years ago what happened was that men had their mistresses and that was the reason for dysfunction at home. It's not that they didn't love their wives but they needed someone else to fulfil their sexual needs.

Hilde: Well, if it happens so frequently, why isn't it discussed more? I mean, they've invented a pill for men who can't get it up, so why haven't they invented something for us?

Elena: It must be because most of the scientists are men.

Martina: Women don't talk about it because they feel guilty.

Elena: And they deal with it by rocking the bed from time to time to keep them happy.

Hilde: You really are crude.

Elena: Is it true or not, Martina?

Martina: Let's not insult whole generations of women who've never enjoyed sex.

Elena: Well, I say shake them up and...

Martina: Worst of all, it's still happening today.

Hilde: You should write something on the subject, Martina.

Elena: And offer a solution. I already have one. What happens, I think, is that those women, over time, have lost interest in their husbands, their mates, or whatever you want to call them, but not their sexual fantasies... so, following the masculine example, what they ought to do in those circumstances is have a lover, an occasional lover...

(The WOMAN has entered with a bowl that looks heavy. The WAITRESS follows her.)

Husband: You're saying all this just to show off. It's a silly game, and I don't know what the point is.

Photographer: We ended up publishing our own magazine, but we couldn't compete...

(The WOMAN has lit the "cremat." The lights dim. We hear only the sound of the violin. The little flames dance up and down to the rhythm of the ladle the WOMAN moves adeptly. The eyes of everyone are entranced by the glow that burns smokelessly. When the violin stops, their voices are softer now. A circle of fire in each pupil.)

Woman: The "cremat" is ready.

(The JOURNALIST stands up and goes over to the table at centre stage. MARTINA and ELENA go too. The WAITRESS holds an earthenware cup that the WOMAN fills elegantly.)

Elena: Such a wonderful aroma... *(The JOURNALIST hands her the first cup.)* Thank you... and you didn't spill a drop.

Journalist: Don't believe everything you see.

(The MAN is beside the WAITRESS.)

Waitress: *(Handing him a cup)* Be careful, don't burn yourself.

Journalist: *(Inviting MARTINA to drink)* Isn't your friend going to have a taste?

Martina: Tonight she can indulge. In her condition, it's better to overdo it once than to drink small amounts on a regular basis.

Journalist: How about you, have you ever been pregnant?

Martina: Hundreds of times!

Elena: *(To the MUSICIAN)* You play quite well. Too bad we only hear your music as a kind of background sound over people's voices and clanking plates. It's not appreciated. I couldn't...

Musician: You must play in an orchestra.

Elena: How did you know?

Musician: Everyone makes the same kind of comments.

Elena: Did I offend you?

(The WAITRESS gives her a look that is hardly cordial and crosses to serve the MARRIED COUPLE.)

Musician: I like to play here, it gives me a kind of freedom... and there is always some expert who knows how

to distinguish between background noise and music.

Elena: Touché. (*She takes a sip*) Unfortunately, my job is as insecure as any other. Up till now I've been lucky, but I know very well that my luck will run out.

Musician: What instrument do you play?

Elena: Come over to the table and I'll show you.

(*The WOMAN watches them.*)

Man: (*Approaching the WAITRESS with a cup to offer her.*) May I, miss?

Waitress: Oh, thank you, but I can't while I'm working.

Man: If you take it aside, no one will notice.

Waitress: All right, just a sip, but if my boss comes out again, the cup is yours. Can I ask you what you're writing?

Man: Impressions, just some observations...

Waitress: For a novel?

Man: Maybe. I've noticed that you don't write down the orders.

Waitress: (*Brief pause*) I don't need to. There're only a few tables...

Man: Nevertheless, you must have a good memory.

(*HILDE has gone to the restroom again. The MUSICIAN has sat down with ELENA at her table. The PHOTOGRAPHER savours the "cremat" calmly. The WOMAN goes over to her.*)

Waitress: (*Returning the cup to the MAN*) Usually I'm very distracted, but at work it's different... it's a matter of concentration. Can I ask you something? If it seems out of line just say so.

Man: Ask.

Waitress: Have you written anything about me? I'm sorry...

Man: Come here and look.

Waitress: You're sure it's OK?

Man: It looks like your boss is involved in small talk, so take advantage of it.

Martina: (*With the JOURNALIST, beside the tree*) What I like most is that the leaves are always green and shiny.

Journalist: The bead necklaces hanging from the branches have aroused my curiosity. Why don't you explain to me why they're there?

Martina: It's your first time at the Magnolia Café... Well, no, I can't tell you.

Journalist: Why not?

Martina: It's like wanting to know how a film ends before you see it. You have to be patient.

Journalist: I'm not very good at being patient.

Martina: Neither am I. But when there's no other choice... what are you going to do?

Journalist: I intend to take one of those beads.

(*A fleeting look from all the others, like a warning*)

Martina: Don't do it!

Journalist: It's not permitted?

Martina: You'll change the ending.

Journalist: Breaking rules is one of my weaknesses.

Martina: But here the ending is already written.

Wife: Afterwards I started tying up loose ends. You, who seemed so offended because they'd returned that individual to his country and called him a criminal and a

liar. You're upset because I've seen through you. You act like all the others who think their hands are clean because they delegate their dirty work to others. No, don't say a word.

Husband: I'm not going to sit here and let you treat me like a murderer and compare me with...

Wife: Shut up and sit down or I'll create a scene the likes of which you've never imagined... Do you know that there's a reporter at that table? A few words from me and you and your party of decrepit old men will be ruined... I'm not treating you like a murderer but like a common criminal. You've left a trail of little crimes, secret and well planned. Whole families left in the street only because of your fancy, stupid signature. You never wanted to know anything about the telephone calls at midnight, from the wives of those unfortunate men who plead with you because you've robbed their children of food. You snore away in the next room, ignoring what suited you to ignore. You drooled with satisfaction over the absurd appointments that made you look so important... All covered over by a shitty ideology whose principles you totally forgot years ago. *(She takes a drink of water to refresh herself)* You broke up your own family with the same absurd arguments; and I was always considered to blame, because you've never been able to accept responsibility for anything you did... You've always stifled any show of affection with that tired air of a British aristocrat, even depriving me of my own children's hugs... *(Pause. She holds back the tears. ELENA lets out a lament on the saxophone, which is picked up by the violin.)* The night you found my door closed, I had just ripped up one of your shirts that was stained with lipstick. One of those "affairs" you read about in trashy novels. *(Silence)* What hurts most is having been your accomplice.

(The JOURNALIST and MARTINA dance under the tree.)

Woman: (*To the PHOTOGRAPHER*) I've watched her grow up and... I don't know how long I'll be able to keep her.

Photographer: You haven't told her yet...

Woman: Every day when I get up I think: "I'll tell her today"... but I'm so afraid she'll leave that... I don't know how she might take it... and what if I lose her forever?

Photographer: You have no reason to blame yourself. You've given her a home and a good upbringing.

Woman: But I haven't known how to show her affection. I would have liked to so many times. The years have made me hard like the bark on that tree.

Waitress: (*To the MAN*) No, really, I don't want to dance, but don't take it the wrong way. My boss wouldn't think it looked right during working hours. I have to get back to work.

Woman: And now there's that young man, the musician... She thinks I haven't noticed. He's a fine boy, but you know how it is with musicians... I don't want her to have a bad experience.

Photographer: She has to live her own life, to be able to choose for herself and make mistakes. I think you have a right to know, but it would be a mistake to tell her what to do.

Woman: You're used to looking through the viewfinder on your camera, a little window through which you can watch without being seen. You can zoom in on what you see or distance it, you can magnify the most insignificant details... You observe and go right to the heart of things. I think you're the only friend I have. (*She leaves the table quickly.*)

Wife: I've been wearing black for days, I know quite well

you haven't noticed. I'm in mourning for the man I've loved silently my whole life. Now that he's dead, I have nothing else to lose.

Waitress: *(To the MAN)* Why don't you ask that lady?

Man: She's with someone.

Waitress: But she doesn't look very happy. And for sure he doesn't know how to dance, or he's a bore.

(At that very moment, the WIFE looks at the MAN. He smiles uncomfortably, he's been caught off guard. She returns his smile. The MAN extends his hand and completes his invitation with a movement of his head. The WIFE makes a move to get up. He hurries to pull back her chair.)

Man: *(To the HUSBAND)* Would you mind if I invite your wife to dance?

Wife: *(Before the HUSBAND can react)* Believe it or not, my friend, but women have been able to speak for themselves for quite a while now.

Man: *(To the HUSBAND)* If you'll excuse us.

Wife: You have no reason to be polite to him, he's never been to anyone.

(The MAN looks at the WAITRESS out of the corner of his eye. She is biting the end of a fingernail slyly.)

Hilde: *(Who has been back at her table for a while, seated with an absent look. She runs her hand over her stomach.)* Where did you leave your companion?

Martina: I thought we couldn't be seen behind the tree.

Hilde: I caught a glimpse.

Martina: He's over there with his friend.

Hilde: Who is she?

Martina: I really didn't ask him... What do you think of Elena?

Hilde: I've heard her play before. You can't deny that she has music in her blood.

Martina: When did you hear her play? She told me you'd never come to hear her?

Hilde: Oh, I don't know... I can't remember... What did you talk about?

Martina: You mean before you got here?

Hilde: No, I mean with the guy.

Martina: Nothing in particular. He's a journalist. Why are you looking at me that way?

Hilde: Since the two of you were hiding...What on earth are you talking about? Your love life has always seemed very exciting to me. I don't know if it's the way you describe it, but I love to hear you and imagine myself the one you're talking about. How are things going with the one from the subway?

Martina: But I didn't meet him in the subway!

Hilde: I know, dear, but since he has such a complicated name...

Martina: It's a relationship that's so passionate it scares me. Sometimes I don't know whether it's fear that it will end or that it will last... I also don't know if I can live with that anxiety much longer. The secrecy of it all feeds my uncertainty, and the passion doesn't give me room to think...

Hilde: Have you thought about not really caring who knows any longer and not hiding yourselves away like that?

Martina: Me, a middle-aged, successful professional woman, who makes her living with rich clients in a

swank neighbourhood, walking down the street hand-in-hand with an attractive young man who's illegal and Tunisian?

Hilde: Tunisian?

Martina: Even you don't get it. It's funny that I'm explaining it to you, but you really think I've taken leave of my senses, lost my way, and that it's a fling that will only last a while.

Hilde: I didn't mean...

Martina: Let's not deceive ourselves, Hilde, we're full of prejudices, I'm probably the same as you. He's the best things that's happened in my life and all those shitty clichés keep me from enjoying it. It makes me feel like crying from impotence, when I should be braver and let it all out...

Hilde: I don't think that's the best solution. You've fought enough to get where you are.

Martina: So what? What price will I have to pay? What use is what I've got if I can't share it? I'm tired of being alone.

Hilde: Now I understand.

Martina: No, Hilde, you don't. You've never been alone.

Hilde: But I've had to choose and give up things.

Martina: I'm re-thinking a lot of things... At my age I discover that I don't know how to choose what's really worth anything in life... He tells me to leave it all, that he'll take me to the desert, that we'll smoke hashish lying on carpets from Arabia, and contemplate the shadows of palm trees in the moonlight... I know he's not going to be willing to stay shut up in my apartment much longer... I know it.

(ELENA and the MUSICIAN continue playing.)

Martina: He came here to shoot a film and didn't want to go back with the crew... Do you know what he told me? That when our eyes first met, he looked at the palm of his hand and saw me there... And he understood that I was his destiny... But in reality he hasn't had an easy life... I don't say that his world is better than ours, but he's been a mirror for mine and I don't like what I've seen.

(The music ends. Applause. The WAITRESS waits tactfully for ELENA to rejoin her friends and then goes over to the MUSICIAN. The WIFE does not return to her table. The MAN invites her to have a cup of the "Cremat". The HUSBAND doesn't look at her and tries to ignore her by looking in another direction, contemplating a non-existent horizon.)

Photographer: Before you publish it, I'd like to read it.

Journalist: I won't give it to the editor until you give me your approval.

Photographer: We can set a day and you can come to my studio. I have some unpublished photos that might interest you.

Journalist: Certainly. Why didn't you include them in the retrospective?

Photographer: I've kept them for myself. At the right time I'll take the responsibility of creating an exhibit. That will be my next project. I want to include pages from the magazine, letters, and all sorts of documentation. Did you know that I'm the only survivor from the group? We made a pact, the last one of us would have the responsibility of making it public and then leaving it in good hands. I'll have the exhibit in the cemetery.

Journalist: In the cemetery?

Photographer: They're all there...

Journalist: And then, will you give it all to some institution?

Photographer: Didn't I say I had to leave it in good hands?

Journalist: Then I don't think it will be easy.

Photographer: You said it... and the irony is that I was the one who made the proposal in the first place. I was always convinced that I would die young.

Martina: (*To the JOURNALIST*) Would you two like to come sit with us?

(*The JOURNALIST gives the PHOTOGRAPHER a questioning look.*)

Photographer: Come on, then! Off we go!

Elena: (*To the WAITRESS and the MUSICIAN*) We thought we might have a last cup together.

Waitress: You can go. I'll clear the tables.

Musician: Don't worry so much. No one's going to say anything to you if you sit down a while.

Waitress: Really, I prefer to start clearing...

Musician: Then I'll stay and help you.

Waitress: No way. I don't want her to see us together...

Elena: (*To the MAN and to the HUSBAND*) You, too, why don't you pull up your chairs?

(*The WIFE goes to her table to get her shawl.*)

Husband: (*Without looking at her*) What do you intend to do? (*His voice has a sound of authority that has lost its shine.*)

Wife: I'll leave you with that uncertainty for the rest of your days.

Husband: But will you stay with me?

Wife: I've never been "with you."

Husband: (*Looks at her*) Over all these years you've learned a lot from me. You speak properly now.

Wife: Asshole. (*She goes to join the others.*)

Journalist: I'm still waiting for someone to explain to me why the necklaces are hanging on the tree branches.

(The HUSBAND stands up. He leaves his smoking cigar in the ashtray on the table. He takes his wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket. He leaves some bills on the table. Parsimoniously, he takes out a leather coin purse and leaves a few coins on top of the bills. The WOMAN enters with an armful of Mardi Gras beads.)

Woman: Are you leaving already? What about your wife? (*She hands him a string of red beads.*) Don't forget the beads. (*The HUSBAND keeps walking, lost in his own thoughts. Before exiting, he tosses the beads on the floor, like an unwanted piece of paper he has been handed on the street.*)

Martina: (*Offering her cigarettes*) Anyone for a smoke?

Hilde: (*To the JOURNALIST*) Look, I think the owner is going to explain about the beads.

Wife: You shouldn't be smoking around a pregnant woman.

Martina: Lady, we're outdoors!

Hilde: It doesn't bother me.

Wife: Then maybe I'll have one.

Journalist: (*To the WOMAN*) Please sit beside me, we have a lot to talk about.

(The WAITRESS removes things from the table.)

Musician: *(To the WAITRESS at the moment the WOMAN looks at him.)* Come here, sit with us. *(The WAITRESS looks at him disturbed, with a finger on her lips.)*

Elena: *(To the WOMAN)* Don't make her work so much, poor girl.

(The WOMAN looks at the WAITRESS. She makes an effort to smile. The WAITRESS watches her, trying to decipher the atypical gesture. There has been an invisible line of communication between them. Perhaps something unutterable has been said. The MUSICIAN makes a place for the WAITRESS.)

Woman: *(Standing beside the JOURNALIST)* Now I'll give everyone beads, and before you leave make a wish in front of the tree. You have to throw the beads so that they catch on a branch, if you want your wish to come true.

Wife: I've left a lot of wishes hanging on those branches.

Man: And none ever came true?

Woman: Maybe the wind blew them off, or you didn't wish hard enough.

Wife: Maybe it was the wind...

Hilde: I always forget what I wish for. I only remember the wish that came true after I threw a coin in the Fountain of Trevi.

Martina: And what was the wish?

Hilde: A change in my life. Afterwards we broke up.

Elena: I don't believe that throwing coins in a fountain or in a river, or rubbing statues with your finger, or tossing beads on a Magnolia tree can change your life...

Musician: Just as you can't believe in the stars affecting your life or palm reading.

Martina: I do believe in palm reading.

Elena: One is superstition and the other astrology.

Photographer: It all depends in the faith you put in it.

When I was a young girl, a fortune teller told me I wouldn't have a long life. For a long time I believed that everything I did was for the last time. It was a terrible feeling, but now I can say that I've never lived so intensely as I did in those years, and I realise that it was the best part of my life. One day I ran across the fortune teller again in an airport. I was going to India and she was coming back... I recognised her by the peculiar way she dressed... She didn't remember me, but I went up to her and said: "I have lived all these years in a state of anxiety and it's all your fault. You told me that I would die young." She looked deep into my eyes, deeper than anyone ever has since, and answered: "If I told you that, it's because I did see it at that moment; but within each of us there exists the strength to change the course of the river of our destiny. If you hadn't possessed that strength, you wouldn't be speaking with me today. It's been a pleasure seeing you."

Elena: Well, I think you were civilised about it. Someone else would have smashed her face after the shitty thing she did to you.

Waitress: A friend of mine told me that death and really bad luck can't be predicted...

(The WOMAN is about to say something but holds her tongue.)

Elena: ...So they can only see what's good, and if it's too painful they have a ready-made answer.

Musician: *(To the PHOTOGRAPHER)* Maybe for your fortune teller death isn't a negative thing.

Martina: What you said is true. Values vary among

different cultures. Your fortune teller was probably influenced by India where they believe in reincarnation... It would be better if we were more open to Eastern philosophies here. On the subject of death, for example, I think we'd live better if we focused on it in a different way.

Wife: Like what? I mean, it depends on the individual. A Catholic doesn't see it...

Hilde: Catholics see it worst of all, because they never completely believe that story of a heaven where we all meet again.

Man: One way or another, it seems to me, all religions profess a belief in the hereafter.

Journalist: Some beliefs help to accept death better than others.

Martina: By not considering it the worst thing that can happen to you.

Wife: Sometimes I think that life can be the worst misfortune and death a longed for liberation.

Photographer: It depends a lot on how a person dies. My father was one of the first victims of the anarchist-union attacks in 1931. He owned a small business and because of the nature of it, he opposed the eight-hour day. That view made him the enemy of the union organisers who sent him threatening, anonymous letters. One day a man dressed in blue overalls showed up. He asked for my father and I ran to look for him. He was holding my hand as we walked and that animal shot him twice. He murdered him right beside me. I was only five years old. Even after all those years it's horrible to tell and I still feel the final clasp of my father's hand.

(HILDE *is crying.*)

Waitress: Maybe we should talk about happier things.

Hilde: No, don't say that because of me. In my condition I get emotional over anything... It's just that the image of that hand... I agree that it depends a lot on how death surprises you... but it also has a lot to do with how one is loved... We put so much of ourselves in a child before it's born, even before conceiving it... it's the same with the man we dreamed about as a girl...without knowing him you imagine how you'll love him. It's the same with all forms of love, as if you had few other options. We make them the underpinnings of our lives and we don't accept the idea that anything could go wrong, that they could abandon us without fulfilling our expectations. How can we be prepared for that if we need more than one life to understand the simplest realities? *(She sighs to lighten the weight of her words.)* Is there any water?

(Someone hands her the bottle. MARTINA opens it and fills a glass for her.)

Wife: Is it you first child? My two pregnancies are the loveliest memories I have.

Journalist: *(To the WOMAN)* Where did the idea of throwing beads on the tree originate?

Woman: It comes from New Orleans. The first Magnolia Café was there. But it originated with the Washo Indian tribe in California... It may still survive on some reservations there. According to the tradition, if the beads thrown on the Magnolia in spring are still there after two moons, by the third moon the man who threw them will meet the woman who will give him his first child.

Elena: And what were you doing in New Orleans?

Woman: It's a long story that's not relevant...

Musician: I didn't know you'd been there. It's a musical

paradise... Do you know anyone there? I've always wanted to go when they celebrate Mardi Gras.

Photographer: I've been a couple of times. It's pure madness. If you're interested, I have some friends there... that is, if they're still alive. *(She laughs broadly. The WOMAN begins to hand out the beads.)*

Martina: Can we choose a colour, or does that matter?

Woman: The colour doesn't matter... I seem to remember that the Indians made all their necklaces the same, and each man put different symbols on them. But I can't say whether or not they represented qualities they hoped to find in a woman or a child.

Man: I'm fascinated by the world of symbols.

Journalist: And did you know any member of the Indian tribe?

Woman: The owner of the Magnolia Café was descended from the Washos.

Musician: So what happened?

Woman: What do you mean?

Musician: How did you come to open a restaurant here like the one there?

Elena: Was the one in New Orleans outdoors too?

Hilde: It would have to be if there was a tree, right?

Martina: *(To the WOMAN)* I'll take the yellow one if I may.

Woman: The tree in New Orleans was on the street, in front of the restaurant entrance.

(She moves to the WAITRESS's side. The WAITRESS doesn't take any beads. She has always thrown a string when the WOMAN wasn't watching. The WOMAN doesn't hand her any, and the WAITRESS doesn't know what she is supposed to do.)

Woman: (*To the WAITRESS*) Are you wondering about the colour too?

Musician: Go on, take one.

(*The WAITRESS takes the beads. The WOMAN continues to hand out the other beads with feigned naturalness.*)

Martina: We could stand around the tree and all throw them at once.

Photographer: Let's see if I have enough strength left in my arm.

Journalist: I'll help to see that you don't miss.

Man: If it drops off, can you throw again?

Waitress: Yes, you can keep trying until it catches on a branch.

Journalist: Well, then, shall we? (*To the PHOTOGRAPHER They stand up and move toward the tree.*)

Hilde: Martina, I'd like to tell you why I haven't come to your office for an examination.

Martina: You don't have to give me a reason.

Hilde: All the same, I'd like to tell you. You see, things have not been going so well for us. There was a staff reduction at work, and the first one they laid off was me because I was pregnant... Guillem was having a problem at work, and I didn't have the courage to tell my problems to anyone.

Martina: But Hilde, what are you saying? You make me feel awful.

Hilde: Don't take it that way... Now I think maybe I was wrong, but...

Martina: What doctor are you seeing?

Hilde: I don't really know. Every time I've been to the clinic I've been assigned to a different one.

Martina: How are things going with you now?

Hilde: Much better. I'm not working, of course, but he's started a new job.

Martina: Are you really telling me the truth?

Hilde: If it weren't, how could I come here for dinner tonight?

Martina: I'm paying for dinner...

Hilde: No, you aren't!

Martina: And in the morning, call the office and ask for an appointment.

Hilde: I don't want you to see me without charging.

Martina: I'll decide that, and not a word more or we'll end up quarrelling.

Hilde: The day I saw Elena play, some of my co-workers had given me a farewell dinner... she didn't see me. I was at a table in the back and light was dim.

Martina: Where was that?

Hilde: I don't remember exactly... its was at a café in the old town.

Martina: How odd. Elena only plays at concerts and special cultural events.

Hilde: Maybe it was something special. Don't say anything to her. But there was certainly nothing "cultural" about it.

Waitress: (*To the MAN*) I want to thank you for calling me "miss" seven times this evening.

Man: You counted?

Waitress: Everyone calls me “girl” or “waitress,” or whatever, but no ever said “miss.”

Man: That seems strange.

Waitress: It does, doesn't it? I've thought so too.

Musician: (*To ELENA*) I'd like to hear you play. Do you have a concert scheduled?

Elena: Next week. If you'll give me your phone number, I'll let you know. If I hear that anyone needs a violinist, would you be interested?

Musician: It depends. You know how I play...

Elena: I think you're very good, and you deserve much better than this.

Musician: Well! Thanks! That's very flattering coming from a professional like you.

Elena: Don't believe everything people tell you, or even what I say.

Musician: (*Laughs*) What do you mean?

Elena: Maybe I'll be more explicit when we see each other again...

Musician: I thought you didn't like mysteries.

Elena: You see how you shouldn't believe everything.
(*She laughs too.*)

Journalist: (*To the PHOTOGRAPHER*) Had she already told you that story about New Orleans?

Photographer: They met there.

Journalist: I thought so. And what happened? She's evaded almost all my questions.

Photographer: I can only tell you that she came back here looking for a sign. The Washo Indian had told her she would find it. When she saw the tree, she moved

heaven and earth until she managed to acquire the land and open the restaurant.

Journalist: And he? Who was he?

Photographer: He? It was just the tree.

Martina: So, is everyone ready?

Woman: *(To the WAITRESS, almost like a murmur)*
Those musician types are very fickle. Here today and gone tomorrow, you know. What do you think?

(The WAITRESS is incapable of uttering a word. Some sound escapes from her like someone who is still learning how to speak.)

Waitress: Mmm... er... er...

Woman: We can talk another time if you like.

(The WOMAN moves away and the JOURNALIST goes over to her.)

Journalist: You must throw one too.

Woman: It's a tradition for the customers.

Journalist: Tonight's special.

Hilde: Wait, wait, Elena's coming now. *(To MARTINA, in confidence)* You're not going to believe this, but that woman, the one who was with her husband before, I think she's wife of the super-chief, not my floor director, but the one at the top. You know, the big shot, the one who had me fired. I wouldn't recognise him because the few times he's come around he was surrounded with lackeys and security...

Martina: You mean the one who's talking with the guy who came alone?

Hilde: Yes, that one, but don't stare at her that way! The picture of the husband that hung in the reception area must have been taken when he was twenty years old! I

had run into her in the restroom one day when she came with him... then I ran into her again in the restroom here... I wasn't sure, but a moment ago she arranged her hairpiece. She took out the same hairpin as the other time. Did you get a look at that hairpin?

Martina: She must be very unhappy.

Elena: Who are you talking about?

Martina: About you. Go on, get those people organised.

Elena: Listen, everyone. We'll throw the beads at the count of three.

Musician: I'll turn off the lights.

Hilde: We won't see where our beads land.

Elena: We have candles, the moon, and the stars.

Photographer: There's no moon tonight.

Man: If they have more candles, we can put them around the tree.

Wife: The beads that fall will get burnt.

Man: If we put the candles close to the trunk, they won't.

Martina: Do you suppose the Indians did it this way?

Journalist: (*To the WOMAN*) I'll help you bring more candles.

Martina: The rest of us will bring the ones from the tables.
(*Bustle of people moving around*)

Journalist: Anyone going to turn off the lights?

Woman: Come with me.

Journalist: I'd like to know more about the Washo.
Would you mind if I came one day and we could talk?

Woman: You shouldn't think that I know much about them...

Journalist: I'm a devotee of tribal traditions, and talking with you would surely be very rewarding.

Waitress: (*To the MUSICIAN*) If they make you a better offer, you'll go, won't you?

Musician: Why did you ask me that?

Waitress: Because I hadn't thought about it until now... tell me, will you go?

Musician: You wouldn't want me to keep playing here forever.

Waitress: And when will we see each other? We've never been together away from here.

Musician: Then it's about time.

(The lights go out. The MUSICIAN gives her a kiss.)

Waitress: I don't intend to stay here forever either. You should give your telephone number to that important woman who knows people in New Orleans. We could go there together.

Wife: (*To HILDE*) You should throw two strings of beads.

Hilde: Have you always made the same wish, or have you changed sometimes?

Wife: I don't remember.

Hilde: I'll definitely remember the wish I make tonight. You should make the same wish, maybe it will come true this time.

Wife: Wishes are for the young, who still have their illusions.

Hilde: You shouldn't give up.

Elena: Alright! Now we'll all count to three and throw. Ready?

(The WOMAN moves away discreetly.)

Everyone: One, two three!

(Wishes in colours tossed in the air, hoping to be caught on the flowering branches of an imperturbable tree)

THE LIGHTS COME UP SUDDENLY

(The actors step out of their roles.)

Hilde: If it's this hot in here, I'm not going to be able to stand wearing that padded stomach. *(To MARTINA)* Help me with the zipper.

Photographer: *(To the JOURNALIST)* I don't think it's completely clear when I ask for the menu that it's to show you the photograph... I suppose I should ask for more than one if they're different.

Journalist: But you've told me that they change them every week; in any case, you should ask for menus from other weeks.

(The HUSBAND enters.)

Husband: *(To the MAN)* What did you think? You certainly took enough notes.

Woman: Now let's all sit down and talk about it.

Elena: My character is the least clear of all. *(To the MAN)* What do you have to tell us?

Martina: *(Helping HILDE to take off the false stomach)* Who made that "Cremat"? It tastes awful.

Musician: *(Rolling a cigarette)* I thought it was pretty bad too.

Wife: *(To the WOMAN as she undoes the hairpiece.)* I'll have to change these shoes. They've given me a blister!

Musician: Any beer left backstage?

Man: Bring me one too.

Waitress: I'll go look. Anyone else want something?

Journalist: Water, if there is any.

Woman: (*To the JOURNALIST*) That business of stumbling over Elena's instrument case, was it something you've added or just an accident?

Photographer: I thought it was very effective.

Journalist: I just bumped into the instrument case.

Elena: Actually, I left it in a different place yesterday.

Journalist: But I was prepared for the collision with the waitress because I knew it was coming.

Woman: You have to tell me any new movements you add. The improvisations in the dialogue are one thing, but the changes in stage movement have to be set.

Photographer: (*To MARTINA*) Let's have a cigarette.

Wife: (*To the MAN*) Any other notes for me?

Man: I'm getting my notes in order. There are words I wrote in a hurry and practically without looking, and now I can't decipher them. When you tell your husband there's a reporter in the restaurant, how do you know that?

Wife: Now you've got me.

Elena: Why don't you stop organising your notes for now, we can all talk and, afterwards, you can finish up.

Hilde: I prefer to do it now, because if we wait until later it will drag on too long and we'll get out very late.

Martina: Now's the time, I'll be too down to go through it all later. Right now I'm raring to go.

Elena: Wasn't your lover Algerian before?

Martina: What did I say today?

Hilde: Today you made him Tunisian.

Martina: Really? Then that's why you looked at me that way. *(They laugh.)*

Journalist: *(To the MAN)* Would you say that there's some sexual attraction between her and me? *(Referring to MARTINA)*

Man: Not exactly sexual. A certain feeling.

Journalist: *(To the WOMAN)* I told you it wasn't a big thing.

Hilde: What you want is to get closer to her.

Journalist: Here's the guy who does best of all when it comes to sex appeal. *(Gives the MUSICIAN a friendly slap on the back that he doesn't expect.)*

Wife: You can say that again.

Musician: You have to know how to choose your roles.

Waitress: But today you got carried away. When I asked you if you were going to play somewhere else, we hadn't rehearsed any kiss.

Musician: You didn't enjoy it?

Waitress: *(Flirting)* Smart ass.

Wife: *(To the HUSBAND)* I know you don't agree, but for me a couple who've been married so long and at their social level... I don't know... the spit... and the business about the onion, I don't know if they would talk to each other that way.

Husband: Why not? Appearances are one thing, but the way they treat each other in private is another.

Woman: Didn't you call him an "asshole" today?

Wife: *(Laughing)* I don't know what I said.

Waitress: I thought you said "scumbag."

Photographer: That's what happens when no one's

keeping a close check on the dialogue.

Wife: It's just what came out.

Woman: (*To the MAN*) My assistant director was sick today, but we have it all on videotape, and tomorrow we'll fix the dialogue.

Photographer: Don't start changing your lines. I have enough trouble learning my own... (*To the JOURNALIST*) You keep that in mind too. I don't remember where it was, but you really threw me at one point today.

Journalist: I'm not sure what you mean.

Elena: (*To the MAN*) Did we agree that when two people are talking the others continue their conversations? For example, I ask "Hilde" how far along she is, but she never answers me...

Man: I think we did agree on that, but while I was writing and trying to watch what one or another of you was doing, I didn't hear some parts of the dialogue...

Woman: But in general, do you think that the relationships between the characters and their stories in particular are clear?...

Man: They touch on a lot of things, and someone might find some of them less than fully developed.

Wife: But we're actually not trying to talk out every theme... Things come quickly, wisps of conversations.

Man: I'm surprised no one brought a cell phone.

Hilde: Why not?

Wife: Let's not go back to that. We dealt with that topic and decided against it.

Woman: Actually, what we were most concerned with today was whether it would be viable to bring a

member of the audience into the staging. How do you feel about that?

Man: Later you can explain to me just how you intend to bring a spectator into things... Well, as you can see, I couldn't keep my eye on everything for you. I did catch a lot of things, and I knew you would be swamping me with questions...

(They all want to talk at once.)

Elena: Let him go on.

Woman: Please!...

Man: However, I do think the experiment could be interesting, not only in terms of the staging, but also for yourselves as actors...

Martina: Maybe it would work at first, but I think it would become mechanical later, and it wouldn't be the same.

Husband: If we have time for anything to become mechanical, it would mean that we're having a long run.

Man: It's the first time you've done a complete run through, and you didn't have to stop...

Waitress: I did when you asked if we had a wine list. I wanted to die.

Elena: You bet, when you told me that it was the wine list you had, I didn't get a bit of it.

Woman: We didn't have to stop because you are a good actor.

Elena: Yes, indeed, you were great, and we haven't even applauded.

(Shouts and applause from EVERYONE)

Woman: You've been a great help. But they had been forewarned not to stop no matter what happened.

Waitress: (*To the MAN*) When you told me that I wasn't writing down the orders, were you trying to see how I'd get out of that one?

Martina: (*To the JOURNALIST*) And you, the way you came over and began to reach up and touch the beads on the tree.

Hilde: Is it already so late?

Woman: Wait before you all run off. Tomorrow we should rehearse both morning and afternoon.

Journalist: I've told you I can't in the morning.

Martina: Since he'd said that he couldn't, I made other plans for the morning.

Elena: We should have the morning free.

Photographer: Let's make it early afternoon, it'll be good for everyone to get a little rest.

Woman: (*Pause*) Everyone here at four, ready to begin. (*To the MAN*) I'm sorry they're exhausted. If you want, we'll have lunch together and continue the discussion.

(EVERYONE *scattering*)

Musician: (*To the WAITRESS*) Can I take you home?

Waitress: But tonight we're not stopping to have anything. I really am exhausted.

Husband: Well, good night everyone.

(*Goodbyes*)

Hilde: (*To the PHOTOGRAPHER*) Are you taking a cab?

Photographer: Yes, are you coming?

Hilde: I'll be right with you.

Elena: See you tomorrow.

Journalist: Did you come on your bike?

Elena: Did you bring yours?

Journalist: I hope it's still where I left it.

Elena: I don't know why you don't bring it inside. One day you'll find it gone.

Journalist: What can we do? Goodbye.

Man: (*To the WIFE and to the WOMAN*) I've brought my car. Can I drop you some place?

Wife: Are you going downtown?

Man: I can take you to your place.

Wife: It's not necessary. Just leave me close to civilisation and I'll be OK.

Man: (*To the WOMAN*) Are you coming?

Woman: Yes, you go on, I just have to turn off the lights.

(Silence all around her. She stands there, touches nothing, looks into the dark theatre. An unexpected thought. She walks toward the tree. She studies it. She goes up to it little by little.)

Wife: (*From offstage*) Are you coming?

Woman: I'll be right there.

(She picks up a bead necklace from the stage. She throws it hard towards the tree.)

LIGHTS DOWN

RE-CALL

(A free evocation of the life and
works of Lou Andreas Salomé)

by
Araceli Bruch

Translated from the Catalan
by Laura Melcion

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tact Laura Melcion. Email: lauramelcion@hotmail.com

Characters

Lyolya Von Salomé (Lyolya Girl): Girl ten years old.

Lyolya Von Salomé (Young Lyolya / Young Lou):

Young lady nineteen to twenty-one years old.

Lou Andreas Salomé (Adult Lou): Woman forty years old.

Lou Andreas Salomé (Elder Lou): Woman sixty to seventy-five years old.

Young Man.

The Play

ACT ONE

Lou's Dream (1871-1881) From ten to twenty years old.

ACT TWO

Lou's Journey (1882-1927) From twenty-one to sixty-five years old.

Scene One

Lou's Freedom (1882-1901) From twenty-one to forty-years old.

Scene Two

Lou's Call (1901-1927) From forty-one to sixty-five years old.

ACT THREE

Lou's Gaze (1861-1937) From birth to death.

Premiere Production

Selected sections of the text were performed at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge and the White Bear Theatre, London, in November 2005, with the following cast:

Lyolya girl Rachel Sternberg

Young Lyolya Montserrat Gili

Elder Lou Victoria Seabrook

Director Olusola Oyeleye

Joy is Perfection
Spinozaⁱ

Act 1

Lou's Dream (1871-1881)

(Darkness. Popular Russian music. If possible, a lullaby. Enter a ten year-old girl. She is carrying a candleholder, with a lit candle inside, and she is wearing a white night-dress that touches her feet. She gets onto her knees, centre stage and faces the audience.)

Lyolya girl: As you know, last week two peasants arrived on our Peterhof farm: a man and a woman. They were very elderly and were freezing cold, but Constantin Sergeievitch who saw them in the middle of the garden, wouldn't let them in. As you know, since then I have been thinking about them every day and today, when I saw Constantin Sergeievitch again, he told me that the old couple weren't there anymore. He said they had become thinner and thinner, until there was nothing left in the garden but the old man's hat, and the black buttons from the old woman's white coat. He said that the ground in front of my house was still covered in frozen tears. I was so upset that Constantin Sergeievitch confessed the truth. "Little Lyolya", he smiled, "don't worry about the old couple any more. They were just two snow-men that have been melting with the breath of the new spring. That's why all that's left of them, scattered between the first shoots of grass, are the dented hat and the black buttons of the white coat." As you know, I grew very angry with Constantin Sergeievitch, because he had made fun of me, treated me like I was a little girl, and caused my heart to ache for a whole week. I've been thinking about this all day. I think that just as snow-men melt, all people stop existing. Why? As you know, every day, I tell you things that happen to me as if they were stories, and you listen to me without saying a word because the stories that I

tell you, you already know them really. But today, I need you to answer me. Tell me, why do people stop existing? (*Pause.*) Are you angry with me, maybe? I beg you to answer me. I don't understand it. Only you know. Why do we stop existing? (*Pause. The girl remains still for a few moments, her face expectant.*) And if you don't exist? If God doesn't exist, where will I go for the answer? Will I have to do it all by myself?

(The girl hears some voices calling her and gets up with the lit candle. The stage, that until now has been dark with only a light over the girl, begins to light up softly, leaving some areas in darkness and others in shadow. Voices off. They are the characters of the stories that LYOLYA invents every day.)

Voice: Lyolya, I'm the clown, and I no longer know how to make people laugh. What should I say?

Voice: Lyolya, I'm the fountain in the garden, I no longer have strength to make the water flow. What should I do?

Voice: Lyolya, I'm the cuckoo clock, I need winding up and I am left without a voice to sing the time.

Voice: Lyolya, I'm the rocking chair, no one comes to sit on my lap and I can no longer rock.

Voice: Lyolya, I'm the tambourine. They've left me in the attic on my own. Nobody thinks about me and I can no longer make a sound.

Voice: Lyolya, I'm the colouring pencil. My tip is blunt and nobody can make me draw.

(The voices, all with different tones, superimpose one-another until they create a suffocating atmosphere. Towards the end of this effect, the voices of boys and girls appear who will simply say their names until they all mix together in a loud uproar. It is important that these names are used, as they are the names of the characters that appear throughout the play.)

Voices of boys and girls: Lyolya I'm Hendrik, Lyolya I'm Genia, Lyolya I'm Roba, Lyolya I'm Sacha, Lyolya I'm Malwida, Lyolya I'm Paul, Lyolya I'm Friedrich, Lyolya I'm Carl, Lyolya I'm Rainer, Lyolya I'm Ernst, Lyolya I'm Sigmund, Lyolya I'm Frida, Lyolya I'm Mouska, Lyolya I'm Gustav.

(The girl meanders from one side of the stage to the other, disorientated by the clamour of voices that are calling her, until she notices that in a corner, sat at a table in front of an old bookcase, there is a nineteen year old girl. It's YOUNG LYOLYA, who is also wearing a long white night-dress that touches her feet. She is asleep with her head resting on the table, on top of a heap of books and papers. When she sees her, LYOLYA GIRL is relieved. Over the course of their conversation, we should see that day is dawning.)

Lyolya girl: Lyolya, Lyolya, wake up.

Young Lyolya: *(Reacts sleepily, waking up)* Oh...! Yes? I must have fallen asleep reading... and what are you doing here so early? Are you up already?

Lyolya girl: I had a nightmare. I'm not sure if I'll be able to explain it. It was night, and I was all alone in a big house. I started to hear voices calling me. Lots of voices! Some were just shouting my name very loudly. And others were whispering to me, but I couldn't understand a thing they were saying. I tried to find out where they were coming from, but I couldn't see anyone, anywhere. They were like ghosts, but they knew my name. I found myself surrounded by ghosts, but I felt alone and disorientated... and then suddenly I woke up, drenched in sweat, and I started walking around the whole house as if I had turned into a ghost too. I was afraid that suddenly, one of these strange characters might jump out from any corner, or from under a door or inside a cupboard or behind a curtain... until I got here and I saw you.

Young Lyolya: Come here little one (*she sits her on the table*). It's all over now. (*She strokes her hair and wipes some sweat from her cheek.*) They're ghosts, just as you say, and ghosts only exist in our imaginations. I had a dream too.

Lyolya girl: Did you? What about?

Young Lyolya: I dreamt of my confirmation ceremony. In the middle of a sepulchral silence, extremely loudly and with all my strength I could feel myself calling "no", like a vast cry that resounded throughout the whole church. My mother started crying, and all her friends and family were pushing me outside. Then, I found myself in a big station, alone, loaded with suitcases, and I was waiting for a train that wouldn't come. But then, I'm not sure how exactly, I was entering a house where there was a beautiful study, bathed in light, full of books and flowers. On either side of this room was a bedroom, and everywhere were comrades, walking up and down. I looked at them all, trying so hard to see their faces, but I couldn't. It seemed like a very nice place. Everyone was working seriously, but they were also talking and laughing. I was looking everywhere for Hendrik. It seemed impossible that I wouldn't find him in such a house, where everyone was studying and discussing and exchanging opinions.

Lyolya girl: Who is Hendrik?

Young Lyolya: He's... my soul mate.

Lyolya girl: What's a soul mate?

Young Lyolya: It's someone you don't need to tell your secrets to because they can already guess them, and who pours their heart out to you so that you can discover other secrets they know, things that you need to learn.

Lyolya girl: Oh...! Then my soul had a friend too who it confessed everything to every day. But last night, just

before I went to sleep and had that nightmare, I knew I had lost him. He was only a ghost, like the ones in my dream.

Young Lyolya: Friends might leave you, little Lyolya, but they can never be lost. What they have given you remains recorded forever, in the tucks and creases of your memory. Now don't worry anymore. You will find more friends. Maybe they were the ones that were calling you in your dream. You'll get older, and when you are grown up like me you will embark on a long journey. It will be your journey, and you will be able to decide where to go, and who to go with.

Lyolya girl: A journey like the one in your dream?

Young Lyolya: Yes, of course, like the one in my dream. Sometimes your dreams can guide you, all you need to do is listen.

Lyolya girl: But you dreamt of very different things: a church, a train station, a house full of books and people, and a friend you were looking for but couldn't find. What do you think it all means?

Young Lyolya: The bit about the church is very clear. Two years ago I refused to get confirmed. Leading up to that decision, I went through a period of doubts and personal conflicts. That must be why I still dream of it. My attitude was seen by everyone as a rejection of my parents' faith, and it provoked a scandal throughout the whole community. At that time, my father had already passed away, and I was relieved to have saved him this sorrow. My mother took it badly and from then on our differences have become more and more accentuated. She says I'm obstinate and want to impose my will on everything.

Lyolya girl: And it must be true, because you did get your way. But you haven't told me why you didn't want to get confirmed.

Young Lyolya: Do you remember that “good Lord” of my childhood, that generous “great Father” with his pockets spilling over with gifts? That good Lord in who all the tenderness of the mother and all the omnipotence of the father fused together in one single symbol? That good Lord who had been my only true friend when I was little, and who I had shared all my secrets with?

Lyolya girl: Yes, the soul mate who I told all my stories to every night and who I realised yesterday that I had lost.

Young Lyolya: Exactly, you have lost him now, and at that time, I had completely forgotten him. But while I was preparing for the confirmation, that memory came alive again, and the more vivid it became, the more I realised that what Pastor Dalton had taught us meant nothing to me. A kind of pious and secret revolution was growing inside of me, making me reject all proof of His existence, of His power, and His incomparable goodness. And I decided to say “no”, extremely loudly, and with all the strength I could.

Lyolya girl: Just like in your dream.

Young Lyolya: Yes, in a similar way. It was around that time I met Hendrik Gillot.

Lyolya girl: Your friend.

Young Lyolya: He was the preacher of the Orthodox Protestant church in the city. His sermons were famous. People told me he was a man of liberal opinions, and that because of this, he was one of Pastor Dalton’s adversaries. Altogether, it drew my attention and I decided to go and hear him. When he stepped up to the pulpit and began to speak I immediately felt that we had things in common. He preached about the great miracle of life and I listened to him, spellbound, as though he were a God. But he wasn’t a God, do you see?

That was what seduced me. He was a human being of flesh and bone. Here was someone who *did* “exist”. I decided to write him a letter. I remember that as I was writing, I felt happy, because I thought if I managed to speak to him, my solitude would be over.

Lyolya girl: And what happened after that?

Young Lyolya: He welcomed me after a short while with open arms. He initiated my learning.

Lyolya girl: Like a sort of teacher.

Young Lyolya: Just like that. A great teacher, because he tried to give my spirit a more positive direction. I allowed myself to be rocked in his wisdom, as in a cradle, and he transformed for me into the Great Divine Father who satisfied my desire to discover, to learn, to know.

Lyolya girl: Maybe that’s why, in that house full of books and people in your dream, you were looking for him and couldn’t find him.

Young Lyolya: Of course, little one, maybe that’s why.

Lyolya girl: You still haven’t explained the train station.

Young Lyolya: Oh, the train station! That’s the bit I like most because it must mean that its time to embark on my journey. I’m happy. Look, its daylight, and its nearly time get dressed. Why don’t you gather our clothes, run along, I must find some papers.

(YOUNG LYOLYA opens a box and takes out a portrait. She looks at it then leaves it on the table. She rummages through some books and from inside one she takes out a paper and starts to read it quietly, as though to herself. At this moment the song begins. It is a chorus of four voices that sing the poem that LYOLYA has started to read. LYOLYA, with the paper in her fingers, begins to dance around the stage, following the melody.)

Poem: Hymn to Life

Truly, the way a friend loves a friend
Is how I love you, riddle, life —
Whether I've rejoiced in you or wept,
Whether you've brought me joy or grief.
I *love* you, with your sorrow too;
And if you must destroy me, still,
I'll tear myself from your arms, as friend
Tears himself from the bosom of friend.
I clasp you with my strength entire!
May your flame kindle me, your riddle
Even in the ardour of the battle
Only more deeply plumb my depths.
Millennia-long to be! To think!
Enclose me fast in both your arms:
If you've no happiness left to give me —
Well then! you still have your pain.ⁱⁱ
(LYOLYA GIRL *enters with the clothes.*)

Lyolya girl: There was a lovely dress in the wardrobe in your room. It was saying "Take me Lyolya. I was made for you. I've been adorned for so long to celebrate this day." I bought it so you can put it on.

Young Lyolya: (*Laughs and kisses her.*) Thank you, little one.

(LYOLYA GIRL *starts to get dressed.* YOUNG LYOLYA *helps her.*)

Young Lyolya: (*Indicating the dress*) I've never worn it. It's the dress Mouska made for me for the confirmation.

Lyolya girl: I, on the other hand, picked this really old one, but it's the one I like best.

Young Lyolya: For you an old one, and for me a new one. Do you know what? These dresses have given me an idea.

Lyolya girl: Are we going to play a game?

Young Lyolya: No. A ritual.

Lyolya girl: A ritual?

Young Lyolya: Yes, a symbolic ceremony to celebrate an important event. It'll be a secret ritual, between you and me.

Lyolya girl: How exciting! And what will we celebrate?

Young Lyolya: Listen carefully, both of us are experiencing a time of change. Soon, you will stop being a little girl and to say goodbye to your childhood you have chosen this old dress that you feel a special attachment to, because you've shared a lot of experiences with it. In the same way, my dress has turned into a symbol.

Lyolya girl: I'm dressed.

Young Lyolya: Then close your eyes now and say some magic words, whichever ones you like.

Lyolya girl: I'll recite my motto.

Young Lyolya: Ok. I'm listening.

Lyolya girl: "The world doesn't have to help you, believe me! If you want a life, steal it."

Young Lyolya: And now, like in fairy tales, you must make three wishes.

Lyolya girl: I wish... for the characters in my dreams to accompany me and give life to my thoughts. I wish... for the people that enter my life to become part of my dreams and for me to become part of theirs. I wish... to plunge head first into a lake of my strange mysteries, and to swim down river without looking back until I reach the sea.

Young Lyolya: So be it. Now, come here, stand on the table and try on my dress (*she puts it on her*) as it is the

symbol for puberty, because very soon your body will transform and your instincts will awaken, and all around you everything will be new like this confirmation dress that you are wearing now. For your entrance into this world, I offer you all my books. Let them be a source of discoveries for you as they have been for me. In them, may you learn all the different ways in which people have reached closer to God and the world, may you read about their dreams and their sufferings, and may you learn the poetry of life and the great theatre of the world. I also want you to look after this portrait that I have kept in my drawer until now. It's Vera Zasulich, a Russian revolutionary — to remind you that in order to fulfil your dreams you must possess a fighting spirit.

Lyolya girl: (*Kisses her*) Now it's my turn to put your new dress on you, and it's your turn to close your eyes and let your heart speak. Let this dress signify the image of your desires.

Young Lyolya: I can neither live according to models nor shall I ever be a model for anyone at all; on the contrary — I shall make my own life according to myself, whatever may come of it. In this, I have no principle to represent, but something much more wonderful — something that is inside oneself and is hot with sheer life, and rejoices, and wants to get out.ⁱⁱⁱ

Lyolya girl: And now, like in fairy tales, you must make three wishes.

Young Lyolya: I wish to live in happiness. I wish for the ability to choose. And I wish to absorb myself, body and soul, with every last treasure I find on the way.

Lyolya girl: So be it. Now, come here, and I will give you my gift. It's an empty suitcase, so that you can fill it all yourself. The only thing inside it is a page from a calendar. I don't know why, but one day it appeared

attached above my bed. It's a piece of advice, and it says: "Strive to be patient, complete your task, and work with your own hands."

Young Lyolya: (*She kisses her*) Give me your hand and repeat after me. I was born in 1861.

Lyolya girl: I was born in 1861.

Young Lyolya: The year that slavery was abolished in Russia.

Lyolya girl: The year that slavery was abolished in Russia.

Young Lyolya: Everywhere, people inhaled a breath of freedom.

Lyolya girl: Everywhere, people inhaled a breath of freedom.

Young Lyolya: Now I know this symbol will accompany me for the rest of my life.

Lyolya girl: Now I know this symbol will accompany me for the rest of my life.

Young Lyolya: Goodbye, little one.

Lyolya girl: I will always be by your side, to remind you of the dreams and fantasies you had when you were little.

Young Lyolya: And you will remind me of your motto.

(LYOLYA GIRL *exits*. YOUNG LYOLYA *stays alone on stage with the suitcase in her hand. The light centres on her.*)

Young Lyolya: I was to leave for Zurich in September of 1880. There, was one of the few European universities that accepted women, but I couldn't get a passport from the Russian authorities because I had abandoned the church. A fresh proof of Gillot's love provided me

with the key to my freedom, even though he was hurt, because I had refused to marry him. He was already married and had two daughters, of more or less my own age. To agree to his wishes would have caused another scandal, but that wasn't the reason why I rejected his proposal. It's true that Hendrik Gillot had been the great love of my adolescence. I adored him as a God, I admired him as a teacher and I loved him like the father I had lost a short while before. But on that day when, with me sitting on his knee, he declared his love for me, I felt incapable of seeing him as a man. And like lightning, this adored being deserted my heart. The moment I heard the voice of a man with his own demands, who wasn't content to realise mine, but on the contrary, threatened them, a chill shot up my spine and I was seized by a single obsession: run. It was then that I realised clearly how my path was dividing, and I needed to make a choice. I chose the path of freedom. Hendrik suggested the possibility of my achieving a confirmation certificate, thanks to one of his friends who practiced in a village in Holland. In the end, I received my confirmation, but I did it through a secret ritual, one beautiful Sunday in May, formalised by Gillot who followed my own instructions. Fortunately my mother who had accompanied us, didn't understand a word of the sacrilegious sermon that Hendrik made in Dutch, or the words of the confirmation that moved us both so much. Hendrik didn't call me by my birth name, Louise, or by my Russian name Lyolya, instead he said: "Lou, fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are mine." These words of Isaiah had symbolic value for both of us, almost like those of a marriage. Just as they united us, so they also separated us, and ever since then, my name has been Lou.

(Darkness. The sound of a train, and then one after the other. Trains that pass each other.)

ACT TWO

Lou's Journey (1882-1927)

Scene One

Lou's Freedom (1882-1901)

(Inside a train carriage. Seated in a compartment there is a woman of some forty years. It is LOU ANDREAS SALOMÉ. Enter LOU VON SALOMÉ, the young lady of the previous scene, with a suitcase. She sits herself opposite ADULT LOU.)

Young Lou: Good morning.

Adult Lou: Good morning.

Young Lou: Are you travelling alone?

Adult Lou: Yes, you too?

Young Lou: Yes, I'm travelling to Berlin. A friend is waiting for me there.

Adult Lou: I lived for many years near Berlin, in Tempelhof.

Young Lou: Oh! And where do you live now?

Adult Lou: In Gottingen. My husband is a professor of oriental languages, and they offered him a place there. We were very keen to live in the mountains, and we were lucky enough to find a house in the middle of the forest. Now and again we even see foxes there. Every time I return from travelling I like to walk bare foot in the garden. I enjoy comparing how the forest has changed in my absence, with the impressions I have from my time away.

Young Lou: Do you travel very often?

Adult Lou: Yes, a great deal, but from time to time I must return to my refuge.

Young Lou: Well, I suppose you could say that I've just started my travels this year. I love to watch how the countryside speeds past, in rhythm with the jolts of the train! I feel like the wind is taking me by the hand to rock me in the air, and when it starts to whip, it's as though life is giving me a new impulse.

Adult Lou: My friend, that's the thrust of youth. Do you know what I think? Every journey is an excuse that allows you to go over a small stretch of your path. In escaping the day to day, you look more favourably on things and deep down you appease an empty space you need to fill. Every time you board a train you leave behind an era of your life, consign it to the forgotten, and open a new era of hope. Don't you find?

Young Lou: And dreams are the motors of hope.

Adult Lou: Do you know what I love most about traveling? Seeing people rushing up and down the aisles, getting on and off the trains, loaded with luggage. And then, finding them all of a sudden sat in front of me, marking out their space in relation to mine. To break the ice I usually start a conversation that will seem insignificant, but while I'm talking and thinking, I find myself involuntarily weaving a path around my own world. Sometimes, people who have at first seemed like strangers, transform into a mirror of my own unconscious. That's exactly what's happened with you, from the moment you boarded the train.

Young Lou: I'm not sure I understand. Do you mean, I remind you of when you were younger?

Adult Lou: I mean, that seeing myself reflected in you, the portrait of my youth takes on a novelistic air. Don't be startled by my speculations. I'm a writer, and have a certain tendency towards fantasy.

Young Lou: What a passionate profession!

Adult Lou: Yes it is, above all the mechanism of writing.
For me it's a vital process.

Young Lou: And what kinds of things have you written?

Adult Lou: Novels, essays, articles... various things.
"Ruth" for example, is a novel that tells of the love
between a professor and an adolescent.

Young Lou: It's curious: In Russia I lived through a similar experience.

Adult Lou: Indeed, it's a common occurrence, but if I'm to be honest, I was also inspired by a personal experience. At the moment I'm reviewing plays. I write for the *Freie Buhne* magazine. I have many friends in the circle of the free theatre. I like theatre very much. Do you know Ibsen?

Young Lou: No. Who is he?

Adult Lou: He's a Norwegian author who has written many plays. In most of them he has made interesting reflections on the world of women. I was lucky enough to know the plays before they were published in German, because my husband knows many languages and he used to read them to me, translating for me as he read. I was so fascinated by the protagonists of Ibsen's plays I decided to write a book about them.

Young Lou: And what happens to these women?

Adult Lou: What they all have in common is the conflict between their lives and their struggle for freedom. In every play, this conflict is resolved in a different way.

Young Lou: How interesting! I've always been fascinated by matters of freedom. But this year, my personal circumstances have been particularly affected. What solutions does Ibsen propose?

Adult Lou: Do you like stories?

Young Lou: Very much. When I was little I used to invent them all the time. Why do you ask?

Adult Lou: Because the very introduction to this book, about the characters of Ibsen, is a story.

Young Lou: Oh! Then why don't you tell it to me?

Adult Lou: Once upon a time there was a cellar, with small crevices full of cobwebs, through which the light from outside just about managed to creep in. The floor was made of wood and above it there was a ceiling of straw. The owners of the house held all kinds of animals captive, and as they looked after them, the animals would gradually lose their natural instinct for life in the open air. These owners had pigeons, birds, rabbits and chickens, and in the middle of them all was a wild duck, the most noble, and worthy of compassion of all the beasts that are deprived of their freedom. This duck had arrived when she was very young. She ignored her origins and grew happily in the cellar, as though she were in her natural habitat until, one day, an autumn storm awoke her true nature. She extended her wings and took flight, abandoning her uncomfortable prison. The story of this duck is that of Nora, the protagonist of *A Doll's House*. But then, wouldn't you know ...here in the attic arrives another duck who is injured and seeking shelter. She makes friends with all the other animals, above all with a bird that is blind. Over time, as the duck grows fat in her captivity, she loses her agility and her longings for freedom are extinguished. Nothing propels her towards the life she had before, nothing, except the sweet song of the bird, who, exerting great effort to make her friend react, forgets that she is blind, extends her wings and attempts to fly, but she crashes into the beams of the cellar, falls to the ground with her wings broken, and dies. This is the story of *Hedwig*.

Young Lou: What a sad story!

Adult Lou: There is another who is resigned to her destiny in the cellar and has no strength to rebel. Only in her dreams does she realise that outside of the cellar, the real world exists. Slowly, she pines away in her prison thinking of what her real destiny might have been. For her there is no future, only a sad gaze at a life full of shattered hope. That's the story of Frau Alwing of *Ghosts*. But there is the story of another duck who breaks into the cellar and becomes the head of all the other animals that she dominates. Instead of putting up a resistance, the other animals correspond with love. And here lies the danger: to domesticate the wild duck with love and routine. Bit by bit, this duck develops into a domesticated animal, and she eventually repents all the acts of her past life so much she convinces herself that only in death will she find atonement. That is the destiny of Rebekka.

Young Lou: So far, only the story of the first duck leaves open a window of hope.

Adult Lou: There is another duck that ends up in the cellar because she strayed from her path and lost her way, but she can't get used to captivity. The other animals try to cheer her spirits, but she doesn't notice, crying so much for her lost freedom that. Finally, the other animals decide to open a window and let her fly. But at that moment, the duck remains still and doesn't take flight. Now that she has freedom, she has lost her fear of captivity. That's what happens to Ellida, in the *Lady from the Sea*. And finally there is a duck that is neither wild nor domestic. She doesn't have the courage of the creatures who are free, but at the same time, she feels ashamed of her security in this home. Her useless life must have a useless end. This is the story of *Hedda Gabler*. When a romantic adventure takes a critical turn, she fears a scandal, and shoots herself.

Young Lou: It's an enlightening story, but I think there can be ducks that enjoy freedom throughout their whole lives. I'm sure that I won't find myself ending up like any of them, because I'll fight to have that same courage that, as you say, the free creatures have.

Adult Lou: I don't think it's easy at all to be a wild duck. What a young duck such as yourself may not be aware of yet, is that any small experience can turn your life on its head. The labyrinth of motivations is very complex.

Young Lou: Then it's a question of finding a solution for every individual situation. Don't you think?

Adult Lou: Of course.

Young Lou: I think you must be a very interesting writer. What else have you written?

Adult Lou: Right now I'm finishing work on a novel about Russia, my homeland, my childhood memories and the impressions I have of a long journey I made with a great friend, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. I'm also working on an essay about love and eroticism. But I wrote my first book when I was very young. I must have been your age, more or less, maybe a bit older. I started to write the book in an attempt to find a solution to a troubled circumstance in my life. In fact, it was just the kind of situation we have been talking about. At the time, I had left home to study abroad. I was recovering from an illness, which meant that I had to spend time with my mother in the south of Europe. The truth is, that I recovered much faster than everyone expected. It must have been the new air of freedom that the duck was breathing! In any case, I made some friends who turned out to be very enriching. I felt that a whole world of experiences was opening up before me like a rainbow of colours, and my mother, who saw how I was taking flight, and was afraid of what might become of me, fought with all her strength to take me

home dead or alive. I needed an excuse, and it occurred to me to write a book. And that's how, completely by chance, I started to write. The book was published with the title *Struggling for God* and I signed it under the pseudonym Henri Lou.

Young Lou: It couldn't have been a novel, with such a title?

Adult Lou: In a way, it was. Using certain characters it evoked the experience of losing God that had concerned me ever since I was very young. I don't suppose you want me to tell you that story, too?

Young Lou: Please do, I'd be very grateful. Do you know what? I'm discovering that what you mentioned earlier, about seeing the image of your youth reflected in me, is not so strange after all. Now I'm beginning to understand that we're similar. Everything that you've told me corresponds, almost exactly, with what's happened to me this year.

Adult Lou: I have an idea. Why don't I give you a brief overview of my book, and then, you can tell me all the things you think we have in common. That way I'll have the pleasure of listening to you, and delighting in memories of my twenties.

Young Lou: Agreed.

Adult Lou: The protagonist is called Kuno, and he lives in fascination of the imposing and dominating figure of his father, a preacher, who is old and very strict. He has a profound bond with his play mate Jane, because of a religious mysticism that they share. Kuno has an almost sickly character. He is defined as a man who is sharp, cold, obstinate and head strong, and he confesses that very early on in his life he lost his faith in the God of his childhood. As a consequence of this loss, Kuno feels abandoned and guilty. Could there be a greater crime on his conscience than the assassination

of God? And if a man lives without God, where should he find the moral principles that must guide him through life? At first Kuno doesn't believe that the human intellect could be an acceptable substitute for the firm castle of God, but then, what is left for the man who has lost his old faith in God and who looks with scepticism at the modern cult of reason? "Nothing," his younger brother Rudolf replies. "He must have sufficient courage to recognise that life is useless, that there is no divine salvation or salvation on earth, and that the most one can hope for is to find peace in the Buddhist ideal of Nirvana." But Kuno is a passionate enemy of resignation. When his brother suggests that all religions consider life to be a necessary ill, Kuno replies that in the essence of religion you can also learn an authentic love of life, and the great experience that is found in the realisation of an ideal. The work is longer, but I don't want to tire you with it. What do you think?

Young Lou: I love it! I'm more and more surprised. Now it's not only my life that has things in common with yours. The characters Rudolf and Kuno remind me of my friends, Nietzsche and Ree.

(They both remain pensive for a moment. The train stops, and two men board that represent Nietzsche and Ree, carefully characterised. ADULT LOU greets them with a light gesture that they correspond, and they sit down next to YOUNG LOU.)

Adult Lou: Well, we agreed that you would also tell me some things.

Young Lou: Oh, yes. I'm sorry. I was rather taken aback. I was talking about my friends. Well, we have planned to live together. As a joke, we call the project the "Trinity", because we want to live together, all three of us like brothers and sisters, and dedicate ourselves wholly to the pursuit of study. This autumn we want to

go and live in Vienna or Paris. We'll see. At the moment I'm on my way to Berlin to meet Ree. He's the friend that I told you is waiting for me.

Adult Lou: Certainly a brave plan.

Young Lou: Well, it sprang up spontaneously. Last March, Malwida von Meysenburg introduced me to Paul Ree, and from the first day that we met, whenever we left the parties that Malwida used to organise at her house, we would walk through the streets of Rome until the early hours of the morning. Paul would talk to me about his philosophical ideas. According to him, an innate moral awareness doesn't exist, and our ideas about Good and Evil are a product of culture. He said that God is an illusion, and heaven a mirage created by man. I confided in him, and we had fun, because he's a man who is blessed with a great sense of humour. Very soon we became close, until one day I had the unexpected surprise of discovering that he asked my mother for my hand in marriage, of which I had absolutely no idea.

Adult Lou: You hadn't realised that he was in love?

Young Lou: Not at all. I was very irritated by the situation, because apart from the discourtesy of talking to my mother behind my back, this plan of marriage clashed directly with everything I wished for. What I mean is, that while Ree was making plans to marry me, I was also making plans to prolong the kind of life I had discovered in Rome, just as soon as my Mother would return to Russia.

Adult Lou: In other words, a dark cloud appeared over your project.

Young Lou: Yes, but immediately I tried to shift it, convincing my friend of the marvellous effects it could produce on our desirous souls to learn to live like brother and sister.

Adult Lou: This is to say, that you were the one who imposed this friend-brother idea.

Young Lou: Let's just say that, rather than impose it, I considered it to be implicit. Perhaps I am influenced by the close relationship I've always maintained with my brothers in Russia.

Adult Lou: But it was clear that the feelings that Ree had for you were not those of a brother, exactly. How could you ask him to continue with this plan?

Young Lou: What do you mean, how could I ask him to continue with it? When on the other hand, I was offering him my friendship, that other incomparable bond, almost unique — a bond that surpasses the greatest contradictions in life.

Adult Lou: Ree accepted?

Young Lou: Naturally. With a host of values that held enough weight for us to go forward with the relationship as much as with our project.

Adult Lou: And Friedrich Nietzsche? How did he enter into this adventure?

Young Lou: He and Ree had become very good friends, especially since the break up of Nietzsche and Wagner. When Ree and I first met, he talked to me about Nietzsche a great deal, because he said that we had many ideas in common; according to him we both recoiled from the idea of facing a world without God, and this pushed us towards researching a new faith that would endorse the grandeur of life, and the indulgence of the senses. Because of this, it occurred to Ree to write to his friend, telling him about me and our project. Nietzsche replied literally, saying that he felt a live desire for this kind of communion of spirits. For me, the possibility of including Nietzsche in our project was very exciting.

Adult Lou: And from the union of these three spirits was born the name of the project, “The Trinity”. An original and fitting name, given the way of life of its members.

Young Lou: But just as it was time to set the project in motion, an absurd kind of battle broke out that could have only one denominator: social conventions.

Adult Lou: Who did you have to fight this battle against, exactly?

Young Lou: Well, as much my mother as Malwida herself, and even Gillot tried to shackle my attempts. My mother’s attitude didn’t surprise me, and the letter from Gillot, I’d gone so far as to say I found it ridiculous.

Adult Lou: Why?

Young Lou: He said the idea of fixating myself exclusively on intellectual objectives demonstrated that I was going through a transitional phase. What did he mean by “transitional”, when it was he who had instigated my pursuit of these kinds of ideas? If he meant that the kind of experiences I might pursue in the future would oblige me to renounce the one thing that is hardest to obtain on this earth: freedom, “then” — I replied to him — “I will always live in transition”. I didn’t want his advice, what I needed was his trust. But I was most hurt by the behaviour of Malwida.

Adult Lou: It’s logical that the reaction of a woman such as Malwida, who has been a passionate defender of personal freedom throughout her whole life, would be the reaction that troubled you most.

Young Lou: Do you know Malwida Meysenburg?

Adult Lou: Who doesn’t know the tireless fighter for social justice? Everyone knows that when she was younger she joined the revolutionaries of 1848, and despite the disaster of the revolution and the upheavals

she experienced in exile, she continued to have a close relationship through letters as much with the political elite as with the avant-garde artists in Europe. And who doesn't know that when she was older and moved to Rome, in a house near the Coliseum, she converted her living room into an obligatory destination of pilgrimage for artists and politics from around the world, who confided in her their worries and despairs?

Young Lou: Well, it's there that I met her, in that living room, presided over by a white bust of Richard Wagner. Malwida always had a silver vase full of anemones next to it.

Adult Lou: She adored the Great Teacher!

Young Lou: And she waited with veritable passion the opening of his latest play at the Festival of Bayreuth. She didn't talk of 1882, instead she referred to it as "the year of Parsifal". I had the opportunity of holding long conversations with Malwida. Both of us descended from the old nobility, she from Germany, and I from Russia, and both of us had fought against the prejudices of our class. We had both challenged our families, and both separated ourselves from the church. I think that Malwida, at her sixty-five years, saw her youth reflected in me, and I, at twenty-one saw in her how I might age. But what captivated me most, was seeing in her the image of a mother-friend.

Adult Lou: A woman hardened by experience, at the threshold of old age, taking under her wing an inexperienced girl, desirous of adventure and at the doors of life. In the depths of her heart the grand dame must have known that the path the young girl had to travel would separate them.

Young Lou: You're right. At first I didn't understand why, when she spoke she always used the term "we". She tried to advise me, saying for example "we don't

have the right to do this” or “we don’t have the right to say that”, but I totally ignore the scope of this word “we” because at the moment, all that matters to me is “I”.

Adult Lou: It’s a very individualist position, all the same.

Young Lou: I won’t deny it, but I feel very happy and I am decided, I will live my own spiritual and human adventure. That’s why, as I’ve already told you, I’m not prepared to renounce the most indispensable of my weapons: freedom.

Adult Lou: You must already know that Malwida has been considered one of the most important figures of German feminism, and that one of the projects that she cherished was the creation of a school where women would have the opportunity to study under the same conditions as men. She wanted to demonstrate that women were not men’s intellectual inferiors. She defended her project from a social point of view, not an individual one, do you see?

Young Lou: Please don’t think that I want to reduce the importance of either Malwida’s ideas or her projects, but what you haven’t said is that, in this fight to achieve equality of rights, she considered that women shouldn’t force their femininity at any time. What did she mean by that?

Adult Lou: What you must understand is that her position and your own correspond to different readings. Every generation makes their own contribution and no link of the chain should be undervalued.

Young Lou: Look, in Russia, where I was brought up, in reality and in practice we were advancing the struggles of the most important feminists in Europe. In my childhood I already breathed that desire for equality. It always seemed to me the most natural thing that women and men should live and study together. In

what way is that different from my Trinity project that Malwida opposed so vehemently? Her attitude demonstrated that she had more prejudices than my mother. Don't you believe that in the future women must be able to find more solutions than the ones proposed by Ibsen in his plays, and that you collected in your wonderful story of the wild duck?

Adult Lou: I do agree with you. However, I wanted to make the point of valuing the effort of women such as Malwida and the contribution they have made to the progress of feminism.

Young Lou: In that case, I do believe strongly that every individual addition, however small, is equally necessary, or more so.

Adult Lou: One thing doesn't exclude the other. But until now you've only told me about your relationship with Ree. What do you say of Nietzsche?

Young Lou: I'm sure you'll find this amusing. Guess where we met? At none other than the Christian temple of excellence: Saint Peter's Basilica of Rome. It was in April. At the time, Ree was working on a piece in which he proposed to demonstrate the non-existence of God, and he was working on it in a prie-dieu in one of the chapels at the side of the basilica. I thought it was awfully funny that he would choose such a sacred place to write a piece of this nature. One day when I accompanied him, Nietzsche appeared. He had arrived from spending time in Messina. When Ree introduced us, Nietzsche offered me his hand, bowed his head profoundly, and said "From which stars did we fall to meet each other here?" I was drawn in by his ceremonious behaviour. Shortly after, Ree came to me with the crazy idea that Nietzsche had asked him to propose to me on his behalf.

Adult Lou: He had also fallen in love?

Young Lou: I don't really think so, but according to him it was the only way that my mother would consent to letting me live with him. Doesn't it seem absurd to you? He wanted to marry me to save appearances. I couldn't conceive of it, how such a liberal thinker could fall into such bourgeois attitudes!

Adult Lou: And how did you react?

Young Lou: I began to ask myself why my most spontaneous wishes always provoked such fountains of misunderstanding. In a short time I had received two unsolicited proposals of marriage from two men, with whom all I wanted was to learn. What was I supposed to think? That the only thing they really valued in me, was my nature as a woman?

Adult Lou: And what happened then?

Young Lou: A trip to Montesacro shed new light on the situation.

Adult Lou: What happened in Montesacro?

Young Lou: Nietzsche proposed an excursion to Orta, a beautiful lake in the north of Italy. All three of us went, accompanied by my mother. But, Ree was irritated by the almost mystical devotion with which Nietzsche and I were enjoying these beautiful surroundings. He decided to stay and keep my mother company, while Nietzsche and I went up to Montesacro. We spent an unforgettable afternoon together, and lost all sense of time. Both Paul Ree and my mother were particularly annoyed when they greeted us.

Adult Lou: Why? What happened that afternoon?

Young Lou: As we were walking, surrounded by this idyllic landscape, Nietzsche murmured, at a tiny, almost imperceptible whisper "Montesacro" and then he added "The most enchanting dream of my life, I owe to you."

Adult Lou: What dream was he referring to?

Young Lou: I don't know, I didn't ask. At that moment, it was enough for me to know that I had been capable of provoking an enchanting dream in someone else.

Adult Lou: One way or the other, didn't he try to explain such an intimate confession?

Young Lou: We experienced moments of extreme tension, perhaps caused by the mixture of emotions that were bubbling under the surface, surging up and then dying again, always brushing against our conversations. I had the feeling that Nietzsche also celebrated life, in the same way that, after each one of his painful physical crises, he was re-born stronger than before. He spoke to me in a quiet voice about his idea of eternal life, and he wouldn't stop repeating that he was in love with his destiny.

Adult Lou: A destiny that he crossed with yours one afternoon in May, in the north of Italy, to celebrate the marriage between mystical ecstasy and erotic exaltation.

Young Lou: A feeling that a simple proposal of marriage made out of pure formality, had transformed into sincere desire.

Adult Lou: Don't you think the feelings of both your friends towards you could endanger your Trinity project?

Young Lou: I don't know, but I've just spent a month with Nietzsche in Tautenburg and I think it's been an enriching experience for both of us. The sincerity with which we've been able to share our most profound thoughts has been so immense, that we've laid ourselves completely bare, with no pretence of any kind. We've anchored ourselves in the deepest abysses. I get the feeling that if anyone had heard us talking, they'd

have thought they were listening to two demons arguing. I proved that Ree was right, that Nietzsche and I express very similar thoughts, we almost use the same words.

Adult Lou: And what kind of impression of him do you have?

Young Lou: I think, in terms of his personality, that he's a man who is fascinated by that secret side of people, that forebodes incomparable loneliness. He's a man that hides a sweet smile behind his moustache, and who has extremely beautiful hands. But above all it's the look in his eyes that gives his features a particular charm, because it doesn't reflect what he sees externally, instead, it provides a window into what passes through his soul. In terms of his philosophy, I think that one day we'll see him as a preacher of a new religion that will only want heroes as followers, like the one expressed by the character Kuno in your book *Struggling for God*, but in terms of our relationship, it's as though I see him as an object of utter fascination, and yet feel a strong impulse to recoil. Something distances me from Nietzsche. We've arrived at Berlin. My friend Paul Ree must be waiting for me. Thank you for everything.

(The two women embrace effusively. The man who represented Ree gets off the train, and from its foot, he waits for YOUNG LOU to come out. When she gets out of the compartment, he helps her down, and they both leave, arm in arm, saying nothing. The character Nietzsche contemplates them as they walk away, and he remains for a few moments observing the action of ADULT LOU who picks up a crumpled paper from the floor. She looks at it instinctively and makes a gesture to alert the young girl, but quickly corrects herself, and reads it aloud. During this action some verses of the Hymn to Life could sound. Here, if possible, Nietzsche's version.)

Adult Lou: (*Reading*) Strive to be patient, complete your task and work with your own hands. (*Immediately she turns the paper over and continues reading.*) Dear Lou, as a motto, I much prefer these verses from Goethe “Ceaseless will endeavour, from half-measures strive to wean us... Wholly, fairly, well demean us, Resting, flagging never.”^{iv}

(*She looks at the character Nietzsche and smiles at him. He responds with a small gesture of salutation, and gets off the train. ADULT LOU remains alone.*)

Adult Lou: The famous Trinity project didn't last its course, but Ree and I lived together for five years faithful to the spirit in which we conceived the idea. The community I had dreamed of was realised, with a circle of men of letters and universities, who varied depending on the years. The experience of friendship was a positive influence on us. That autumn, Nietzsche spent three weeks with us in Leipzig. All three of us were still making plans, even though we knew the real reason for us meeting was to bid farewell. Since then Nietzsche distanced himself from Ree, and to me he gave a poem that, in a way, sealed our relationship. In his book *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche said that there were two types of genius, the kind that above all want to create and who believe, and the kind who allow themselves to be fertilised and give birth. He belonged to the latter. At that time, from the roots of his suffering and tormented soul, and scaling its way up over the branches of his mind, was the sap for the prophecy that was to produce *Zarathustra*. I wrote a book about Nietzsche, twelve years later, that was published in 1894. Reading his work, the intense relations that we'd had helped me to understand the universe of his thoughts. I wrote the book with a complete independence of spirit. I paid no attention to the obvious hostility of his family, or the books that appeared after his death, but propelled above all by the

misunderstandings that some of his aphorisms, taken out of their context, had provoked. The intense states of mind and the immense desperation of Nietzsche had created a crucible of his desire for knowledge, and from the flames was born his complete works, expressed with a poetic density, that at the same time, only Goethe had surpassed, because in Nietzsche, there had co-existed a permanent state of tension and conflict, a memorable music, a free spirit, a religious reformer and an innate poet.

Scene Two

Lou's Claim (1901-1927)

(A woman of some sixty or sixty-five years boards the train with a discreet travel bag. It's ELDER LOU ANDREAS SALOMÉ. She sits in front of the woman from the previous scene, ADULT LOU ANDREAS SALOMÉ.)

Elder Lou: Good afternoon.

Adult Lou: Good afternoon.

Elder Lou: Are you travelling alone?

Adult Lou: Yes. You too?

Elder Lou: Yes, but I'm pleased to have found you. I like to travel in the company of younger people.

Adult Lou: Do you travel often?

Elder Lou: Not so much since the war. I move around rather pointedly now, nearly always for professional reasons. But when I was your age I didn't stop. My favourite capitals were Paris and Berlin. I also spent time in Munich and Vienna, and once a year, I went to Saint Petersburg to visit my family.

Adult Lou: Incredible!

Elder Lou: Why are you surprised?

Adult Lou: Because I'm from Saint Petersburg too, and also because I often visit the same cities. But what's most astonishing is that until a moment ago, just before you arrived, I shared a good part of my journey with a Russian girl. As our memories surfaced, my past emerged in her face as though it were a mirror. And now you appear...

Elder Lou: Like a sort of ghost that laughs in the face of

time, perhaps so that you might project the past, present and future onto the walls of this compartment.

Adult Lou: A fine image for a moment caught in flight. Are you by any chance a sorceress?

Elder Lou: (*Laughs*) With the passing of time, we all become a bit like witches, don't you think? But right now, for you, I'm just a lure, a call that summons you back to your self, just as you were for the young Russian girl. We're different, but identical pearls, stringing together to complete a cycle, beneath the great call of one same firmament.

Adult Lou: Do you mean to tell me that you and I, and the young Russian girl are all the same person? That the jolts of this train have called me back to the precipice of my own life, to awaken the conscience of my unconscious world?

Elder Lou: Right now, you are living through a time in which the fruits of your life have mastered a sweet, mature flavour. For me, however, all the leaves that I have patiently coloured in by each brush stroke of my days, are now being undressed by the wind. When I am completely naked, I will have to occupy myself with pruning all the branches, one by one. Only then will a new circle begin and my life will have served to allow another one to flower.

Adult Lou: Ma'am, you talk like an unreal and fantastical being.

Elder Lou: Maybe I do, and, on the other hand, my friend, these days I am convinced that fictitious characters don't exist. Just as we conceive them they are real. It seems strange, but only because we're advised to value reality and fiction in different ways. We insist on putting barriers between what is visible and what is invisible.

Adult Lou: Do you mean that things we invent serve as a way of explaining to ourselves what we can't see?

Elder Lou: In a way, yes. I believe that the impulse to create is like the murmur of the inconceivable, and that Eros is the hidden arrow that vibrates in the arch of the human soul.

Adult Lou: Twin arrows, I would say, that guide us to the expression of art or of love, twin arrows that stab at each other, wounding the liveliest erotic desire or the most poignant mystical exaltation.

Elder Lou: Art and love as human creation; mysticism and sexuality, different faces of the same inaccessible and mysterious moon.

Adult Lou: Eros that guides us and eroticism that seduces us.

Elder Lou: And thus seduced, so we seduce, to provoke in another the act of creation: whether it be love, or a work of art.

Adult Lou: The artist uses their own life to create their work.

Elder Lou: That must be why in every artistic process there is an element of danger: a certain rivalry with life.

Adult Lou: And that is when the demands of life and of the work of art enter into conflict, as is the case now with my adored friend Rainer-Maria Rilke. I remember a lovely poem that he dedicated to me.

Close my eyes: I will still see you;
Cover my ears: I will still hear you,
without feet, still walk to where you are,
and, speechless, still call you into being.
Sever my arms and I'll still hold you tight
in my heart's longing like a fist;
Lay my heart to rest, and my brain will do its beating,

and if you should set my mind aflame,
then on my blood I will carry you away.^v

(At that moment a man who represents Rilke boards the train and sits down next to ADULT LOU.)

Elder Lou: You see how it's in the results, in the supreme realisations, as is the case with the poetry of Rilke, where the profound logic that unites man, artist, life and dreams, is manifested.

Adult Lou: I remember that when I met Rainer in 1897, he was a young poet of little more than twenty years, still awe-struck by the quantity of poems he had written and had published. At the time I was thirty-six years old, and had been married to Carl Andreas for ten years. Rainer had sent me some anonymous poems. The first time we met each other, I was drawn by his particular way of "being a man".

Elder Lou: And that's how, in the spring of that year, a great love story unfolded.

Adult Lou: Do you know what I think? Even if we'd never met in this world, our lives have been interwoven since the beginning of time. We both knew that our relationship had always existed. And if I became his wife for more than four years it was because, at my thirty-six years of age, he was for me the first reality, the first man. Such is the case that I could repeat to you word for word what he said when he confessed his love to me "Only you are real." And we became man and wife in the literal sense of the word "union", the moment culminating in that two people, even against their own will, feel compelled to embrace in a way that must lay them completely bare.

Elder Lou: And since then we have been great friends, but our friendship, evident in over thirty years of correspondence, has not been the fruit of choice, but of a clandestine marriage.

Adult Lou: Because we were not two halves seeking each other out, but instead, trembling and feverish, we recognised each other as one unfathomable unity.

Elder Lou: And we became brother and sister, as we probably were in some distant past, in an age before incest became sacrilegious.

Adult Lou: Together in the eternal element that unites men amongst themselves.

Elder Lou: United in the great mysteries of life and death.

Adult Lou: I remember that in one of his letters, Rainer wrote: “it’s not only precious for two beings to recognise each other, it’s essential that they find each other again in the right moment, and that together they celebrate profound and silent festivities that bind closely their desires, so that they can rise against the storms. Before two beings may fall together into misfortune, it’s necessary for them to have been happy together, to have in common some sacred memory, to maintain a similar smile on their lips and a like nostalgia in their souls.”

Elder Lou: It’s a magnificent fragment, and it illustrates how two beings cannot appreciate love if they have not known an intimate spiritual affinity.

Adult Lou: When I visited Russia with Rilke in 1890, I experienced such strong emotions, few times have I felt them with such force again. To him, it meant the immersion in his creative activity, because in Russian history and theology he found a crucible wherein to plunge his most intimate anxieties and fervour. For me it was the inebriation of finding Russia again, in all its amplitude. I discovered for the first time, despite being Russian, the immensity of the country, the misery, the submission and the hope of the people.

Elder Lou: I remember when I changed trains at the border. The inspector seated me, calling me “ma’am”, or “little bird”. I was intoxicated by the smell of those thin goatskin leathers and the perfume of the Russian cigarettes. And, when the three rings of the bell signalled the train departing, I was inundated with an unforgettable happiness. But curiously, that feeling I have never been able to define, was not related to seeing my family again, or to missing my home land.

Adult Lou: Experiences like that grew ever more frequent with Rainer. Our days overflowed with constant efforts to treasure the experiences that we were most moved by.

Elder Lou: When two lovers are receptive, emotions are intensified in such a way as that shared experiences can become almost mythical, even though frequently the occurrences are not extraordinary.

Adult Lou: That was exactly what had such an impact on me. When the same moments were capable of bringing us both the different things that we needed, and while together we travelled over that immense land from the Black Sea to the White Sea the mouth of our own river was widening. Everywhere we looked we found a single man with a single expression, his face painted with joy and sincerity, the face of the Russian people.

Elder Lou: That country people, absent of all pretence, that had so emoted Tolstoy.

Adult Lou: Rainer and I were completely captivated. We loved that single man, because we realised that thanks to him, we had learnt so much about ourselves. But the greatest paradox was in returning from that idyllic journey, I had to separate from Rilke.

Elder Lou: A return that denounced the tragic nature of love.

Adult Lou: I rebelled against his dependence, and I understood that I could be faithful to no one but myself. Now I think that every love is, in its essence, a tragedy, but on the other hand, it can produce immense and productive effects. I am working on an essay about all of this, where I attempt to explain what I believe about love.

Elder Lou: That love without freedom dies.

Adult Lou: That unrequited love dies through un-initiation

Elder Lou: That requited love dies of satiation.

Adult Lou: Yes, only unfaithful love lives.

Elder Lou: And although it is as precious and irreplaceable as our homeland, love is also as disturbing and threatening as infinity.

Adult Lou: It can only survive with freedom to change.

(Pause. The character that represents Rilke gets off the train. The two women remain silent for a few moments.)

Adult Lou: We fell silent. As though an angel had passed.

Elder Lou: It must have been the angel of Rilke's poetry... I was thinking about changes. They are usually fortunate. The spirit needs to change its skin like snakes do, to renovate itself. Didn't Nietzsche say the same thing?

Adult Lou: I agree. What seems perfect until a certain point can eventually become a pitfall.

Elder Lou: A while ago we were talking about callings. I thought you might like to know, that I was fifty years old, a little bit older than you, when I decided to change profession.

Adult Lou: Oh yes? And what do you do now?

Elder Lou: Psychoanalysis, the most marvellous profession in the world.

Adult Lou: Well then, you are a therapist.

Elder Lou: Yes, and I dedicate myself to it body and soul. The life of each patient is like a novel that allows me to reach closer to the mysteries of life.

Adult Lou: When I write, I like to work from the psychological development of the characters.

Elder Lou: You see? In different ways, we both do similar things. You collect impressions from the exterior world and you transform them in your laboratory. I bore into the mines of the human universe to extract a raw material that also needs analysing. There is a love relationship between author-public through the text, as there is a relationship of love between patient-therapist through therapy. You create imaginary worlds and I recapture them. They're different ways to make suffering more bearable.

Adult Lou: Or life more agreeable.

Elder Lou: Or life more agreeable, yes: your point of view is better.

(They laugh)

Adult Lou: Tell me what motivated you to study psychoanalysis.

Elder Lou: It was a long process, evidently; but I was already very receptive to Freudian investigation.

Adult Lou: In what way?

Elder Lou: I had come to realise that every individual has a psychological destiny that is unique and extraordinary.

Adult Lou: Maybe your communion with Rilke's destiny also influenced you.

Elder Lou: I suppose so, especially having lived so closely to the terrible anxieties that pursued him in his most creative periods. But mostly, it was inspired by our Russian village, the people, and how accustomed they are to express their innermost feelings so spontaneously.

Adult Lou: And such a capacity they have to awaken the most complex psychic worlds, with their abundant and penetrative use of words.

Elder Lou: In 1911, after the congress of Weimar, I moved to Vienna, and for a time, I began to study by my own means.

Adult Lou: And what about Sigmund Freud, didn't you deal with him personally?

Elder Lou: Yes, of course. Now we are very good friends, but I still remember clearly our first interview. He laughed openly at me, wouldn't you know? That a woman of fifty years would wish so ardently to learn this science, he couldn't conceive of it, and when I told him that I had decided to attend not only the classes at his school, but also those of Alfred Adler, who later became his worst enemy, he was even more stunned.

Adult Lou: And what did you do then?

Elder Lou: Nothing, I continued to study. Finally, my perseverance was repaid and I was integrated as much into the small nucleus of Freud's disciples as to the circle of Adler's.

Adult Lou: And did you personally undergo psychoanalysis?

Elder Lou: But of course. It was essential if I wanted to practise as a therapist. From 1912 till 1913 I compiled the results of that new experience in the form of a diary. Now I am preparing a book, in thanks to Freud.

Adult Lou: And what else have you published?

Elder Lou: So far, articles. At the moment I'm investigating the concept of narcissism. I don't think enough has been done about it.

Adult Lou: It's all very interesting. Why don't you explain to me the main themes?

Elder Lou: In this open letter I talk about the great importance of the Freudian theory as a starting point, and personally, I wanted to pay homage to the figure of its founder. I think it opens up an exhilarating path. Of course, I also explain my own take on some aspects.

Adult Lou: For example?

Elder Lou: In matters of art, I consider myself almost blasphemous. I think that what provokes the flourishing of creativity, as much as the inebriation found in erotica is a need for love that is not satisfied. Artistic creation does not arise from the love of an object. And I believe that art, contrary to dreams, does not look for an actual realisation of the desire. For art to be created, desire must rest in oblivion.

Adult Lou: Do you mean that the object that provokes it has to decompose like buried matter?

Elder Lou: Exactly, to be re-born later in a different form.

Adult Lou: And what other discrepancies do you have?

Elder Lou: I disagree with the overriding hatred of love that originates in Freud, and I don't agree at all with the differentiation he makes between the drive for life and death. I think that all drives are for life, and that even if there is a destructive element, it is in a way, a liberation from the intensity of life. However destructive hate can be it is already a step forwards, a

departure away from passivity. Life and death are two aspects of the same reality.

Adult Lou: And how has the religious concept, so rooted in your own mind, compared with all of this?

Elder Lou: Look, despite the risk of satanisation, I think that religious belief can be positive. Religion can help to quieten the internal delirium of man. And it can also be creative! For some people, the creation of God can be an act of artistry.

Adult Lou: A curious opinion. The creation of the Creator creating man and this way he himself receives the fortune of being created.

Elder Lou: I admit that you have touched on a prickly point. At first glance my beliefs seemed incompatible with the radical atheism of the Freudian school. From the very start, I wanted to confront the study of psychoanalysis from a philosophical angle. I wanted to relate the invisible part of human nature that was being offered to me by this science, with the invisible part of the divine nature that had always interested me.

Adult Lou: And have you managed to establish it?

Elder Lou: My friend, I continue to topple into the same abysses. But what makes me different from Freud in this aspect, is that he would have wanted to liberate man from his tie with The One, while I am increasingly convinced that it is in the ecstasy of our global being where we celebrate the mystery of our original ties with all of existence. But on the other hand, I have to admit that the acceptance of riches from a non-spiritual nature have been for me a happy discovery and now I perceive both invisible worlds that I wanted to relate as a spiral. I'm very interested in states of mind — of which the religious state is one — in which the physical emotion and the psychic emotion coincide. If

psychoanalysis looks for recordings in the first years of life, I look in infancy and more widely, in the infancy of the human race, the key of these states where the physical emotion and the psychic coincide in equilibrium, before a scission is produced.

Adult Lou: I am interested in the extreme states that can drive man to genius or madness.

Elder Lou: They have always attracted us. Have a glance at the people with which you have been involved. Nietzsche, Ree, Rilke, to name a few examples. We need people who accomplish things, and don't abstain, don't you think? (*Signalling the public*) Look at all the people out there! Every individual is unique and extraordinary. But look, they are all in silence... Do you remember the movement of the bells in the towers of Russia?

Adult Lou: I have a profound and fond memory of it. But why do you ask me that now?

Elder Lou: Because for me, when I would look at the clapper swinging from side to side, I could see them oscillating, but I couldn't hear them. Despite the rhythm of their intense call, the bells were mute. The call is on the inside, like the invisible part of human nature. The physical and the psychic need to join together to create a growing force like the stream of water from a fountain, that falls again into the pool from where it came. Then, we will here the call of all the bells.

Adult Lou: This is the station where I have to get off. Let me embrace you. (*They embrace*) You know... I will have a walk in the forest before returning home. Today I don't feel like writing.

(LOU ANDREAS SALOMÉ *gets off the train.* ELDER LOU *is left alone. She contemplates the other woman as she leaves, who, every now and again, turns back to wave goodbye. The light centres on ELDER LOU.*)

Elder Lou: After our conversation, I watched as she walked away with her uncertain step, and I found myself cheering up somewhat. My journey was invading me. In the end, I had learnt that a fixed path is only a mirage, and from the window, I continued to contemplate the desert. Suddenly, the ghost of Frida appeared on the horizon of my thoughts. Death had taken her from me at the cusp of fifty years. This loss had distressed me, as had the fatal fall of Paul Ree from the cliffs at Celerina. In both cases, silence had befallen my heart. The dreams I had then caressed the fear that I had of words. It always evoked the same thing: I saw them again, and in a state of complete delirium, I cried. I had to learn to understand life again from the point of death. I realised that we only get to know a very ephemeral fragment of the possibilities of existence. When we are young, we struggle to forge a personality for ourselves, until we flower into autonomous beings and that is when, from time to time, we bear the fruit of all that we've nourished: we have children, we create works... but when, in later years, we contemplate life more thoroughly, we realise that the essence of something lives in us and we reach an eternity of which we ignore everything. When we get old, our ego has become so feeble that, seen from the outside, it appears non-existent. The body only retains it, paralyses it, imprisons it. The mechanism that we call life is a mechanism of death and inversely so. Both are essentially the same thing. For life to become truly free, many things must become mortal. In the advanced states of this liberation, such as illness, age, or the very death of which we speak, you can barely see it, because the physical mirror has cracked for the others, for all those who are still prisoners in their bodies, and we only see the negative side; life no longer expresses itself materially: it's escaped. We would need a form of existence that is more elevated, more subtle. It is not a dream. After all, the most beautiful ideas are based on this

kind of hypothesis, because the most marvellous and intense experiences pass through the soul.

(The sound of the train as it stops. ELDER LOU prepares to get off the train. A young man is waiting for her, and kindly helps her down. LOU gives him her small travel bag. They greet each other and talk as they leave the stage, but what they say is inaudible, because of the sounds of the train station. The man represents Ernst Pfeiffer, to whom LOU ANDREAS SALOMÉ donated her unpublished works, authorising him to use them at his disposal, as he saw fit. In this case it is not necessary to characterise him as the all the other men that have appeared throughout the journey. The man accompanies the woman until she leaves the stage and he remains alone with the small travel bag.)

HISTORICAL NOTE

(The man is alone on the stage.)

Man: When, in 1934, two and a half years before she died, Lou Andreas-Salomé donated all her unpublished works to me, she already occupied an important place in German literature of the end of the nineteenth century, next to writers such as Marie von Eschenbach or Ricarda Huch. Over the course of her life she had published some twenty books, amongst essays and novels, and over a hundred articles in the most prestigious magazines of her time. The critics had especially valued the tone of her writing, and her profound understanding of the human soul. Long before she became interested in psychoanalysis and dedicated herself to it professionally, Andreas-Salomé had been one of the first authors to analyse her own emotions and experiences. I was only able to share with her the last years of her life, but I knew of the rumours created by those who defamed her. For some, she had been a daring woman who paraded her beauty and her ingenuity throughout bohemia and the most elite salons of the fashionable

capitals of Europe since 1880. Others, considered her “the woman of culture”, dazzling, decadent, and a snob, who had become famous as a collector of celebrity friends, a serial conqueror of prestigious men and provoker of scandals, suicides, marriage break-ups and all manner of sentimental roller coasters. There is no doubt whatsoever that Lou Andreas-Salomé was a woman of exceptional talent and intelligence, and that in her attitudes, thoughts and writing, she advanced her era. Her friendship with Nietzsche provoked a scandal from Rome to Saint Petersburg that culminated in an attempt to expel her from Germany and return her to Russia. But she bears it with impenetrable indifference, and when Nietzsche admits that he was inspired by her when he wrote *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and affirms that she understood his work like no one had done before, she leaves inscribed by her own hand the personal contribution she made to the controversial figure of the philosopher. Sigmund Freud laughs when, in her fifties, Lou tells him that she wants to pursue psychoanalysis, but she, in the long term makes her own valuable addition to the Freudian theories and despite her discrepancies with the teacher she finally achieves a treatment of equality and respect. This exceptional woman left in my hands a single autobiography in the form of notes where she concentrated what was essential from each lived experience. This document demonstrated to me the passionately intellectual and human trajectory of Lou: a miniscule grain of sand in her microcosmic perfection grew in my eyes, like the shooting star that becomes lost in infinity, destined to occupy its place in the macro-cosmos. I was inheriting her halo, with which to inscribe her fiery path, lost in the nebulous of an exuberant legend. For her, death was a return to one’s roots, and when the time came, she left quietly, discreetly, conserving the powerful charm of spirit that characterised her. Maybe she has fulfilled her wish of returning to the unity of all that exists.

ACT THREE

Lou's Gaze (1861-1937)

(The same setting as Act 1, with the addition of an old gramophone of the 1930s. An elderly lady of seventy-five years, the same ELDER LOU of the previous scene, carefully characterised, is sitting at the study table, writing. She can barely see, and it should be evident that she is working with much difficulty. Tired by her efforts, she gets up, tidies the manuscripts she is working on, and goes towards the gramophone. She puts music on: "The Song of the Earth" by Mahler and sits on an armchair close to the book shelf. As she listens to the music, she caresses the manuscript in her hands, her gaze lost in infinity. The music fades down slowly, as between bars the voice of a child gets louder, along the same melody. Over the course of the conversation that follows, we should see that night is falling.)

Elder Lou: Come in little Lyolya. I was waiting for you.

(LYOLYA VON SALOMÉ, the girl we met in Act One, runs in and embraces her.)

Elder Lou: It makes me so happy that you come to see me. Since the death of Andreas, only you and the visits of my good friend Pfeiffer make my afternoons here in Gottingen a little shorter.

Lyolya: Do you still have work to do, or can you tell me some stories?

Elder Lou: I can tell you all the stories you wish. Every day I see less and less, and I can scarcely write. But I'll tell you secret: when the clock sounds, indicating its time for my faithful collaborators to leave, I hurry over to sit in this armchair, and formulate my wish for your presence, I put on music, and I wait. And after a short while, I can already hear you arrive like a little ferret

and a flurry of happiness arises in me, because like you I look forward to evoking my homeland Russia, and to have you by my side so that I can see that laughing girl who I barely dare to see myself reflected in any more. Do you remember how you used to slide through the big rooms of the house in your ballet shoes?

Lyolya: I couldn't stand the receptions or the protocol and I escaped as often as I could. We lived surrounded by officers, but I was only pleased to see one uniform, the one of the young baron Frederiks.

(As the girl tells her anecdote, LOU laughs as though to herself.)

Lyolya: He was truly handsome, and he lived in the same building as us, as he was the Tsar's adjutant. I was hopelessly in love with him, and one day when I saw him coming towards me, I got so nervous that I slipped over on the icy steps I was standing on. He gallantly rushed to save me, but then fell onto his bottom like me. He burst out laughing, and I just stared at him, entranced, and fell into a blissful silence.

(They both laugh)

Lyolya: But what I liked most was sleighing with my brothers Genia, Roba and Sacha on the parquet in the hall. I pretended to be a horse, and I puffed proudly when they used to tell me I was the most ferocious troika horse in Russia.

Elder Lou: Little devil, tell the truth, what you liked most was winding up that vivid imagination of yours, and inventing story after story for yourself. Your characters even appeared in your nightmares as though they were ghosts. Everyone at home remembers how, when you were ill with smallpox and delirious from the fever, you spoke anxiously of the characters in your stories that were feeling lonely and were seeking you out.

Lyolya: It's true, yes, without me they didn't know what to do or where to go, and there was nothing and no one that could save them from their confusion. And that's why I decided that when I was older, I would write down the stories that I invented.

Elder Lou: And I kept the promise. You see that book on the table? It's where the story "The Alliance between Torvald and Ursula"^{vi} is written. Bring it here, as I want to dedicate it to you.

(LYOLYA happily goes to get the book on the table and when she picks it up she reads the title out loud.)

Lyolya: "The Hour Without God, and Other Children's Stories." Is it this one?

Elder Lou: Yes, that's the one.

Lyolya: Why did you give it that title?

Elder Lou: When I started to write the book, I was already quite old. As I was reflecting on it, a memory of my childhood that I had completely forgotten crashed into my thoughts like a flash. I will explain it to you, because this discovery was very important for me. A servant that came during winter to the city to bring us fresh eggs from the countryside, told me that in the middle of the garden in front of my house, there was an old couple that needed shelter and that he had made them leave. The next time he came, I asked him about the couple, intently, because the idea that they had suffered the cold and hunger was very distressing for me. "Where could they have gone?" I asked, worried. "Well, they are not very far" he answered. "Then, they are still in front of the house?" I insisted. "No, it's not quite that either. They have transformed completely. They've been shrinking smaller and smaller, until they melted completely. And one morning as I was sweeping in front of the house, I found that all that was left, were the little black buttons from her white coat, and a

soggy old hat”, and he explained how this injustice was still covered over with their icy tears.

(As LOU is explaining this anecdote, LYOLYA sheds a few tears.)

Elder Lou: Now I understand that what worried me so much about this terrible story was not so much a feeling of pity for the couple, but fear at the incomprehensible enigma of time slipping away. Something made me recoil from the most evident explanation, that they were two snowmen, and everything in me demanded a different answer. Probably, it was the same night that I asked the Good Lord for a definitive response. Maybe it would have been enough for his invisible lips to have pronounced these words “the snow man and snow woman.” But the fact that he didn’t answer at all was a complete catastrophe.

Lyolya: Of course, because the great fiery star had exploded into infinite little sparks, like the old couple who had melted into tears of ice.

Elder Lou: And over the course of my life I have searched for every one of those sparks, and wherever I found them, in people or in things or in experiences, I have made them mine, trying to reconstruct a whole that was lost.

Lyolya: Is it these memories you have written in this book?

Elder Lou: They are only brief notes of all these experiences. I’ve tried to explain what the most essential things have been. I felt an imperious necessity to write from these memories. They’ve been imposing themselves on me so suddenly these days, like a volcanic eruption, that just when you least expect it, spits out the lava of its entrails. I assure you that it is not by chance that the forgotten doesn’t return to us until the end of our lives. It’s as though it were necessary to

travel a long path before the eternal value of some memories can be revealed.

Lyolya: And the memories that come to your mind are of when you were little, and when you were a young lady, and of how you got older until you were elderly. I have my whole life in front of me, and a huge world to discover. I'll go on fantastic journeys that will lead me on a thousand and one paths. All the characters of my stories will multiply. I see it all so immensely, and I feel as though my arms are so very small to hold it all.

Elder Lou: Of course you do, my love, your feeling of time can't be the same as the one I have now, but one day you will know that, whatever the circumstances that have given us the chance to experience both happiness and pain in our lives, the personal experience does not hold such importance as people are so eager to grant it. Life rests on our eyes like a hieroglyphic, and we form part of its complete mystery. Now, it is your turn to taste this life by little mouthfuls. Believe me when I say that you mustn't devalue anything, because what seem to be the most dull and least decisive moments, can be the ones that bring us infinite riches, while the moments that seem most glorious and successful, can be incapable of giving us an overall view of life.

Lyolya: You said you would dedicate the book to me.

Elder Lou: You're right. Bring me a pen.

(The girl does so, and LOU writes some words with difficulty. She offers the book to the girl and LYOLYA reads out loud the dedication.)

Lyolya: "Let her childhood rise again / the unconscious, and the marvellous/and of her first years, full of promises / the infinitely obscure and rich cycle of legends."^{vii} They are very beautiful verses. Did you write them as well?

Elder Lou: They were written by a great poet, a man who I loved. He was called Rainer Maria Rilke. You know? Human life — what am I saying? — life! Is a work of poetry. Although we are unconscious of it, we live it every day, in fragments, but she, in her intangible totality weaves our lives, composes the poem. We are not the authors of this work of art that is our life.

Lyolya: Did Rainer also say that?

Elder Lou: It is something. I have learnt. I am a bit tired.

Lyolya: Do you feel alright?

Elder Lou: Of course! Don't worry. I need to sleep. Tomorrow I will feel better. And whatever happens to me, I am certain that behind me, there are arms that are open to receive me.

Lyolya: Would you like me to read to you before I go?

Elder Lou: No need. Pfeiffer read to me for a while yesterday. As he started to read, I felt the sensation of being far, far away. I wanted to know how he had said some things, and I decided that I would say them in exactly the same way. It's more than that; I think some people can feel they closely identify with them.

(The girl leaves the papers and the pen on top of the table.)

Elder Lou: Lyolya!

Lyolya: Yes?

Elder Lou: Maybe I would like you to read me something.

Lyolya: Good! What is it?

Elder Lou: A prayer. It's inside the book I gave you.

(The girl opens the book where the poem is written, she sits on the old woman's lap and starts to read.)

Prayer to Death:
The day I rest in this coffin

Spark extinguished —
Caress, once more, my hair
With your loving hand.
Before they return to ground
All that must return,
Upon my mouth, that you have loved
Make still one more kiss.
But do not forget: in this foreign bed
I sleep in but appearance
Because my life has found shelter in you!
And now I am yours completely.^{viii}

(She recites the poem slowly, her voice breaking up intermittently, because she is falling asleep. When she is fast asleep, ELDER LOU takes the book from her fingers.)

Elder Lou: Actually, I've spent my whole life working — working hard, and *only* working... What for? To do... what exactly?

(She rocks the girl in her arms and starts to hum the Hymn to Life that has been the leitmotif of the whole play. She closes her eyes. The sound track starts to meld with LOU as she continues to hum with her eyes closed. The book will fall from her fingers and the music stops immediately.)

BLACKOUT

Footnotes

ⁱ Although this is not Spinoza's original statement, or a direct translation of the quote which appears in the original play, Lou quoted Spinoza in this way in her Journal of 1912. In the book by Angela Livingstone (*Lou Andreas Salomé, her Life and Writings*, Gordon Fraser, 1984), the author gives this explanation of the Journal entry:

...Lou writes of our coming to rediscover what "more primitive people" always knew, namely that Joy is Perfection and she adds the name Spinoza in brackets. In fact what Spinoza wrote — in the passage she apparently has in mind — is not

that joy is perfection, but that joy is “the affect by which the mind crosses over to a greater perfection” [*Ethics*, part III]. It is most telling that Lou, forgetting this, set up an equation between happiness and sublimity, while behind it lay, as she also really knew, something else: the long transition to happiness... [Translator’s note]

ii The poem was written by Lou Andreas Salomé in August 1882 who gave it to Nietzsche. He composed music to it, and entitled it the “Hymn to Life”. Curiously, in this score, Nietzsche did not indicate the name of the author but instead, in *Ecce Homo* (1888) where he writes about the birth of *Zarathustra*, he penned the following commentary: “The text, to say this expressly because a misunderstanding has gained currency, is not by me: it is the amazing inspiration of a young Russian woman who was my friend at that time, Miss Lou von Salomé. Whoever can find any meaning at all in the last words of this poem will guess why I preferred and admired it: they attain greatness”. This composition with a mixed chorus and orchestra, appeared in 1887, however, in 1882 the Professor Riedel created it with a chorus of four. It is this version which should play now. [Author’s note]

iii This fragment is translated by Angela Livingstone (*Lou Andreas Salomé, her Life and Writings*, Gordon Fraser, 1984), from the original written by Lou. [TN]

iv Three verses from the fifth and sixth stanzas of the Goethe poem “General Confession”. The translation extracted from the book *Poems of Goethe* translated by Edgar Alfred Bowring. [A&T]

v A poem of Rilke, published in *The Book of Pilgrimage 11,22*. It was not recognised as a love poem until the autobiography of Lou *Lebenstruckblick (Looking Back)*, where she includes it in the chapter “With Rainer”. Ernst Zinn, having studied the style and language of the text, deduced that it could have been written in the spring or autumn of 1899. The romance between Rilke and Andreas Salomé began in 1897. [AN]

vi The English translation of the original German title of the story is “The Alliance between Tor and Ur”, (Tor and Ur: the Origin and the Fool). Ursula is the name of the little girl who all the stories in this collection revolve around. In this story, little Ursula meets little Torvald, who involves her in a make-believe world. [TN]

vii Poem 9 of the Rilke’s collection *Poverty and Death*. “Make us marvellous, Lord, make us great.”

viii The poem as it appears in this text was put into the mouth of a man talking to his child in the work *A Struggle for God*

(1885) published under the pseudonym Henri Lou. It is translated from Lou's original by Angela Livingstone (*Lou Andreas Salomé, her Life and Writings*, Gordon Fraser, 1984.)