Death

by Maurice Maeterlinck

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DEATH

BY

MAURICE MAETERLINCK

TRANSLATED BY

ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS

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THE WORKS OF MAURICE MAETERLINCK IN UNIFORM STYLE AND BINDING

ESSAYS

The Treasure of the Humble Wisdom and Destiny The Life of the Bee The Buried Temple The Double Garden The Measure of the Hours Death

PLAYS

Sister Beatrice and Ardiane and Barbe Bleue Joyzelle and Monna Vanna The Blue Bird, A Fairy Play Mary Magdalene Pélléas and Mélisande, and Other Plays Princess Maleine The Intruder, and Other Plays Aglavaine and Selysette

HOLIDAY EDITIONS

The text in each case is an extract from one of the above mentioned books.

Our Friend the Dog Old-Fashioned Flowers The Swarm The Intelligence of the Flowers Chrysanthemums The Leaf of Olive Thoughts from Maeterlinck

Camera Portrait by E. O. Hoppé, London

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DEATH

I

OUR IDEA OF DEATH

I

It has been well said:

“Death and death alone is what we must consult about life; and not some vague future or survival, in which we shall not be present. It is our own end; and everything happens in the interval between death and now. Do not talk to me of those imaginary prolongations which wield over us the childish spell of number; do not talk to me—to me who am to die outright—of societies and peoples! There is no reality, there is no true duration, save that between the cradle and the grave. The rest is mere bombast, show, delusion! They call me a master because of some magic in my speech and thoughts; but I am a frightened child in the presence of death!”[1]

II

A PRIMITIVE IDEA

T

That is where we stand. For us, death is the one event that counts in our life and in our universe. It is the point whereat all that escapes our vigilance unites and conspires against our happiness. The more our thoughts struggle to turn away from it, the closer do they press around it. The more we dread it, the more dreadful it becomes, for it battens but on our fears. He who seeks to forget it burdens his memory with it; he who tries to shun it meets naught else. But, though we think of death incessantly, we do so unconsciously, without learning to know death. We compel our attention to turn its back upon it, instead of going to it with uplifted head. We exhaust all our forces, which ought to face death boldly, in distracting our

will from it. We deliver death into the dim hands of instinct and we grant it not one hour of our intelligence. Is it surprising that the idea of death, which should be the most perfect and the most luminous—being the most persistent and the most inevitable—remains the flimsiest of our ideas and the only one that is backward? How should we know the one power which we never looked in the face? How could it profit by flashes kindled only to help us escape it? To fathom its abysses, we wait until the most enfeebled, the most disordered moments of our life arrive. We do not think of death until we have no longer the strength, I will not say, to think, but even to breathe. A man returning among us from another century would not recognize without difficulty, in the depths of a present-day soul, the image of his gods, of his duty, of his love or of his universe; but the figure of death, when everything has changed around it and when even that which composes it and upon which it rests has vanished, he would find almost untouched, rough-drawn as it was by our fathers, hundreds, nay, thousands of years ago. Our intelligence, grown so bold and active, has not worked upon this figure, has added no single touch to it. Though we may no longer believe in the tortures of the damned, all the vital cells of the most skeptical among us are still steeped in the appalling mystery of the Hebrew Sheol, the pagan Hades, or the Christian Hell. Though it may no longer be lighted by very definite flames, the gulf still opens at the end of life, and, if less known, is all the more formidable. And, therefore, when the impending hour strikes to which we dared not raise our eyes, everything fails us at the same time. Those two or three uncertain ideas whereon, without examining them, we had meant to lean, give way like rushes beneath the weight of the last moments. In vain we seek a refuge among reflections that rave or are strange to us and do not know the roads to our heart. No one awaits us on the last shore where all is unprepared, where naught remains afoot save terror.

III

WE MUST ENLIGHTEN AND ESTABLISH OUR IDEA OF DEATH

I

It were a salutary thing for each of us to work out his idea of death in the light of his days and the strength of his intelligence and to learn to stand by it. He would say to death:

“I know not who you are, or I would be your master; but, in days when my eyes saw clearer than to-day, I learnt what you are not: that is enough to prevent you from becoming my master.”

He would thus carry, imprinted on his memory, a tried image against which the last agony would not prevail and in which the phantom-stricken eyes would take fresh comfort. Instead of the terrible prayer of the dying, which is the prayer of the depths, he would say his own prayer, that of the peaks of his life, where would be gathered, like angels of peace, the most limpid, the most pellucid thoughts of his life. Is not that the prayer of prayers? After all, what is a true and worthy prayer, if not the most ardent and disinterested effort to reach and grasp the unknown?

IV

WE MUST RID DEATH OF THAT WHICH GOES BEFORE

T

The doctors and the priests,” said Napoleon, “have long been making death grievous.”

Let us, then, learn to look upon it as it is in itself, free from the horrors of matter and stripped of the terrors of the imagination. Let us first get rid of all that goes before and does not belong to it. Thus, we impute to it the tortures of the last illness; and that is not right. Illnesses have nothing in common with that which ends them. They form part of life and not of death. We easily forget the most cruel sufferings that

restore us to health; and the first sun of convalescence destroys the most unbearable memories of the chamber of pain. But let death come; and at once we overwhelm it with all the evil done before it. Not a tear but is remembered and used as a reproach, not a cry of pain but becomes a cry of accusation. Death alone bears the weight of the errors of nature or the ignorance of science that have uselessly prolonged torments in whose name we curse death because it puts an end to them.

V

THE PANGS OF DEATH MUST BE ATTRIBUTED TO MAN ALONE

I

In point of fact, whereas the sicknesses belong to nature or to life, the agony, which seems peculiar to death, is wholly in the hands of men. Now what we most dread is the awful struggle at the end and especially the hateful moment of rupture which we shall perhaps see approaching during long hours of helplessness and which suddenly hurls us, disarmed, abandoned and stripped, into an unknown that is the home of the only invincible terrors which the human soul has ever felt.

It is twice unjust to impute the torments of that moment to death. We shall see presently in what manner a man of to-day, if he would remain faithful to his ideas, should picture to himself the unknown into which death flings us. Let us confine ourselves here to the last struggle. As science progresses, it prolongs the agony which is the most dreadful moment and the sharpest peak of human pain and horror, for the witnesses, at least; for, often, the sensibility of him who, in Bossuet’s phrase, is “at bay with death,” is already greatly blunted and perceives no more than the distant murmur of the sufferings which he seems to be enduring. All the doctors consider it their first duty to protract as long as possible even the most excruciating convulsions of the most hopeless agony. Who has not, at a bedside, twenty times

wished and not once dared to throw himself at their feet and implore them to show mercy? They are filled with so great a certainty and the duty which they obey leaves so little room for the least doubt that pity and reason, blinded by tears, curb their revolt and shrink back before a law which all recognize and revere as the highest law of human conscience.

VI

THE MISTAKE OF THE DOCTORS IN PROLONGING THE PANGS OF DEATH

O

One day, this prejudice will strike us as barbarian. Its roots go down to the unacknowledged fears left in the heart by religions that have long since died out in the mind of men. That is why the doctors act as though they were convinced that there is no known torture but is preferable to those awaiting us in the unknown. They seem persuaded that every minute gained amidst the most intolerable sufferings is snatched from the incomparably more dreadful sufferings which the mysteries of the hereafter reserve for men; and, of two evils to avoid that which they know to be imaginary, they choose the real one. Besides, in thus postponing the end of a torture, which, as good Seneca says, is the best part of that torture, they are only yielding to the unanimous error which daily strengthens the circle wherein it is confined: the prolongation of the agony increasing the horror of death; and the horror of death demanding the prolongation of the agony.

VII

THEIR ARGUMENTS

T

They, on their part, say or might say that, in the present stage of science, two or three cases excepted, there is never a certainty of death. Not to support life to its last limits, even at the cost of insupportable torments, were perhaps to kill. Doubtless there is not one chance in a hundred thousand that the sufferer escape. No matter. If that chance exist which, in the majority of cases, will give but a few days, or, at the utmost, a few months of a life that will not be the real life, but much rather, as the Latin said, “an extended death,” those hundred thousand torments will not have been in vain. A single hour snatched from death outweighs a whole existence of tortures.

Here are, face to face, two values that cannot be compared; and, if we mean to weigh them in the same balance, we must heap the scale which we see with all that remains to us, that is, with every imaginable pain, for at the decisive hour this is the only weight which counts and which is heavy enough to raise by a few degrees the other scale that dips into what we do not see and is loaded with the thick darkness of another world.

VIII

THAT WHICH DOES NOT BELONG TO DEATH

I

Increased by so many adventitious horrors, the horror of death becomes such that, without reasoning, we accept the doctors’ reasons. And yet there is one point on which they are beginning to yield and to agree. They are slowly consenting, when there is no hope left, if not to deaden, at least to lull the last agonies. Formerly, none of them would have dared to do so; and, even to-day, many of them hesitate and, like misers, measure out drop by drop the clemency and peace which they grudge and which they ought to lavish, dreading lest they should weaken the last resistance,

that is to say, the most useless and painful quiverings of life that does not wish to give place to the coming quiet.

It is not for me to decide whether their pity might show greater daring. It is enough to state once more that all this does not concern death. It happens before it and below it. It is not the arrival of death, but the departure of life that is appalling. It is not death, but life that we must act upon. It is not death that attacks life; it is life that wrongfully resists death. Evils hasten up from every side at the approach of death, but not at its call; and, though they gather round it, they did not come with it. Do you accuse sleep of the fatigue that oppresses you if you do not yield to it? All those strugglings, those waitings, those tossings, those tragic cursings are on this same side of the slope to which we cling and not on the other side. They are, for that matter, accidental and temporary and emanate only from our ignorance. All our knowledge only helps us to die in greater pain than the animals that know nothing. A day will come when science will turn against its error and no longer hesitate to shorten our misfortunes. A day will come when it will dare and act with certainty; when life, grown wiser, will depart silently at its hour, knowing that it has reached its term, even as it withdraws silently every evening, knowing that its task is done. Once the doctor and the sick man have learnt what they have to learn, there will be no physical nor metaphysical reason why the advent of death should not be as salutary as that of sleep. Perhaps even, as there will be other things to consider, it will be possible to surround death with deeper delights and fairer dreams. Henceforth, in any case, once death is exonerated from all that goes before, it will be easier to face it without fear and to enlighten that which follows after.

IX

THE HORRORS OF THE GRAVE ALSO DO NOT BELONG TO DEATH

D

Death, as we usually picture it, has two terrors looming behind it. The first has neither face nor shape and overshadows the whole region of our mind; the other is more definite, more explicit, but almost as powerful and strikes all our senses. Let us first examine the latter.

Even as we impute to death all the evils that precede it, so do we add to the dread which it inspires all that happens beyond it, thus doing it the same injustice at its going as at its coming. Is it death that digs our graves and orders us to keep there that which was made to disappear? If we cannot think without horror of the fate of the beloved in the grave, is it death or we that placed him there? Because death carries the spirit to some place unknown, shall we reproach it with our bestowal of the body which it leaves with us? Death descends upon us to take away a life or change its form: let us judge it by what it does and not by what we do before it comes and after it is gone. And it is already far away when we begin the frightful work which we try hard to prolong as much as we possibly can, as though we were persuaded that it is our only security against forgetfulness. I am well aware that, from any other than the human point of view, this proceeding is very innoxious. Looked upon from a sufficient height, decomposing flesh is no more repulsive than a fading flower or a crumbling stone. But, when all is said, it offends our senses, shocks our memory, daunts our courage, whereas it would be so easy for us to avoid the hateful test. Purified by fire, the memory lives in the heights as a beautiful idea; and death is naught but an immortal birth cradled in flames. This has been well understood by the wisest and happiest nations in history. What happens in our graves poisons our thoughts together with our bodies. The figure of death, in the imagination of men, depends before all upon the form of burial; and the funeral rites govern not only the fate of those who depart, but also the happiness of those who stay, for they raise in the very background of life the great image upon which their eyes linger in consolation or despair.

X

WHEN CONTEMPLATING THE UNKNOWN INTO WHICH DEATH HURLS US, LET US FIRST PUT RELIGIOUS FEARS FROM OUR MINDS

T

There is, therefore, but one terror particular to death: that of the unknown into which it hurls us. In facing it, let us not delay in putting from our minds all that the positive religions have left there. Let us remember only that it is not for us to prove that they are not proved, but for them to establish that they are true. Now not one of them brings us a proof before which a candid intelligence can bow. Nor would it suffice if that intelligence were able to bow; for man lawfully to believe and thus to limit his endless seeking, the proof would need to be irresistible. The God offered to us by the best and strongest proof has given us our reason to employ loyally and fully, that is to say, to try to attain, before all and in all things, that which appears to be the truth. Can He exact that we should accept, in spite of it, a belief of which the wisest and the most ardent do not, from the human point of view, deny the uncertainty? He proposes for our consideration a very doubtful story which, even if scientifically established, would prove nothing and which is buttressed by prophecies and miracles no less uncertain. If not by our reason, by what then would He have us decide? By usage? By the accidents of race or birth, by some æsthetic or sentimental hazard? Or has He set within us another higher and surer faculty before which the understanding must yield? If so, where is it? What is its name? If that God punishes us for not having blindly followed a faith that does not force itself irresistibly upon the intelligence which He gave us; if He chastises us for not having made, in the presence of the great enigma with which He confronts us, a choice which condemns the best and most divine part of that which He has placed in us, we have nothing left

to reply: we are the dupes of a cruel and incomprehensible sport, we are the victims of a terrible snare and an immense injustice; and, whatever the torments wherewith the latter loads us, they will be less intolerable than the eternal presence of its Author.

XI

ANNIHILATION IMPOSSIBLE

H

Here we stand before the abyss. It is void of all the dreams with which our fathers peopled it. They thought that they knew what was there; we know only what is not there. It has enlarged itself with all that we have learnt to know nothing of. While waiting for a scientific certainty to break through its darkness—for man has the right to hope for that which he does not yet conceive—the only point that interests us, because it is situated in the little circle which our actual intelligence traces in the thickest blackness of the night, is to know whether the unknown for which we are bound will be dreadful or not.

Outside the religions, there are four imaginable solutions and no more: total annihilation; survival with our consciousness of to-day; survival without any sort of consciousness; lastly, survival with universal consciousness different from that which we possess in this world.

Total annihilation is impossible. We are the prisoners of an infinity without outlet, wherein nothing perishes, wherein everything is dispersed, but nothing lost. Neither a body nor a thought can drop out of the universe, out of time and space. Not an atom of our flesh, not a quiver of our nerves will go where they will cease to be, for there is no place where anything ceases to be. The brightness of a star extinguished millions of years ago still wanders in the ether where our eyes will perhaps behold it

this very night, pursuing its endless road. It is the same with all that we see, as with all that we do not see. To be able to do away with a thing, that is to say, to fling it into nothingness, nothingness would have to exist; and, if it exist, under whatever form, it is no longer nothingness. As soon as we try to analyze it, to define it, or to understand it, thoughts and expressions fail us, or create that which they are struggling to deny. It is as contrary to the nature of our reason and probably of all imaginable reason to conceive nothingness as to conceive limits to infinity. Nothingness, besides, is but a negative infinity, a sort of infinity of darkness opposed to that which our intelligence strives to enlighten, or rather it is but a child-name or nickname which our mind has bestowed upon that which it has not attempted to embrace, for we call nothingness all that which escapes our senses or our reason and exists without our knowledge. The more that human thought rises and increases, the less comprehensible does nothingness become. In any case—and this is what matters here—if nothingness were possible, since it could not be anything whatever, it could not be dreadful.

XII

THE SURVIVAL OF OUR CONSCIOUSNESS

N

Next comes survival with our consciousness of to-day. I have broached this question in an essay on Immortality,[2] of which I will only reproduce an essential passage, contenting myself with supporting it with a few new considerations.

What composes this sense of the ego which turns each of us into the centre of the universe, the only point that matters in space and time? Is it formed of sensations of our body, or of thoughts independent of our body? Would our body be conscious of itself without our mind? And, on the other hand, what would our mind be without

our body? We know bodies without mind, but no mind without a body. It is almost certain that an intellect devoid of senses, devoid of organs to create and nourish it, exists; but it is impossible to imagine that ours could thus exist and yet remain similar to that which derived from our sensibility all that gave it life.

XIII

IT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE

T

This ego, as we conceive it when we reflect upon the consequences of its destruction, this ego is neither our mind nor our body, since we recognize that both are waves that flow away and are renewed incessantly. Is it an immovable point, which could not be form or substance, for these are always in evolution, nor life, which is the cause or effect of form and substance? In truth, it is impossible for us to apprehend or define it, to tell where it dwells. When we try to go back to its last source, we find hardly more than a succession of memories, a series of ideas, confused, for that matter, and unsettled, attached to the one instinct of living: a series of habits of our sensibility and of conscious or unconscious reactions against the surrounding phenomena. When all is said, the most steadfast point of that nebula is our memory, which seems, on the other hand, to be a somewhat external, a somewhat accessory faculty and, in any case, one of the frailest faculties of our brain, one of those which disappear the most promptly at the least disturbance of our health. “As an English poet has very truly said, that which clamours aloud for eternity is the very part of me that will perish.”

It matters not: that uncertain, indiscernible, fleeting and precarious ego is so much the centre of our being, interests us so exclusively, that every reality of our life disappears before this phantom. It is a matter of utter indifference to us that

throughout eternity our body or its substance should know every joy and every glory, undergo the most splendid and delightful transformations, become flower, perfume, beauty, light, air, star; it is likewise indifferent to us that our intellect should expand until it mixes with the life of the worlds, understands and governs it. We are persuaded that all this will not affect us, will give us no pleasure, will not happen to ourselves, unless that memory of a few almost always insignificant facts accompany us and witness those unimaginable joys.

“I care not,” says this narrow ego, in its firm resolve to understand nothing. “I care not if the loftiest, the freest, the fairest portions of my mind be eternally living and radiant in the supreme gladnesses: they are no longer mine; I do not know them. Death has cut the network of nerves or memories that connected them with I know not what centre wherein lies the sensitive point which I feel to be all myself. They are now set loose, floating in space and time, and their fate is as unknown to me as that of the most distant constellations. Anything that occurs exists for me only upon condition that I be able to recall it within that mysterious being which is I know not where and precisely nowhere, which I turn like a mirror about this world whose phenomena take shape only in so far as they are reflected in it.”

Let us then consider that all that composes our consciousness comes first of all from our body. Our mind does but organize that which is supplied by our senses; and even the images and words—which in reality are but images—by the aid of which it strives to tear itself from those senses and deny their sway are borrowed from them. How could that mind remain what it was when there is nothing left to it of that which formed it? When our mind no longer has a body, what shall it carry with it into infinity whereby to recognize itself, seeing that it knows itself only by grace of that body? A few memories of a life in common? Will those memories, which were already fading in this world, suffice to separate it for ever from the rest of the universe, in boundless space and in unlimited time?

XIV

THE SAME, CONTINUED

B

But," I shall be told, "there is more in us than the intellect discovers. We have many things within us which our senses have not placed there; we contain a being superior to the one we know."

That is probable, nay, certain: the share occupied by unconsciousness, that is to say, by that which represents the universe, is enormous and preponderant. But how shall the ego which we know and whose destiny alone concerns us recognize all those things and that superior being whom it has never known? What will it do in the presence of that stranger? If I be told that stranger is myself, I will readily agree; but was that which upon earth felt and measured my joys and sorrows and gave birth to the few memories and thoughts that remain to me, was that this unmoved, unseen stranger who existed in me without my cognizance, even as I am probably about to live in him without his concerning himself with a presence that will bring him but the pitiful recollection of a thing that is no more? Now that he has taken my place, while destroying, in order to acquire a greater consciousness, all that formed my small consciousness here below, is it not another life commencing, a life whose joys and sorrows will pass above my head, not even brushing with their new wings that which I feel myself to be to-day?

XV

IF IT WERE POSSIBLE, IT WOULD NOT BE DREADFUL

I

It seems, therefore, that a survival with our present consciousness is as impossible

and as incomprehensible as total annihilation. Moreover, even if it were admissible, it would not be dreadful. It is certain that, when the body disappears, all physical sufferings will disappear at the same time; for we cannot imagine a soul suffering in a body which it no longer possesses. With them will vanish simultaneously all that we call mental or moral sufferings, seeing that all of them, if we examine them well, spring from the ties and habits of our senses. Our soul feels the reaction of the sufferings of our body, or of the bodies that surround it; it cannot suffer in itself or through itself. Slighted affection, shattered love, disappointments, failures, despair, treachery, personal humiliations, as well as the afflictions and the loss of those whom it loves, acquire the sting that hurts it only by passing through the body which it animates. Outside its own sorrow, which is the sorrow of not knowing, the soul, once delivered from its body, could suffer only at the recollection of that body. It is possible that it still grieves over the troubles of those whom it has left behind on earth. But, in the eyes of that which no longer counts the days, those troubles will seem so brief that it will not grasp their duration; and, knowing what they are and whither they lead, it will not behold their severity.

The soul is insensible to all that is not happiness. It is made only for infinite joy, which is the joy of knowing and understanding. It can grieve only at perceiving its own limits; but to perceive those limits, when one is no longer bound by space and time, is already to transcend them.

XVI

THE SURVIVAL WITHOUT CONSCIOUSNESS

T

There remains but the survival without consciousness, or survival with a consciousness different from that of to-day.

A survival without consciousness seems at first sight the most probable. From the point of view of the good or ill awaiting us on the other side of the grave, it amounts to annihilation. It is lawful, therefore, for those who prefer the easiest solution and that most consistent with the present state of human thought, to set that limit to their anxiety there. They have nothing to dread; for every fear, if any remain, would, if we look into it carefully, deck itself with hopes. The body disintegrates and can no longer suffer; the mind, separated from the source of pleasure and pain, is extinguished, scattered and lost in a boundless darkness; and what comes is the great peace so often prayed for, the sleep without measure, without dreams and without awakening.

But this is only a solution that flatters indolence. If we press those who speak of a survival without consciousness, we perceive that they mean only their present consciousness, for man conceives no other; and we have just seen that it is almost impossible for that manner of consciousness to persist in infinity.

Unless, indeed, they would deny every sort of consciousness, even that of the universe into which their own will fall. But that means solving very quickly and very blindly, with a stroke of the sword in the night, the greatest and most mysterious question that can arise in a man’s brain.

XVII

THE SAME, CONTINUED

T

This question is closely allied to our modified consciousness. There is for the moment no hope of solving it; but we are free to grope in its darkness, which is not perhaps equally dense at all points.

Here begins the open sea. Here begins the glorious adventure, the only one abreast

with human curiosity, the only one that soars as high as its highest longing. Let us accustom ourselves to regard death as a form of life which we do not yet understand; let us learn to look upon it with the same eye that looks upon birth; and soon our mind will be accompanied to the steps of the tomb with the same glad expectation that greets a birth. If, before being born, we were permitted to choose between the great peace of non-existence and a life that should not be completed by the magnificent hour of death, which of us, knowing what we ought to know, would accept the disquieting problem of an existence that would not end in the reassuring mystery of its conclusion? Which of us would care to come into a world where there is so little to learn, if he did not know that he must enter it if he would leave it and learn more? The best part of life is that it prepares this hour for us, that it is the one and only road leading to the magic gateway and into that incomparable mystery where misfortunes and sufferings will no longer be possible, because we shall have lost the body that produced them; where the worst that can befall us is the dreamless sleep which we count among the number of the greatest boons on earth; where, lastly, it is almost unimaginable that a thought can survive to mingle with the substance of the universe, that is to say, with infinity, which, if it be not a waste of indifference, can be nothing but a sea of joy.

XVIII

THE LIMITED EGO WOULD BECOME A TORTURE

B

Before fathoming that sea, let us remark to those who aspire to maintain their ego that they are calling down the sufferings which they dread. The ego implies limits. The ego cannot subsist except in so far as it is separated from that which surrounds it. The stronger the ego, the narrower its limits and the clearer the separation. The more painful too; for the mind, if it remain as we know it—and we are not able to

imagine it different—will no sooner have seen its limits than it will wish to overstep them: and, the more separated it feels, the greater will be its longing to unite with that which lies outside. There will therefore be an eternal struggle between its being and its aspirations. And really there were no object in being born and dying only for the purpose of these endless contests. Have we not here yet one more proof that our ego, as we conceive it, could never subsist in the infinity where it must needs go, since it cannot go elsewhere? It behooves us therefore to get rid of imaginations that emanate only from our body, even as the mists that veil the daylight from our sight emanate only from low places. Pascal has said, once and for all: “The narrow limits of our being conceal infinity from our view.”

XIX

A NEW EGO CAN FIND A NUCLEUS AND DEVELOP ITSELF IN INFINITY

O

On the other hand—for we must be honest, probe the conflicting darkness which we believe nearest to the truth and show no bias—on the other hand, we can grant to those who are wedded to the thought of remaining as they are that the survival of a mere particle of themselves would suffice to renew them again in the heart of an infinity wherefrom their body no longer separates them. If it seems impossible that anything—a movement, a vibration, a radiation—should stop or disappear, why then should thought be lost? There will, no doubt, subsist more than one idea powerful enough to allure the new ego, which will nourish itself and thrive on all that it will find in that new and endless environment, just as the other ego, on this earth, nourished itself and throve on all that it met there. Since we have been able to acquire our present consciousness, why should it be impossible for us to acquire

another? For that ego which is so dear to us and which we believe ourselves to possess was not made in a day; it is not at present what it was at the hour of our birth. Much more chance than purpose has entered into it; and much more foreign substance than any inborn substance which it contained. It is but a long series of acquisitions and transformations, of which we do not become aware until the awakening of our memory; and its nucleus, of which we do not know the nature, is perhaps more immaterial and less concrete than a thought. If the new environment which we enter on leaving our mother's womb transforms us to such a point that there is, so to speak, no connexion between the embryo that we were and the man that we have become, is it not right to think that the much newer, more unknown, wider and more fertile environment which we enter on quitting life will transform us even more? One can see in what happens to us here a figure of that which awaits us elsewhere and readily admit that our spiritual being, liberated from its body, if it does not mingle at the first onset with the infinite, will develop itself there gradually, will choose itself a substance and, no longer trammelled by space and time, will grow without end. It is very possible that our loftiest wishes of to-day will become the law of our future development. It is very possible that our best thoughts will welcome us on the other bank and that the quality of our intellect will determine that of the infinite that crystallizes around it. Every hypothesis is permissible and every question, provided it be addressed to happiness; for unhappiness is no longer able to answer us. It finds no place in the human imagination that explores the future methodically. And, whatever be the force that survives us and presides over our existence in the other world, this existence, to presume the worst, could be no less great, no less happy than that of to-day. It will have no other career than infinity; and infinity is nothing if it be not felicity. In any case, it seems fairly certain that we spend in this world the only narrow, grudging, obscure and sorrowful moment of our destiny.

XX

THE ONLY SORROW THAT CAN TOUCH OUR MIND

W

We have said that the one sorrow of the mind is the sorrow of not knowing or not understanding, which contains the sorrow of powerlessness; for he who knows the supreme causes, being no longer paralyzed by matter, becomes one with them and acts with them; and he who understands ends by approving, or else the universe would be a mistake, which is not possible. I do not believe that another sorrow of the sheer mind can be imagined. The only one which, before reflection, might seem admissible and which, in any case, could be but ephemeral would arise from the sight of the pain and misery that remain on the earth which we have left. But this sorrow, after all, would be but one side and an insignificant phase of the sorrow of powerlessness and of not understanding. As for the latter, though it is not only beyond the domain of our intelligence, but even at an insuperable distance from our imagination, we may say that it would be intolerable only if it were without hope. But, in order to be without hope, the universe would have to abandon any attempt to understand itself, or admit within itself an object that remained for ever foreign to it. Either the mind will not perceive its limits and, consequently, will not suffer from them, or else it will overstep them as it perceives them; for how could the universe have parts eternally condemned to form no part of itself and of its knowledge? Hence we cannot understand that the torture of not understanding, supposing it to exist for a moment, should not end by mingling with the state of infinity, which, if it be not happiness as we comprehend it, could be naught but an indifference higher and purer than joy.

XXI

INFINITY AS CONCEIVED BY OUR REASON

L

Let us turn our thoughts towards it. The problem extends beyond humanity and embraces all things. It is possible, I think, to view infinity under two distinct aspects and try to foresee our fate therein. Let us contemplate the first of these aspects. We are plunged into a universe that has no limits in space or time. It never began, nor will it ever end. It could not have an aim, for, if it had one, it would have attained it in the infinity of years that preceded us. It is not making for anywhere, for it would have arrived there; consequently, all that the worlds within its pale, all that we ourselves do can have no influence upon it. If it have no thought, it will never have one. If it have one, that thought has been at its climax since all time and will remain there, changeless and immovable. It is as young as it has ever been and as old as it will ever be. It has made in the past all the efforts and all the experiments which it will make in the future; and, as all the possible combinations have been exhausted since all time, it does not seem as if that which has not taken place in the eternity that extends before our birth can happen in that which will follow after our death. If it have not become conscious, it will never become so; if it know not what it wishes, it will continue in ignorance, hopelessly, knowing all or knowing nothing and remaining as near its end as its beginning.

XXII

INFINITY AS PERCEIVED BY OUR SENSES

A

All this would be, if not intelligible, at least acceptable to our reason; but in that universe float thousands of millions of worlds limited by space and time. They are born, they die and they are born again. They form part of the whole; and we see,

therefore, that parts of that which has neither beginning nor end themselves begin and end. We, in fact, know only those parts; and they are of a number so infinite that in our eyes they fill all infinity. That which is going nowhere teems with that which appears to be going somewhere. That which has always known what it wants, or will never learn, seems eternally to be making more or less unfortunate experiments. What is that which has already attained perfection trying to achieve? Everything that we discover in that which could not possibly have an aim looks as though it were pursuing one with inconceivable ardour; and the spirit that animates what we see in that which should know everything and possess itself seems to know nothing and to seek itself without intermission. Thus all that is apparent to our senses in infinity gainsays that which our reason is compelled to ascribe to it. According as we fathom it, we understand better the depth of our want of understanding; and, the more we strive to penetrate the two incomprehensibilities that stand face to face, the more they contradict each other.

XXIII

WHICH OF THE TWO SHALL WE KNOW?

W

What will become of us amid all this obscurity? Shall we leave the finite wherein we dwell to be swallowed up in this or the other infinite? In other words, shall we end by mingling with the infinite which our reason conceives, or shall we remain eternally in that which our eyes behold, that is to say, in numberless changing and ephemeral worlds? Shall we never leave those worlds which seem doomed to die and to be reborn eternally, to enter at last into that which, since all eternity, can neither have been born nor have died and which exists without either future or past? Shall we one day escape, with all that surrounds us, from the unhappy experiments, to find our way at last into peace, wisdom, the changeless and boundless

consciousness, or into the hopeless unconsciousness? Shall we have the fate which our senses foretell, or that which our intelligence demands? Or are both senses and intelligence illusions, puny implements, vain weapons of a brief hour that were never intended to probe or contend with the universe? If there really be a contradiction, is it wise to accept it and to deem impossible that which we do not understand, seeing that we understand almost nothing? Is truth not at an immeasurable distance from those inconsistencies which appear to us enormous and irreducible and which, doubtless, are of no more importance than the rain that falls upon the sea?

XXIV

THE INFINITY WHICH BOTH OUR REASON AND OUR SENSES CAN ADMIT

B

But, even to our poor understanding of to-day, the discrepancy between the infinity conceived by our reason and that perceived by our senses is perhaps more apparent than real. When we say that, in a universe that has existed since all eternity, every experiment, every possible combination has been made; when we declare that there is not a chance that that which has not taken place in the uncountable past can take place in the uncountable future, our imagination attributes to the infinity of time a preponderance which it cannot possess. In truth, all that infinity contains must be as infinite as the time at its disposal; and the chances, encounters and combinations that lie therein have not been exhausted in the eternity that goes before us any more than they could be in the eternity that comes after us. There is, therefore, no climax, no changelessness, no immovability. It is probable that the universe is seeking and finding itself every day, that it has not become entirely conscious and does not yet

know what it wants. It is almost certain that its ideal is still veiled by the shadow of its immensity and almost evident that the experiments and chances are following one upon the other in unimaginable worlds, compared wherewith all those which we see on starry nights are no more than a pinch of gold-dust in the ocean depths. Lastly, it is very nearly sure that we ourselves, or whatever remains of us—it matters not—will profit one day by those experiments and those chances. That which has not yet happened may suddenly supervene; and the best state, as well as the supreme wisdom which will recognize and establish it, is perhaps ready to arise from the clash of circumstance. It were not at all astonishing if the consciousness of the universe, in the endeavour to form itself, had not yet met with the aid of the necessary chances and if human thought were seconding one of those decisive chances. Here there is a hope. Small as man and his thought may appear, he has exactly the value of the most enormous forces that he is able to conceive, since there is neither great nor small in the immeasurable; and, if our body equalled the dimensions of all the worlds which our eyes can see, it would have exactly the same weight and the same importance with regard to the universe that it has to-day. The mind alone perhaps occupies in infinity a space which comparisons do not reduce to nothing.

XXV

OUR FATE IN INFINITY

W

Whatever the ultimate truth may be, whether we admit the abstract, absolute and perfect infinity—the changeless, immovable infinity which has attained perfection and which knows everything, to which our reason tends—or whether we prefer that offered to us by the evidence, here below undeniable, of our senses—the infinity which seeks itself, which is still evolving and not yet established—it behoves us

above all to foresee in it our fate, which, in any case, must end by absorption in that very infinity.

The first infinity, the ideal infinity, is so strangely contrary to all that we see that it is best not to attack it until we have tried to explore the second. Moreover, it is quite possible that it may succeed the other. As we have said, that which has not taken place in the eternity before may happen in the eternity after us; and nothing save innumerous accidents is opposed to the prospect that the universe may at last acquire the integral consciousness that will establish it at its climax. After giving a glance, useless, for that matter, and impotent, at all that may perhaps arise, we shall try to interrogate, without hope of answer, the mystery of the boundless peace into which it is possible that we may sink with the other worlds.

XXVI

THE SAME, CONTINUED

B

Behold us, then, in the infinity of those worlds, the stellar infinity, the infinity of the heavens, which assuredly veils other things from our eyes, but could never be a total illusion. It seems to us to be peopled only with objects—planets, suns, stars, nebulæ, atoms, imponderous fluids—which move, unite and separate, repel and attract one another, which shrink and expand, displace one another incessantly and never arrive, which measure space in that which has no limit and number the hours in that which has no term. In a word, we are in an infinity that seems to have almost the same character, the same habits as that power in the midst of which we breathe and which, upon our earth, we call nature or life.

What will be our fate in that infinity? It is not vain to ask one’s self the question, even if we should mingle with it after losing all consciousness, all notion of the ego,

even if our existence should be no more than a little substance without name, soul or matter—one cannot tell—suspended in the equally nameless abyss that replaces time and space. It is not vain to ask one's self the question, for we are concerned with the history of the worlds or of the universe; and this history, far more than that of our petty existence, is our own great history, in which perhaps something of ourselves or something incomparably better and vaster will end by finding us again some day.

XXVII

SHALL WE BE UNHAPPY THERE?

S

Shall we be unhappy there? It is hardly reassuring when we consider the habits of our nature and remember that we form part of a universe that has not yet collected its wisdom. We have seen, it is true, that good and bad fortune exist only in so far as regards our body and that, when we have lost the agent of our sufferings, we shall not meet any of the earthly sorrows again. But our anxiety does not end here; and will not our mind, lingering upon our erstwhile sorrows, drifting derelict from world to world, unknown to itself in the unknowable that seeks itself hopelessly; will not our mind know here the frightful torture of which we have already spoken and which is doubtless the last which the imagination can touch with its wing? Lastly, if there were nothing left of our body and our mind, there would still remain the matter and the spirit (or, at least, the obviously single force to which we give that double name) which composed them and whose fate must be no more indifferent to us than our own fate; for, let us repeat, from our death onwards, the adventure of the universe becomes our own adventure. Let us not, therefore, say to ourselves:

"What can it matter? We shall not be there."

We shall be there always, because everything will be there.

XXVIII

QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

W

Will all this to which we shall belong, in a world ever seeking itself, continue a prey to new, unceasing and perhaps painful experiments? Since the part that we were was unhappy, why should the part that we shall be enjoy a better fortune? Who can assure us that those unending combinations and endeavours will not be more sorrowful, more awkward and more baneful than those which we are leaving; and how shall we explain that these have come about after so many millions of others which should have opened the eyes of the genius of infinity? It is idle to persuade ourselves, as Hindu wisdom would, that our sorrows are but illusions and appearances: it is none the less true that they make us very really unhappy. Has the universe elsewhere a more complete consciousness, a more just and serene principle of thought than on this earth and in the worlds which we perceive? And, if it be true that it has somewhere attained that better thought, why does the thought that presides over the destinies of our earth not profit by it? Could no communication be possible between worlds which must have been born of the same idea and are steeped in it? What would be the mystery of that isolation? Are we to believe that the earth marks the most advanced stage and the most favoured experiment? What, then, can the thought of the universe have done and against what darkness must it have struggled, to have come no farther than this? But, on the other hand, can it have been stayed by that darkness or by those obstacles which, being unable to arise from any elsewhere, can but have sprung from itself? Who then could have set those insoluble problems to infinity and from what more remote and profound region than itself would they have issued? Some one, after all, must know what they ask; and, as behind infinity there can be none that is not infinity itself, it is impossible to imagine

a malignant will in a will that leaves no point around it but what it fills entirely. Or are the experiments begun in the stars continued mechanically, by virtue of the force acquired, without regard to their uselessness and to their pitiful consequences, according to the custom of nature, which knows nothing of our parsimony and squanders the suns in space as it does the seed on earth, knowing that nothing can be lost? Or, again, is the whole question of our peace and happiness, like that of the fate of the worlds, reduced to knowing whether or not the infinity of endeavours and combinations be equal to that of eternity? Or, lastly, to come to the greatest probability, is it we who deceive ourselves, who know nothing, who see nothing and who consider imperfect that which is perhaps faultless, we, who are but an infinitesimal fragment of the intelligence which we judge with the aid of the little shreds of thought which it has vouchsafed to lend us?

XXIX

THE SAME, CONTINUED

H

How could we reply, how could our thoughts and glances penetrate the infinite and the invisible, we who neither understand nor even see the thing by which we see and which is the source of all our thoughts? In fact, as has been very justly observed, man does not see light itself. He sees only matter, or rather the small part of the great worlds which he knows by the name of matter, touched by light. He does not perceive the immense rays that cross the heavens save at the moment when they are stopped by an object of the nature of those which his eye is accustomed to see upon this earth: were it otherwise, the whole space filled with innumerable suns and boundless forces, instead of being an abyss of absolute darkness which absorbs and extinguishes the clusters of beams that shoot across it from every side, would be but a prodigious, untenable ocean of flashes. Shakespeare’s famous lines:

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

have long since become utterly inadequate. There are no longer more things than our philosophy can dream of or imagine: there is none but things which it cannot dream of, there is nothing but the unimaginable; and, if we do not even see the light, which is the only thing that we believed we saw, it may be said that there is nothing all around us but the invisible.

We move in the illusion of seeing and knowing that which is strictly indispensable to our little lives. As for all the rest, which is well-nigh everything, our organs not only debar us from reaching, seeing or feeling it, but even restrain us from suspecting what it is, just as they would prevent us from understanding it, if an intelligence of a different order were to bethink itself of revealing or explaining it to us. It is impossible for us, therefore, to appreciate in any degree whatsoever, in the smallest conceivable respect, the present state of the universe and to say, as long as we are men, whether it follows a straight line or describes an immense circle, whether it is growing wiser or madder, whether it is advancing towards the eternity which has no end or retracing its steps towards that which had no beginning. Our sole privilege within our tiny confines is to struggle towards that which appears to us the best and to remain heroically persuaded that no part of what we do within those confines can ever be wholly lost.

XXX

IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO ANSWER THEM

B

But let not all these insoluble questions drive us towards fear. From the point of view of our future beyond the grave, it is in no way necessary that we should have

an answer to everything. Whether the universe have already found its consciousness, whether it find it one day or see it everlastingly, it could not exist for the purpose of being unhappy and of suffering, neither in its entirety, nor in any one of its parts; and it matters little if the latter be invisible or incommensurable, considering that the smallest is as great as the greatest in what has neither limit nor measure. To torture a point is the same thing as to torture the worlds; and, if it torture the worlds, it is its own substance that it tortures. Its very destiny, in which we are placed, protects us. Our sufferings there could be but ephemeral; and nothing matters that is not eternal. It is possible, although somewhat incomprehensible, that parts should err and go astray; but it is impossible that sorrow should be one of its lasting and necessary laws; for it would have brought that law to bear against itself. In like manner, the universe is and must be its own law and its sole master; if not, the law or the master whom it must obey would then be the universe; and the centre of a word which we pronounce without being able to grasp its scope would be simply displaced. If it be unhappy, that means that it wills its own unhappiness; if it will its unhappiness, it is mad; and, if it appear to us mad, that means that our reason works contrary to everything and to the only laws possible, seeing that they are eternal, or, to speak more humbly, that it judges what it wholly fails to understand.

XXXI

EVERYTHING MUST FINISH EXEMPT FROM SUFFERING

E

Everything, therefore, must finish, or perhaps everything already is, if not in a state of happiness, at least in a state exempt from all suffering, all anxiety, all lasting unhappiness; and what, after all, is our happiness upon this earth, if it be not the absence of sorrow, anxiety and unhappiness?

But it is childish to talk of happiness and unhappiness where infinity is in question. The idea which we entertain of happiness and unhappiness is something so special, so human, so fragile that it does not exceed our stature and falls to dust as soon as we go beyond its little sphere. It proceeds entirely from a few accidents of our nerves, which are made to appreciate very slight happenings, but which could as easily have felt everything the reverse way and taken pleasure in that which is now pain. We believe that we see nothing hanging over us but catastrophes, deaths, torments and disasters; we shiver at the mere thought of the great interplanetary spaces, with their cold and formidable and gloomy solitudes; and we imagine that the revolving worlds are as unhappy as ourselves because they freeze, or clash together, or are consumed in unutterable flames. We infer from this that the genius of the universe is an outrageous tyrant, seized with a monstrous madness, and that it delights only in the torture of itself and all that it contains. To millions of stars, each many thousand times larger than our sun, to nebulæ whose nature and dimensions no figure, no word in our languages is able to express, we attribute our momentary sensibility, the little ephemeral and chance working of our nerves; and we are convinced that life there must be impossible or appalling, because we should feel too hot or too cold. It were much wiser to say to ourselves that it would need but a trifle, a few papillæ more or less to our skin, the slightest modification of our eyes and ears, to turn the temperature, the silence and the darkness of space into a delicious spring-time, an unequalled music, a divine light. It were much more reasonable to persuade ourselves that the catastrophes which we think that we behold are life itself, the joy and one or other of those immense festivals of mind and matter in which death, thrusting aside at last our two enemies, time and space, will soon permit us to take part. Each world dissolving, extinguished, crumbling, burnt or colliding with another world and pulverized means the commencement of a magnificent experiment, the dawn of a marvellous hope and perhaps an unexpected happiness drawn direct from the inexhaustible unknown. What though they freeze or

flame, collect or disperse, pursue or flee one another: mind and matter, no longer united by the same pitiful hazard that joined them in us, must rejoice at all that happens; for all is but birth and re-birth, a departure into an unknown filled with wonderful promises and maybe an anticipation of some unutterable event....

And, should they stand still one day, become fixed and remain motionless, it will not be that they have encountered calamity, nullity or death; but they will have entered into a thing so fair, so great, so happy and bathed in such certainties that they will for ever prefer it to all the prodigious chances of an infinity which nothing can impoverish.

Footnotes:

[1] Marie Lenéru, Les Affranchis, Act III., Sc. iv.

[2] This essay forms part of the volume published under the title of The Measure of the Hours.—Translator's Note.

Transcriber's Note:

Minor changes have been made to correct typesetters' errors; otherwise every effort has been made to remain true to the author's words and intent.

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