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Leopold Andrian, *The Garden of Knowledge* (1895)
A New Translation

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Ego Narcissus

καὶ διὰ τοῦτο δρᾷ ἵνα πάθῃ,
ὁ πάσχει ὅτι ἔδρασε.

—

Ein Orphiker

Piu ch'un anima e alta e perfetta
Piu sente in ogni cosa il buono ed il malo

—

Dante¹

There was once a prince of some lands bordering on Germany who, when he was twenty years old or so, married a beautiful woman. He was very different from her, but she loved this difference in him, alluring mystery full of promise that it was, one that she believed sooner or later would wonderfully reveal itself. In the second year of their marriage, she bore him a son who resembled her more with every day that went by. Time passed, and, remaining as they did very different from each other, the hope which had nourished her love began to wane. Ten years later the prince fell ill, and as his end drew nigh, when his bracelet became too large for his wrist and his rings too large for his fingers, his face changing with each passing week, she felt again that uneasy love that she had once had for him, without, however, the hope that had formerly accompanied it, knowing as she did that he would shortly die. When the prince did then die, she thought that it was his death alone that had prevented the mystery from being revealed to her. And she mourned for him. Her son, Erwin, though, had her hands and voice, and the very sound of his voice both disturbed and assuaged the fulsomeness of her pain. And so it was that she sent him to boarding school.

At the time – he was almost twelve – Erwin tended, more than he would ever do again, to keep to himself, and happily so. His body and soul lived almost two separate lives, one mysteriously in the other. The things of the world outside had for him no more importance than things in a dream. They were words of a language that happened by accident to be his and only his will gave them meaning, context and colour. In college he would pass the day in the company of thirty classmates, each of whom would catch his attention and intrude on his life. Yet these companions were destined to remain foreign to his soul and therefore he saw their intrusions as an unbearable imposition, indeed he feared them as malicious foes. Realizing, though, that they impinged too much on his life, he began to reflect on the one thing that he believed he could understand of them, namely, their words. But those words, to which he attached great importance, utterly confused him since, spoken superficially, they changed meaning and, likewise, his new companions seemed at some moments articulate and, at others, unintelligible. He could not even understand his own life, dependent as it was on them. Even moments of joy came to him unannounced, unfathomable, as when his mother came to visit him or sent him letters and sacred images still redolent of her lace. In an existence over which he no longer had any control, even what his soul

could experience became unfathomable, be it the thrill as he went down the slopes on a toboggan between the infinite white snow and the infinite blue sky, or his melancholy on summer evenings.

Life was like an occupation for which he was not suited but was compelled to see through. It made him tired and all day long he looked forward to going to sleep. And when, later, in the dormitory upstairs the lights went out and his cheek rested on a cold pillow, he felt that shiver of contentment that only those who are unhappy experience when all around is at peace.

Sometime later Erwin was overcome by a longing for things that exuded a sense of peace: for the gentle Congregationists whom he befriended, for the fathers whom he met as they meditated in the park, for the celebrations in Church and above all for those secluded parts of the college in which chapels dedicated to unknown saints, together with a holy baptismal font, were tucked away.

The evening before his first communion he realized that this peace came from God, that this peace was truly to be found in God alone, and so he vowed to become a priest.

From that moment his present life became less burdensome to him because he regarded it as untrue, and with that he realized that only by participating in the life of the Church could he gain an intimation of the true life. He often thought of his future life in God. It would assuredly be most beautiful. In these intimations he began to find beauty of many varieties, ones that differed from each other in the same way as the murmurings of the glorious litanies in honour of the mother of God on warm evenings in May differed from the commemoration of the dead on All Souls Day or from the prayers that, on Good Friday in early spring, priest and congregation raised before bare altars to the cruel wood on which hung the Saviour of the world. But he also recognized other kinds of beauty. The castles in the autumnal countryside were beautiful, as were the rooms of palaces in the city when filled with fragrance and scent. Beautiful too were the carriages and the harnesses of their horses with silver embossed on their coats of arms. And the horses themselves! How beautiful they were: the white horses belonging to his mother, golden chestnut sorrels, the black horses of the coach and fours! And many other things existed, things that were not in God, things that as a priest he would never have and yet were beautiful ... all the beautiful things of this world.

Life would be a struggle between the Church and the World. But he imagined this duel to be full of so many courtesies, such lofty ceremonies, such refined gestures, that, for those two great, equally brave, champions, the struggle was, as it were, transformed into a tournament. The two adversaries would indulge in this tournament as a pretext for standing off and facing each other, for admiring each other's splendour and for appreciating their own glory through that of their opponent. It was like two heroes coming to challenge each other from the ends of the world, the most intrepid hero of the east and the most intrepid hero of the west. After saluting each other, with their lances lowered but their visors still raised, they almost forget to fight as they gaze upon each other. In anticipation of this singular duel, Erwin savoured the easy-going pleasures of Vienna on his days out. He savoured them even more inasmuch as he felt like an envoy despatched from a distant realm to a foreign country to which he was to deliver a declaration of war on the following day. But for the time being, this envoy would remain content to admire the festive parades, games and performances organized in his honour.

During that period Erwin spent most of his time in the company of a Polish boy, who, like him, did not appreciate the food at school and constantly spoke of home. Erwin was, however, fonder of another boy called Lato, Lato with his fair, fair hair and bright eyes. But Lato mixed with his foes. And the latter, realizing that Erwin was scared of them, one day roughed him up on the toboggan slope. They threw him to the ground, a lot of snow went down his neck and he fell ill with pneumonia. During his convalescence, they had after all come to see him and so Erwin came to realize that in reality they were kind lads and not his enemies.

Soon after recovering he went to Bolzano accompanied by one of the fathers. Throughout the day he enjoyed the journey. But in the evening, when they passed through villages as lamps

were being lit, he felt sad that he could not inhabit any of them or at least meet the people who lived there. Then, at Innsbruck, an officer got onto the train, a lieutenant from the Kaiserjäger who was being transferred to Riva, a transfer with which he was delighted because the cough he had had for many years was showing no sign of improvement. He was very young, not particularly refined, but polite in a shy and engaging manner. He spoke in a roundabout way and tended to slightly over-emphasize vowels that shouldn't be stressed. Erwin liked him. After they got off the train in Bolzano, Erwin talked with the father about him. He had tuberculosis, said the father, and would soon die. All night long Erwin kept thinking about the lieutenant and his impending death. It seemed awful that they would never meet again and suddenly overcome by regret and despair, he realized that he did not even know his friend's name.

Erwin spent three years studying in Bolzano. At first many memories of the college in Vienna came back to him. They were not memories of things that had been dear to him while he was there. Rather, what he remembered was that life that he had held in little regard at the time. It appeared to him, seductive, brazen, almost tangible, observing him reproachfully and longingly. He could see in his mind's eye those journeys to Vienna in noisy horse drawn omnibuses, journeys that he enjoyed even though he was numb with cold. He could see a uniform, a cap, chin strap hanging loose in the manner that officers then affected. He could see the gas lamps burning on the sky-blue whitewashed walls. He could see those large afternoon parties at which nobody ever asked to leave with him so that he was left standing there, not knowing what to do. Often, too, he saw Lato with his bright eyes and fair, fair hair, Lato whom he scarcely knew. Indeed, that life became beautiful, imbued with a beauty that, at the time, he had discovered in other aspirations. But Erwin did not realize this and he longed to return to the college.

There were, however, many things he liked in Bolzano: the green bell towers, the dull, deep sound of the bells, forever ringing, and spring, when the fruit trees bloomed.

At that time, a singer who was accustomed to perform in big cities came to the theatre at Bolzano. With the many contrivances that she deployed during her stylized, intense, performance, she made her part real and yet simultaneously revealed to the audience that her part was no more than a sham, a pretext for prostituting herself in a singularly deferential manner. These two contrasting aspects of her performance made her all the more fascinating to Erwin. The theatre, with its music and lights, transformed what was vulgar, voluptuous and performed with abandon into an imposing, procacious and bewildering display; and yet, the thrill and splendour on stage mingled with the audience's applause conjured up, curiously, a great triumph for the singer and for her sumptuous physical presence. One particular aspect of her performance struck him again and again. Towards the end of the piece, the notes of the orchestra became fainter and more melodious, the choir took their leave and she remained alone on the stage. She then presented herself in front of the stage lights, her face brilliant with makeup, her eyes alight and her lips tinged with a slightly bland smile of apotheosis. At that moment, with tremors of emotion in her voice, which, because they were so affected, never failed to fascinate Erwin, she discharged her frivolous and disingenuous interpretation of the libretto onto the audience. By chance, Erwin discovered that in real life she was an elderly woman and that she wasn't beautiful at all. From that moment on she became even more extraordinary in his eyes. Eventually, he decided to pay her a visit, though the thought made him apprehensive. The singer lived in one room, together with an actor. She was indeed not beautiful and she was elderly, but even so she gave the impression of being a young girl.

During his first year at school Erwin didn't make any friends. After his first holidays were over, Heinrich Philipp arrived in Bolzano. Heinrich Philipp was not a true Austrian, but, with the dethronement of King Robert, his father, who was related to the king, had emigrated to Austria and Heinrich Philipp had lived in Vienna until he was sixteen. He always spoke about Vienna with Erwin. Heinrich Philipp possessed three qualities. Those who made his acquaintance noticed them

immediately, like the glittering of three precious stones. They were in fact three exercises of one single virtue. He possessed the goodness of saints, namely, the ability to understand the deepest motivation in every human being. He was courteous and adopted a manner appropriate to each person he encountered. And he was likeable for the constant consideration that he showed others. When, however, Erwin came to know him better, he noticed that Philipp sometimes changed completely. It was as if he was speaking right through Erwin and back to himself. And then, in those moments, Erwin learned words he did not know and understood the meaning of other words he had not previously understood – or, more simply, he discovered that, in what had up to then not been mysterious to him, there were numerous mysteries and that things bad and forbidden were also full of charm. When in those moments Heinrich Philipp spoke of Vienna, he adopted an unusual tone and Erwin dimly understood that the forbidden words were somehow connected to life in Vienna: the Vienna Opera Ball, the Sofiensaal, the Ronacher Theatre and the Orpheum and the circus and the *fiacre*.

His memories of the college and his acquaintance with Heinrich Philipp meant that, gradually, and in consequence of his new expectations, Erwin retrimmed his hopes for the future. Vienna and the great world would make them come true. He vaguely imagined a life in which the greatest beauty that there was could be enjoyed in the most beautiful and varied ways. Yet, though at peace with himself in this respect, he sensed every now and again a strange, restless impulse, one that was partly a desire to discover new things and partly an urge to deny what he in fact desired. But this impulse was not pronounced and Erwin contented himself with the knowledge that at some point it too would be requited. It would be fulfilled in the things that Heinrich Philipp talked about in such an odd and mysterious way: the Vienna Opera Ball, the Sofiensaal, the Ronacher Theatre and the Orpheum and the circus and the *fiacre*.

Even so in his mind he often returned to college, to his friends and, above all, to Lato.

Heinrich Philipp stayed in Bolzano for just one winter. Erwin found himself alone again. He would, though, be returning to Vienna and during his third year, he waited impatiently for the moment when he would do so. He didn't enjoy Bolzano anymore, except for the long walks in the company of an elderly priest, a physicist, who told him all about his life and scientific interests. These Erwin found meaningless but all the same he listened while the priest talked about magnets, colour changes and the way in which materials attracted each other, just as when, as a child, he had listened to tales of magicians, even though he already knew there were no such things. Indeed the elderly priest seemed to have something of the magician about him, in that he had the power to condition frogspawn to produce Siamese frogs.

At that time Erwin spent his summers either in the countryside with his mother or travelling in the mountains with his tutor. Once, during one of these trips in the Tyrol, he felt nostalgic for Bukovina and remembered a friend who lived there. But at the time he could not pay a visit and this made him feel that he had lost something irretrievably. Nor did the thought that he might see Bukovina on another occasion console him. Of these summers he would later remember the drawn-out evenings, by the great lakes of Carinthia, evenings that never became cool. He thought, too, of the people who liked to spend their summers there: actresses, students of the military academy and Viennese girls with their beautiful, soft, figures in white dresses with broad coloured silk ribbons.

By the time he arrived in Vienna Erwin was seventeen. Following his arrival, he visited the college as soon as he could. Many of his friends there took the opportunity to promise that they would come and see him at Christmas. This cheered him up, especially the thought of seeing Lato again. But he was even more eager at the thought of seeing a new boy whom he had just met for the first time. He was an ugly boy with big eyes who was slow on the uptake in class. Since he did not come from a rich family, he hoped to become an officer and find a position with an archduke.

During the first few months Erwin often visited his college friends, but as time went by he thought about them less and less and came to love Vienna for its own sake. He loved the large Baroque palaces in the narrow streets and the resounding inscriptions on our monuments, the

Spanish step of the horses, the uniforms of the guards and the courtyard of the imperial palace on winter days when the music, loud and boisterous, seeping into the limbs of the crowd, warmed and soothed them. He loved the major feast days, celebrated by all, especially that of Corpus Domini, the day on which the blessed body of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ reaches us with no less radiance and jubilation than on those festive days when the Emperor Charles VI, returning from his Spanish territories, entered Vienna, the ever-faithful capital of his empire and kingdom.

Erwin also liked the shop window displays of heavily woven, single colour carriage blankets and the dark batiste of the handkerchiefs among bright flowery silks. He liked the coaches drawn by four black horses among the pink flowers of the Prater. He liked that the *fiacres* were as elegant as his friends, and he liked his elegant friends for their refined and easy-going way of life. Above all, he liked that, sometimes, they could dance all night long to the sound of village music and take delight in a single word or at the thought of being Viennese and that in the streets of Vienna even barrel organs were played well. The Viennese, it seemed, were charming by nature, with an allure that became evermore entrancing, like a light that fascinates us because we cannot work out if it is made of two colours constantly blending with each other, or just one colour forever changing its hue as it shimmers.

Often he felt exhilarated by presentiments of the many, many pleasures that Vienna yet had to offer and by the thought that, concealed within them, lay the mystery of their charm. And so Erwin was able to assuage the yearning for the 'other', a yearning that now had become more intense and more insistent than in Bolzano. Everything in which the 'other' was to be found was to hand: the Opera Ball, the Sofiensaal, the Ronacher Theatre and the Orpheum and the circus and the *fiacre*. When he said the 'other', he felt that in every direction there unfolded a world in which everything was forbidden and mysterious, a world just as large as the one he knew. In particular, when observing the *fiacres*, he had a strange, disconcerting rush of excitement. Some of them seemed remarkably like young gentlemen. That this similarity implied a contrast must, he thought, have something to do with the nature of the 'other'. He especially liked one *fiacre* who used to drive through the Prater in the spring. His horses had bouquets of violets in the harnesses and the *fiacre* sat there, leaning slightly forward, holding the bridles aloft and apart, arms raised elegantly, motionless but alive, like a graceful and somewhat mannered sketch thanks to the mannered elegance of his clothing.

In June of the second year, a friend invited him to make an excursion to a Heuriger together with two *fiacres*. They stayed there all night sitting at one of the small tables among the acacias, the scent of the plants mingling with the music. But Erwin did not find in the *fiacres* what he had imagined. They resembled, in fact, young gentlemen, even if the contrasts in their souls, like those in the style of their dress, were more marked. Sometimes they were more childlike, and their manners more delicate, albeit more artificial.

During the holidays, Erwin recalled from time to time how the *fiacres* had not disclosed 'the other' to him. The world, too, began to lose its fascination because there was no other world to contrast it with. In the autumn he stayed in the mountains for some time before returning to the city. He felt, though, as if he had left something behind in the pasturelands through which he had walked and the mountain huts in which he had stayed, or rather he felt as if he had forgotten to bring something of them with him. He feared the city, where autumn is perceived as a summer laid waste.

Just before Christmas Erwin made friends with one of his school companions, someone whom he hadn't taken any notice of in previous years. Clemens was poor and unrefined. He was indiscreet and mischievous like a street urchin yet at the same time almost touchingly innocent. His face was pale, apart from the dark circles around his eyes. His fair hair, lustreless as if powdered and the many soft yet expressive lines of his features, particularly those beneath his eyes, evoked the delicate beauty of late antiquity. Clemens had the same voice as the officer with whom he, Erwin, had travelled to Bolzano but did not look like him. He loved to look at him and listen to

the sound of his voice. What he liked even more was to walk with him in springtime in the Prater or to take him to see his erstwhile friends, friends who did not understand Clemens. He also loved spraying him with the latest fragrances or giving him things which were called beautiful because they were fashionably shocking and outré: Parisian fabrics and textiles in unusual patterns and colours, golden bracelets and silver or metal cigarette holders engraved with tiny coats of arms or large monograms. Often they went to taverns outside the city to listen to the big military bands. They were both captivated by the waltzes, monotonous in their unfailingly cloying vulgarity. And among the soft and seductive songs of a civilization pleased with itself, there came upon them a faint sense of cossetted happiness, a feeling of self-love or mutual love, or love for all they had loved, or love for their Austrian fatherland that indeed bestowed whatever they wanted and could not be forsaken.

Then spring came, a time of year when Erwin always felt lethargic and had the appearance of someone who was unwell, but this year more so than usual. In late spring, when the gardens were beautiful, he went to the gardens of Schönbrunn or Laxenburg or to the public gardens, always on his own. There he recited lines of poetry: what they said meant nothing to him, even though their musicality moved him. And in Bourget's languid verses two words stood out again and again. Again and again those two words made him shiver in that they promised to reconcile all that was sublime with all that was base, two things that he had previously sought separately. The words were 'woman' and 'life'.

[Cont'd]

¹ Andrian does not follow Dante *verbatim*; he changes one or two words keeping the same meaning. He twice fails to insert the accents on *più*. All the editions of *The Garden of Knowledge* kept the original epigraph written by Andrian.