Reflections on the Composition of The Abyss

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The first version of *The Abyss*: *La Mort conduit l'attelage* of 1923-24 re-worked in 1934: such an imperfect text, so thin especially, so underdeveloped, so vague in its motivations particularly where Zeno and Nathanael are concerned; today it seems remarkable to me that in spite of all its gaps and flaws, a discerning critic of the time was able to name the theme of each part of the trilogy: the spirit, the body, the soul. I hadn't thought of it myself.

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The soul, the spirit, the body. An admirable trilogy to be sure, and it immediately brings to mind, with the protracted emotion that poetry leaves behind in us, Rimbaud's admirable "Noël" in *Une saison en enfer:* "The Kings of life, the three Magi, the body, the soul, the spirit ..." Yes. But when we draw closer to a character, we realize to what extent these well-defined allegories differ from reality. The body, the soul, and the spirit overlap; what's more, they are different forms assumed by the same living, sentient matter. No doubt that inside each person the proportions of these three elements are different, just as the proportions of sexual components are different in each human being. With Zeno the spirit is the most dominant, but the spirit is activated as it were by the continuous and near-furious surges of the soul, and would not develop by itself without the experiences and the *control* of the body.

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To a great extent, our internal-external equilibrium is dependent on the senses: if a man closes his eyes he is no longer capable of balancing on one foot. The very notion of personhood blurs into a vague feeling of dizziness. The straightness of

that line we believe to be so firmly drawn is dependent on the way the world is reflected in the pupils of our eyes.

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(Which doesn't imply that Zeno and I deny the soul. But the soul is a reality to which perhaps almost no one has yet gained access.)

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As time goes on I am more and more convinced that the folly of reworking my old texts is actually very wise. Writers carry only so many beings within themselves. Instead of depicting these characters in a new guise, which would mean merely giving them another name, I have preferred to deepen, develop, and nourish the characters with whom I have already lived and to learn more about them as I learn more about life and to improve on the world I know. "I have never been able to understand how one could have enough of any beloved," are the words I put into Hadrian's mouth, speaking of his lovers. And I have never been able to believe I could grow tired of a character I've created. I'm still observing them as they go on living. They will have surprises in store for me until my dying day.

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This in no way excuses the contemptible literary device of serving up the same characters over and over by routine, or through lack of imagination, or by some silly attachment to a character, without the new episode he's been placed in or the new words put into his mouth adding one iota to what he is already. So many characters are like comic strip heroes: they are used *ad nauseam*, taking advantage of the pleasure the lazy reader gets from encountering a name or a character he already knows. Dickens often errs in this sense through sentimental attachments to his own creatures. Never Stendhal. Balzac drifts in this direction, but *La Comédie humaine* teems with so many countless acts and feelings that the very repetitions are imbued with a life of their own, and end up *enriching* his characters, even if they do not develop or change. Proust does the same. It is true that M. de Charlus

does change in the course of the immensity of *Temps perdu*, but the change takes place along a very precise curve the author seems to have described ahead of time (which does not invalidate the fact that it's right); in fact, and other than this essential development, M. de Charlus' innumerable entrances and exits are as predictable as those of a favorite clown and as monotonous: Charlus finally is both a target for the barbs the author really intends for himself and an accomplice who speaks for him. This inexhaustible Charlus reminds one of the butt of some broad family joke that is endlessly amusing within a given group or milieu, and whose mechanism Proust himself described so admirably. But these devices, which would be exasperating in a lesser writer, simply result in Proust with our being oversaturated by Charlus' presence as we would be by a person we encounter constantly. He is real to the point of exasperating us.

The fact remains that the very great, perhaps the greatest writers never stoop to merely serving up the same character in the same way. Pierre Besoukhov gets bigger or taller each time he comes on stage; he is never *quite* the same man. As Flaubert pointed out, Tolstoy repeats himself at times when talking of strategems or the philosophy of history, but never where human beings are concerned.

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Up to a certain point in his speculations, Hadrian can reach over to us; and we, over the bridge of the wisdom of antiquity we are free to use still, we can draw near to Hadrian. The characters in *La Mort conduit l'attelage* answer only to themselves, alone, contradictory, defined as much by their refusals as by their acceptances, marked by their time and sometimes by that which enables them to escape their time, even though they sometimes bruise their heads against the walls that hem them in. This impulse to escape is conscious in Zeno, who uses the dialectical means he has given himself to move out of his time, but the same impulse is unconscious in Anna, linked to the profound life of the body; with Nathanael I've tried to show the strange freedom of the soul, which needs neither words nor images.

La Mort conduit l'attelage is an attempt to show that strange freedom which can develop gradually within us if we do not reject its existence, and which allows us to escape from certain tyrannies, and no matter what the circumstances may be,

to be ourselves, though bruised, deformed, almost disfigured by custom and necessity.

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One must experience debauchery in order to leave debauchery behind; experience love, in the conventional sense of the term, in order to judge love; one must experience history in order to free oneself from history's pitfalls, which is to say the pitfalls of human society itself, whose history is but a series of archives.

To come finally to that time where man does not exist.

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Other than deepening the themes, inventing details that link up events, and suppressing this or that naive historical error, I observe, between the awkward but ardent "D'après Dürer" and *The Abyss* of the present, the following changes:

> Less sympathy for the Calvinist reform movement; in *The Abyss* the only sympathy shown is for Simon, the Protestant of the extreme left. Calvinism is treated with irony for the harshness of its practices and beliefs, even though the faith of the adolescent Martha is a noble one and Martha deteriorates after she abandons that faith.
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> Less sympathy for the Lutheran reform movement, seen through the indignation of the Anabaptist group and the philosophical hostility of Zeno. The excesses in both camps (Catholic and Protestant) much more pronounced.
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> A subtler feeling for the relations between Zeno and the Church.
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> Interest in the doctrines of hermeticism and the Cabala.

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In 1971, on the streets of Bruges, I retraced Zeno's steps, all of his comings and goings. How he modified his itinerary, for instance, when he went to the forge to attend to Han. The location of the inn where he had his meals. At what street corner he saw Idelette pass by, a prisoner. Morning strolls one whole April, sometimes in the sunlight, more often in the mist or drizzle. And with me was Valentine the beautiful, the gentle, the fair, who would bark loudly at the horses (I did try to stop her) and run merrily into the Gruuthuse courtyard and caper through the daffodils in the garden of the Béguinage -— and now (six months later, October 3, 1971) she's as dead as Idelette, as Zeno, as Hilzonda. And no one will understand if I say that I'll never get over her death, any more than I could had it been the death of a human being.

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Where, when, and how? Wherever it may be, whenever it may be, and by whatever means, I know I will have at my bedside a physician and a priest — Zeno and the Prior of the Cordeliers.

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The old bakery in Salzburg is still there and the arch over the little stone bench where Zeno liked to sit.

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It was at Salzburg in June of 1964, attending mass (kneeling on the stone floor) in the church of the Franciscans that I saw in my mind's eye and for the first time the character of the Prior of the Cordeliers in its entirety. Until then I had only caught glimpses of his exterior traits (the references to the Prior in "Return to Bruges").

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The Abyss was started (under another title) when I was the age of the young Zeno and the young Henry Maximilian at the beginning of the book. It was finished when I was a little older than Zeno and Henry Maximilian were when they both were struck down by death.

Minds dragging along behind them, like snakeskins or rolls of bark, their sixteenth-century ideas.

Repetitions (mantras). While I was writing the second and third parts of this book, I often repeated to myself in silence or half-aloud: "Zeno, Zeno, Zeno, Zeno, Zeno, Zeno ..." Twenty times, a hundred times, even more. And felt, by dint of repeating the name, a little more reality congealing. I'm not surprised at mystical practices whereby the faithful call upon God by repeating his name thousands of times, or lovers, using folk magic, who "call forth" the object that's been lost.

A character whom one has thus constructed, and whom one can no longer destroy, supposing one should want to: another meaning to *Zeno in aeternum.*

Each conversation is a way of adding to the contours and relief of a character.

The visit to Münster in 1956 — the autumn of Suez — almost as somber as the image of the past itself.

One of the lines about the child of the white nights is taken from a poem by Théophile de Viau.

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My immobile life has gone on for more than ten years now (1978).

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In some ways, "prison" more than "immobility," since it is no longer up to me whether I step through the open door.

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The obsession of illness observed in another.

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On rereading, I realize that Zeno and Henry Maximilian both die in February. I tried to change the month for the latter but to no avail. The scene was perceived as the end of an Italian winter.

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It was important to realign the episode about Pierre de Hamaere's suicide according to the indications given by chronicles of the time: he had had some poison brought to him by *friends of his in town.* These few words tend to indicate that a small clandestine group existed outside the monastery walls and to which the Friar probably belonged. It goes without saying that this fact tells us something about the secret life of the city (Ghent in the original, but Bruges here) and brings it closer to what we know of our own time.

Idelette and her "moorish maid" (Bosch's dark-skinned women to a certain extent inspired the latter) are imaginary but necessary for the "Disorders of the Flesh" in this chapter to be more than just a homosexual episode; and for the drama of a boy and a girl and their adolescent loves and the tragedy of infanticide to be juxtaposed with episodes of love supposedly against nature. The religious and popular morality of the day in its entirety is thus held up for scrutiny. And I say to myself that the behaviour of these young men and women is no different from the way students behave today, without their being plunged into scandal, or at least without the scandal's consequences being necessarily fatal.

This would seem to be an area then where we have gained considerably in wisdom compared to the Renaissance, or rather compared to the Middle Ages, which the Renaissance more often than not merely covers with a thin veneer. But our hypocrisy is just as strong, if not stronger. Moreover, we seem to have lost the sense of the importance and sacredness of sexual acts that those persons still possessed (for the damned is one of the forms of the sacred). We allow ourselves more, and openly (or *nearly* openly), not because we have re-sacralized the act of the flesh, but because we have reduced it to a physiological phenomenon of little consequence.

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Zeno and Henry Maximilian (I realize also on re-reading) both end with a refusal: Henry refuses the honours offered to him and settles into his life as a poor captain; Zeno refuses the retraction that would spare his life. It took both of them a long time to realize that the refusal had to be made.

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The number of bad reasons — or intermediary motives if one prefers — that Zeno comes up with before he finds himself face to face with *Hic Zeno*, and then *Zeno in aeternum*.

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Insofar as one thinks in articulate language, Zeno thinks in medieval Latin. From time to time the *a* has to be supplied.

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The "gems ... each symbolizing a single moment in the Great Transmutation" mentioned in one of Zeno's early remarks is a silly slip. There are no such gems. Between these "gems" retained in 1956 and right up to 1967 from the 1924 version, and the "metals" of the present version, there are ten years of reading texts on alchemy.

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In the awkward and still naive 1924 version published in 1934, Zeno still comes across as the liberal philosopher with logical and materialistic truth always on his side. The conception is similar to the one entertained by the radicals of the 1880s regarding Giordano Bruno, and equally false. The main change occurred during an evening at Alf's, around 1958: while I was listening to a series of works by Bach, I composed in my mind, with about six or seven years head start on the *actual* composition, the entire conversation between Zeno and the Canon that takes place a few hours before Zeno's death.

When the music was over and I had left, I completely forgot about this dialogue. But I knew I would find it again one day.

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The same experience with the new version of "Nathanael"* that was composed in silence during one night (no: in just a few hours of a night) of insomnia as I waited for a train in a little junction station. But not written down and for the moment lost.

*Character in *La Mort conduit l'attelage*, who became much later on the hero of *Un homme obscur* (1982).

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During the winter of 1954-1955, in Fayence, evenings often spent in Zeno's company next to the great kitchen fireplace of that early sixteenth-century house, where the fire seemed to leap so freely between the two stone pilasters that jutted out into the room. Later, from 1956-1957 on, so many times in front of the fireplace at "Petite Plaisance".

Actually, I used to leave him wherever I wished. When I left Salzburg in 1964, I had decided to leave him on the stone bench of the old bakery. He sat there waiting, as sure that I would come back and look for him there as some of my living friends are sure of my return to them.

If I were writing this for the public in some careful essay, I would have to show — but how? — that this is not an hallucination. So far in my life I've never experienced any. I often said to myself as I was working on Hadrian: "Why bother evoking a phantom, when the spirit itself is always present in abundance."

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"Zeno lets himself go to prison," O. pointed out to me. "He's not a hero." It's true that prison represents both the penultimate ordeal and at the same time, a leave of absence. Everything is a game.

(For the author as well: Hermann Mohr!) We do what we can to amuse ourselves as we wait for the train to leave. It's after the judgment is finally pronounced that Zeno enters into a state of heroic grace.

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The paragraph describing Zeno's father at the beginning of chapter II, was one the worst pieces kept from 1924. The "historical novel" as seen by a history student. In a case like this, there is no "historical" truth that is not narrowly specific. "Took great delight in endless conversations with Leonardo da Vinci, Caesar Borgia's engineer at the time," is quite silly; "took great delight in discussing horses and machines of war with Leonardo da Vinci, Caesar Borgia's engineer at the time," strikes the right note. We always have to focus the binoculars we are using to see up close what is far away.

When G., speaking as a translator, asks me to explain why this character at that moment does this or that deed, I stop and look for a reason. I have *seen* him do it.

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How many times, at night, not able to sleep, have I had the impression *I was stretching out my hand* to Zeno as he lay on my bed, resting from existence. I know that grey-brown hand well, long and very strong, and its lean spatulate fingers with their big, rather pale nails, cut short. The wrist is bony and the palm quite hollow, furrowed with many lines. I know the pressure of that hand, its exact degree of warmth. (I have never taken Hadrian's hand.) More than once I have made the *physical* gesture of putting out my hand to this man I invented.

Let me say immediately for any imbecile who might happen to read this note, that if I've often watched my characters making love (and at times with a certain carnal pleasure), I have never thought of joining them. One does not sleep with a part of oneself.

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A more remote presence, but infinitely amicable, of the Prior of the Cordeliers.

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The new dimension (starting in 1956) to my conception of Zeno's twentieth year is the emphasis on the extraordinary complexity of the adventure of the spirit. Zeno contradicting himself, reworking his views on things. At times, more spiritually minded than Canon Bartholomew Campanus himself.

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Nothing is more secret or more difficult to attain than the genuine notion of a personal (or personalized) God whose presence is nearly everywhere in stereotyped

forms. (The svara of the Hindu yogis). Zeno succeeds in doing so (or at least in glimpsing him as a hypothesis) two or three hours before his death.

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The intelligent reader will know, without my telling him, whose footsteps along the corridor Zeno thinks he hears a moment before his death: "We met on ground far beyond any differences."

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Greete has a little of W ...; Martha has a little of X ...; Catherine has a little of Y ...; Bartholomew Campanus has a little of Z ... Campanus has certain elements of a priest I knew as a child: Canon Carli.

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There is some of my father's temperament in Henry Maximilian's temperament.

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Where women are concerned, Zeno is almost always less the seducer than the seduced. The maidservant with a fondness for green fruit, Jeannette Fauconnier, Sign Ulfsdatter, Catherine. Even the young Hungarian girl was "avid to play her part as prey." When they do not get into his bed by themselves, Zeno lets them pass by.

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Vivine is a caricature of Solveig.

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So long as an invented being is not as important to us as we are to ourselves, he is nothing.

I imagine the Ligre family to be originally from Picardy— perhaps settled in Bruges from Arras in the fourteenth century.

Disincarnate oneself in order to reincarnate oneself in another. And to do so, use his bones, his flesh, and his blood, and the thousands of images imprinted on his grey matter.

Try to include, with a minimum of changes, the frightful official accounts of the torture sessions inflicted on Campanella, and signed by a certain Precioso, a notary and clerk of the ecclesiastical court of Naples, in all their nauseating detail. But these indignities — which in our time too are commonplace — would probably provide the reader with just one more sensational scene, and likely give the impression I had intended to write an anticlerical novel. Atrocity is never more hideous than when it is portrayed in its more moderate moments— when keeping up an appearance of consideration. A scholarly, courteous prelate and an old priest anxious to save his pupil end up *all the same* leaving a man to die at the stake, and finding it normal that he should do so.

Same remark for torture. In a sense, it is more atrocious for Zeno to avoid torture *thanks to certain potent influences* than for him to undergo it *as was the custom.*

Came across, in a local chronicle of the seventeenth century, a certain Cleenewerck, a judge, taking part in the case of a defrocked priest. Never found the text again.

Remarks: only one (but odious) Protestant crime against an intellectual: Michael Servetus (but Bernardino Ochino seems to have had a narrow escape). Fewer executions than one would have thought if political executions like More and Cranmer are omitted (but this list does not include England and Scotland). Nevertheless uncertainty and terror very apparent. Lutheran and Calvinist heretics at greater risk than atheists and skeptics. No death sentences for intellectuals handed down on morality grounds. Da Vinci was denounced and harrassed but it went no further than that; Michelangelo was hounded by blackmailers like Pietro Aretino but nothing more than that.

Yet Théophile de Viau had a very narrow escape; presumption seems to have played a certain role in Etienne Dolet's trial, and a libellous one apparently in Vanini's. Note as well attacks in this sense against Paracelsus and Campanella in his early youth. For the latter, definite certainty played no role in the last three trials. No death sentences for intellectuals on grounds of practicing the magic arts.

The story of the witch burned alive because she was wicked enough to piss in a field in order to bring on the rain and ruin crops comes from a book on witchcraft in the Middle Ages, and the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries whose title and author I've forgotten. I came across the story again in a book by Aldous Huxley, *The Devils of Loudun*, that I'm re-reading at the present (October, 1974), and which gives the source in part: the incident happened at Dole in 1610. My original source gave more details.

Hadrian died at sixty-two years and six months, but his illness had declared itself two and a half years earlier. It had been incubating in him since the year 130. Thus, six years of more or less constant ill-being, then two more of impatiently borne suffering, terminating in a rather gentle death. (Which we do not witness as the *Memoirs* end, logically enough, a few days before Hadrian dies).

Zeno died six days short of fifty-nine years. In vigorous health to the very end. Of dry and nervous temperament; Hadrian's is at once sanguine and lymphatic. A certain *puffiness* in his features caused by illness, from a relatively early age.

Judicious men, both of them, quite capable of the cold stare.

Hadrian's interest in medicine.

Hadrian sometimes tempted by the occult. Compared to Zeno, however, he is nothing but a "rank amateur."

Two beings profoundly dissimilar: one rebuilt from real fragments, the other imaginary, but nourished with a pabulum of reality. These two lines of force crisscross: one starts from the real and rises toward the imaginary, the other starts from the imaginary and plunges into the real. The central point where the lines intersect is precisely the sense of BEING.

Astrologically: Hadrian Aquarius, the sign of abundance and gifts. Zeno Pisces, the cold and secret sign, the passage through the abyss. Hadrian's sky: Saturn – Venus — Jupiter. Zeno's: Saturn — Mercury.

Both men attracted sensually and almost exclusively by the temperament and bodies of men. Both men capable of erotic relations and friendships with women. Hadrian has more leisure for lovemaking than Zeno.

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"Homosexuality is a view of life," stated Edmond Jaloux forty years ago, speaking of *Alexis*, and his remark was the more striking as it came, I believe, from a man whose behaviour was totally heterosexual. But in spite of *Alexis*, I had nevertheless some difficulty in understanding what he meant, a little like Zeno who takes some time before he understands remarks made by Don Blas.

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In one sense, Sign Ulfsdatter is Zeno's Plotina. A companion, nearly equal, and who can be trusted. But Zeno possessed Sign.

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The pederasty of Hadrian has its vocabulary and its rites; it is rooted in a cultural tradition: debauchery acknowledged by the Roman world, although censured like all immoral conduct by the moralists; lyricism of the Greek and Latin poets; and finally a philosophical tradition that is purely Greek (and not Latin at all) which Hadrian the Hellenophile turns to very consciously. When required, he falsifies his own reality slightly in order to fit it into these heroic and poetic frameworks. There is nothing *secretive* in all that.

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The sexuality of Zeno has no vocabulary. He rejects violently the routines of feminine love of his time: easy-going debauchery in the fableau style, or Petrarchan quintessence. Then again, his penchant for pederasty, no matter how common it was everywhere at the time, is officially against the law. These secretive and nearly

always brief encounters need no words. They merely mark the unconscious and the conscience a little deeper each time. Antinous was recogized in Hadrian's time as an official *eromenos* with, as it were, a social position. Aleï remains a valet. The relationships with Gerhart, François Rondelet or Fray Juan (and probably Josse Cassel) are no different from relationships of the same nature in our own time. Fear of social disgrace still produces about the same effects as the fear of the stake once did.

Moreover, even though a fiery death at the stake was commonplace, it represented a remote risk for most lovers of the time. It leads one to the conclusion that the homosexual lover of the sixteenth century was afraid of burning at the stake about as much as a present-day American with the same tendencies is afraid of being dismissed from the diplomatic corps — perhaps a little less so.

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The fact remains that for Zeno all romance is eliminated by this lack of *expression*, or takes on nearly invisible forms. Only the poets (Shakespeare, Michelangelo), and only the greatest or the boldest of them, were able in their times to express themselves. With da Vinci, on the contrary, the constraints with repect to expression extended to include all human emotions.

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We know more about Zeno's youth than we do about Hadrian's.

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Zeno's meditations in "The Abyss" are in part classic Buddhist meditations (fire, water, bones...). In Zeno's case, the "Heraclitian" audacities of alchemical thought opened the way for this different psychology and metaphysics. Had I thought it necessary, I could have had Zeno reinvent the latter, the way Pascal reinvented Euclidian geometry by starting from certain premises, but this device would have taken an excessive amount of time for a novel, not to mention boosting the already considerable intellectual powers I had attributed to Zeno. I preferred to suppose

that he was subjected to the admirable osmosis that in fact almost always occurs between two juxtaposed worlds foreign to each other, and to show Zeno making contact with the Orient through a heretical Muslim who had some notions of Hindu thought and its methods, just as I had shown him making contact with Jewish thought through Don Blas, the marrano.

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From time to time Zeno's jests are like those of a man of the cloth.

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Probably this is due mainly to the difference in epochs, partly real and partly because of the perspective which cannot help but be our own; no matter what we do to adhere closely to the texts (and the fact there are relatively few texts plays a role here), we keep on seeing and particularly feeling the ancient world as a world in some way more ample and more golden than ours, and where even the worst acquires with distance a kind of dignity: having made every effort to grasp the real person, we still see Hadrian a little like Tischbein saw Goethe in the Roman countryside, fully in harmony with both the passing moment and with a timeless tradition that sustained but did not fetter him.

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Hadrian believes in the possibility of communicating rationally with his fellow man, in language which *translates* thought (and this is why one can have him tell his life almost oratorically); Zeno knows that all conversations have their misunderstandings and their lies, even with the amicable Prior of the Cordeliers.

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Catherine is a Baubo.*

*The obscene hag who exposed her sexual parts in the Eleusinian processions.

Until now I had read only the first five or six chapters of Apuleius and known the rest of the book mainly through summaries and commentaries, so it was with surprise and admiration that I come across, in the eleventh chapter of an English version, the words of the priest describing what is clearly the passage towards death: "I approached the confines of death, and having trod the threshold of Proserpine, I returned from it, being carried through all the elements. *At midnight, I saw the sun shining with a splendid light*, and I manifestly drew near to the gods above and beneath..." In a similar fashion, as Zeno is dying, in what is precisely his last *vision*, just before only his hearing remains for another few moments, he sees the midnight sun *shining with a splendid light* in the sky of the polar summer. And indeed, there was a rational reason for introducing the image into my book because Zeno's journey through Swedish Lapland was in his eyes the most *foreign* he had ever made, and linked incidentally to the memory of the "white nights" of a brief love affair. My interest in Apuleius is none the lesser and may actually be the greater because Apuleius had never *seen* the midnight sun. A kind of archetypal symbol of death and a sort of triumph over death.

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Josse Cassel is more than a bit player; like Colas Gheel, no matter what the sensual role was he may have played in Zeno's life, he has another dimension which is the *intellectual* attraction for a man of the common people. Taste for reality unvarnished, under all the superposed layers of culture; taste for simplifying existence.

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Vegetarianism and a profound tenderness for the animal world are present in da Vinci, as we all know. We often forget, however, that this tenderness is also present in Montaigne and expressed in exquisite terms. And while I was studying *Les Tragiques*, I came across numerous traces of the same tenderness in Aubigné.

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Zeno's ardour is to be compared to that of Giordano Bruno. Zeno's is drier. Bruno is above all a visionary and a poet.

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Campanella, who in certain respects is *behind the times* of his century (effect of the monastic and southern Italy milieu perhaps), comes closer to the *tone*, from the standpoint of philosophical argumentation, that I would have liked to impart to Zeno. But Zeno would have been incapable of pouring his thought into a utopian mold of any sort.

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What Zeno at twenty years of age refuses when Thierry Loon offers it to him, is exactly what Campanella does at around twenty-six, and which in sum cost him his thirty-one years of prison: a social and political armed rebellion, at the head of a small band of men.

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Bruno and Campanella profoundly *poets*; Zeno not at all.

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Suicide. Zeno commits suicide, not on principle or because of any particular attraction, but, trapped between an unacceptable compromise and a needlessly hideous death, he does what we would all do in his stead, what K. Lowith's mother did for instance when threatened to be sent to Dachau. (And in the same fashion, by cutting open her veins). Hadrian, who had marked the place of his heart on his chest in the event that he should fall into the hands of the enemy, would have done the same thing, and likewise "with open eyes."

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But the dying Hadrian looks back on his human past, and not toward the vast sounds and the vast lights that already are bearing him away.

Suicide. Zeno, Mishima, Montherlant (died on September 21, 1972, five days ago—I'm writing this on Tuesday the 26th, 1972). The body torn open, freeing the soul. (Mishima died in November of 1970. In his last interview, in *Le Figaro* I believe, published after his death, he mentioned *Memoirs of Hadrian.*)

Zeno at the extreme edge of vitalistic and dynamic thought and on the fringes of our modern type of mechanistic and materialistic thought; we, who by a long road have come back to mental conceptions very close to those of a Geber or a Paracelsus with the world of eighteenth and nineteenth century science behind us, we meet him at these confines.

Henry Maximilian, a man divided as it were between the life of the senses and the emotions of love, with on one side the taverns and their girls, and on the other the tender and fervent attentions paid to women who, according to the rules of the game (and to a very deep prejudice) are presumed chaste, belongs to the world of the sensual, courteous man as he has existed up to the present time (and perhaps including the present time...).

With the episode of the ham offered to the Italian beauty short of food during a time of famine, he moves for the first time beyond the mere sensuality, the mere vanity, the mere idealistic biases of his time. For one moment he loves the Signora for herself and for what she is.

How much more remains to be said about the *obscure periods* of Zeno's life: in Leon, at Pont-Saint-Esprit, in Avignon, in Lyons between Etienne Dolet and Michael Servetus, in Marseilles during the embarcation for Algiers. Or again, in Lyons and briefly in Genoa and Bologna in 1541, where the only names I let come to the surface are those of Joseph Ha-Cohen and Ruggieri, and the only encounter the one with Lorenzaccio. Or again two other dark periods, Germany between 1542 and 1551 where the only details to appear are the encounter with Martha, the mention of Aleï, and the difficulties in Basel which in Zeno's life are the closest parallel with Paracelsus, with the same ups and downs in his financial affairs, disappearances into solitude and near-hallucinatory research; then, once again, after the flight from Innsbruck, Germany, and Poland, between the winter of 1551 and his arrival in Sweden in 1555. The novel gives no details or information about this period except for the name of Bonifacius Kastel at Ratisbonne, Zeno's engagement as military surgeon in the armies of the king of Poland, the recollection of the wounded, frozen, and dying along the roadsides, that I owe to a story told to me by an American physician who was haunted all his life by the horror of the battlefields of 1944, and the mass in Cracow that comes from a personal recollection of a mass I attended there.

And yet I spent many an hour dreaming up these episodes and I was tempted to include them in the book, even if it meant adding another hundred pages or so... But the hierarchy of events and memories would have been irreparably impaired. It would have turned out to be one of those dull biographies where nothing is said because everything is said.

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Innsbruck is a period of crisis: the last convulsions of the self. In Bruges, the *conversion* is almost completed.

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Response to a question from Grace regarding the translation of *The Abyss* and the problem of the *sergent** of the Walloon Guards (the Great Hart Inn) in "The Prior's Illness". Quite impossible to make the head of the troop into a captain because the

rank and the inn setting would be an echo of "A Conversation in Innsbruck". Advantage of the word *sergent:* we are plunged immediately into the world of the common people.

*"officer" in Grace Frick's version (Translator's note)

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Characters seen from the inside and from the outside. The Prior is continually *seen* from the outside. Only his words reveal the inside. Enormous differences between the inside and the outside of Zeno, even when no element of hypocrisy is involved. The chapter entitled "The Abyss" is there to reveal the inner being. (Partially the same effect in the chapter on "The Leisures of Summer"). In "A Conversation in Innsbruck", the inside is revealed through words, but consequently the thoughts, even freely expressed, have already been formulated. When the act of reflection is described as such in certain other chapters, it is reflection stemming from action that is in itself partly external. In the conversations with the Prior, the words themselves are situated, no matter how sincere they may be, within the Prior's frame of reference, even when Zeno contradicts him, and we see only one view of the character, the angle of refraction and the angle of incidence with his time. The odd thing in an instance like this one is that genius yields to wisdom.

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Details: the rogue of a monk who stole the unguents was invented solely to spark a fit of anger, but he was to serve later in characterizing Brother Cyprian.

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Men of the cloth. I think there are five of them in the book: Campanus, Don Blas de Vela, the Nuncio, the Prior, the Mitered Abbot of Saint Bavon. Great difficulty in varying between them, not their personalities, which are quite distinct, but their rank, titles, and the forms of address to be used when speaking to them, if one is to avoid plunging the reader into confusion. Up to a certain point, one can make use of this difficulty. The characters in whom, comparatively speaking, Zeno does

not have a lasting interest are identified in his memory only by their titles. Those he often calls to mind have a name. In order to avoid confusing the Prior of the Cordeliers with the Prior of the Jacobins, Don Blas de Vela, who had nothing but a title all through the first part of the book, now has a name. But the detail also means that Zeno thinks about him more often. Same remark about names where women are concerned. The Hungarian girl and the girl from Valencia are nameless because they have not played a role in Zeno's memory,* and because of a certain refusal on his part, which is due more to his time than to his temperament, to individualize women. The Lady of Frösö is nameless, even though she is for Zeno a very distinct person, in part because she remains above all *a noble lady.*

*But when Zeno thinks back on them, he does find a name for them eventually (Ilona, Casilda Perez) and so does the author.

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Relationships with the women characters are perhaps the most difficult to portray in terms of fidelity to the exact customs of the times. One example to follow is Dürer's *Journal*; the other, Montaigne. Women in the thinking of a Renaissance man (unless he was a Platonist or a Petrarchist, or a rake like the seigneur de Brantôme, and even then) always play very narrowly defined roles, even when these roles are not subordinate ones.

The Prior's timid allusion to his good, devout wife has to be extremely reticent. He is embarrassed to bring up so modest a recollection.

The maidservant Catherine is an obvious echo of the womenservants mentioned in the tales of Zeno's boyhood.

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But this must not be said. Zeno himself would not take the trouble to make the connection. An important device, which consists in not necessarily having a character call to mind the same persons with whom we have seen him in contact in his life. This involves a technique obviously, and very nearly a trick which allows for different aspects of the character to be shown that reveal the nearly inexhaustible richness of any life. But there is an internal truth here also: lapses of

memory, voluntary or no, rejection of what is not essential. Vivine and Jeannette Fauconnier are not to be mentioned again.

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Impossibility on the artistic level to develop all the doublets which are after all an important trait of any life. For this reason I had to eliminate the character of Mustapha to avoid falling back into the same cadences as those in the passages about Prince Erik.

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Inventing details. Procession of the Holy Blood: the detail was added only to motivate the person dining next to the tavern window (influenced by memories of Seville); but the procession took place after the first Monday in May, which determined the chronological sequences of the last part of the book.

And again, the detail brings along with it the Walloon Guards who had lined the streets, and the fatigue of the Prior who had followed the procession on foot. Lastly, the mention of the Holy Blood becomes a kind of symbol of blood flowing.

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The extraordinary difficulty in portraying the anguish of the abyss when the anguish is not emotional but metaphysical. Most readers are apt to think that this is not a matter of great concern. And yet, this is what happens in part to Pascal: most readers are attached to the *Mystère de Jésus* where emotion is strong, or to the argumentative part which appeals to one's taste for controversy. But one speaks of "the abyss" of Pascal as though a hole had suddenly appeared in his room. The main subject is almost never broached.

Another almost insurmountable difficulty: presenting the mental vision instead of the intellectual concept, without causing the reader to believe there has been regression rather than progression, in France especially, where the intellectual

concept takes precedence over almost any other form of thought. In the mental vision there is a slowness that is close to immobility and which is balked at by

those for whom intelligence is something rapid, even at the cost of the superficiality this entails. Gide, by way of exception, said something profound in *Les Nourritures terrestres* — and no doubt thought it was merely a paradox — when he said "The wise man is one who is moved by peanuts".* Have the courage to portray a character who is absorbed in the exhausting and sacred contemplation of peanuts or their equivalents. Show how slowly and irreversibly the mind comes to perceive the strangeness of things.

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*Gide's exact words are: "Le sage est celui qui s'étonne de tout" (The sage is someone who marvels at everything); elsewhere in *Les Nourritures terrestres* we find: "Don du poète : celui d'être ému pour des prunes" (The poet's gift: his ability to be moved by next to nothing). The play on words is based on "prunes" which in French suggests something insignificant, of no value, as the word "peanuts" does in English in this context. (Translator's note)