

AUSTERLITZ

W. G. Sebald

TRANSLATED BY ANTHEA BELL



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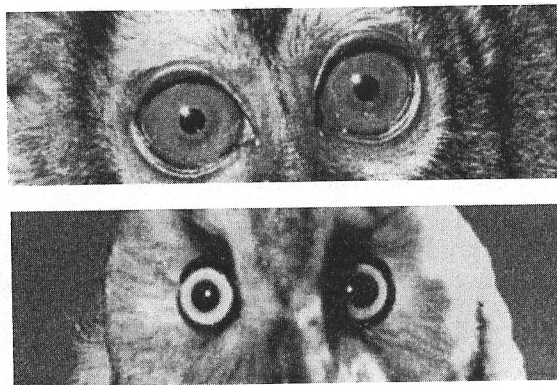
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A U S T E R L I T Z

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In the second half of the 1960s I traveled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes, partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me, staying sometimes for just one or two days, sometimes for several weeks. On one of these Belgian excursions which, as it seemed to me, always took me further and further abroad, I came on a glorious early summer's day to the city of Antwerp, known to me previously only by name. Even on my arrival, as the train rolled slowly over the viaduct with its curious pointed turrets on both sides and into the dark station concourse, I had begun to feel unwell, and this sense of indisposition persisted for the whole of my visit to Belgium on that occasion. I still remember the uncertainty of my footsteps as I walked all round the inner city, down Jeruzalemstraat, Nachtegaalstraat, Pelikaanstraat, Paradijsstraat, Immerseelstraat, and many other streets and alleyways, until at last, plagued by a headache and my uneasy thoughts, I took refuge in the zoo by the Astridplein, next to the Centraal Station, waiting for the pain to subside. I sat there on a bench in dappled shade, beside an aviary full of brightly feathered finches and siskins fluttering about. As the afternoon drew to a close I walked through the park, and fi-

nally went to see the Nocturama, which had first been opened only a few months earlier. It was some time before my eyes became used to its artificial dusk and I could make out different animals leading their sombrous lives behind the glass by the light of a pale moon. I cannot now recall exactly what creatures I saw on that visit to the Antwerp Nocturama, but there were probably bats and jerboas from Egypt and the Gobi Desert, native European hedgehogs and owls, Australian opossums, pine martens, dormice, and lemurs, leaping from branch to branch, darting back and forth over the grayish-yellow sandy ground, or disappearing into a bamboo thicket. The only animal which has remained lingering in my memory is the raccoon. I watched it for a long time as it sat beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again, as if it hoped that all this washing, which went far beyond any reasonable thoroughness, would help it to escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own. Otherwise, all I remember of the denizens of the Nocturama is that several of them had strikingly large eyes, and



the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us



purely by means of looking and thinking. I believe that my mind also dwelt on the question of whether the electric light was turned on for the creatures in the Nocturama when real night fell and the zoo was closed to the public, so that as day dawned over their topsy-turvy miniature universe they could fall asleep with some degree of reassurance. Over the years, images of the interior of the Nocturama have become confused in my mind with my memories of the *Salle des pas perdus*, as it is called, in Antwerp Centraal Station. If I try to conjure up a picture of that waiting room today I immediately see the Nocturama, and if I think of the Nocturama the waiting room springs to my mind, probably because when I left the zoo that afternoon I went straight into the station, or rather first stood in the square outside it for some time to look up at the façade of that fantastical building, which I had taken in only vaguely when I arrived in the morning. Now, however, I saw how far the station constructed under the patron-

age of King Leopold II exceeded its purely utilitarian function, and I marveled at the verdigris-covered Negro boy who, for a century now, has sat upon his dromedary on an oriel turret to the left of the station façade, a monument to the world of the animals and native peoples of the African continent, alone against the Flemish sky. When I entered the great hall of the Centraal Station with its dome arching sixty meters high above it, my first thought, perhaps triggered by my visit to the zoo and the sight of the dromedary, was that this magnificent although then severely dilapidated foyer ought to have cages for lions and leopards let into its marble niches, and aquaria for sharks, octopuses, and crocodiles, just as some zoos, conversely, have little railway trains in which you can, so to speak, travel to the farthest corners of the earth. It was probably because of ideas like these, occurring to me almost of their own accord there in Antwerp, that the waiting room which, I know, has now been turned into a staff canteen struck me as another Nocturama, a curious confusion which may of course have been the result of the sun's sinking behind the city rooftops just as I entered the room. The gleam of gold and silver on the huge, half-obscured mirrors on the wall facing the windows was not yet entirely extinguished before a subterranean twilight filled the waiting room, where a few travelers sat far apart, silent and motionless. Like the creatures in the Nocturama, which had included a strikingly large number of dwarf species—tiny fennec foxes, spring-hares, hamsters—the railway passengers seemed to me somehow miniaturized, whether by the unusual height of the ceiling or because of the gathering dusk, and it was this, I suppose, which prompted the passing

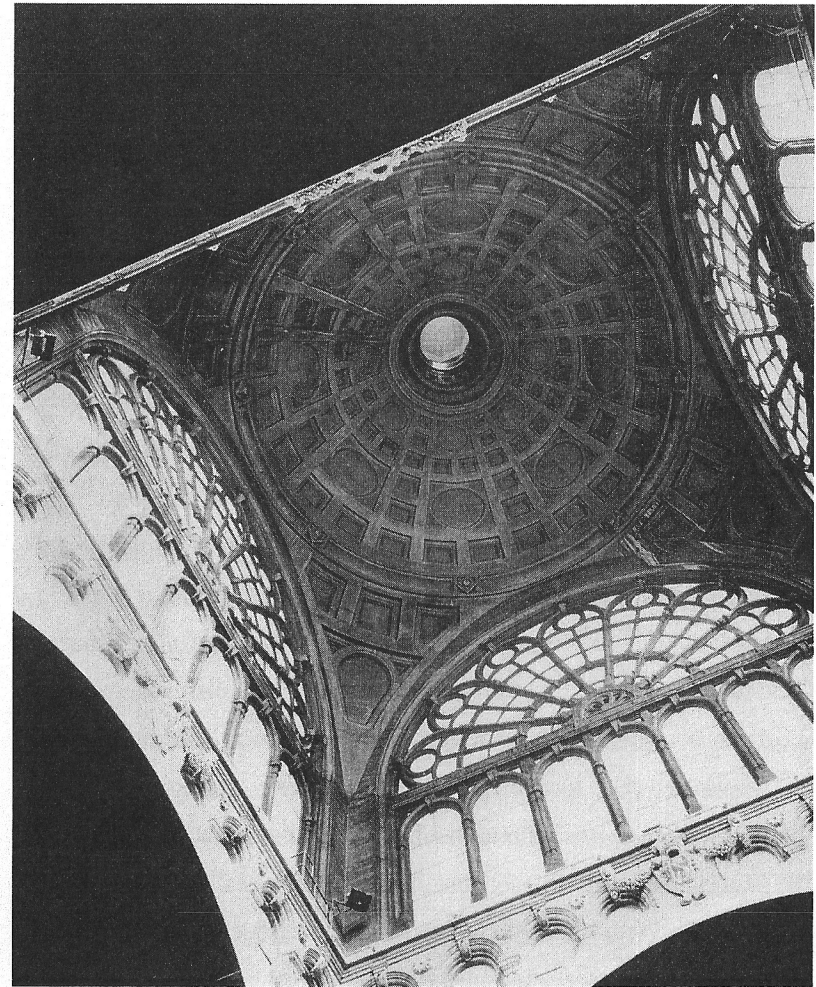
thought, nonsensical in itself, that they were the last members of a diminutive race which had perished or had been expelled from its homeland, and that because they alone survived they wore the same sorrowful expression as the creatures in the zoo. One of the people waiting in the *Salle des pas perdus* was Austerlitz, a man who then, in 1967, appeared almost youthful, with fair, curiously wavy hair of a kind I had seen elsewhere only on the German hero Siegfried in Fritz Lang's *Nibelungen* film. That day in Antwerp, as on all our later meetings, Austerlitz wore heavy walking boots and workman's trousers made of faded blue calico, together with a tailor-made but long outdated suit jacket. Apart from these externals he also differed from the other travelers in being the only one who was not staring apathetically into space, but instead was occupied in making notes and sketches obviously relating to the room where we were both sitting—a magnificent hall more suitable, to my mind, for a state ceremony than as a place to wait for the next connection to Paris or Oostende—for when he was not actually writing something down his glance often dwelt on the row of windows, the fluted pilasters, and other structural details of the waiting room. Once Austerlitz took a camera out of his rucksack, an old Ensign with telescopic bellows, and took several pictures of the mirrors, which were now quite dark, but so far I have been unable to find them among the many hundreds of pictures, most of them unsorted, that he entrusted to me soon after we met again in the winter of 1996. When I finally went over to Austerlitz with a question about his obvious interest in the waiting room, he was not at all surprised by my direct ap-

proach but answered me at once, without the slightest hesitation, as I have variously found since that solitary travelers, who so often pass days on end in uninterrupted silence, are glad to be spoken to. Now and then they are even ready to open up to a stranger unreservedly on such occasions, although that was not the case with Austerlitz in the *Salle des pas perdus*, nor did he subsequently tell me very much about his origins and his own life. Our Antwerp conversations, as he sometimes called them later, turned primarily on architectural history, in accordance with his own astonishing professional expertise, and it was the subject we discussed that evening as we sat together until nearly midnight in the restaurant facing the waiting room on the other side of the great domed hall. The few guests still lingering at that late hour one by one deserted the buffet, which was constructed like a mirror image of the waiting room, until we were left alone with a solitary man drinking Fernet and the barmaid, who sat enthroned on a stool behind the counter, legs crossed, filing her nails with complete devotion and concentration. Austerlitz commented in passing of this lady, whose peroxide-blond hair was piled up into a sort of bird's nest, that she was the goddess of time past. And on the wall behind her, under the lion crest of the kingdom of Belgium, there was indeed a mighty clock, the dominating feature of the buffet, with a hand some six feet long traveling round a dial which had once been gilded, but was now blackened by railway soot and tobacco smoke. During the pauses in our conversation we both noticed what an endless length of time went by before another minute had passed,

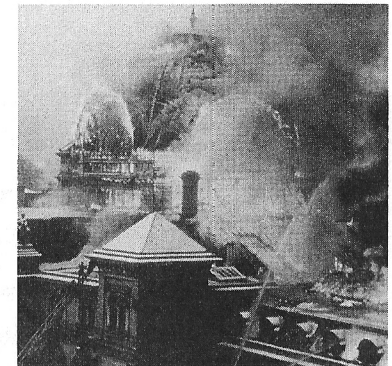
and how alarming seemed the movement of that hand, which resembled a sword of justice, even though we were expecting it every time it jerked forward, slicing off the next one-sixtieth of an hour from the future and coming to a halt with such a menacing quiver that one's heart almost stopped. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Austerlitz began, in reply to my questions about the history of the building of Antwerp station, when Belgium, a little patch of yellowish gray barely visible on the map of the world, spread its sphere of influence to the African continent with its colonial enterprises, when deals of huge proportions were done on the capital markets and raw-materials exchanges of Brussels, and the citizens of Belgium, full of boundless optimism, believed that their country, which had been subject so long to foreign rule and was divided and disunited in itself, was about to become a great new economic power—at that time, now so long ago although it determines our lives to this day, it was the personal wish of King Leopold, under whose auspices such apparently inexorable progress was being made, that the money suddenly and abundantly available should be used to erect public buildings which would bring international renown to his aspiring state. One of the projects thus initiated by the highest authority in the land was the central station of the Flemish metropolis, where we were sitting now, said Austerlitz; designed by Louis Delacenserie, it was inaugurated in the summer of 1905, after ten years of planning and building, in the presence of the King himself. The model Leopold had recommended to his architects was the new railway station of Lucerne, where he had

been particularly struck by the concept of the dome,* so dramatically exceeding the usual modest height of railway buildings, a concept realized by Delacenserie in his own design, which was inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, in such stupendous fashion that even today, said Austerlitz, exactly as the architect intended, when we step into the entrance hall we are seized by a sense of being beyond the profane, in a cathedral consecrated to international traffic and trade. Delacenserie borrowed the main elements of his monumental structure from the palaces of the Italian Renaissance, but he also struck Byzantine and Moorish notes, and perhaps when I arrived, said Austerlitz, I myself had noticed the round gray and white granite turrets, the sole purpose of which was to arouse medieval associations in the minds of railway passengers. However laughable in itself, Delacenserie's eclecticism, uniting past and future in the Centraal Station with its marble stairway in the foyer and the steel and glass roof spanning the platforms, was in fact a logical stylistic approach to the new epoch, said Austerlitz, and it was also appropriate, he continued, that in Antwerp Station the elevated level from which the gods looked down on visitors to the Roman Pantheon should display, in hierarchical order, the deities of the nineteenth century—mining,

*On looking through these notes I remember that in February 1971, during a short visit to Switzerland, one of the places I visited was Lucerne. After seeing the Glacier Museum I spent some time standing on the bridge over the lake on my way back to the station, because the view of its dome and the snow-white heights of the Pilatus massif rising in the clear winter sky behind it had reminded me of my conversation with Austerlitz in Antwerp four and a half years earlier. A few hours later, on the night of 4 February, long after I was fast asleep in my hotel room in Zurich, a fire broke out in Lucerne Station, spread very rapidly and entirely destroyed the domed building. I could not get the pictures I saw next day in the newspapers and on television out of



my head for several weeks, and they gave me an uneasy, anxious feeling which crystallized into the idea that I had been to blame, or at least one of those to blame, for the Lucerne fire. In my dreams, even years later, I sometimes saw the flames leaping from the dome and lighting up the entire panorama of the snow-covered Alps.

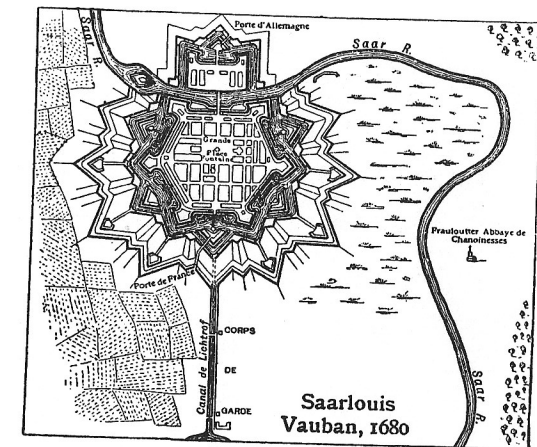


industry, transport, trade, and capital. For halfway up the walls of the entrance hall, as I must have noticed, there were stone escutcheons bearing symbolic sheaves of corn, crossed hammers, winged wheels, and so on, with the heraldic motif of the beehive standing not, as one might at first think, for nature made serviceable to mankind, or even industrious labor as a social good, but symbolizing the principle of capital accumulation. And Time, said Austerlitz, represented by the hands and dial of the clock, reigns supreme among these emblems. The clock is placed above the only baroque element in the entire ensemble, the cruciform stairway which leads from the foyer to the platforms, just where the image of the emperor stood in the Pantheon in a line directly prolonged from the portal; as governor of a new omnipotence it was set even above the royal coat of arms and the motto *Endracht maakt macht*. The movements of all travelers could be surveyed from the central position occupied by the clock in Antwerp Station, and conversely all travelers had to look up at the clock and were obliged to adjust their activities to its demands. In fact, said Austerlitz, until the railway timetables were synchronized the clocks of Lille and Liège did not keep the same time as the clocks of Ghent and Antwerp, and not until they were all standardized around the middle of the nineteenth century did time truly reign supreme. It was only by following the course time prescribed that we could hasten through the gigantic spaces separating us from each other. And indeed, said Austerlitz after a while, to this day there is something illusionistic and illusory about the relationship of time and space as we experience it in traveling, which is why whenever we come home from elsewhere we never feel quite sure if we have really been abroad. From the first I was astonished by the way Austerlitz put his ideas

together as he talked, forming perfectly balanced sentences out of whatever occurred to him, so to speak, and the way in which, in his mind, the passing on of his knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life. I shall never forget how he concluded his comments on the manufacture of the tall waiting-room mirrors by wondering, glancing up once more at their dimly shimmering surfaces as he left, *combien des ouvriers périssent, lors de la manufacture de tels miroirs, de malignes et funestes affectations à la suite de l'inhalation de vapeurs de mercure et de cyanide*. And just as Austerlitz had broken off with these words that first evening, so he continued his observations the following day, for which we had arranged a meeting on the promenade beside the Schelde. Pointing to the broad river sparkling in the morning sun, he spoke of a picture painted by Lucas van Valckenborch towards the end of the sixteenth century during what is now called the Little Ice Age, showing the frozen Schelde from the opposite bank, with the city of Antwerp very dark beyond it and a strip of flat countryside stretching towards the sea. A shower of snow is falling from the lowering sky above the tower of the cathedral of Our Lady, and out on the river now before us some four hundred years later, said Austerlitz, the people of Antwerp are amusing themselves on the ice, the common folk in coats of earthy brown colors, persons of greater distinction in black cloaks with white lace ruffs round their necks. In the foreground, close to the right-hand edge of the picture, a lady has just fallen. She wears a canary-yellow dress, and the cavalier bending over her in concern is clad in red breeches, very conspicuous in the pallid light. Looking at the river now, thinking of that painting and its tiny figures, said Austerlitz, I feel as if the moment depicted by

Lucas van Valckenborch had never come to an end, as if the canary-yellow lady had only just fallen over or swooned, as if the black velvet hood had only this moment dropped away from her head, as if the little accident, which no doubt goes unnoticed by most viewers, were always happening over and over again, and nothing and no one could ever remedy it. On that day, after we had left our viewing point on the promenade to stroll through the inner city, Austerlitz spoke at length about the marks of pain which, as he said he well knew, trace countless fine lines through history. In his studies of railway architecture, he said when we were sitting in a bistro in the Glove Market later that afternoon, tired from our wandering through the city, he could never quite shake off thoughts of the agony of leave-taking and the fear of foreign places, although such ideas were not part of architectural history proper. Yet, he said, it is often our mightiest projects that most obviously betray the degree of our insecurity. The construction of fortifications, for instance—and Antwerp was an outstanding example of that craft—clearly showed how we feel obliged to keep surrounding ourselves with defenses, built in successive phases as a precaution against any incursion by enemy powers, until the idea of concentric rings making their way steadily outward comes up against its natural limits. If we study the development of fortifications from Floriani, da Capri, and Sanmicheli, by way of Rusenstein, Burgsdorff, Coehoorn, and Klengel, and so to Vauban and Montalembert, it is amazing, said Austerlitz, to see the persistence with which generations of masters of the art of military architecture, for all their undoubtedly outstanding gifts, clung to what we can easily see today was a fundamentally wrong-headed idea: the notion that by designing an ideal tracé with blunt bas-

tions and ravelins projecting well beyond it, allowing the cannon of the fortress to cover the entire operational area outside the walls, you could make a city as secure as anything in the world can ever be. No one today, said Austerlitz, has the faintest idea of the boundless amount of theoretical writings on the building of fortifications, of the fantastic nature of the geometric, trigonometric, and logistical calculations they record, of the inflated excesses of the professional vocabulary of fortification and siegecraft, no one now understands its simplest terms, *escarpe* and *courtine*, *faussebraie*, *réduit*, and *glacis*, yet even from our present standpoint we can see that towards the end of the seventeenth century the star-shaped dodecagon behind trenches had finally



crystallized, out of the various available systems, as the preferred ground plan: a kind of ideal typical pattern derived from the Golden Section, which indeed, as study of the intricately sketched plans of such fortified complexes as those of Coevorden, Neuf-Brisach, and Saarlouis will show, immediately strikes the layman as an emblem both of absolute power and of the ingenuity the en-

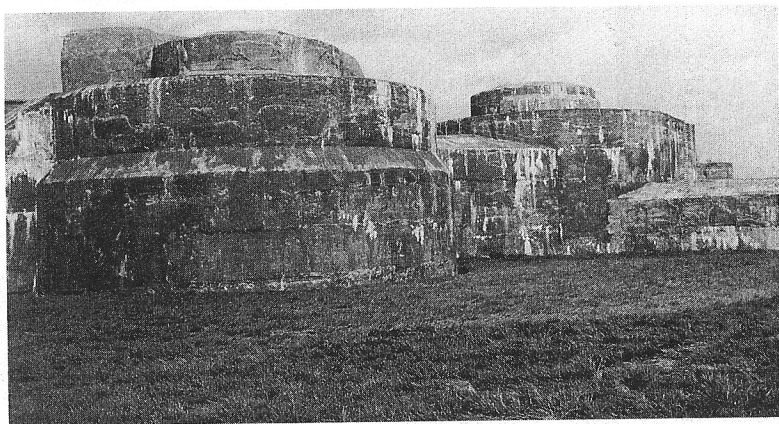
gineers put to the service of that power. In the practice of warfare, however, the star-shaped fortresses which were being built and improved everywhere during the eighteenth century did not answer their purpose, for intent as everyone was on that pattern, it had been forgotten that the largest fortifications will naturally attract the largest enemy forces, and that the more you entrench yourself the more you must remain on the defensive, so that in the end you might find yourself in a place fortified in every possible way, watching helplessly while the enemy troops, moving on to their own choice of terrain elsewhere, simply ignored their adversaries' fortresses, which had become positive arsenals of weaponry, bristling with cannon and overcrowded with men. The frequent result, said Austerlitz, of resorting to measures of fortification marked in general by a tendency towards paranoid elaboration was that you drew attention to your weakest point, practically inviting the enemy to attack it, not to mention the fact that as architectural plans for fortifications became increasingly complex, the time it took to build them increased as well, and with it the probability that as soon as they were finished, if not before, they would have been overtaken by further developments, both in artillery and in strategic planning, which took account of the growing realization that everything was decided in movement, not in a state of rest. And if the defensive power of a fortress really was put to the test, then as a rule, and after the squandering of enormous quantities of war material, the outcome remained more or less undecided. There could not be a clearer illustration of this anywhere, said Austerlitz, than here in Antwerp, where in 1832, as haggling over parts of Belgian territory went on even after the new kingdom had been founded, the

citadel, built by Pacciolo and further fortified with a ring of outworks by the Duke of Wellington, was besieged for three weeks by a French army of fifty thousand men. In mid-December, from their base in the fort of Montebello, which they had already taken, the French succeeded in storming the half-ruined outwork of the St. Laurent lunette and advancing to a position immediately beneath the walls with their breaching batteries. The siege of Antwerp, which was unsurpassed in the history of warfare, at least for some years, both in terms of expenditure and vehemence, said Austerlitz, reached its memorable culmination when some seventy thousand thousand-pound shells were fired at the citadel from the huge mortars invented by Colonel Pairhans, destroying everything without trace except for a couple of casemates. The old Dutch general Baron de Chassé, commander of the pile of rubble which was all that remained of the fortress, had already had the mines laid to blow himself up, along with that monument to his loyalty and heroic courage, when word from his king with permission to surrender reached him just in time. Although the whole insanity of fortification and siegecraft was clearly revealed in the taking of Antwerp, said Austerlitz, the only conclusion anyone drew from it, incredibly, was that the defenses surrounding the city must be rebuilt even more strongly than before, and moved further out. In 1859, accordingly, the old citadel and most of the outer forts were leveled and work began on the construction of a new *enceinte* ten miles long, with eight forts situated over half an hour's march away from it, a project which proved inadequate after less than twenty years because of the longer range of modern guns and the increasingly destructive power of explosives, so that, in obedience to the same old logic,

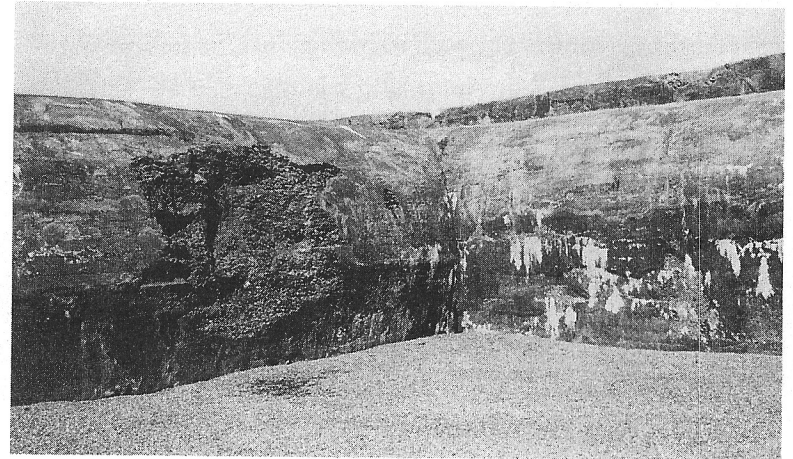
construction now began on yet another ring of fifteen heavily fortified outworks six to nine miles away from the *enceinte*. During the thirty years or more it took to build this complex the question arose, as was only to be expected, said Austerlitz, of whether the expansion of Antwerp beyond the old city boundaries through its rapid industrial and commercial development did not mean that the line of forts ought to be moved yet another three miles further out, which would actually have made it over thirty miles long, bringing it within sight of the outskirts of Mechelen, with the result that the entire Belgian army would have been insufficient to garrison the fortifications. So, said Austerlitz, they just went on working to complete the system already under construction, although they knew it was now far from being able to meet the actual requirements. The last link in the chain was the fortress of Breendonk, said Austerlitz, a fort completed just before the outbreak of the First World War in which, within a few months, it proved completely useless for the defense of the city and the country. Such complexes of fortifications, said Austerlitz, concluding his remarks that day in the Antwerp Glove Market as he rose from the table and slung his rucksack over his shoulder, show us how, unlike birds, for instance, who keep building the same nest over thousands of years, we tend to forge ahead with our projects far beyond any reasonable bounds. Someone, he added, ought to draw up a catalogue of types of buildings listed in order of size, and it would be immediately obvious that domestic buildings of *less* than normal size—the little cottage in the fields, the hermitage, the lockkeeper's lodge, the pavilion for viewing the landscape, the children's bothy in the garden—are those that offer us at least a semblance of peace, whereas no one in his right

mind could truthfully say that he liked a vast edifice such as the Palace of Justice on the old Gallows Hill in Brussels. At the most we gaze at it in wonder, a kind of wonder which in itself is a form of dawning horror, for somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins. These remarks, made by Austerlitz as he was leaving, were still in my mind next morning when I was sitting over a coffee in the Glove Market which he had left so abruptly the day before, and was hoping that he might reappear. And as I was glancing through the newspapers while I waited I came upon an article—I don't remember now if it was in the *Gazet van Antwerpen* or *La libre Belgique*—about the fortress of Breendonk, from which it emerged that in 1940, when for the second time in its history the fort had to be surrendered to the Germans, it was made into a reception and penal camp which remained in existence until August 1944, and that since 1947, preserved unchanged as far as possible, it had been a national memorial and a museum of the Belgian Resistance. If the name of Breendonk had not come up in my conversation with Austerlitz the previous evening, this mention of it in the paper, even supposing I had noticed it at all, would hardly have made me go to see the fort that very day. The passenger train I boarded later that morning took a good half-hour to travel the short distance to Mechelen, where a bus runs from outside the station to the small town of Willebroek; it is on the outskirts of this town that the fort stands in its grounds of some ten hectares, set among the fields rather like an island in the sea and surrounded by an embankment, a barbed-wire fence, and a wide moat. It was unusually hot for the time of

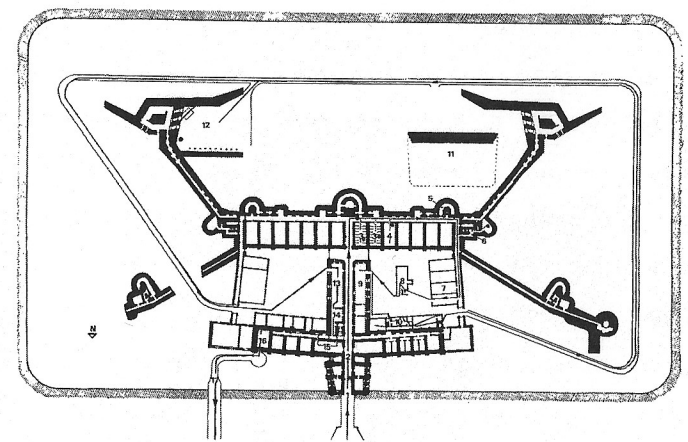
year, and large cumulus clouds were piling up on the southwest horizon as I crossed the bridge over the dark water. After the previous day's conversation, I still had an image in my head of a star-shaped bastion with walls towering above a precise geometrical ground plan, but what I now saw before me was a low-built concrete mass, rounded at all its outer edges and giving the gruesome impression of something hunched and misshapen: the broad back of a monster, I thought, risen from this Flemish soil like a whale from the deep. I felt reluctant to pass through the black gateway into the fortress itself, and instead began by walking round it on the outside, through the unnaturally deep green, almost blue-tinged grass growing on the island. From whatever viewpoint I tried to form a picture of the complex I could make out no architectural plan, for its projections and indentations kept shifting, so far exceeding my comprehension that in the end I found myself unable to connect it with anything shaped by human civilization, or even with the silent relics of our prehistory and early history. And the longer I looked at it, the more often it



forced me, as I felt, to lower my eyes, the less comprehensible it seemed to become. Covered in places by open ulcers with the raw crushed stone erupting from them, encrusted by guano-like droppings and calcareous streaks, the fort was a monolithic,

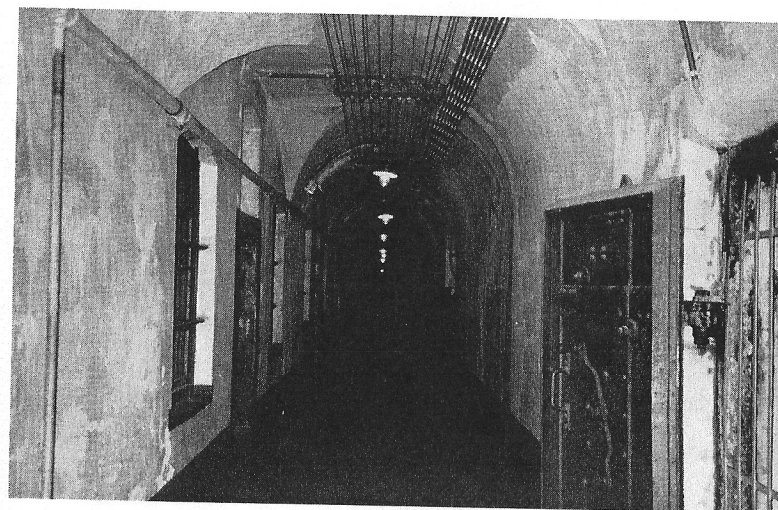


monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence. Even later, when I studied the symmetrical ground plan with its outgrowths

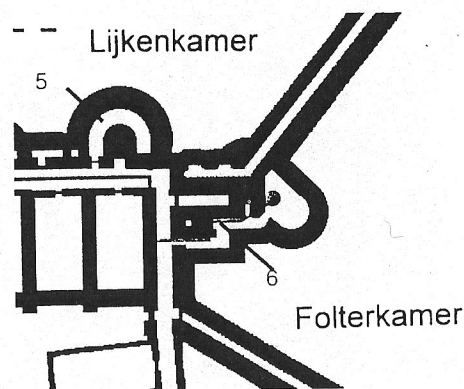


of limbs and claws, with the semicircular bastions standing out from the front of the main building like eyes, and the stumpy projection at the back of its body, I could not, despite its now evident rational structure, recognize anything designed by the human mind but saw it, rather, as the anatomical blueprint of some alien and crab-like creature. The path round the fort led past the tarred black posts of the execution ground, and the labor site where the prisoners had to clear away the earthworks around the walls, moving over a quarter of a million tons of soil and rubble with only shovels and wheelbarrows to help them. These wheelbarrows, one of which can still be seen in the anteroom of the fort, must have seemed terrifyingly primitive even then. They consisted of a kind of stretcher with two crude handles at one end and an iron-shod wooden wheel at the other. A container with sloping sides, roughly cobbled together from unplanned planks, stood on the crossbars of the stretcher, the whole clumsy contraption resembling the handcarts used by farmers where I lived as a child for clearing muck out of the stables, except that the wheelbarrows in Breendonk were twice as large, and even when they were empty must have weighed around a hundredweight. I could not imagine how the prisoners, very few of whom had probably ever done hard physical labor before their arrest and internment, could have pushed these barrows full of heavy detritus over the sun-baked clay of the ground, furrowed by ruts as hard as stone, or through the mire that was churned up after a single day's rain; it was impossible to picture them bracing themselves against the weight until their hearts nearly burst, or think of the overseer beating them about the head with the handle of a shovel when they could not move forward. However, if I could not en-

visage the drudgery performed day after day, year after year, at Breendonk and all the other main and branch camps, when I finally entered the fort itself and glanced through the glass panes of a door on the right into the so-called mess of the SS guards with its scrubbed tables and benches, its bulging stove and the various adages neatly painted on its wall in Gothic lettering, I could well imagine the sight of the good fathers and dutiful sons from Vilsbiburg and Fuhlsbüttel, from the Black Forest and the Bavarian Alps, sitting here when they came off duty to play cards or write letters to their loved ones at home. After all, I had lived among them until my twentieth year. My memory of the fourteen stations which the visitor to Breendonk passes between the entrance and the exit has clouded over in the course of time, or perhaps I could say it was clouding over even on the day when I was in the fort, whether because I did not really want to see what it had to show or because all the outlines seemed to merge in a world illuminated only by a few dim electric bulbs, and cut off for ever from the



light of nature. Even now, when I try to remember them, when I look back at the crab-like plan of Breendonk and read the words of the captions—*Former Office, Printing Works, Huts, Jacques Ochs Hall, Solitary Confinement Cell, Mortuary, Relics Store, and Museum*—the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on. Histories, for instance, like those of the straw mattresses which lay, shadow-like, on the stacked plank beds and which had become thinner and shorter because the chaff in them disintegrated over the years, shrunken—and now, in writing this, I do remember that such an idea occurred to me at the time—as if they were the mortal frames of those who lay there in that darkness. I also recollect now that as I went on down the tunnel which could be said to form the backbone of the fort, I had to resist the feeling taking root in my heart, one which to this day often comes over me in macabre places, a sense that with every forward step the air was growing



thinner and the weight above me heavier. At the time, anyway, in that silent noonday hour in the early summer of 1967 which I spent inside the fort of Breendonk, encountering no other visitors, I hardly dared to go on to the point where, at the end of a second long tunnel, a corridor not much more than the height of a man, and (as I think I remember) somewhat sloping, leads down to one of the casemates. This casemate, in which you sense immediately that there is a layer of concrete several meters thick overhead, is a narrow room with walls converging at a sharp angle on one side, rounded on the other, and with its floor at least a foot lower than the passage giving access to it, so that it is less like an oubliette than a pit. As I stared at the smooth, gray floor of this pit, which seemed to me to be sinking further and further, the grating over the drain in the middle of it and the metal pail standing beside the drain, a picture of our laundry room at home in W. rose from the abyss and with it, suggested perhaps by the iron hook hanging on a cord from the ceiling, the image of the butcher's shop I always had to pass on my way to school, where at noon Benedikt was often to be seen in a rubber apron washing down the tiles with a thick hose. No one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind which our childhood terrors lurk are flung open. But I do remember that there in the casemate at Breendonk a nauseating smell of soft soap rose to my nostrils, and that this smell, in some strange place in my head, was linked to the bizarre German word for scrubbing brush, *Wurzelbürste*, which was a favorite of my father's and which I had always disliked. Black striations began to quiver before my eyes, and I had to rest my forehead against the wall, which was gritty, covered with bluish spots, and seemed to me to be perspiring

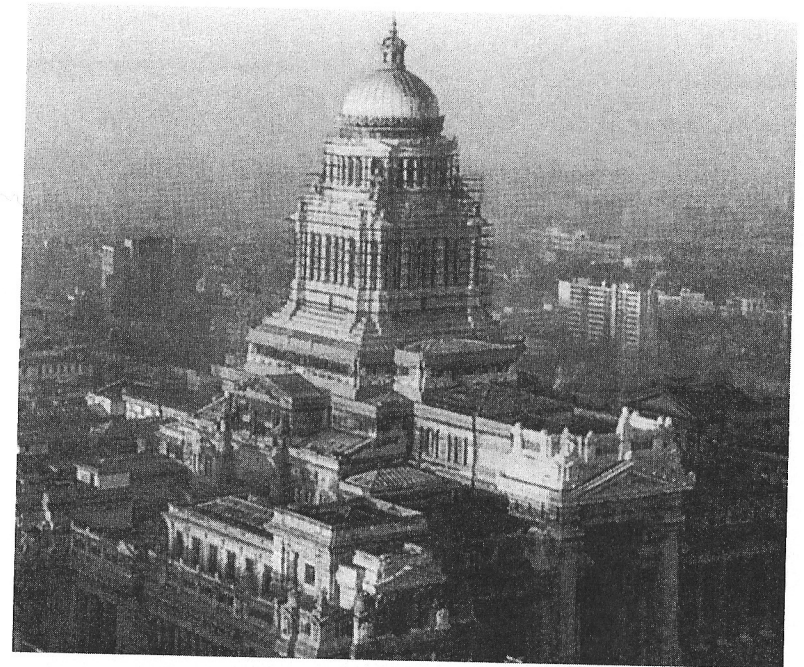
with cold beads of sweat. It was not that as the nausea rose in me I guessed at the kind of third-degree interrogations which were being conducted here around the time I was born, since it was only a few years later that I read Jean Améry's description of the dreadful physical closeness between torturers and their victims, and of the tortures he himself suffered in Breendonk when he was hoisted aloft by his hands, tied behind his back, so that with a crack and a splintering sound which, as he says, he had not yet forgotten when he came to write his account, his arms dislocated from the sockets in his shoulder joints, and he was left dangling as they were wrenched up behind him and twisted together above his head: *la pendaison par les mains liées dans le dos jusqu'à évanouissement*—this is how it is described in the book *Le Jardin des Plantes*, in which Claude Simon descends once more into the storehouse of his memories, and on page 235 begins to tell the fragmentary tale of a certain Gastone Novelli who, like Améry, was subjected to this particular form of torture. The passage opens with an entry of 26 October 1943 from General Rommel's diary, in which Rommel comments that in view of the total powerlessness of the police in Italy one must now take charge oneself. As a result of the measures thereupon introduced by the Germans, says Simon, Novelli was arrested and taken to Dachau. Novelli, Simon continues, never mentioned what happened to him there except on one occasion, when he said that after his liberation from the camp he found the sight of a German, or indeed any so-called civilized being, male or female, so intolerable that, hardly recovered, he embarked on the first ship he could find, to make his living prospecting for diamonds and

gold in South America. For some time Novelli lived in the green jungle with a tribe of small people who had gleaming, coppery skins and had emerged beside him as if out of nowhere one day, without moving so much as a leaf. He adopted their customs, and to the best of his ability compiled a dictionary of their language, consisting almost entirely of vowels, particularly the sound *A* in countless variations of intonation and emphasis, not a word of which, Simon writes, had yet been recorded by the Linguistic Institute in São Paulo. Later Novelli returned to his native land and began to paint pictures. His main subject, depicted again and again in different forms and compositions—*filiforme, gras, soudain plus épais ou plus grand, puis de nouveau mince, boiteux*—was the letter *A*, which he traced on the colored ground he had applied sometimes with the point of a pencil, sometimes with the stem of his brush or an even blunter instrument, in ranks of scarcely legible ciphers crowding closely together and above one another, always the same and yet never repeating themselves, rising and falling in waves like a long-drawn-out scream.

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 AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
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Although Austerlitz did not reappear in the Glove Market in Antwerp that June day in 1967 on which, in the end, I went out to Breendonk, our paths kept crossing, in a way that I still find hard to understand, on all my Belgian excursions of that time, none of them planned in advance. A few days after our first encounter in the *Salle des pas perdus* of the Centraal Station, I met

him again in an industrial quarter on the southwestern outskirts of the city of Liège, which I had reached towards evening, coming on foot from St. Georges-sur-Meuse and Flémalle. The sun was just breaking once again through the inky blue wall of cloud heralding a storm, and the factory buildings and yards, the long rows of terraced housing for the laborers, the brick walls, the slate roofs, and the windowpanes shone as if a fire were glowing within them. When the rain began lashing down on the streets I took refuge in a tiny bar called, as I remember, the *Café des Espérances*, where to my considerable surprise I found Austerlitz bent over his notes at one of the Formica tables. On this second meeting, as on all subsequent occasions, we simply went on with our conversation, wasting no time in commenting on the improbability of our meeting again in a place like this, which no sensible person would have sought out. From where we sat until late that evening in the *Café des Espérances*, you could look through a back window down into a valley, perhaps a place of water meadows in the past, where now the reflected light from the blast furnaces of a gigantic iron foundry glared against the dark sky, and I remember clearly how, as we both gazed intently at this spectacle, Austerlitz launched into a discourse of over two hours on the way in which, during the nineteenth century, the vision of model towns for workers entertained by philanthropic entrepreneurs had inadvertently changed into the practice of accommodating them in barracks—just as our best-laid plans, said Austerlitz, as I still remember, always turn into the exact opposite when they are put into practice. It was several months after this meeting in Liège that I came upon Austerlitz, again entirely by chance, on the old Gallows Hill in Brussels, on the steps of the Palace of Justice



which, as he immediately told me, is the largest accumulation of stone blocks anywhere in Europe. The building of this singular architectural monstrosity, on which Austerlitz was planning to write a study at the time, began in the 1880s at the urging of the bourgeoisie of Brussels, over-hastily and before the details of the grandiose scheme submitted by a certain Joseph Poelaert had been properly worked out, as a result of which, said Austerlitz, this huge pile of over seven hundred thousand cubic meters contains corridors and stairways leading nowhere, and doorless rooms and halls where no one would ever set foot, empty spaces surrounded by walls and representing the innermost secret of all sanctioned authority. Austerlitz went on to tell me that he himself, looking for a labyrinth used in the initiation ceremonies of the Freemasons, which he had heard was in either the basement

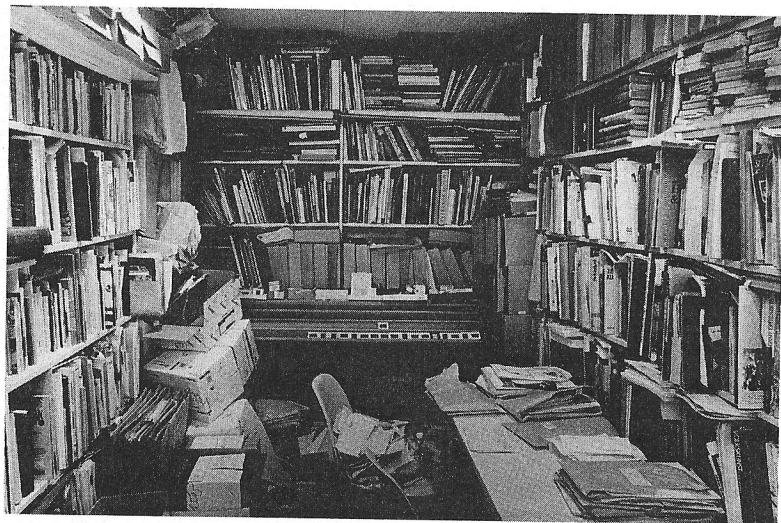
or the attic story of the palace, had wandered for hours through this mountain range of stone, through forests of columns, past colossal statues, upstairs and downstairs, and no one ever asked him what he wanted. During these wanderings, feeling tired or wishing to get his bearings from the sky, he had stopped at one of the windows set deep in the walls to look out over the leaden gray roofs of the palace, crammed together like pack ice, and down into ravines and shaft-like interior courtyards never penetrated by any ray of light. He had gone on and on down the corridors, said Austerlitz, sometimes turning left and then right again, then walking straight ahead and passing through many tall doorways, and once or twice he had climbed flights of creaking wooden stairs which gave the impression of being temporary structures, branching off from the main corridors here and there and leading half a story up or down, only to end in dark cul-de-sacs with roll-top cupboards, lecterns, writing desks, office chairs, and other items of furniture stacked up at the end of them, as if someone had been obliged to hold out there in a state of siege. He had even heard, said Austerlitz, of people who, over the years, had managed to start up a small business in one or other of the empty rooms and remote corridors of that great warren: a tobacconist's, a bookie's, a bar, and it was rumored, Austerlitz added, that a man called Achterbos had once turned a gentlemen's lavatory down in the basement into a public convenience for, among others, passersby in the street, installing himself at the entrance with a small table and a plate to take the money, and that later, when he engaged an assistant who was handy with a comb and a pair of scissors, it was a barber's shop for a while. I heard several such apocryphal stories from Austerlitz, anecdotes

in curious contrast to his usual rigorous objectivity, not only that day but on our later encounters, for instance one quiet November afternoon when we spent some time sitting in a café with a billiards room in Terneuzen—I still remember the proprietress, a woman with thick-lensed spectacles who was knitting a grass-green sock, the glowing nuggets of coke in the hearth, the damp sawdust on the floor, the bitter smell of chicory—and looked out through the panoramic window, which was framed by the tentacles of an ancient rubber plant, at the vast expanse of the misty gray mouth of the Schelde. Then, not long before Christmas, I saw Austerlitz coming towards me on the promenade at Zeebrugge when evening was falling and there was not another living soul in sight. It turned out that we had both booked on the same ferry, so we slowly walked back to the harbor together, with the emptiness of the North Sea on our right, and the tall façades of the apartment blocks set among the dunes, with the bluish light of television screens flickering behind their windows, curious, unsteady and ghostly. It was night by the time the ferry sailed. I stood together on the stern deck. The white wake vanished in the darkness, and I remember that we once thought we saw a snowflake swirling in the lamplight. Only on this night crossing of the Channel, in fact, did I discover from a chance remark dropped by Austerlitz that he was a lecturer at a London institute of art history. As it was almost impossible to talk to him of anything personal, and as neither of us knew where the other came from, we had always spoken in French since our first conversation in Antwerp, I with lamentable awkwardness. Austerlitz with such natural perfection that for a long time I thought he had been brought up in France. When we

English, in which I was better versed, I was strangely touched to notice in him an insecurity which had been entirely concealed from me before, expressing itself in a slight speech impediment and occasional fits of stammering, during which he clutched the worn spectacle case he always held in his left hand so tightly that you could see the white of his knuckles beneath the skin.

*

Almost every time I went to London in the years that followed I visited Austerlitz where he worked in Bloomsbury, not far from the British Museum. I would usually spend an hour or so sitting with him in his crowded study, which was like a stockroom of books and papers with hardly any space left for himself, let alone



his students, among the stacks piled high on the floor and the overloaded shelves. When I began my own studies in Germany I had learnt almost nothing from the scholars then lecturing in the humanities there, most of them academics who had built their ca-

reers in the 1930s and 1940s and still nurtured delusions of power, and I found Austerlitz the first teacher I could listen to since my time in primary school. I remember to this day how easily I could grasp what he called his tentative ideas when he talked about the architectural style of the capitalist era, a subject which he said had fascinated him since his own student days, speaking in particular of the compulsive sense of order and the tendency towards monumentalism evident in law courts and penal institutions, railway stations and stock exchanges, opera houses and lunatic asylums, and the dwellings built to rectangular grid patterns for the labor force. His investigations, so Austerlitz once told me, had long outstripped their original purpose as a project for a dissertation, proliferating in his hands into endless preliminary sketches for a study, based entirely on his own views, of the family likeness between all these buildings. Why he had embarked on such a wide field, said Austerlitz, he did not know; very likely he had been poorly advised when he first began his research work. But then again, it was also true that he was still obeying an impulse which he himself, to this day, did not really understand, but which was somehow linked to his early fascination with the idea of a network such as that of the entire railway system. At the very beginning of his studies, said Austerlitz, and later, when he was first living in Paris, he used to visit one of the main railway stations almost daily, usually the Gare du Nord or the Gare de l'Est and especially in the morning or evening, to see the steam locomotives moving into the soot-blackened, glass-roofed halls, or to watch the brightly illuminated, mysterious Pullman trains slide gently out into the night like ships on the endless expanse of the sea. He had quite often found himself in the grip of dangerous

and entirely incomprehensible currents of emotion in the Parisian railway stations, which, he said, he regarded as places marked by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune. I can still see Austerlitz one afternoon in the London institute making this comment on what he once later described as his obsession with railway stations, speaking not so much to me as to himself, and it was the only hint of his personal life he allowed himself to give me before I returned to Germany at the end of 1975, intending to settle permanently in my native country, to which I felt I had become a stranger after nine years of absence. As far as I remember I wrote to Austerlitz from Munich a couple of times, but I never had any reply to my letters, either because, as I thought at the time, Austerlitz was away somewhere, or as I now think because he did not like writing to Germany. Whatever the reason for his silence, the link between us was broken, and I did not renew it when, scarcely a year later, I decided to return to the United Kingdom. It would now of course have been up to me to let Austerlitz know of the unforeseen change in my plans, and my failure to do so may have resulted from the fact that soon after my return I went through a difficult period which dulled my sense of other people's existence, and from which I only very gradually emerged by turning back to the writing I had long neglected. At any rate, I did not often think of Austerlitz in all those years, and when the thought of him did cross my mind I always forgot him again the next moment, so that we did not in fact resume our old relationship, which had been both a close and a distant one, until two decades later, in December 1996, and through a curious chain of circumstances. I was in some anxiety at the time because I had noticed, looking up an address in the telephone book, that

the sight in my right eye had almost entirely disappeared overnight, so to speak. Even when I glanced up from the page open in front of me and turned my gaze on the framed photographs on the wall, all my right eye could see was a row of dark shapes curiously distorted above and below—the figures and landscapes familiar to me in every detail having resolved indiscriminately into a black and menacing cross-hatching. At the same time I kept feeling as if I could see as clearly as ever on the edge of my field of vision, and had only to look sideways to rid myself of what I took at first for a merely hysterical weakness in my eyesight. Although I tried several times, I did not succeed. Instead, the gray areas seemed to be spreading, and now and then, opening and closing my eyes alternately to compare their degrees of clarity, I thought that I had suffered some impairment on the left as well. Considerably alarmed by what I feared was the progressive decline of my eyesight, I remembered reading once that until well into the nineteenth century a few drops of liquid distilled from belladonna, a plant of the nightshade family, used to be applied to the pupils of operatic divas before they went on stage, and those of young women about to be introduced to a suitor, with the result that their eyes shone with a rapt and almost supernatural radiance, but they themselves could see almost nothing. I no longer know how I connected this memory with my own condition that dark December morning, except that in my mind it had something to do with the deceptiveness of that star-like, beautiful gleam and the danger of its premature extinction, an idea which filled me with concern for my ability to continue working and at the same time, if I may so put it, with a vision of release in which I saw myself, free of the constant compulsion to

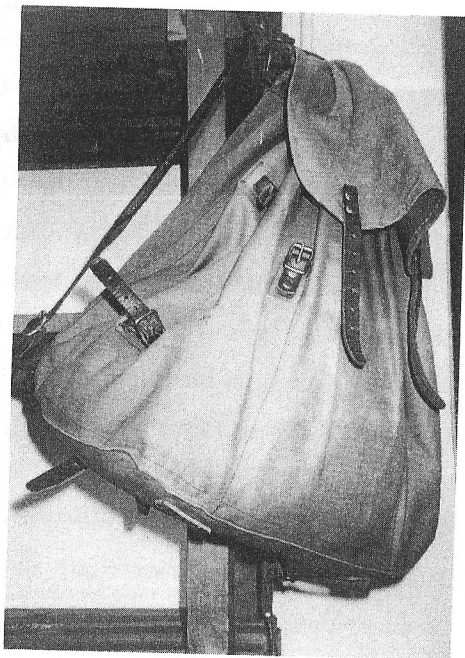
read and write, sitting in a wicker chair in a garden, surrounded by a world of indistinct shapes recognizable only by their faint colors. Since there was no improvement in my condition over the next few days, I went to London just before Christmas to see a Czech ophthalmologist who had been recommended to me. As usual when I go down to London on my own, a kind of dull despair stirred within me on that December morning. I looked out at the flat, almost treeless landscape, the vast brown expanse of the plowed fields, the railway stations where I would never get out, the flock of gulls which makes a habit of gathering on the football pitch on the outskirts of Ipswich, the allotments, the crippled bushes overgrown with dead traveler's joy on the embankments, the quicksilver mudflats and channels at Manningtree, the boats capsized on their sides, the Colchester water tower, the Marconi factory in Chelmsford, the empty greyhound track at Romford, the ugly backs of the terraced houses past which the railway line runs in the suburbs of the metropolis, the Manor Park cemetery and the tower blocks of flats in Hackney, sights which are always the same and flit past me whenever I go to London, yet remain alien and incomprehensible in spite of all the years that have passed since my arrival in England. I always feel particularly apprehensive on the last stretch of the journey, where just before turning into Liverpool Street Station the train must wind its way over several sets of points through a narrow defile, and where the brick walls rising above both sides of the track with their round arches, columns, and niches, blackened with soot and diesel oil, put me in mind once again that morning of an underground columbarium. It was around three in the afternoon by the time I reached Harley Street and one of its mauve

brick buildings, almost all of them occupied by dermatologists, urologists, gynecologists, neurologists, psychiatrists, ear, nose, and throat specialists, and eye surgeons, and was standing by the window in the soft lamplight of Zdeněk Gregor's slightly overheated waiting room. From the gray sky that lowered over the city outside a few isolated snowflakes were floating down, and disappeared into the dark chasms of the yards behind the buildings. I thought of the onset of winter in the mountains, the complete absence of sound, and my childhood wish for everything to be snowed over, the whole village and the valley all the way to the mountain peaks, and how I used to imagine what it would be like when we thawed out again and emerged from the ice in spring. And as I stood in the waiting room remembering the snow of the Alps, the whitened panes of the bedroom window, the curved drifts around the porch, the softly capped insulators of the telegraph poles, and the trough of the well which was sometimes frozen over for months, the opening lines of one of my favorite poems came into my mind. . . . *And so I long for snow to sweep across the low heights of London.* . . . I imagined that out there in the gathering dusk I could see the districts of the city of London crisscrossed by innumerable streets and railway lines, crowding ever more closely together as they marched east and north, one reef of buildings above the next and then the next, and so on, far beyond Holloway and Highbury, and I saw the snow falling on this huge outcropping of stone slowly, steadily, until everything was covered up and buried. . . . *London a lichen mapped on mild clays and its rough circle without purpose* . . . It was a circle of this kind with an indistinct outline that Zdeněk Gregor drew on a piece of paper to illustrate the extent of the gray area in my right eye

when he had examined it. Usually, he said, this was only a temporary disability, in which a bubble suffused by clear liquid formed on the macula, rather like a blister under wallpaper. There was considerable uncertainty, said Zdeněk Gregor, about the causes of the disorder, described by the literature on the subject as central serous chorioretinopathy. All that was really known was that it occurred almost exclusively in middle-aged men who spent too much time reading and writing. After the consultation I must have a procedure called a fluorescing angiography carried out to determine the affected area of the retina more precisely—it would mean taking a series of photographs of my eyes, or rather, if I understood him correctly, of the back of the eye through the iris, the pupil, and the vitreous humor. The technician already waiting for me in a small room specially equipped for such purposes was a man of extraordinarily distinguished appearance who wore a white turban and looked, I foolishly thought, rather like the Prophet Muhammad. He carefully rolled up my shirt sleeve, and inserted the tip of the needle into the prominent vein below the crook of my elbow without my feeling anything at all. While he was introducing the contrast medium into my bloodstream he said I might feel slightly unwell in a little while, and in any case my skin would be discolored yellow for a few hours. After we had sat in silence for a moment or two, both in our respective places in the little room which, like a sleeping car, was illuminated only by a dim bulb, he asked me to move closer to him and place my head in the framework fixed in a kind of stand on the table, with my chin in a shallow depression and my forehead against the iron band above it. As I write this I once again see the little points of light that shot into my widely opened eyes each time he pressed

the shutter release. Half an hour later I was sitting in the saloon bar of the Great Eastern Hotel at Liverpool Street, waiting for the next train home. I had sought out a dark corner, since by now I did indeed feel rather qualmish inside my yellow skin. On the way to the station in the taxi we had seemed to be driving in a wide, looping trajectory through some kind of Luna Park, so strangely did the city lights turn beyond the windscreen, and now the dim globes of the sconces, the mirrors behind the bar, and the colorful batteries of bottles of spirits were circling before my eyes as if I were on a roundabout. Leaning my head against the wall, and breathing deeply and slowly from time to time when I felt nausea rising, I had for a good while been watching the toilers in the City gold mines as they came to meet at their usual watering hole early in the evening, all of them identical in their dark blue suits, striped shirts, and gaudy ties, and as I tried to grasp the mysterious habits of the members of this species, which is not to be found in any bestiary—their preference for crowding close together, their semi-gregarious, semi-aggressive demeanor, the way they put their throats back in emptying their glasses, the increasingly excitable babble of their voices, the sudden hasty departure of one or another of them—as I was watching all of this I suddenly noticed a solitary figure on the edge of the agitated crowd, a figure who could only be Austerlitz, whom I realized at that moment I had not seen for nearly twenty years. He had not changed at all in either his carriage or his clothing, and even had the rucksack still slung over his shoulder. Only his fair, wavy hair was paler, although it still stuck out oddly from his head as it used to. Nonetheless, while I had always thought he was about ten years older than I, he now seemed ten years younger, whether because

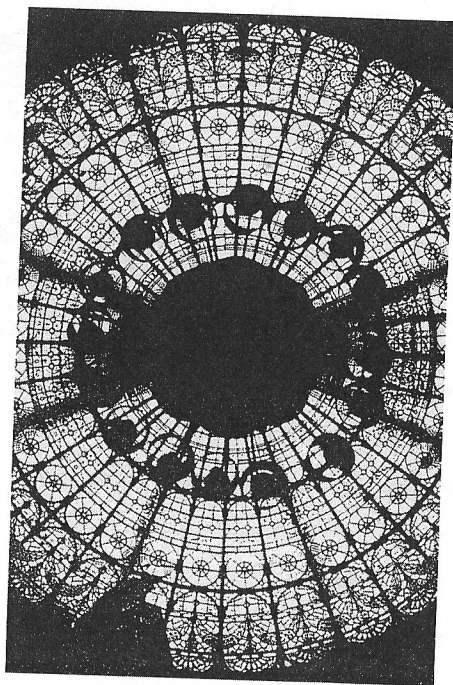
of my own poor state of health or because he was one of those bachelors who retain something boyish about them all their days. As far as I remember, I was overcome for a considerable time by my amazement at the unexpected return of Austerlitz. In any case, I recollect that before approaching him I had been thinking at some length about his personal similarity to Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the horror-stricken expressions on both their faces. I believe it was mainly the rucksack, which Austerlitz told me later he had



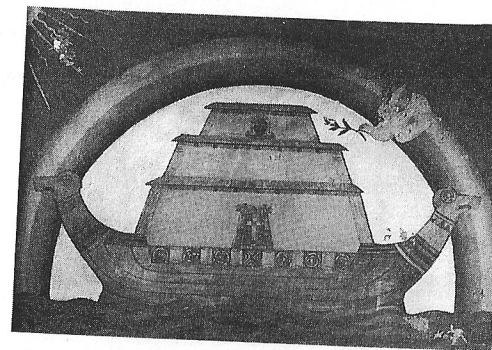
bought for ten shillings from Swedish stock in an army surplus store in the Charing Cross Road just before he began his studies, describing it as the only truly reliable thing in his life, which put into my head what on the surface was the rather outlandish idea of a certain physical likeness between him and the philosopher who died of the disease of cancer in Cambridge in 1951. Wittgenstein

always carried a rucksack too, in Puchberg and in Otterthal, when he went to Norway, Ireland, or Kazakhstan, or home to his sisters to spend Christmas with them in the Alleegasse. That rucksack, which his sister Margarete once told him in a letter was almost as dear to her as himself, went everywhere with him, even, I believe, across the Atlantic on the liner *Queen Mary*, and then on from New York to Ithaca. And now, whenever I see a photograph of Wittgenstein somewhere or other, I feel more and more as if Austerlitz were gazing at me out of it, and when I look at Austerlitz it is as if I see in him the disconsolate philosopher, a man locked into the glaring clarity of his logical thinking as inextricably as into his confused emotions, so striking is the likeness between the two of them: in stature, in the way they study one as if across an invisible barrier, in the makeshift organization of their lives, in a wish to manage with as few possessions as possible, and in the inability, typical of Austerlitz as it was of Wittgenstein, to linger over any kind of preliminaries. Accordingly, and without wasting any words on the coincidence of our meeting again after all this time, Austerlitz took up the conversation that evening in the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel more or less where it had last been broken off. He had spent the afternoon, he told me, looking round the Great Eastern, which was soon to be thoroughly renovated, concentrating mainly on the Freemasons' temple incorporated into the hotel by the directors of the railway company at the turn of the century, when the building had only just been completed and furnished with the utmost luxury. Though I really gave up my architectural studies long ago, he said, I sometimes relapse into my old habits, even if I don't make notes and sketches anymore, but simply marvel at the strange edifices we construct. That had been the case

today, when his way led him past the Great Eastern and, obeying a sudden impulse, he had gone into the foyer where, as it turned out, he had been very courteously received by the business manager, a Portuguese called Pereira, despite my request, said Austerlitz, which can't be one he hears every day, and despite my odd appearance. Pereira, Austerlitz went on, took me up a broad staircase to the first floor, produced a large key, and unlocked the portal of the temple, a hall with walls paneled in sand-colored marble and red Moroccan onyx, a black and white checkered floor, and a vaulted ceiling with a single golden star at the center emitting its rays into the dark clouds all around it. Then Pereira and I went all over the hotel, most of it taken out of use already, through the great dining hall which could accommodate more than three hundred guests under its high glass dome, through the smoking rooms



and the billiards saloons, through suites and up staircases to the fourth floor where the kitchens used to be, and then down to the basement and the floor below the basement, once upon a time a cool labyrinth for the storage of Rhine wines, claret, and champagne, for the making of thousands of items of pâtisserie and the preparation of vegetables, red meat, and pale poultry. As for the fish section, where perch, pike, plaice, sole, and eels lay heaped on black slate slabs with fresh water constantly running over them, Pereira described it as a whole underworld in itself, said Austerlitz, and if it hadn't been too late he, Austerlitz, would go round the place again with me. He added that he would particularly like to show me the temple, with its ornamental gold-painted picture of a three-story ark floating beneath a rainbow, and the dove just returning to it carrying the olive branch in her beak. Oddly



enough, said Austerlitz, as he stood in front of this attractive motif with Pereira that afternoon he had been thinking of our encounters in Belgium, so long ago now, and telling himself he must find someone to whom he could relate his own story, a story which he had learned only in the last few years and for which he needed the kind of listener I had once been in Antwerp, Liège,

and Zeebrugge. Contrary to all statistical probability, then, there was an astonishing, positively imperative internal logic to his meeting me here in the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel, a place he had never before entered in his life. Having said this, Austerlitz fell silent, and for a while, it seemed to me, he gazed into the farthest distance. Since my childhood and youth, he finally began, looking at me again, I have never known who I really was. From where I stand now, of course, I can see that my name alone, and the fact that it was kept from me until my fifteenth year, ought to have put me on the track of my origins, but it has also become clear to me of late why an agency greater than or superior to my own capacity for thought, which circumspectly directs operations somewhere in my brain, has always preserved me from my own secret, systematically preventing me from drawing the obvious conclusions and embarking on the inquiries they would have suggested to me. It hasn't been easy to make my way out of my own inhibitions, and it will not be easy now to put the story into anything like proper order. I grew up, began Austerlitz that evening in the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel, in the little country town of Bala in Wales, in the home of a Calvinist preacher and former missionary called Emyr Elias who was married to a timid-natured Englishwoman. I have never liked looking back at the time I spent in that unhappy house, which stood in isolation on a hill just outside the town and was much too large for two people and an only child. Several rooms on the top floor were kept shut up year in, year out. Even today I still sometimes dream that one of those locked doors opens and I step through it, into a friendlier, more familiar world. Several of the rooms that were not locked were unused too. Furnished sparsely with a bed or a chest of drawers,

curtains drawn even during the day, they drowsed in a twilight that soon extinguished every sense of self-awareness in me. So I can recall almost nothing of my early days in Bala except how it hurt to be suddenly called by a new name, and how dreadful it was, once my own clothes had disappeared, to have to go around dressed in the English fashion in shorts, knee-length socks which were always slipping down, a string vest like a fishnet and a mouse-gray shirt, much too thin. I know that I often lay awake for hours in my narrow bed in the manse, trying to conjure up the faces of those whom I had left, I feared through my own fault, but not until I was numb with weariness and my eyelids sank in the darkness did I see my mother bending down to me just for a fleeting moment, or my father smiling as he put on his hat. Such comfort made it all the worse to wake up early in the morning and have to face the knowledge, new every day, that I was not at home now but very far away, in some kind of captivity. Only recently have I recalled how oppressed I felt, in all the time I spent with the Eliases, by the fact that they never opened a window, and perhaps that is why when I was out and about somewhere on a summer's day years later, and passed a house with all its windows thrown open, I felt an extraordinary sense of being carried away and out of myself. It was only a few days ago that, thinking over that experience of liberation, I remembered how one of the two windows of my bedroom was walled up on the inside while it remained unchanged on the outside, a circumstance which, as one is never both outside and inside a house at the same time, I did not register until I was thirteen or fourteen, although it must have been troubling me throughout my childhood in Bala. The manse was always freezing, Austerlitz continued, not just in win-

ter, when the only fire was often in the kitchen stove and the stone floor in the hallway was frequently covered with hoarfrost, but in autumn too, and well into spring and the infallibly wet summers. And just as cold reigned in the house in Bala, so did silence. The minister's wife was always busy with her housework, dusting, mopping the tiled floor, doing the laundry, polishing the brass door fittings and preparing the meager meals which we usually ate without a word. Sometimes she merely walked round the house making sure that everything was in its proper place, from which she would never allow it to be moved. I once found her sitting on a chair in one of the half-empty rooms upstairs, with tears in her eyes and a crumpled wet handkerchief in her hand. When she saw me standing in the doorway she rose and said it was nothing, she had only caught a cold, and as she went out she ran her fingers through my hair, the one time, as far as I remember, she ever did such a thing. Meanwhile it was the minister's unalterable custom to sit in his study, which had a view of a dark corner of the garden, thinking about next Sunday's sermon. He never wrote any of these sermons down, but worked them out in his head, toiling over them for at least four days. He would always emerge from his study in the evening in a state of deep despondency, only to disappear into it again next morning. But on Sunday, when he stood up in chapel in front of his congregation and often addressed them for a full hour, he was a changed man; he spoke with a moving eloquence which I still feel I can hear, conjuring up before the eyes of his flock the Last Judgment awaiting them all, the lurid fires of purgatory, the torments of damnation and then, with the most wonderful stellar and celestial imagery, the entry of the righteous into eternal bliss. With apparent ease,

as if he were making up the most appalling horrors as he went along, he always succeeded in filling the hearts of his congregation with such sentiments of remorse that at the end of the service quite a number of them went home looking white as a sheet. The minister himself, on the other hand, was in a comparatively jovial mood for the rest of Sunday. At midday dinner, which always began with tapioca soup, he would make a few informative and semi-jocular remarks to his wife, who was exhausted from cooking the meal, inquired after my welfare, generally by asking, "And how is the boy?," and tried to draw me out a little. The meal always finished with the minister's favorite dish of rice pudding, and he usually fell silent as he enjoyed it. Once dinner was over he lay down on the sofa to rest for an hour, or in fine weather he would sit out under the apple tree in the front garden looking down the valley, as well satisfied with his week's work as the Lord God of Sabaoth after the creation of the world. Before evening prayers he went to his rolltop desk and took out the tin box in which he kept the calendar published by the Calvinist Methodists of Wales, a gray little book already worn rather threadbare and listing the Sundays and church festivals for the years 1928 to 1946, in which he had made regular entries against every date week by week, removing the thin solid ink pencil from the back of the book, moistening its tip with his tongue, and very slowly and neatly, like a schoolboy under supervision, noting down the name of the chapel where he had preached that day and the biblical passage he had taken as his text, for instance, under 20 July 1939: The Tabernacle, Llandrillo—Psalms CXLVII, 4, 'He telleth the number of the stars: he calleth them all by their names'; under 3 August 1941: Chapel Uchaf, Gilboa—Zephaniah III, 6, 'I

have cut off the nations: their towers are desolate; I made their streets waste, that none passeth by'; and under 21 May 1944: Chapel Bethesda, Corwen—Isaiah XLVIII, 18, 'O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea!' The last entry in this little book, which is among those few of the minister's possessions to have passed into my hands after his death and through which I have often glanced recently, said Austerlitz, was made on one of the additional leaves inserted at the end and is dated 7 March 1952. It runs: Bala Chapel—Psalms CII, 6, 'I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert.' For the most part, of course, these Sunday sermons, and I must have heard over five hundred of them, went over my head when I was a child, but even if the meaning of the various words and phrases was a mystery to me for a long time, and whether Elias delivered them in English or Welsh, I did understand that his subject was the sinfulness and punishment of mankind, fire and ashes and the approaching end of the world. However, said Austerlitz, in my memory Calvinist eschatology is linked not so much to these biblical images of destruction as to what I saw with my own eyes when I was out with Elias. Many of his younger colleagues in the ministry had been called up into the army soon after the beginning of the war, and consequently at least every other Sunday he had to go and preach to another congregation, often quite a long way off. At first we drove across country in a little two-seater trap drawn by an almost snow-white pony, and in accordance with Elias's usual custom he would sit hunched up in the blackest of moods on the outward journey. On the way back, however, his

spirits rose, just as they did at home on Sunday afternoons; he sometimes even hummed to himself, and cracked the whip around the pony's ears now and then. And these light and dark sides of the minister Elias were reflected in the mountainous landscape around us. I remember, said Austerlitz, how we were once driving through the endless Tanat valley, with nothing on the hillsides to right and left of us but crooked bushes, ferns, and rusty-hued vegetation, and then, for the last part of the way up to the col, only gray rock and drifting mist, so that I was afraid we were coming to the very ends of the earth. But on another day, when we had just reached the Pennant pass I saw a gap open up in the banked clouds towering high in the west, and the rays of the sun cast a narrow beam of light down to the valley floor lying at a dizzying depth below us. Where there had been nothing a moment ago but fathomless gloom, there now shone a little village with a few orchards, meadows, and fields, surrounded by black shadows but sparkling green like the Islands of the Blest, and as we walked down the road from the pass beside the pony and trap everything grew lighter and lighter, the mountainsides emerged from the darkness shining brightly, the fine grasses bending in the wind shimmered with light, the silvery willows gleamed down on the banks of the stream; before long we had descended from the barren heights and found ourselves among trees and bushes again, beneath the softly rustling oaks and maples, and rowans already laden with red berries. Once, I think when I was nine, I went away with Elias to a place in South Wales where the flanks of the mountains had been ripped open on both sides of the road, and the woods mauled and cut down. I don't remember the name

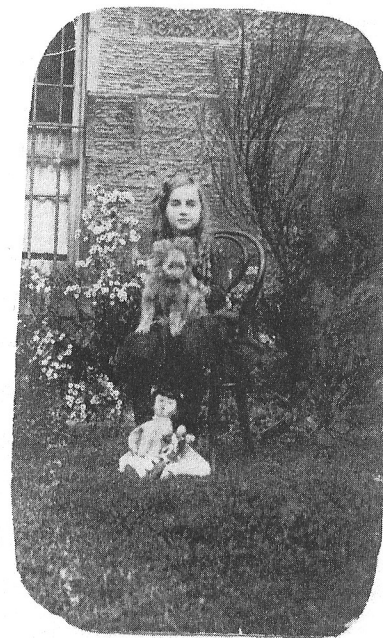
of the village we reached at nightfall. It was surrounded by pit-head stocks of coal spilling down into the alleys here and there. We had been given a room in the house of one of the church elders, from which there was a view of a winding tower with a gigantic wheel turning now this way and now that in the gathering dusk, and further down the valley tall flames and showers of sparks shot high into the sky from the smelting furnaces of an iron and steel works, at regular intervals of about three or four minutes. When I was in bed Elias sat on a stool by the window, looking out in silence for a long time. I think that it was the sight of the valley first illuminated by the firelight, then sinking back into darkness, which inspired him to preach on a text from Revelation next morning, delivering a sermon on the wrath of the Lord, on the war and the devastation of the dwellings of men, a diatribe in which, so the elder told him when we left, he had surpassed himself. If the congregation had been almost petrified by terror during the sermon, I myself could hardly have had the divine power invoked by Elias more permanently impressed on my mind than by the fact that a bomb had dropped in broad daylight that afternoon in the little town at the end of the valley, where Elias was to take evening prayers that same day. The ruins were still smoldering when we reached the center of the town, and people were standing about in the road in small groups, some with their hands still raised to their mouths in horror. The fire engine had driven straight across a round flower bed, and there on the grass, dressed in their Sunday best, lay the bodies of those who, as I hardly needed Elias to tell me, had sinned against the Lord's commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy. In this way a

kind of Old Testament mythology of retribution gradually built up inside my head, and I always saw its supreme expression in the submersion of the village of Llanwddyn beneath the waters of the Vyrnwy reservoir. As far as I can remember it was on the way back from one of his journeys to preach away from home, at either Abertridwr or Pont Llogel, that Elias stopped the pony-trap on the banks of this lake and walked out with me to the middle of the dam, where he told me about his family home lying down there at a depth of about a hundred feet under the dark water, and not just his own family home but at least forty other houses and farms, together with the church of St. John of Jerusalem, three chapels, and three pubs, all of them drowned when the dam was finished in the autumn of 1888. In the years before its submersion, so Elias had told him, said Austerlitz, Llanwddyn had been particularly famous for its games of football on the village green when the full moon shone in summer, often lasting all night and played by over ten dozen youths and men of almost every age, some of them from neighboring villages. The story of the football games of Llanwddyn occupied my imagination for a long time, said Austerlitz, first and foremost, I am sure, because Elias never told me anything else about his own life either before or afterwards. At this one moment on the Vyrnwy dam when, intentionally or unintentionally, he allowed me a glimpse into his clerical heart, I felt for him so much that he, the righteous man, seemed to me like the only survivor of the deluge which had destroyed Llanwddyn, while I imagined all the others—his parents, his brothers and sisters, his relations, their neighbors, all the other villagers—still down in the depths, sitting in their houses and

walking along the road, but unable to speak and with their eyes opened far too wide. This notion of mine about the subaquatic existence of the people of Llanwddyn also had something to do with the album which Elias first showed me on our return home that evening, containing several photographs of his birthplace,



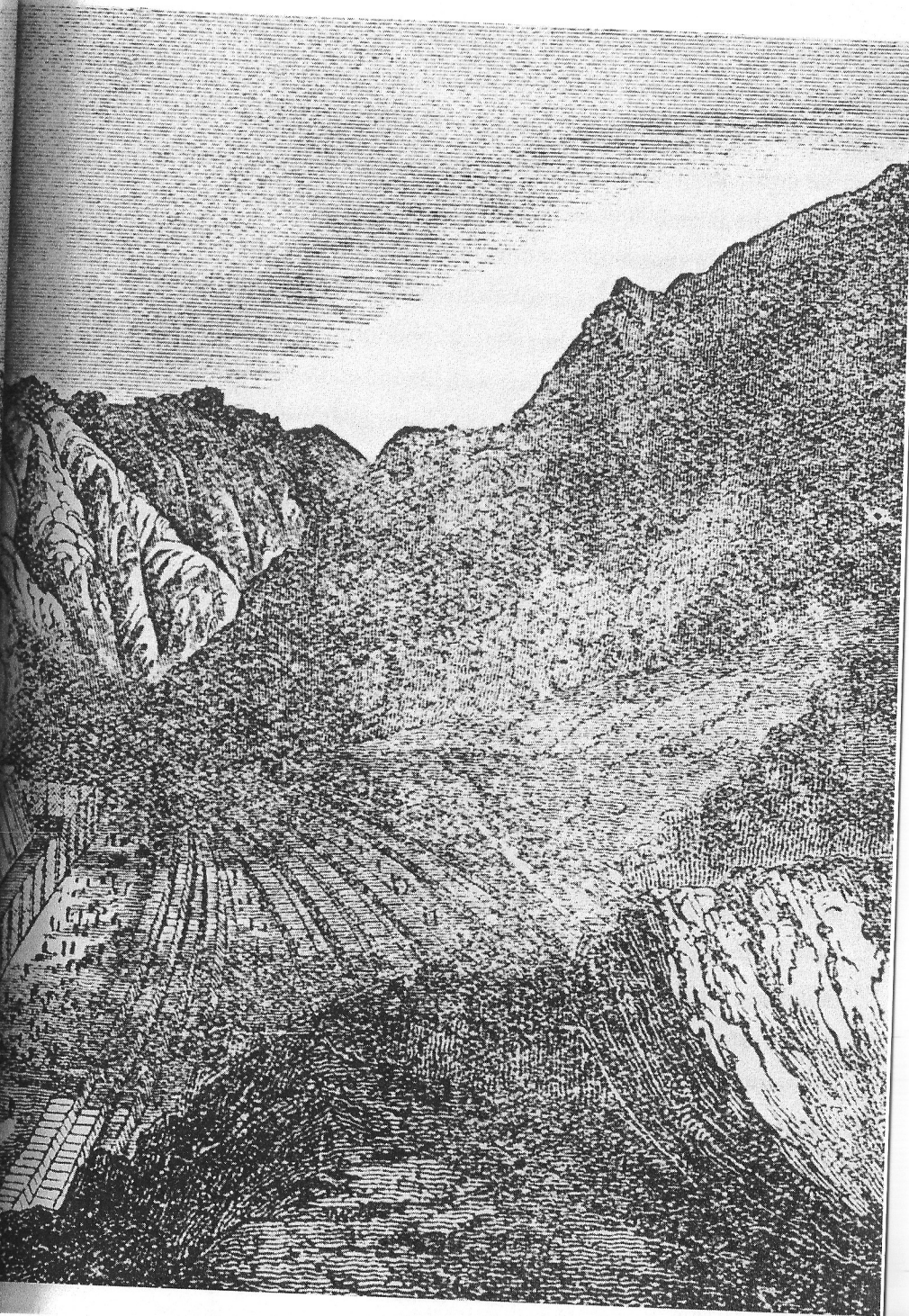
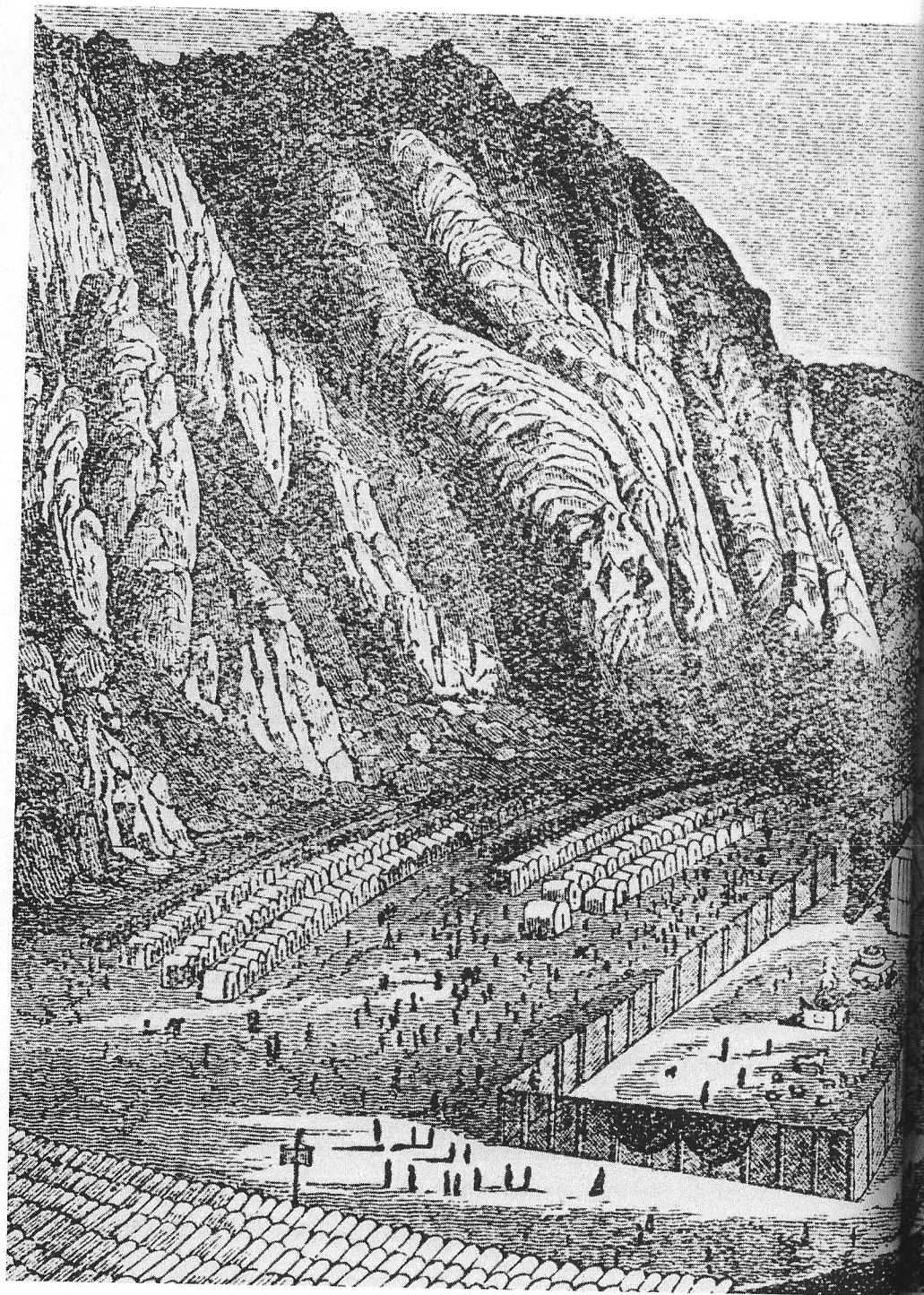
now sunk beneath the water. As there were no other pictures of any kind in the manse, I leafed again and again through these few photographs, which came into my own possession only much later along with the Calvinist calendar, until the people looking out of them, the blacksmith in his leather apron, Elias's father the sub-postmaster, the shepherd walking along the village street with his sheep, and most of all the girl sitting in a chair in the garden with her little dog on her lap, became as familiar to me as if I were living with them down at the bottom of the lake. At night, before I fell asleep in my cold room, I often felt as if I too had



been submerged in that dark water, and like the poor souls of Vyrnwy must keep my eyes wide open to catch a faint glimmer of light far above me, and see the reflection, broken by ripples, of the stone tower standing in such fearsome isolation on the wooded bank. Sometimes I even imagined that I had seen one or other of the people from the photographs in the album walking down the road in Bala, or out in the fields, particularly around noon on hot summer days, when there was no one else about and the air flickered hazily. Elias said I was not to speak of such things, so instead I spent every free moment I could with Evan the cobbler, whose workshop was not far from the manse and who had a reputation for seeing ghosts. I also learned Welsh from Evan, picking it up very quickly, because I liked his stories much better than the endless psalms and biblical verses I had to learn by heart for Sunday school. Unlike Elias, who always connected illness and

death with tribulations, just punishment, and guilt, Evan told tales of the dead who had been struck down by fate untimely, who knew they had been cheated of what was due to them and tried to return to life. If you had an eye for them they were to be seen quite often, said Evan. At first glance they seemed to be normal people, but when you looked more closely their faces would blur or flicker slightly at the edges. And they were usually a little shorter than they had been in life, for the experience of death, said Evan, diminishes us, just as a piece of linen shrinks when you first wash it. The dead almost always walked alone, but they did sometimes go around in small troops; they had been seen wearing brightly colored uniforms or wrapped in gray cloaks, marching up the hill above the town to the soft beat of a drum, and only a little taller than the walls round the fields through which they went. Evan told me the story of how his grandfather once had to step aside on the road from Frongastell to Pyrsau to let one of these ghostly processions pass by when it caught up with him. It had consisted entirely of beings of dwarfish stature who strode on at a fast pace, leaning forward slightly and talking to each other in reedy voices. Hanging from a hook on the wall above Evan's low workbench, said Austerlitz, was the black veil that his grandfather had taken from the bier when the small figures muffled in their cloaks carried it past him, and it was certainly Evan, said Austerlitz, who once told me that nothing but a piece of silk like that separates us from the next world. It is a fact that through all the years I spent at the manse in Bala I never shook off the feeling that something very obvious, very manifest in itself was hidden from me. Sometimes it was as if I were in a dream and trying to perceive reality; then again I felt as if an invisible twin brother were

walking beside me, the reverse of a shadow, so to speak. And I suspected that some meaning relating to myself lay behind the Bible stories I was given to read in Sunday school from my sixth year onwards, a meaning quite different from the sense of the printed words as I ran my index finger along the lines. I can still see myself, said Austerlitz, muttering intently and spelling out the story of Moses again and again from the large-print children's edition of the Bible Miss Parry had given me when I had been set to learn by heart the chapter about the confounding of the languages of the earth, and succeeded in reciting it correctly and with good expression. I have only to turn a couple of pages of that book, said Austerlitz, to remember how anxious I felt at the time when I read the tale of the daughter of Levi, who made an ark of bulrushes and daubed it with slime and with pitch, placed the child in the ark and laid it among the reeds by the side of the water—*yn yr hesg ar fin yr afon*, I think that was how it ran. Further on in the story of Moses, said Austerlitz, I particularly liked the episode where the children of Israel cross a terrible wilderness, many days' journey long and wide, with nothing in sight but sky and sand as far as the eye can see. I tried to picture the pillar of cloud going before the people on their wanderings 'to lead them the way,' as the Bible puts it, and I immersed myself, forgetting all around me, in a full-page illustration showing the desert of Sinai looking just like the part of Wales where I grew up, with bare mountains crowding close together and a gray-hatched background, which I took sometimes for the sea and sometimes for the air above it. And indeed, said Austerlitz on a later occasion when he showed me his Welsh children's Bible, I knew that my proper place was among the tiny figures populating the camp. I



examined every square inch of the illustration, which seemed to me uncannily familiar. I thought I could make out a stone quarry in a rather lighter patch on the steep slope of the mountain over to the right, and I seemed to see a railway track in the regular curve of the lines below it. But my mind dwelt chiefly on the fenced square in the middle and the tent-like building at the far end, with a cloud of white smoke above it. Whatever may have been going on inside me at the time, the children of Israel's camp in the wilderness was closer to me than life in Bala, which I found more incomprehensible every day, or at least, said Austerlitz, that is how it strikes me now. That evening in the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel Austerlitz also told me that there was no wireless set or newspaper in the manse in Bala. I don't know that Elias and his wife, Gwendolyn, ever mentioned the fighting on the continent of Europe, he said. I couldn't imagine any world outside Wales. Only after the end of the war did this state of affairs begin to change. A new epoch seemed to dawn with the victory celebrations, when even in Bala there was dancing in the streets, which were decked with brightly colored bunting. For me, it began when I first broke the ban on going to the cinema, and after that I used to watch the newsreel from the cubbyhole occupied by the film projectionist Owen, one of the three sons of the visionary Evan. Around the same time Gwendolyn's state of health deteriorated, almost imperceptibly at first but then with increasing speed. She, who had always kept everything in the most painfully neat order, began to neglect first the house and then herself. She simply stood in the kitchen, looking helpless, and when Elias prepared a meal as best he could she would eat almost nothing.

Her illness was certainly the reason why I was sent to a private school near Oswestry in the autumn term of 1946, when I was twelve years old. Like most such educational establishments, Stower Grange was the most unsuitable place imaginable for an adolescent. The headmaster, a man called Penrith-Smith, who wandered aimlessly about the school buildings in his dusty gown all day from early morning until late at night, was hopelessly forgetful and absentminded, and the rest of the teaching staff in that immediate post-war period were also a curious collection of oddities, most of them over sixty or suffering from some affliction. School life ran more or less of its own accord, not so much thanks to the masters who taught us at Stower Grange as in spite of them, and certainly not by virtue of any particular ethos but through customs and traditions, a number of them positively Oriental in character, going back over many generations of pupils. There were all kinds of forms of major tyranny and minor despotism, forced labor, enslavement, serfdom, the bestowal and withdrawal of privileges, hero-worship, ostracism, the imposition of penalties and the granting of reprieves, and by dint of these the pupils, without any supervision, governed themselves and indeed the entire school, not excluding the masters. Even when Penrith-Smith, a remarkably kindly man, did have to chastise one of us in his office for some reason which had been brought to his notice, you could easily have gained the impression that the victim was temporarily granting the head master who inflicted the punishment a privilege due in fact only to him, the boy who had reported to take it. Sometimes, particularly at weekends, it seemed as if all the masters had gone away leaving the pupils in their care to their own devices in the school, which was at least

two miles outside town. Then some of us would wander about at our own sweet will, while others hatched plots to extend their power bases, or went to the laboratory furnished only with a few rickety benches and stools at the end of the dark basement corridor known, for some inexplicable reason, as the Red Sea, to toast bread and make scrambled eggs from a sulfur-yellow powdered egg substitute, a large supply of which was kept in one of the wall cupboards, along with other substances intended for chemistry lessons. Given the conditions at Stower Grange, of course, quite a number of boys spent all their schooldays there in a state of misery. For instance, said Austerlitz, I remember a boy called Robinson, who was obviously so unable to reconcile himself to the harshness and idiosyncrasies of school life that at the age of nine or ten he tried, on several occasions, to run away in the middle of the night by climbing down a drainpipe and striking out across country. A policeman always brought him back next morning in the check dressing gown which, curiously, he must have put on especially for his flight, and handed him over to the headmaster like a common criminal. However, unlike poor Robinson, said Austerlitz, I myself found my years at Stower Grange a time not of imprisonment but of liberation. While most of us, even those who tormented their contemporaries, crossed off the days on the calendar until they could go home, I would have preferred never to return to Bala at all. From the very first week I realized that for all the adversities of the school it was my only escape route, and I immediately did all I could to find my way around its strange jumble of countless unwritten rules, and the often almost carnivalesque lawlessness that prevailed. It was a great advantage that I soon began to distinguish myself on the rugby field, perhaps be-

cause a dull pain always present within me, although I was unaware of it at the time, enabled me to lower my head and make my way through ranks of opponents better than any of my fellow pupils. The fearlessness I displayed in rugby matches, as I remember them always played under a cold winter sky or in pouring rain, very soon gave me special status without my having to try for it by other means, such as recruiting vassals or enslaving weaker boys. Another crucial factor in my good progress at school was the fact that I never found reading and studying a burden. Far from it, for confined as I had been until now to the Bible in Welsh and homiletic literature, it seemed as if a new door were opening whenever I turned a page. I read everything in the school library, which contained an entirely arbitrary selection of works, and everything I could borrow from my teachers—works on geography and history, travel writings, novels, biographies—and sat up until late in the evening over reference books and atlases. My mind thus gradually created a kind of ideal landscape in which the Arabian desert, the realm of the Aztecs, the continent of Antarctica, the snow-covered Alps, the North-West Passage, the river Congo, and the Crimean peninsula formed a single panorama, populated by all the figures proper to those places. As I could move into that world at any time I liked—in a Latin lesson, during divine service, on the interminable weekends—I never fell into the depression from which so many of the boys at Stower Grange suffered. I felt miserable only when it was time to go home for the holidays. Even on my first return to Bala at half-term on All Saints' Day, I felt as if my life were once again under the unlucky star which had been my companion as long as I could remember. Gwendolyn had gone further downhill during my two

months' absence. She now lay in bed all day looking fixedly up at the ceiling. Elias came in to see her for a while every morning and every evening, but neither he nor Gwendolyn spoke a single word. It seems to me now, looking back, said Austerlitz, as if they were slowly being killed by the chill in their hearts. I don't know what kind of illness Gwendolyn died of, and I suspect that she herself could not have said. At least, she had no weapon against it but the curious compulsion which came over her several times a day, and perhaps during the night too, to powder herself with a kind of cheap talc from a large container standing on the little table beside her bed. Gwendolyn used such quantities of this powder, fine as dust and slightly greasy, that the linoleum floor around her bed, and soon the whole room and the corridors of the upper story as well, were covered with a white layer, slightly sticky because of the damp air. I only recently remembered this white pall over the manse, said Austerlitz, when I was reading the reminiscences of his childhood and youth by a Russian writer who describes a similar mania for powder in his grandmother, a lady who, although she spent most of her time lying on a sofa nourishing herself almost exclusively on wine gums and almond milk, enjoyed an iron constitution and always slept with her window wide open, so that once, after a night of stormy weather, she woke up in the morning under a blanket of snow without coming to the slightest harm. However, it was different in the manse. The sickroom windows were kept closed, and the white powder which had settled on everything, grain by grain, and through which visible paths had now been trodden, was not at all like glittering snow. Rather, it resembled the ectoplasm that, as Evan had once told me, clairvoyants can produce from their mouths in

great bubbles which then fall to the ground, where they soon dry and fall to dust. No, it was not newly fallen snow wafting around the manse; what filled it was something unpleasant, and I did not know where it came from, only much later and in another book finding for it the completely incomprehensible but to me, said Austerlitz, immediately enlightening term "arsanical horror." It was during the coldest winter in human memory that I came home for the second time from the school in Oswestry, and found Gwendolyn barely alive. There was a coal fire smoldering on the hearth of her sickroom. The yellowish smoke that rose from the glowing coals and never entirely dispersed up the chimney mingled with the smell of carbolic pervading the whole house. I stood for hours at the window, studying the wonderful formations of icy mountain ranges two or three inches high formed above the crossbars by water running down the panes. Now and then solitary figures emerged from the snowy landscape outside. Wrapped in dark scarves and shawls, umbrellas open to keep off the flurry of snowflakes, they stumbled up the hill. I heard them knocking the snow off their boots down in the porch before they slowly climbed the stairs, escorted by the neighbor's daughter who was now keeping house for the minister. With a certain hesitancy, and as if they had to bend underneath something, they stepped over the threshold and put whatever they had brought—a jar of pickled red cabbage, a can of corned beef, a bottle of rhubarb wine—down on the chest of drawers. Gwendolyn took no notice of these visitors, and the visitors themselves dared not look at her. They usually stood at the window with me for a little while, looking out too, and sometimes cleared their throats slightly. When they had gone again, it was as quiet as be-

fore except for the shallow breathing I could hear behind me, and an eternity seemed to pass between each breath. On Christmas Day, making a great effort, Gwendolyn sat up in bed once more. Elias had brought her a cup of sweet tea, but she only moistened her lips with it. Then she said, so quietly that you could hardly hear her: What was it that so darkened our world? And Elias replied: I don't know, dear, I don't know. Gwendolyn lingered until the New Year. On Epiphany Day, however, she reached the final stage. The cold had grown stronger than ever outside, and it had become more and more silent. The whole country, so I heard later, came to a standstill that winter. Even Lake Bala, which I had thought as big as the ocean when I arrived in Wales, was covered by a thick sheet of ice. I thought of the roach and eels in its depths, and the birds which the visitors had told me were falling from the branches of the trees, frozen stiff. It was never really light in these days, and when at last, very far away, the sun shone faintly in the misty blue sky, the dying woman opened her eyes wide and would not move her glance from the weak light filtering through the windowpanes. Only when darkness fell did she lower her lids, and not long after that a gurgling sound began to emerge from her throat with every breath she took. I sat beside her all night, together with the minister. At dawn the stertorous breathing stopped. Gwendolyn's body arched slightly and then sank back again. It was a kind of tensing movement; I had felt it once before, when I picked up an injured rabbit from the headland of a field, and its heart stopped in my hand for fear. But directly after she had arched herself in death Gwendolyn's body seemed to shrink a little, reminding me of what Evan had told me. I saw her eyes sink back in their sockets, and her thin lips, now stretched

tautly back, half-bared her crooked bottom teeth, while outside, for the first time in many days, the rose-colored light of dawn touched the rooftops of Bala. I don't remember exactly how the rest of that day passed after she died, said Austerlitz. I think I was so exhausted that I lay down and slept very deeply for a very long time. When I got up again, Gwendolyn was already in her coffin, which stood on the four mahogany chairs in the front room. She was wearing her wedding dress, kept all these years in a trunk upstairs, and a pair of white gloves with a great many little mother-of-pearl buttons which I had never seen before. The sight of them brought tears into my eyes, the first tears I had ever shed in the manse. Elias was sitting beside the coffin keeping watch over the dead woman, while on his own out in the empty barn, which creaked with the frost, the young assistant minister who had ridden over from Corwen on a pony was rehearsing the sermon he would preach on the day of the funeral. Elias never recovered from his wife's death. *Grief* is not the right word for the condition into which he had fallen since she lay dying, said Austerlitz. Although I did not understand it at the time, as a boy of thirteen, I can see now that the unhappiness building up inside him had destroyed his faith just when he needed it most. When I came home again in the summer, it was weeks since he had been able to carry out his duties as a minister. He climbed into the pulpit once more, opened the Bible, and in a broken voice, as if reading to himself alone, announced his text from Lamentations: 'He has made me dwell in darkness as those who have been long dead.' Elias did not preach the sermon itself. He merely stood there for a while, looking out over the heads of his congregation, who were paralyzed by alarm, with what seemed to me the motionless eyes

of one blinded. Then he slowly climbed down from the pulpit and left the chapel. He was taken away to Denbigh before the end of that summer. I visited him there only once, just before Christmas, with one of the elders of the congregation. The patients were accommodated in a large stone building, and I remember, said Austerlitz, that we had to wait in a room painted green. After quarter of an hour or so, an attendant came and took us up to Elias, who was lying in a bed with railings, his face to the wall. The attendant said: Your son's here to see you, *parech*, but even when he was addressed a second and a third time Elias did not answer. When we left the ward again one of the other inmates, a gray little man with tangled hair, plucked my sleeve and whispered behind his hand: He's not the full shilling, you know—which at the time, curiously enough, said Austerlitz, I felt was a reassuring diagnosis and made the whole wretched situation tolerable.—More than a year after my visit to the Denbigh asylum, at the beginning of the summer term of 1949, when we were just preparing for the exams which would determine our subsequent careers, said Austerlitz, resuming his narrative after a certain time, the headmaster Penrith-Smith summoned me to his study one morning. I can still see him in his frayed gown, wreathed in the blue tobacco smoke from his pipe, standing in the sunlight that slanted in through the small panes of the lead-glazed window and repeating several times in various ways, in his typically confused manner, that in the circumstances my conduct had been exemplary, truly exemplary, given the events of the last two years, and if in the next few weeks I came up to my teachers' expectations of me, which were undoubtedly justified, the Stower Grange trustees would award me a sixth-form scholarship. First,

however, it was his duty to tell me that I must put not Dafydd Elias but Jacques Austerlitz on my exam papers. It appears, said Penrith-Smith, that this is your real name. My foster parents, with whom he had discussed the matter at length when I entered the school, had meant to tell me about my origins in good time before the examinations, and if possible adopt me, but as matters now stood, said Penrith-Smith, that was unfortunately out of the question. All he knew himself was that the Eliases had taken me into their house at the beginning of the war, when I was only a little boy, so he could tell me no more. He was sure it would all be settled once Elias's condition improved. As far as the other boys are concerned, said Penrith-Smith, you remain Dafydd Elias for the time being. There's no need to let anyone know. It's just that you will have to put Jacques Austerlitz on your examination papers or else your work may be considered invalid. Penrith-Smith had written the name on a piece of paper, and when he handed it to me I could think of nothing to say, said Austerlitz, but "Thank you, sir." At first, what disconcerted me most was that I could connect no ideas at all with the word *Austerlitz*. If my new name had been Morgan or Jones, I could have related it to reality. I even knew the name *Jacques* from a French nursery rhyme. But I had never heard of an Austerlitz before, and from the first I was convinced that no one else bore that name, no one in Wales, or in the Isles, or anywhere else in the world. And since I began investigating my own history some years ago, I have never in fact come upon another Austerlitz, not in the telephone books of London or Paris, Amsterdam or Antwerp. But not long ago, turning on the wireless, I happened upon an announcer saying that Fred Astaire, of whom I had previously known nothing at all, was born with

the surname of Austerlitz. Astaire's father, who according to this surprising radio program came from Vienna, had worked as a master brewer in Omaha, Nebraska, where Astaire was born, and from the veranda of the Austerlitz family's house you could hear freight trains being shunted back and forth in the city's marshaling yard. Astaire is reported to have said later that this constant, uninterrupted shunting sound, and the ideas it suggested of going on a long railroad journey, were his only early childhood memories. And just a couple of days after I chanced in this way upon the story of a man entirely unknown to me, Austerlitz added, a neighbor who describes herself as a passionate reader told me that in Kafka's diaries she had found a small, bow-legged man of my own name who, as Kafka recorded, had been called in to circumcise his nephew. I feel it is unlikely that these trails lead anywhere, nor do I entertain any hopes of a note I found some time ago in a file on the practice of euthanasia, mentioning one Laura Austerlitz who made a statement to an Italian investigating judge on 28 June 1966 about the crimes committed in a rice mill on the peninsula of San Saba near Trieste in 1944. At least, said Austerlitz, I haven't yet succeeded in tracking down this namesake of mine. I don't even know if she is still alive, thirty years after making her statement. But personally, as I was saying, I had never heard the name Austerlitz before that April day in 1949 when Penrith-Smith handed me the piece of paper on which he had written it. I couldn't work out the spelling, and read the strange term which sounded to me like some password three or four times, syllable by syllable, before I looked up and said: Excuse me, sir, but what does it mean? To which Penrith-Smith replied: I think you will find it is a small place in Moravia, site of a famous battle, you

know. And sure enough, the Moravian village of Austerlitz was discussed at great length during the next school year, for the curriculum in the Lower Sixth included European history, generally regarded as a complicated and not entirely safe subject, so that as a rule it was confined to the period from 1789 to 1814 which ended with a great English victory. The master who was to teach us this period—both glorious and terrible, as he often emphasized—was one André Hilary, who had only just taken up his post at Stower Grange after being demobbed and who, as it soon turned out, was familiar with every detail of the Napoleonic era. André Hilary had studied at Oriel College, but had grown up surrounded by an enthusiasm for Napoleon going back through several generations of his family. His father, so he once told me, said Austerlitz, had him baptized André in memory of Marshal Masséna, Duke of Rivoli. Hilary could trace the orbit of the Corsican comet, as he put it, across the sky from its very beginning to its extinction in the South Atlantic Ocean, enumerating all the constellations through which it passed, and the events and characters on which it cast light at any point of its ascendancy or decline, speaking without any preparation and just as if he had been there himself. The Emperor's childhood in Ajaccio, his studies at the military academy of Brienne, the siege of Toulon, the stresses and strains of the Egyptian expedition and his return over a sea full of enemy ships, the crossing of the Great St. Bernard, the battles of Marengo, Jena and Auerstedt, of Eylau and Friedland, of Wagram, Leipzig, and Waterloo—Hilary brought it all vividly to life for us, partly by recounting the course of these events, often passing from plain narrative to dramatic descriptions and then on to a kind of impromptu performance distributed among several

different roles, from one to another of which he switched back and forth with astonishing virtuosity, and partly by studying the gambits of Napoleon and his opponents with the cold intelligence of a nonpartisan strategist, surveying the entire landscape of those years from above with an eagle eye, as he once and not without pride remarked. Most of us were deeply impressed by Hilary's history lessons, not least, said Austerlitz, because very often, probably owing to his suffering from slipped disks, he gave them while lying on his back on the floor, nor did we find this at all comic, for it was at such times that Hilary spoke with particular clarity and authority. His undoubted *pièce de résistance* was the battle of Austerlitz. He spoke on it at length, describing the terrain, the highway leading east from Brünn to Olmütz, with the hilly Moravian countryside on its left and the Pratzen heights on its right, the curious cone-shaped mountain which reminded the veterans in the Napoleonic army of the Egyptian pyramids, the villages of Bellwitz, Skolnitz, and Kobelnitz, the game park and pheasant enclosure, the watercourse of the Goldbach and the pools and lakes to the south, the French encampment as well as that of the ninety thousand Allies, which extended over a length of nine miles. Hilary told us, said Austerlitz, how at seven in the morning the peaks of the highest hills emerged from the mist like islands in a sea and, as the day gradually grew brighter over the rounded hilltops, the milky haze in the valleys became noticeably denser. The Russian and Austrian troops had come down from the mountainsides like a slow avalanche, and soon, increasingly unsure where they were going, were wandering around on the slopes and in the meadows below, while the French, in a single onslaught, captured the now half-abandoned positions on the

Pratzen heights and then proceeded to attack the enemy in the rear from that vantage point. Hilary painted us a picture of the disposition of the regiments in their white and red, green and blue uniforms, constantly forming into new patterns in the course of the battle like crystals of glass in a kaleidoscope. Again and again we heard the names of Kolovrat and Bragation, Kutuzov, Bernadotte, Miloradovich, Soult, Murat, Vandamme, and Kellermann, we saw the black clouds of smoke hovering over the guns, the cannonballs flying past above the heads of the troops, the glint of bayonets as the first rays of the sun penetrated the mist; we even seemed to hear the heavy cavalry clashing, and felt (like a weakness sensed in our own bodies) whole ranks of men collapsing beneath the surge of the oncoming force. Hilary could talk for hours about the second of December 1805, but nonetheless it was his opinion that he had to cut his accounts far too short, because, as he several times told us, it would take an endless length of time to describe the events of such a day properly, in some inconceivably complex form recording who had perished, who survived, and exactly where and how, or simply saying what the battlefield was like at nightfall, with the screams and groans of the wounded and dying. In the end all anyone could ever do was sum up the unknown factors in the ridiculous phrase, "The fortunes of battle swayed this way and that," or some similarly feeble and useless cliché. All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others. We try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us: the fallen drummer boy, the infantryman

shown in the act of stabbing another, the horse's eye starting from its socket, the invulnerable Emperor surrounded by his generals, a moment frozen still amidst the turmoil of battle. Our concern with history, so Hilary's thesis ran, is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered. I myself, added Austerlitz, in spite of all the accounts of it I have read, remember only the picture of the final defeat of the Allies in the battle of the Three Emperors. Every attempt to understand the course of events inevitably turns into that one scene where the hosts of Russian and Austrian soldiers are fleeing on foot and horseback on to the frozen Satschen ponds. I see cannonballs suspended for an eternity in the air, I see others crashing into the ice, I see the unfortunate victims flinging up their arms as they slide from the toppling floes, and I see them, strangely, not with my own eyes but with those of short-sighted Marshal Davout, who has made a forced march with his regiments from Vienna and, glasses tied firmly behind his head with two laces, looks like an early motorist or aviator. When I look back at André Hilary's performances today, said Austerlitz, I remember once again the idea I developed at the time of being linked in some mysterious way to the glorious past of the people of France. The more often Hilary mentioned the word *Austerlitz* in front of the class, the more it really did become my own name, and the more clearly I thought I saw that what had at first seemed like an ignominious flaw was changing into a bright light always hovering before me, as promising as the sun of Austerlitz itself when it rose above the December mists. All that school year I felt as if I had been chosen, and although, as I also knew, such a belief

in no way matched my uncertain status, I have held fast to it almost my whole life. I don't think that any of my fellow pupils at Stower Grange knew my new name, and the masters, who had been informed of my double identity by Penrith-Smith, went on calling me Elias too. André Hilary was the only one to whom I myself told my real name. It was soon after we had handed in an essay on the concepts of empire and nation that Hilary summoned me to his study outside regular school hours to return my work, which he had marked with a triple-starred *A*, giving it back in person and not, as he put it, along with everyone else's pathetic efforts. He himself had published various articles in historical journals, and he said he could not have written such a perceptive piece in so comparatively short a space of time; he wondered whether I had perhaps been initiated into historical studies at home by my father or an elder brother. When I answered Hilary's question I had some difficulty in not losing my command over myself, and it was in this situation, which I felt I could no longer endure, that I told him the secret of my real name. It was some time before he was able to calm down. He struck his forehead again and again, breaking into exclamations of astonishment, as if Providence had finally sent him the pupil he had always wanted. For the rest of my time at Stower Grange, Hilary supported and encouraged me in every possible way. I owe it to him first and foremost, said Austerlitz, that I far outstripped the rest of my year in our final examinations in history, Latin, German, and French, and could go on my own way into freedom, as I confidently thought at the time, provided with a generous scholarship. When we said goodbye André Hilary gave me a present from his collection of Napoleonic memorabilia, a gold-framed piece of dark

card on which, behind shining glass, were fixed three rather fragile willow leaves from a tree on the island of St. Helena, along with a scrap of lichen resembling a pale sprig of coral taken by one of Hilary's forebears, as the tiny caption said, from the heavy granite tombstone of Marshal Ney on 31 July 1830. This memento, worth nothing in itself, is still in my possession, said Austerlitz. It means more to me than almost any other picture, first because despite their fragility the relics preserved in it, the lichen and the dried lanceolate willow leaves, have remained intact for more than a century, but also because it reminds me daily of Hilary, without whom I would surely never have been able to emerge from the shadows of the manse in Bala. Moreover, it was Hilary who, after my foster father's death in the Denbigh asylum early in 1954, undertook the task of winding up his meager estate and then set on foot the process of my naturalization, which in view of the fact that Elias had obliterated every indication of my origin involved a good deal of difficulty. When I was studying at Oriol, like Hilary himself before me, he visited me regularly, and we took every opportunity of making excursions to the deserted and dilapidated country houses to be found all around Oxford, as elsewhere, in the postwar years.

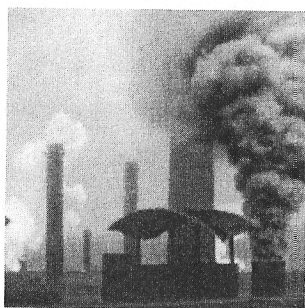
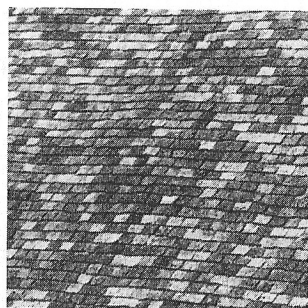
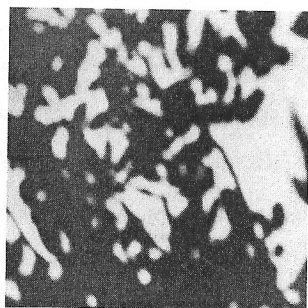
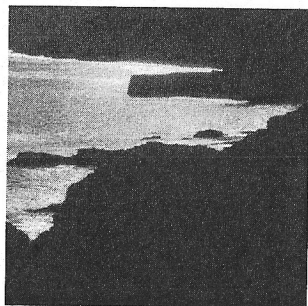
While I was still at school, said Austerlitz, as well as Hilary's support my friendship with Gerald Fitzpatrick in particular helped me to overcome the self-doubts that sometimes oppressed me. In line with the usual practice at public schools, Gerald was assigned to me as a fag when I entered the sixth form. It was his job to keep my room tidy, clean my boots, and bring the tray with the tea things. From the first day, when he asked me for one of the new photographs of the rugger team where I featured

to the extreme right of the front row, I realized that Gerald felt as isolated as I did, said Austerlitz, who scarcely a week after our reunion at the Great Eastern Hotel sent me a postcard copy of the picture he had mentioned, without further comment. On that December evening, however, in the hotel bar, which was quiet



now, Austerlitz went on to tell me more about Gerald, and how he had suffered from awful homesickness ever since his arrival at Stower Grange, entirely against the grain of his naturally cheerful disposition. All the time, said Austerlitz, in every free moment he had, he was rearranging the things he had brought from home in his tuck box, and once, not long after he became my fag, I found him at the end of a corridor one dreary Saturday afternoon, with the autumn rain pouring down outside, trying to set fire to a pile of newspapers stacked on the stone floor beside the open door which led into a back yard. I saw his small, crouched figure in the gray light behind him, and the little flames licking around the edges of the newspaper, but the fire would not burn properly. When I asked what he thought he was doing, he said he wanted to

make a huge blaze, and would not mind if the whole school were reduced to a pile of rubble and ashes. After that I kept an eye on Gerald. I let him off tidying my room and cleaning my boots, and I made the tea myself and shared it with him, a breach of regulations regarded with disapproval by most of my fellow pupils and my housemaster himself, rather as if it were against the natural order of things. In the evenings Gerald often accompanied me to the darkroom where, at this time, I was making my first experiments with photography. This little cubbyhole behind the chemistry lab had not been used for years, but the wall cupboards and drawers still held several boxes with rolls of film, a large supply of photographic paper, and a miscellaneous collection of cameras, including an Ensign such as I myself owned later. From the outset my main concern was with the shape and the self-



contained nature of discrete things, the curve of banisters on a staircase, the molding of a stone arch over a gateway, the tangled precision of the blades in a tussock of dried grass. I took hundreds of such photographs at Stower Grange, most of them in square format, but it never seemed to me right to turn the viewfinder of my camera on people. In my photographic work I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long. Gerald enjoyed helping me, and I can still see him, a head shorter than I was, standing beside me in the darkroom, which was dimly illuminated only by the little reddish light, holding the photographs in tweezers and swishing them back and forth in a sink full of water. He often told me about his family on these occasions, and most of all he liked talking about the three homing pigeons who would be expecting his return, he thought, as eagerly as he usually awaited theirs. Gerald's Uncle Alphonso had given him these pigeons a year ago for his tenth birthday, said Austerlitz, two of them a slaty blue, one snow-white. Whenever possible, if someone was going to Bala or Aberystwyth by car, he would send his three pigeons to be freed at a distance, and they always infallibly found their way back to their loft. Once, towards the end of last summer, Tilly the white pigeon did stay away much longer than the homeward flight should have taken her, after being dispatched on a test flight from Dolgellau only a few miles up the valley, and it was not until the following day, when he was on the point of giving up hope, that she finally returned—on foot, walking up the gravel drive with a

broken wing. I often thought later of this tale of the bird making her long journey home alone, wondering how she had managed to reach her destination over the steep terrain, circumventing numerous obstacles, and that question, said Austerlitz, a question which still exercises my mind today when I see a pigeon in flight, is one that, against all reason, seems to me connected with the way Gerald finally lost his life.—I believe, Austerlitz went on after some considerable time, it was on the second or third parents' visiting day that Gerald, proud of his privileged relationship with me, introduced me to his mother, Adela. She can hardly have been thirty at the time, and she was very glad that after his initial difficulties her young son had found a protector in me. Gerald had already told me about his father, Aldous, shot down over the Ardennes in the last winter of the war, and I had also heard how his mother was now living with only an old uncle and an even older great-uncle in a country house just outside the small seaside town of Barmouth. Gerald claimed that its position was the finest anywhere along the entire Welsh coast. Once Adela had discovered from Gerald that I had no parents or any family at all, I was invited to their house repeatedly, indeed constantly, even when I was doing my national service and when I was up at Oxford, and I could wish now, said Austerlitz, to have vanished without trace in the peace that always reigned there. At the very beginning of the school holidays, when we traveled westward up the Dee valley in the little steam train from Wrexham, I would feel my heart begin to lift. Bend after bend, our train followed the winding of the river, the green meadows looked in through the open carriage window, and so did the houses, stony gray or whitewashed, the gleaming slate roofs, the silver shades of the willows, the darker

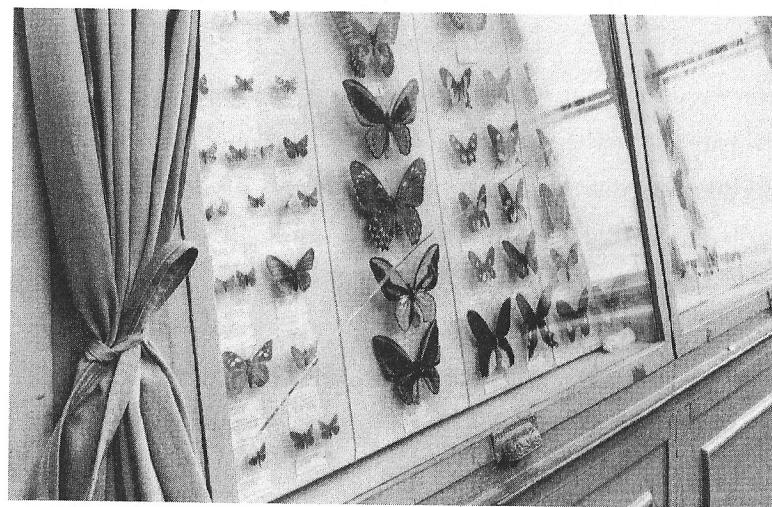
alder woods, the sheep pastures climbing up beyond the trees, and higher still the mountains, sometimes tinged with blue, and the sky where the clouds, coming in from the sea, always drove eastwards. Scraps of steam vapor flew past outside; you could hear the engine whistling and feel the air cool on your forehead. Never have I traveled better, said Austerlitz, than on this journey of seventy miles at the most, which took us three and a half hours. When we stopped at Bala, the halfway station, of course I could not help thinking back to my time in the manse, visible up there on its hill, yet it always seemed to me inconceivable that I had really been among its unhappy inhabitants for almost the whole of my life. And every time I set eyes on Lake Bala, particularly when its surface was churned up by the wind in winter, I remembered the story Evan the cobbler had told me, about the two headstreams of Dwy Fawr and Dwy Fach which are said to flow right through the lake, far down in its dark depths, never mingling their waters with its own. The two rivers, according to Evan, said Austerlitz, were called after the only human beings not drowned but saved from the biblical deluge in the distant past. At the far end of Lake Bala the railway line passed over a low anticline into the Afon Mawddach valley. The mountains were higher now, coming down closer and closer to the tracks until you reached Dolgellau, where they retreated again, and gentler slopes fell to the estuary of the Mawddach, which reaches far inland like a fjord. Finally, when we left the southern bank and crawled to the opposite side over the bridge, almost a mile long and supported on mighty posts of oak, on our right the riverbed, inundated by the sea at high tide and looking like a mountain lake, and on our left Barmouth Bay stretching to the bright horizon, I felt

so joyful that I often scarcely knew where to look first. Adela used to fetch us from Barmouth station, usually in the little black-painted pony trap, and then it was only half an hour before the gravel of the drive up to Andromeda Lodge was crunching under our wheels, the bay pony stopped, and we could get down and enter into our holiday refuge. The two-story house, built of pale gray brick, was protected to the north and northeast by the Llawr Llech hills, which fall steeply away at this point. To the southwest the terrain lay open in a wide semicircle, so that from the forecourt of the house you had a view of the full length of the estuary from Dolgellau to Barmouth, while these places themselves were excluded from the panorama, which was almost devoid of human habitations, by a rocky outcrop on one side and a laurel-grown hill on the other. Only on the far side of the river could the little village of Arthog be seen—in certain atmospheric conditions, said Austerlitz, you might have thought it an eternity away—infinitesimally small, with the shadowy side of Cader Idris rising behind it to a height of almost three thousand feet above the shimmering sea. While the climate of the entire area was remarkably mild, temperatures in this especially favored place were a couple of degrees higher even than the Barmouth average. The garden, which had run completely wild during the war years and went up the slope at the back of the house, contained plants and shrubs that I had never seen in Wales before: giant rhubarb and New Zealand ferns taller than a grown man, water lettuce and camelias, thickets of bamboo and palms. And a brook tumbled down over a rocky wall to the valley, its white spray constantly pervading the dappled twilight under the leafy canopy of the tall trees. But it was not only the plants, natives of warmer climates, that

made you feel you were living in another world: the greatest exotic attractions of Andromeda Lodge were the white cockatoos which flew all around the house within a radius of up to two or three miles, calling from the bushes, bathing and luxuriating in the fine spray from the cascading brook until evening fell. Gerald's great-grandfather had brought several pairs home from the Moluccas and established them in the orangery, where they soon increased and multiplied, forming a large colony. They lived in small sherry casks that had been stacked on top of each other in a pyramid against one of the side walls, and departing from their native custom, said Austerlitz, they had lined these casks themselves with wood shavings from a sawmill down beside the river. Most of them even survived the hard winter of 1947, since Adela kept the old orangery stove heated for them through the two icy months of January and February. It was wonderful, said Austerlitz, to see the dexterity with which the birds clambered around the trelliswork, hanging on by their beaks, and performing all kinds of acrobatic feats as they came down; to watch them flying in and out of the open windows or hopping and walking along the ground, always active and always, or that was the impression they gave, intent upon some purpose or other. In fact they were very like human beings in many ways. You might hear them sigh, laugh, sneeze, and yawn. They cleared their throats before beginning to converse in their own cockatoo language, they showed themselves alert, scheming, mischievous and sly, deceitful, malicious, vindictive and quarrelsome. They liked certain people, particularly Adela and Gerald, and persecuted others with downright malice, for instance the Welsh housekeeper who seldom showed her face out of doors. They seemed to know exactly when she

would be going to chapel, always wearing a black hat and carrying a black umbrella, and on these occasions they lay in wait to screech at her in the most obnoxious way. They also reflected human society in the way they ganged up together in ever-changing groups, or then again paired off in couples sitting side by side as if they knew nothing but harmony and were forever inseparable. They even had their own cemetery, with a long row of graves in a clearing surrounded by strawberry trees, and one of the rooms on the upper floor of Andromeda Lodge had in it what was obviously a purpose-built wall cupboard, full of dark green cardboard boxes containing a number of dead birds of species related to the cockatoos, their red-chested or yellow-headed brothers, Hyacinth and Scarlet Macaws, Ruby Lorikeets and Blue-Winged Parrotlets, Horned Parakeets and Ground Parrots, all brought back by Gerald's great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather from his circumnavigation of the globe, or alternatively ordered from a trader called Théodore Grace in Le Havre for a few guineas or louis d'or, as noted on the provenances placed inside the boxes. The finest of all these birds, in a collection which also included some native woodpeckers, wrynecks, kites, and orioles, was the African Gray parrot. I can still see the inscription on his green cardboard sarcophagus: *Jaco, Ps. erithacus L.* He came from the Congo and had reached the great age of sixty-six in his Welsh exile, as his obituary recounted, adding that he had been very tame and trusting, was a quick learner, chattered away to himself and others, could whistle entire songs and had composed some too, but best of all he liked to mimic the voices of children and to have them teach him new words. His one bad habit was that if no one gave him any apricot kernels and hard nuts, which he could

crack open with the greatest ease, he went about in a bad temper chewing and shredding the furniture. Gerald often took this special parrot out of his box. He was about nine inches long, and as his name suggests had ash-gray plumage, as well as a carmine tail, a black beak, and a pale face that you might have thought was marked by deep grief. Indeed, Austerlitz went on, there was some kind of cabinet of natural curiosities in almost every room at Andromeda Lodge: cases with multiple drawers, some of them glass-fronted, where the roundish eggs of parrots were arranged in their hundreds; collections of shells, minerals, beetles, and butterflies; slowworms, adders, and lizards preserved in formaldehyde; snail shells and sea urchins, crabs and shrimps, and



large herbaria containing leaves, flowers, and grasses. Adela had once told him, said Austerlitz, that the transformation of Andromeda Lodge into a kind of natural history museum had begun in 1869, when Gerald's parrot-collecting ancestor made the acquaintance of Charles Darwin, then working on his study of the

Descent of Man in a rented house not far from Dolgellau. Darwin had paid frequent visits to the Fitzpatricks of Andromeda Lodge in those days, and according to a family tradition he always praised the wonderful view from the house. It was from the same period, according to Adela, said Austerlitz, that the schism in the Fitzpatrick clan dated, a schism continuing to the present day, whereby one of the two sons in every generation abandoned the Catholic faith and became a natural scientist. For instance Aldous, Gerald's father, had been a botanist, while his brother, Evelyn, over twenty years his senior, clung to the traditional Papist creed, regarded in Wales as the worst of all perversions. In fact the Catholic line of the family had always been represented by its crazier and more eccentric members, as the case of Uncle Evelyn clearly illustrated. At the time when I was spending many weeks every year with the Fitzpatricks as Gerald's guest, said Austerlitz, Evelyn was perhaps in his mid-fifties, but was so crippled by Bechterew's disease that he looked like an old man, and could walk only with the greatest difficulty, bending right over. For that very reason, however, and to prevent his joints from seizing up entirely, he was always on the move in his rooms on the top floor, where a kind of handrail had been fitted along the walls, like the barre in a ballet school. He held on to this handrail as he inched his way forward, moaning quietly, his head and bent torso scarcely higher than his hand on the rail. It took him a good hour to make the rounds of his quarters, from the bedroom into the living room, out of the living room into the corridor, and from the corridor back to the bedroom. Gerald, who had already developed an aversion to the Roman faith, once claimed, said Austerlitz, that Uncle Evelyn had grown so crooked out of sheer

miserliness, which he justified to himself by reflecting that he sent the money he did not spend in any given week, usually amounting to twelve or thirteen shillings, as a donation to the Mission to the Congo for the salvation of black souls still languishing in unbelief. There were no curtains or other furnishings in Evelyn's rooms, since he did not want to make unnecessary use of anything, even if it had been acquired long ago and simply had to be brought from another part of the house. Years before, he had had a narrow strip of linoleum laid on the wooden floor where he walked beside the walls, to spare the wood, and his dragging footsteps had worn the linoleum so thin that you could make out almost nothing of its original flower pattern. Not until the temperature on the thermometer beside the window had dropped to below fifty degrees Fahrenheit for several days running was the housekeeper allowed to light a tiny fire in the hearth, a fire burning almost no fuel at all. To save electricity, Evelyn always went to bed when darkness fell, which meant around four in the afternoon in winter, although lying down was perhaps even more painful for him than walking, so that as a rule, despite his exhausted state after his constant perambulations, it was a long time before he could get to sleep. Then, through the grille of a ventilation shaft that linked his bedchamber to one of the ground-floor living rooms and inadvertently functioned as a kind of communication channel, he could be heard calling on numerous different saints for hours on end, in particular, if I remember correctly, Saints Catherine and Elizabeth, who suffered the most cruel of martyrdoms, begging them to intercede for him in the contingency, as he put it, of his imminent appearance before the judgment seat of his Heavenly Lord.

