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MIRCEA CĂRTĂRESCU

Nostalgia

Translated by Julian Semilian



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Prologue

I open the book, the book moans

I cast for the times, the times are gone

TUDOR ARGHEZI

The Roulette Player

Grant Israel's consolation

To the one who has eighty years and no to-morrow.

I record here (for what reason?) these verses from Eliot. In any case, not as a possible opening for one of my books, because I will never write anything else again. Yet, if I write these lines, I do not regard them as literature, not by far. I have written enough literature, for sixty years I did nothing but that, so let me permit myself now, at the end's end, one moment of lucidity: everything I wrote after the age of thirty was no more than painful imposture. I've had enough of writing without the hope that I would ever surpass myself, that I would ever be capable of leaping over my shadow. It's true, up to a certain point I have been honest with myself, in the only manner possible for an artist; that is, I wanted to say everything about myself, absolutely everything. But so much more bitter was the illusion, since literature is not the adequate means to say anything real about yourself. From the first lines with which you layer the page, the hand that holds the pen slips into a foreign, mocking hand, as though entering a glove, while your image in the page's mirror scatters all over the place like quicksilver, so that out of its disordered blobs coagulates the Spider or the Worm or the Degenerate or the Unicorn or the God, when all you wanted to do was simply speak about yourself. Literature is teratology.

For a few solid years now I've been sleeping an agitated sleep and dreaming of an old man who goes mad from loneliness. Only the dream reflects me realistically. I wake up weeping from loneliness, even though I may spend the day in the comfort of friends who are

still living. I can't bear to live my life any longer, but the fact that today or tomorrow I will cross into endless death forces me to try to reflect. Because of this, because I must reflect, like someone who is thrown into a labyrinth is forced to seek an exit, even through walls smeared with dung, even through a rathole; this is the only reason I still write these lines. Not particularly to prove (to myself) that God exists. Unfortunately I have never been, despite all my efforts, a believer, I have never had to endure a battle with doubt or denial. It might have been better for me to be a believer, because writing requires drama and drama is born out of the agonizing struggle between hope and despair, where faith plays a role which I imagine is essential. In my youth half the writers converted, while the other half lost faith, which for their literature produced just about the same effect. How I envied them for the fire their demons fanned under the cauldrons where they wallowed as artists! And look at me now, cradled in my nook, a bundle of rags and cartilage, whose mind or heart or faith no one would think to bet on, because there is nothing more to take from me.

I drowse here in my armchair, terrified at the thought that nothing exists outside any more other than night, solid as an infinite lump of pitch, a black fog that has slowly gnawed, in pace with the advancing years, cities, houses, streets, faces. The only sun left in the universe seems to reside in the lamp's light bulb, and the only thing illuminated by it – an old man's shrivelled face.

After I'm dead, my tomb, my cranny, will continue to float in the black fog, the solid fog, ferrying nowhere these pages which no one will read. But in them is finally . . . everything. I have written a few thousand pages of literature – powder and dust. Intrigues masterfully conducted, marionettes with electrifying grins, but how to say anything, even a little bit, in this immense convention of art? You would like to turn the reader's heart inside out, but what does he do? At three he's done with your book, at four he takes up another, no matter how great the book you placed in his hands. But these ten, fifteen pages, they are a different matter, a different game. My reader now is no one else but death. I even see his black eyes, humid, attentive like a young girl's, reading as I fill

up the page, line after line. These pages contain my scheme for immortality.

I say scheme, although everything – and this is my triumph and my hope – is the truth. How strange: most of the characters populating my books are invented, but they appeared to everyone as copies of reality. Only now do I have the courage to write about someone who is real, someone who lived for a long time in my proximity, but who, according to my conventions, would appear improbable. No reader could accept that in his world, elbowing him in the same tram, breathing the same air, might live a man whose life is an actual mathematical proof of an order in which no one believes today, or believes only because it is absurd. But! – the Roulette Player is not a dream, and neither is he the hallucination of a sclerotic brain, nor an alibi. Now, thinking about him, I am convinced that I too made the acquaintance of that beggar at the end of the bridge whom Rilke wrote about, around whom the worlds rotate.

Thus, though not someone dear to me, the Roulette Player did exist. And the roulette, too, existed. You heard nothing about it, but tell me, what did you hear about Agartha, the ancient civilization at the Earth's core? I lived the roulette's unlikely times, I saw the plummeting of fortunes and the amassing of fortunes in the savage light of gunpowder. I too howled under the low ceiling of underground halls and cried from happiness when a man was carried out with scattered brains. I made the acquaintance of the great roulette magnates, the landowners and the bankers who wagered those increasingly exorbitant sums. For more than ten years, the roulette was the bread and circus of our serene inferno. There hasn't even been a whisper about something like that for the last forty years? Consider, how many thousands of years passed since the Greek mysteries? Does anyone today know what actually took place in those caverns? Where blood is the subject, everything is hush-hush. Everyone was hush-hush, or perhaps everyone in the know bequeathed after his death a few useless pages such as these, to be followed with a skeletal finger only by Death. Each one's individual Death, the dark twin born at the time of his birth.

The man whom I write about here had some name or another, which the world forgot because soon everyone called him the Roulette Player. Saying 'the Roulette Player', you were speaking about him alone, though there were many other roulette players. I remember him without difficulty. Downcast figure, triangular face on top of a long neck, thin and yellowish, desiccated skin and hair nearly scarlet. Eyes of a morose monkey, asymmetrical, uneven in size, it seems to me now. He gave an impression that suggested impurity, pollution. That is how he looked in his farmer's hand-me-downs, that is how he looked later in his tails. Lord, how tempted I am to sketch a little hagiography of him, to throw a transcendent light on his cheek, to put a fire in his eyes! But I clench my jaws and swallow these miserable tics. The Roulette Player had the dark face of a somewhat well-to-do peasant, his teeth half metal, half charcoal. From the time I met him until the day he died (by pistol, but not by bullet) he looked the same. Still, he was the only being who was fated to catch sight of the infinite mathematical God and challenge him to a wrestling match.

I claim no merit for knowing him or that I can write about him. I might be able to hoist, but with only his aspect before my eyes, an enormously ramified scaffolding, a paper Babel, a *Bildungsroman* of a thousand pages, where I, like Thomas Mann's humble Serenus Zeitblom, would follow with huffing soul the progressive demonizing of the new Adrian. But then, what? Even if by the turn of an absurd fate I could come up with what I hadn't for sixty years, a masterpiece, I ask myself, what is the good of it? . . . For my final purpose, for my grand stake (next to which all of the world's masterpieces are nothing but sand in an hourglass or dandelion down), it is enough to list in a few lines the larval life stages of a psychopath: the brutal child with darkened face who slices insects into sections and kills songbirds with stones, passionate about playing marbles and throwing horseshoes (I remember him perpetually losing, losing money, losing marbles, losing buttons then desperately getting into brawls); the adolescent with moments of epileptic fury and exacerbated erotic appetites; the jailbird sentenced for rape and burglary. I believe that the only one close to him during this last twisted stage

of his life was me, perhaps because we had been somehow thrown together since childhood, our parents being neighbours. In any case, he never hit me and looked at me less suspiciously than the rest, whoever they may have been. I remember, each time I visited him – even in prison, where, in the greenish chill of the visiting room, cursing horrendously, he complained all the time of his bad luck at poker – he asked me for money. He wept from the humiliation of being perpetually cleaned out, of being incapable of even one lucky hand among the thousands he played, where he might win money from the others. He sat there on the green bench, a pint-sized man with eyes reddened by conjunctivitis.

No, it's impossible for me to speak of him in a realistic manner. How can you realistically present a living parable? Any automatic device, any stylistic trick or turn that hints even slightly at literary prose depresses me, nauseates me. Let me say that, after he was released from prison, he took up drinking and after one year hit the skids something horrible. He had no job, and the only places where you could be certain to find him were a few lowlife dives, where for that matter I believe he slept. You saw him ambling from one table to the next, attired in that unmistakable manner that drunks adopt (jacket over bare skin, seat of the trousers dragging on the ground) and bumming a mug of beer. Numerous times I saw the sinister prank, painful even for me, but at the same time amusing, that the usual customers played on him from time to time: they called him to their table and promised him his mug of beer if he could draw the long matchstick from the pair that one of them held in his fist. And they rolled around laughing hysterically when he always drew the short one. Not once, I am certain of this, did he win his beer in this way.

It was during that period that my first short stories appeared in magazines, and after a time my first short-story volume, which even today I consider the best work I have ever done. I was happy then about each line I wrote, I felt myself competing not with my contemporaries but with the great writers of the world. Slowly I gained entry to the consciousness of the public and the literary world, I was worshipped and violently censured in equal proportion. I got married for the first time and, finally, I felt I was alive. This was in fact

fatal for me, because writing doesn't reconcile itself with happiness and plenty. I had forgotten of course about my friend, when, a few years later, I ran into him again in the most unlikely place: a restaurant in the centre of the city, in the low, hallucinatory halo cast by a cluster of chandeliers studded with rainbow flashing prisms. I was speaking quietly with my wife while my gaze roamed through the room, when suddenly my attention was drawn to a group of businessmen who occupied an ostentatiously stacked table. There he sat, in their midst, the centre of attention, in his gaunt lankiness, brilliantly outfitted but still displaying the vagabond appearance, his dim hollow eyes. He lounged insouciantly on a chair, while the others prattled on in a sort of uncouth mirth. I have always been repulsed by the burnished cheeks and the ill-bred undertaker garb men of that ilk affect to distinguish themselves. But I was above all perplexed by the unexpected transfiguration of my friend's material situation. I have no idea if he was happy to see me, he was impenetrable, but he invited us to join them, and, as the evening wore on, among the many banalities and stupidities which threaded our conversation, a few imprecise allusions filtered in, enigmatic phrases the businessmen flung over the baroque abundance stacking the table and to which I had no clue how to react. For the following several weeks I sensed the terror of beginning to discern, albeit subconsciously, some vistas which disappeared towards a space other than the bourgeois world which, after all, we inhabited, even if softly hued by art's posturing. More, I had on numerous occasions, on the street or in my office, the feeling that I was being watched, scrutinized by something indefinite, circumstantial, which floated and dissolved like twilight smoke in the air. Now I know for certain that I was indeed subjected to close scrutiny, because I had been chosen to begin my apprenticeship in the subterranean world of the roulette.

At times I am filled with happiness at the thought that God could not exist. What years ago seemed a bloody paradise (my life of that period flashes before me in a greenish foreshortening resembling Mantegna's Christ) appears to me now as an inferno euphemized by forgetting but no less probable and, thus, horrifying. They told me,

in order to encourage me the first time I went underground, that only the first game is difficult to endure, that afterwards the roulette's anatomical side not only ceases to disgust, but you end up discovering in it the veritable, sweet charm of this game; for him whose blood comes to be infiltrated by it, they went on, it becomes a necessity, like women, like wine. That first night they blindfolded and took me from one vehicle to another over the city streets until I was no longer able to tell who I was any more, let alone where I was. Then they dragged me along some twisted and tortuous corridors and we walked down a few steps that reeked of wet stones and cat carcasses. You could hear overhead the occasional rumble of a tram. They removed the rag from my eyes: I was in a basement lit feebly by a few candles, where under the arched vault a few sardine barrels were arranged to resemble tables while small crates and thick cylinders cut from tree trunks served as chairs. It all looked like a wine cellar ostentatiously contrived to look rustic. This impression was enhanced by the metal cups and beer glasses from which some ten or fifteen jolly and well-dressed individuals were sipping their drinks, huddled around the barrels and talking among themselves. I noticed they were eyeing me.

Large cockroaches flitted across the clay floor. Some, half crushed by the kick of a heel, still stirred a claw or an antenna. I sat at a table next to my red-headed friend. The bets were already concluded and inscribed with chalk on a small blackboard, so I assumed that for now I would be only a spectator. The sums were large, larger than I had ever seen being staked on a game of chance. Suddenly the animation of the 'stockholders' – as I was to find out was the name given to those who bet on this game – abated, while the beverages, forgotten in the cups and glasses, slowly filled the brownish air with a sour smell of pure alcohol and stale beer. The gazes of the basement denizens fell, one by one, upon the tiny door. It opened after a while and a man stepped in, resembling closely my childhood friend during his period of maximum decline. The pockets of his jacket were torn, his trousers were held up by string. Not much to say about his face, except that it was the face of a drunk. He was shoved in by his 'boss' – that was the name given

to those who employed the roulette players – who had the aspect of a bartender and carried under his armpit a greasy wooden box. The drunk stepped up on top of a pine crate that I had not spotted until then and stood there with his slouching shoulders, in the attitude of a grotesquely sketched Olympic winner. The stockholders stared and fidgeted, pointing to some aspect or another of the man on the crate. I caught one of them off-guard, crossing himself secretly. Another chewed furiously at the skin around his fingernails. Yet another shouted something at the skin around his fingernails. Yet another shouted something at the boss. But, as though severed by a sword, the clamour ended when the boss opened the small box. Hypnotized, they all craned their necks towards the little black object that sparkled as though studded with diamonds. It was a revolver, a well-greased six-shooter. The boss presented it to the crowd with slow, nearly ritualistic gestures, like an illusionist who displays the empty hands with which he is about to accomplish his wonders. He then passed his palm over the revolver's chamber and twirled it; it emitted a thin, clogged whine like the cackle of a gnome. He put the revolver down and from a little cardboard box took out a bullet, shiny in its brass shell, which he handed out to the nearest stockholder. The stockholder checked it carefully, focused his attention on each of its surfaces, approved it with a short nod of the head, as though dissatisfied at not finding something out of order; then he passed it to the one sitting next to him. The bullet made the rounds of the room, leaving grease tracks on everyone's fingers. I also touched it for an instant. I had expected, I don't know why, that it would be cold as ice or that it would burn, but it was lukewarm. The bullet returned to the boss, who with large and explicit gestures inserted it into one of the six openings of the barrel. Then he passed his palm again over the mobile piece of metal, which spun for a few long seconds, emitting the same sharp and squeaky whine. Finally, with an odd sort of reverence, he handed the glimmering weapon to the man standing on the crate. In a silence that turned your bones to dust, and in which you could hear – I recall now – the rustle of the cockroaches and the feeble hush of their antennae as they brushed past each other, the man

lifted the pistol to his temple. Because of the horrifying tension and the weak light, my eyes began to tire, so that suddenly the beggar's silhouette dissolved into yellow and greenish phosphorescent stains. The rough plaster of the white wall behind him stood out in bold relief: I could see every dent, each grain of plaster thickened like the skin on the face of an old man, leaving bluish tracks on the wall. All at once the basement began to reek of musk and sweat. The man on the crate, eyes tightened and mouth twisted as though tasting something awful, pulled the trigger violently.

Then he smiled, naive and befuddled. The tiny click of the trigger was the only sound that was heard. Overwhelmed, he stepped down and sat on the crate. The boss rushed to him and nearly crushed him with his embrace. On the other hand, the individuals in the room began to howl like madmen, to curse bitterly. When the boss and his roulette player exited through the undersized door, they ushered them out with savage boos and catcalls, as you would only hear at a boxing match.

By chance, the first roulette player I ever saw escaped with his life. Since then, for many years in a row, I attended hundreds of roulettes, and I saw numerous times an image that cannot be described: the human brain, the only veritably divine substance, the alchemical gold which contains everything, scattered on the walls and on the floor and mixed up with splinters of the skull. Think about bullfighting or gladiators, and you will understand why this game soon infused my blood and changed my life. Roulette has in principle the geometrical simplicity and force of the spider web: a roulette player, a boss and a number of stockholders are the chief dramatis personae. In secondary roles, you have the basement's owner, the cop who makes the rounds of the neighbourhood, the common porters hired to dispose of the corpses. The relatively insignificant sums that the roulette provided them with were, from their point of view, veritable fortunes. The roulette player was most certainly the roulette's star and its reason for being. As a rule, the roulette players were recruited from the great throngs of unfortunates resembling vagabond dogs, the drunks and jailbirds fresh out on the street, ever in search of bread. Anyone, as long as he was alive and willing to place his soul on