

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 Agarthā, 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

the battleground for much, much money (but what did money mean under those conditions?) could become a roulette player. It was also preferable that he was, as much as possible, without social relations: job, family, close friends. The roulette player had five chances in six to survive. He usually received about ten per cent of what the boss earned. The boss must be in possession of serious funds, because, if his roulette player died, he had to pay all the stakes the stockholders wagered against him. The stockholders in their turn had one chance in six to win, but, if the roulette player died, they could demand stakes ten times over, or even twenty times, according to prior agreement with the boss. The roulette player, however, did not have five chances out of six to live except the first time he played. Statistically speaking, if he placed the pistol once more against his temple, his chances diminished. At his sixth attempt, his chances dwindled to zero. In fact, until my friend entered the world of the roulette, becoming the Roulette Player in capitals, there were no known cases of survival after even four games. Of course, most of the roulette players played occasionally and would not repeat for anything in the world their dreadful experience. Only a few were attracted by the possibility of making money, and this usually in order to employ a roulette player themselves – and thus becoming bosses – which was actually possible after the second game.

There is no reason to continue here with further description of the game. It is, in truth, stupid and alluring like any game hallowed by the stain of blood, so pleasing to our despicable nature. I return to the one who destroyed the game by force of the fact that he played it to perfection. From what legend tells (which you could hear at the time in all of the city's taverns), he was not recruited by any boss but found out single-handedly about the roulette and sold himself. I suspect the boss who hired him was delighted to get a roulette player without any trouble, because long and exasperating transactions were usually necessary, agonizing bargains with those who assigned their souls to the auction block. At the start, any vagabond would demand the moon in the sky, and you needed consummate skill to convince him that his life and his blood were not worth the entire universe, but that, instead, they were worth a

certain number of paper bills, and that number depended on the demand of the market. A roulette player to whom you didn't need to demonstrate that he was in fact a nobody, whom you didn't need to threaten with the police, was unexpected luck, all the more so when he accepted without discussion the first offer, proposed out of the corner of your mouth and with eyes askance in the usual manner of the bosses. About the first few roulette games that my friend participated in, I couldn't find out very much. I can't imagine that he was noticed by the stockholders the first and the second time he survived, or even the third. At most, he was thought of as a lucky player. After his fourth, his fifth, he had already become the central figure of the game, a veritable myth that would in fact burgeon exorbitantly in the years that followed. During a period of two years, until our encounter in the restaurant, the Roulette Player lifted the pistol to his temple eight times in various cellars throughout the filthy labyrinths underneath the foundations of our city. Each time, I was told – and later saw it for myself – on his tormented face almost without a forehead, an overwhelming terror etched itself, an animal fear that you couldn't bear to witness. It seemed as though this very fear cajoled fate and helped him escape. His emotional tension reached a peak when, tightening his eyelids and smirking, he abruptly pulled the trigger. You heard the slight click, after which his frame with its heavy bones crashed softly to the floor: he lost consciousness but was unharmed. For several days he was out cold in his bed, completely emptied of vitality, but then he quickly recovered and took up again the life he usually lived, between the cabaret and the brothel. As hard as he tried – being possessed of a limited imagination – he could not spend as much as he earned and ended up increasingly wealthier. He had long relinquished having a boss; he became his own boss. Why he continued risking his life was an enigma. You could only come up with one explanation, that he did it for a kind of glory, like an athlete who attempts to surpass himself in each race. If that in fact was the truth, it was something entirely new in the world of the roulette, which was always played exclusively for money. Who would get it into his head to become a world champion at surviving? The fact

was that the Roulette Player managed to maintain for the time the demented tempo of that race which he ran against only one other competitor: death. And, just when it seemed that this clandestine cavalcade was about to tumble into monotony (those who went to witness my friend's roulettes did it only out of the desire to see him gone once and for all and not in order to bet, because they had developed the increasingly resigned feeling they were betting against the devil), the Roulette Player perpetrated his first gesture of defiance which practically liquidated the roulette, pulverizing any possibility of competition besides the one between him and everything that surpasses our unfortunate condition. In the winter of that year he announced, through the ineffable, speedy and certain network of information of the world of the roulette, that he would organize a special roulette on Christmas night: the revolver's chamber would be loaded with two bullets instead of one.

The chances of survival were now only three to one, if you didn't consider their progressive reduction after so many games. Many connoisseurs, even after the Roulette Player's death, regarded that Christmas roulette as his stroke of genius, and that everything that followed, though more spectacular, was merely a consequence of that gesture. The subterranean room belonged to a cognac factory and preserved the chemical reek of poor quality alcohol. Though it was larger than other rooms I had been in, that night it was packed. Anywhere you looked, you stared at the faces of well-known figures, officers and painters, industrialists and society women, even a few bearded priests, all of them animated by the unexpected innovation brought to the rules of the roulette. The blackboard on which two young men in shirt-sleeves wrote the odds of the betting occupied the entire wall behind the crate upon which the Roulette Player would take his place. In time he made his appearance, barely discernible through the blue smoke of the cellar. He stepped up on the crate and, after the ceremonial of the detailed verification of weapon and bullet – which lasted longer than usual, as the members of the crowd couldn't refuse themselves the pleasure of caressing, almost voluptuously, the gun's barrel – he picked up the pistol, loaded it, shoving the two bullets at random into the openings of the chamber, which he

then twirled by rolling his palm over it. The tiny clogged cackle was heard again in the silence of the room, but as always the silence was not disturbed by an explosion, and no flower of blood stained the wall's plaster. The Roulette Player collapsed from the crate into the arms of those in the first rows, knocking over glasses and propelling rolls of coins over the improvised tables. I wept like a child, from relief and from despair: I had bet a sum which for me was gigantic, and lost, just like all those who had taken an obstinate stance despite the evidence that the Roulette Player's chance of winning was enormous. We left the tortuous lair, as always, in small groups; the night outside, the silence of the outskirts made us feel as we walked that we were the object of a gaze that had dissolved the entire surroundings in the layer of blinding, fluorescent snow that had fallen over everything, over the display windows adorned with Christmas trees and stars of silver paper, over the rare passers-by loaded with packages and bundled-up children, with scarfs shrouding their mouth and nose. Here and there a woman with cheeks glowing from the humid cold, wrapped in a fur coat, dragged her lover or husband in front of the boots or shawls in the shop windows casting violet and turquoise and azure shadows upon their faces. My walk home took me alongside the children's playground, where a horde of bewildered urchins smeared with candy paused before the tiny stands selling lemonade and gingerbread. A father huddled in bulky clothes, dragging after him on the thin ice a sled mounted by his little girl, winked at me. He was one of the bosses I had encountered at another roulette. Suddenly I felt horrible.

Certainly, I promised myself many times to break with the world of the roulette. But during that time I published around two or three books a year; I had the sort of success that preceded a long silence followed by forgetfulness. With each new book I recovered my roulette losses and then I would dive into it again, under the earth, where a foreboding of flesh and bones lures us while we are still alive. The one thing I wonder a great deal about now is the 'idealistic' and 'delicate' content of those books, the nauseating D'Annunzianism I indulged in. Noble reflections, royal gestures, silk lace, scintillating *mots d'esprit* and a narrator who is wise and

all-knowing, who spun out of the substance without substance of his stories thousands of dainty charms. Once again lured into the roulette's conspiracy, it was impossible not to be instantly struck, as though by a wave that becomes progressively hotter and more turbulent, by the news about the new rules of the game tacitly imposed by the overwhelming personality of the Roulette Player. After repeating two more times the double-bullet roulette, he found himself so wealthy, so engaged in owning stock in so many branches of the country's big businesses, that the roulette, as a lowlife affair, as a source of existence or wealth, became an absurd idea. On the other hand, his odds tended to decline, despite the fanatics who ruined themselves by obstinately playing against him. At a single sign from the Roulette Player, the whole system of bets crumbled. It was now considered in bad taste to organize the roulettes where some miserable vagabond would place the pistol to his temple. There were no more bosses and no more stockholders, and the only one who still organized the roulettes was the Roulette Player. But everything became a spectacle involving tickets rather than bets, a show with only one performer who, from time to time, like a gladiator in the arena, confronted his destiny. The rented halls became progressively more spacious. The tradition of the underground hole was abandoned, along with the reek of blood and manure, the Rembrandtian penumbras. Now the subterranean rooms were decorated with heavy silks with a watery sheen, crystal goblets on the tables that were buried in waves of Dutch lace, furniture decorated with floral intarsia and candelabra with hundreds of prisms and quartz icicles. Instead of ordinary beer, sophisticated drinks were served in bottles contorted into odd shapes. Women in evening gowns were escorted to the tables, from where they inquisitively surveyed the stage on which an orchestra now played, bursting out in every direction with golden funnels of trumpets, curved necks of saxophones, graceful cylinders, in constant motion, of trombones. I suppose that was how the room looked when the Roulette Player loaded the revolver with three bullets. He had now as many possibilities to survive as to play this demented game for the last time. This new ambience, the ostentatious luxury that mantled the roulette's terrifying insect like

a chrysalis, did nothing if not inflame the spectators' fervour for the smell of death. Everything that follows is very much the truth. The Roulette Player doused his hair with brilliantine and wore a smock with the loose trousers fashionable at the time, but the revolver was real, and so were the bullets, and the probability of the expected 'accident' – greater than ever. The weapon circulated through everybody's hands, leaving on one's fingers a subtle odour of oil. Not even the most delicate lady in the room concealed her eyes, in whose violet sparkle you could read the perverse craving to witness what many only heard about the roulette: the cranium cracking like an eggshell and the ambiguous liquid substance of the brain gushing on the gown's lap. As for me, I have always been shaken by the craving of women to be near death, their fascination with men who, almost metaphysically, smell of gunpowder. The incredible success with women of a chimpanzee, haggard and stupid, who from time to time gambles with his own life, must have its roots in this. At no other time, I believe, did they love with such zest, those women who after witnessing a man's death went home with their lovers, shedding their bloodied dresses, stained like bandages by the ashen substance and the ocular liquid. But the Roulette Player stepped up on the crate, adorned now with red brocade, lifted the pistol to his temple and, with the same expression of convulsive fright on his face, jerked the trigger. Then, in the silence that suspended everything for the space of a few seconds, all you heard was the thud of his frame hitting the floor. After a few days' delirium at the hospital, the Roulette Player resumed his usual life. It's difficult for me to forget his tortured aspect, sprawled on the Bukhara rug at the foot of the crate with his eyes staring upwards. Other times the roulette players who survived were booed and hooted by the forlorn stockholders; but, now, my friend was cheered like a movie star and his body, plunged into unconsciousness, was surrounded with veneration. Young women, hysterically weeping, swarmed towards him and were happy merely to touch him.

The roulette with three greased bullets inside the chamber fuses in my mind with the events that followed. It was as though the diabolical arrogance of the Roulette Player propelled him ever

more to offend Chance's divinities. Soon, he announced a roulette with *four* bullets thrust into the chamber's alveoli, and then, with *five*. One single empty opening out of six, one single chance of survival out of six! This game ceased being a game and even the most superficial among those who occupied the velvet armchairs felt – not with their brains, but with their bones and cartilage and nerves – the theological grandeur that the roulette had achieved. After the Roulette Player loaded his weapon and twirled the chamber, unleashing again the tiny staccato cackle of well-oiled black metal, the hexagonal cylinder, heavy with bullets paused – with its single empty space – in front of the hammer. The click of the trigger, which sounded with a hollow echo, and the collapse of the Roulette Player were surrounded by a sacred silence.

I sit at my writing table with the blanket thrown over me, and yet I am horribly cold. While I wrote these lines, my room, my tomb, has whirled so quickly through the black fog outside that I got sick. I twisted and turned in my bed all night long, a helpless sack of bones steamed by sweat. Outside nothing exists any more, or will evermore. No matter how long you might journey, in whatever direction, all the way to the infinite, all you would find is the black fog, dense and solid as pitch. The Roulette Player is the stake I wager on and the kernel of dough around which the fluffy bread of the world might grow. Otherwise everything, whether it exists or not, is as flat as a biscuit. If he existed, and he did exist – that is my wager – then the world exists, and I will be no longer forced to shut my eyes; with shrivelled skin on my bones, with my flesh as my sheath like a fur of blood, I will march forth for as long as eternity lasts. From this story let me fashion myself an aquarium, the most miserable of aquariums – because I have no interest in a fancy aquarium – where he and I, guarantors of each other's reality, will attempt to survive, like a couple of semi-transparent fish whose heartbeat is on view, dragging along after them a thin strand of excrement. I am horrified at the thought that the aquarium might get punctured. For God's sake, let me keep trying, though I no longer feel my spine . . .

For years on end the Roulette Player had the Angel by the lapels, trying his best to throw him and shaking him all over. The evening came, however, when he grabbed him by the throat and, gathering all his strength, stared him deeply in the eye. And the Lord, towards morning, crippled the Roulette Player and changed his name . . . During that last evening, practically the entire upper crust of the city congregated in the huge refrigerated hall beneath the abattoir. The hall's décor may have appeared entirely odd to those accustomed to the parvenu's ostentatious luxury of previous halls. I can't tell whether it was someone's imagination or a reminiscence from Huysmans' *À rebours* that inspired the nostalgic hybrid – a somewhat perverse admixture of promiscuity and refinement – whose effect was far more powerful than the pomp from the previous roulettes. At first sight – with the exception of the sheer size of the hall – you had the impression that you were inside one of the old cellars from the 'prehistoric' period of the roulette. The walls were filled with obscene scribbles and inscriptions rudely scratched or traced with charcoal, but an eye with the merest of training could not help but notice right away the aesthetic refinement, the coherent and emotionally stirring manner of a great artist whose name, for obvious reasons, I prefer not to remember. The tables made of precious wood essences and golden mouldings simulated the sardine barrels of the bygone era. Crystal mugs imitated the gross aspect of those made from cheap glass, down to the greenish nuance and the artificial blemishes. Gloomy filters scattered a morbid tallow flame light, admixed with waves of bluish smoke, like the cheap stogies of old, except that now they were perfumed with musk in order to awaken a delicately nostalgic feeling. On the stage, at the front of the hall, brought in from the harbour, rested an actual orange crate inscribed with Arabic script. Inside the hall, lured by that evening's fantastic stakes, you could recognize diverse petroleum magnates in their white burnouses, movie stars and singers in current vogue, industrialists with starched shirt fronts and carnations inside their lapel buttonholes. Everyone agreed at the entrance to have a silk scarf tied around their eyes, not to be removed until they were already in the hall. I myself was a sort of star – I say this with plenty

of disgust, in order not to be suspected of a lack of modesty – who attracted the stares of even the most blasé among them, even those who were sitting next to me. Never before were my books – which had grown progressively thicker and in keeping with their taste – so highly publicized: noble, yes; first and foremost, noble. Generous, first and foremost, generous. Thus sounded the commendation of the jury when I received the National Prize: ‘For the noble and generous humanity of his books, for the complete mastery of an expressive language.’

When the Roulette Player made his appearance in the room, bedecked in bizarre strips of cloth that tastefully simulated rags, and when the master of ceremonies, disguised as a boss, opened the box which he had brought under his arm offering the public a superb ivory-handled Winchester with a shimmering barrel (at present in a private collection), everyone and I stopped breathing. We refused to believe that what was to follow could actually take place: the Roulette Player had announced a few weeks earlier that at the next roulette he would load the revolver *with all six bullets!* Between the progression – no matter how improbable – from one bullet to five and thence to the present insanity, there was a chasm spanning the distance from one single chance to no chance at all. The last drop of the *human* which the Roulette Player had still preserved in his attempts had evaporated now under certitude’s million suns. The verification of the bullets and the weapon lasted hours on end. When they were returned to him, the Roulette Player took his place on the crate, made them clatter in his fist like dice, then inserted them, one by one, into the six openings of the chamber. With a violent jerk of his palm, he put them in motion. ‘Useless,’ I remember someone whispering next to me. In the terrifying silence, the tiny clogged cackle of the chamber could be heard clearly. Shaking, his face convulsing, his eyes betraying a terror that you could only witness in those in agony, he lifted the pistol to the temple. The crowd stood up.

I strained so hard to scrutinize him that I could feel the bulging of the veins in my temples. I could see the pistol’s hammer lifting slowly, appearing to vibrate. And abruptly, as though this vibration

propagated itself into the room, I felt the ground run from under my feet. I saw the Roulette Player crumbling from the crate and the revolver discharging with an apocalyptic blast. But the air was already filled with a deafening clamour, split by the screams of the women and the clanging of the capsizing bottles, now in splinters. Overtaken by the panic of the constricted space, we stepped on each other in order to scramble out. The tremors lasted a few good minutes, transforming entire streets into piles of debris and twisted metal. In front of the exit, a derailed tram crashed into a furniture store and smashed the windows to smithereens. After an hour, the earthquake started again, less forceful now. Who had the courage to venture into their own homes that night? I walked the streets until the morning's fog whitened the horizon and the dust of the shattered buildings settled on the sidewalks. It wasn't till then that I remembered the Roulette Player had probably been abandoned there, in the subterranean hall, and I went back to see if he was still living. I found him stretched on the floor, tended to by a few individuals. One of his legs was dislocated at the hip, and he gasped from pain. Next to him lay the revolver, reeking of gunpowder, with only five bullets in the chamber. The sixth left a blackish hole in one of the room's walls, near the ceiling. I stopped a car on the street and took my childhood friend to the hospital. He recovered quickly, but limped for the rest of the year that he still lived. That evening, he buried the roulette, soon obliterated from everyone's mind, the way we usually forget anything that we bring to perfection. The younger generations after the war never even suspected that such Mysteries ever existed. I alone bear witness – but for you, no one; but for you, nothing.

From the evening of the earthquake on, the Roulette Player absconded to his dubious quarters, leaving behind him, as usual, a series of barely hushed-up scandals. It seems he never thought about the roulette again.

I can't write even one page a day. Constant pain in the legs and vertebrae. Pain in the fingers, in the ears, along the skin on my face. What will be, what will be after death? I would like to believe – how I would! – that a new life will open up there, that our present state

is larval, a period of waiting. That the ego, the I, as long as it exists, must find a means to assure its own permanence. That I will embark upon something more infinite, more complex. Otherwise everything is absurd, and I see no place for the absurd in the world's design. The billions of galaxies, the imperceptible fields and finally this world which surrounds my cranium like an aura could not exist if I were unable to know it in its entirety, possess it, be it. Last night, cradled under my blankets, I had a kind of vision. I had just been born from an elongated and bloody belly, unutterably obscene, that propelled me with an odd twirling motion, with infinite speed, leaving behind me tracks of tears, lymph and blood. I twisted myself like a screw into the night. And suddenly, out of night's edge, appeared before me a gigantic God of light, so large that my senses and understanding could not contain him. I was headed towards his enormous chest, while the traces of his severe face were shooting upwards, flattening out at the edge of my field of vision. Soon I couldn't see anything but the great yellow light of his chest, which I pierced in my twisting, and, after an endless navigation through his flesh of fire, I gushed out through the spine. Gazing behind me as I flew away, I saw this colossal Jehovah plummeting to the left with his face downwards. Little by little, he diminished in size and disappeared, once again I was alone in the limitless night. After a period impossible to appraise (but which I would name eternity), at the edge of my sight arose another enormous God, identical to the first. I pierced him as well and gushed forth into the void. Then, after a new eternity, another one appeared. The row of Gods, perused from behind, proliferated in size. There were hundreds, then thousands, plummeting with face downwards to the right and to the left like the teeth of a gigantic zipper of flames. And opening the zipper in my flight, I unveiled the chest of the true God, which I beheld in foreshortening, more grandiose than anything in the world. Twirling and incinerated by his light, I hoisted myself to such a height above him that I could view him in his entirety. How beautiful he was! With hairy chest, like a bull, he displayed a woman's bosom. His face was youthful, crowned by the flame of his locks braided in thousands of tresses; his hips wide,

sheltering his powerful virile organ. In his entirety, from his brow to his soles, he was made only of light. His eyes were half-open, his smile was at once ecstatic and melancholy, while directly over his heart, underneath the left breast, he exposed a horrible wound. Between the fingers of his right hand he held, in an unbearably graceful manner, a red rose. Thus he floated, reclining in the space that strove to contain him, but which appeared soaked through, contained by him . . . I woke up amidst the cold furniture of my room, a senile man weeping dry tears. I wanted to throw away these senseless pages collected here. But what can a man who wrote literature all his life do? How can he escape the arcana of style? How, with what instruments, can you cloak the page with a pure confession, freed from the prison cell of artistic convention? Let me collect myself and have the courage to admit it: you can't. I've known this from the beginning but, in my cornered animal cunning, I concealed my game, my stake, my bet from your gaze. Because, finally, I staked my life on literature. I used, in my masochistic, Pascalian reasoning, everything that seemed to stand against me. This is my reasoning, everything that causes me to take this 'story' (only I know by what effort) to the end: *I knew the Roulette Player*. Of this I cannot have doubts. In spite of the fact that it was impossible for him to exist, still, he existed. But there is a place in the world where the impossible is possible, namely in fiction, that is, literature. There the laws of statistics can be broken, there you can have a man more powerful than the laws of chance. The Roulette Player couldn't exist in the world, which is a way of saying that the world in which he existed is fictional, is literature. I have no doubt the Roulette Player is a character. But then I, too, am a character, and so I can't stop myself from bursting with joy. Because characters never die, they live each time their world is 'read.' If he never kisses his beloved, the shepherd painted on the Grecian urn knows at least that he will forever gaze at her. Thus, my wager and my hope. I hope from the bottom of my heart and I have a forceful argument: that the Roulette Player did exist, that I am a character from a tale and that, although I am eighty years old, I will never die, because in fact I never lived. Maybe I do not live in

a worthwhile tale, perhaps I am only a secondary character, but for someone at the end of his life any perspective is preferable to that of disappearing forever.

There were hundreds of speculations regarding the fantastic luck of the Roulette Player. What can I do except add one more, if not more real, at least more coherent than the majority of the others? Being familiar with the Roulette Player since childhood, I know that, in fact, what always distinguished him was not good luck, but, on the contrary, bad luck, of the darkest, I would say supernatural, bad luck. Never once did he experience the joy of winning even the most childish game where chance played a role. From the game of marbles to horse races, from throwing horseshoes to poker, it seemed that destiny used him as a clown, always peered at him with an ironic eye. The roulette was his great chance, and it's bewildering how this man, so rudimentary in his thought, found the cunning to capitalize on the only point to pierce, like a scorpion, fate's armour and to transform everlasting ridicule into eternal triumph. How? It seems to me simple now, primitive, but at the same time brilliantly simple: *the Roulette Player staked his bet against himself*. When he lifted the pistol to his temple, he divided himself. His will turned against him and condemned him to death. Each time, he was convinced with his whole being that he would die. From that, the expression of endless horror which appeared on his face. However, his bad luck being absolute, he could only fail each time in his intention to commit suicide. Maybe this explanation is foolish, but as I said, I can't see another that has a chance to stand on its own. In fact, none of this matters any more now . . .

I am tired. I make the effort of a lifetime to write a single page. It will be the last, because the dice are cast and the aquarium is finished. Let me plug up the last leaking crack – and then I will rest next to it, silent and motionless. Only the tresses and veils of swimmers will pulsate from time to time. I await that moment with such voluptuousness that I can barely wait to finish the tale of the Roulette Player. His end came quickly, soon after the six-bullet roulette

which he monstrosly survived. Less than a year later, returning from gambling one milky morning, he was abruptly dragged into an alleyway off the abandoned path he took home. An adolescent, less than seventeen years old, put a pistol to his temple and demanded his money. He was found a few hours later, dead, with the pistol next to him, from which the unfortunate punk didn't wipe his fingerprints. The corpse had no trace of a bullet wound, and medical expertise concluded that death was caused by a heart attack. In fact, inside the revolver, which never went off, there were no bullets. The young man was found the same day, hiding at some friends' house, and everything became clear. His intention was merely to rob. The pistol was empty, and he used it only to intimidate. But the drunk he attacked was overwhelmed by a terrible fear and collapsed to the ground, while the young man lost his head, threw away the revolver, and ran. Because he had no relatives and no one seemed to know him (I myself hid for a few days, till the whole thing blew over), the Roulette Player was buried in a hurry, with a simple cross made of boards stuck on his grave.

This is how I, too, close my cross and coffin of words, under which, like Lazarus, I will await my return to life when I hear your powerful and clear voice, reader. I close – in order that the tombstone should have an epitaph, in order to complete the circle – with Eliot's verses, which I love so dearly:

Grant Israel's consolation

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

