

PROLOGUE

VOICES IN THE SKY

Hosannah! Hosannah!

GABRIEL

Silence! The Lord is going to speak.

THE ETERNAL FATHER

Listen, Saint Michael, Thomas, Bonaventure, great Saint Hubert who was archbishop at Liège, and you, Pythagoras, Joseph the Just and Marcus Tullius.¹ For a thousand years and more your ordeals have been complete and your souls have risen from limbo to the highest seats in paradise, as the dew of the marsh reeds once did, when the sun brought it to my feet. You know that time is complete, after three thousand five hundred years, and the last judgment will soon take place in Jehosophat.

Look! In the depths of the skies, the earth is still trembling; bewildered, it rolls through space, no longer knowing where it is going. Consider whether a leaf fallen from a birch tree in the Ardennes, on the feast of the dead, has ever blown over more mountains and more paths, traveling without knowing where before being engulfed in my well of wrath. You remember. When the hawk of Germany or Judea rose up from the heather, in the early morning, every bird in the fields and every bird in the towns went to hide its head under a twig and suppressed its voice. Consider whether all the worlds that powder the abyss would not like to cower beneath a wisp of thatch, beneath the grass of a spring or the cloak of a man, while I deploy my extended wings over their hiding-places in an eternal circle.

The silence is profound. Do you hear, from the heights of the Empyrean, that sun which is humming so far away that the news has not yet reached it, and the Hosannah of the Cherubim that falls from one world to the other, more monotonous than raindrops into the lake of a grotto? That's enough rest. Another hundred years would be too many. If the World is weary of its first day, by touching it with a wing, my angel Gabriel, you shall reawaken the worker in my vineyard. I have said to you: the earth is bad, I shall create another tomorrow.

This time, I will make humankind from a better clay, and knead it better. The trees will have more shade, the mountains will be higher. Neither your cope, Saint Hubert, nor your lance, nor your azured shield, nor your diamond-studded miter will shine as brightly as tomorrow's light on a golden sea. The days will be longer, and your experience will save that world more effectively from all temptation than the Cherubim and Seraphim were able to do of old, in emerging candidly from the cradle of nothingness.

But whatever the state will be into which the world that is about to be born shall eventually fall, in order to prepare yourself better to hold it in your charge, I want the good, the bad and all the deeds and destinies accomplished in the world where you have lived to be retraced now, in eternal figures. I want the secrets that I hid, with my hand, in the hollows of rocks and the shimmering sky of lakes to be revealed. I want you to be shown the earth since it escaped my hand like the grain of the sower to produce its tares, until the day when I reaped them, all dry and withered, in the valley of Jehosophat.

The adulterous woman that I stoned on the edge of the road the day before yesterday, you shall see in veils, beneath the girdle of seas, valleys and forests that she untied on the evening of her eternal night. You shall see by what long sunlit days and arid nights the cup from which my name and my life overflowed gradually emptied, only retaining the lees and the universe in its depths.

SAINT BONAVENTURE

Lord, when a swallow is about to depart for Africa or Asia, its little ones are already fluttering their wings in advance over the roofs of Florence the beautiful. Thus we make haste, divine swallows, to follow you forever into the future worlds that are dormant within you, which you will create. Will

¹ The inclusion of Pythagoras and Marcus Tullius (Cicero) with the saints serves to emphasize the eclectic quality of the heavenly company that the Eternal Father likes to keep while preparing for his post-apocalyptic new world, whose planning and population are more elaborately described in the account of "The Fourth Day."

this world, Lord, be another world of Calabria, with monasteries and diamond cells? Will there be cypresses with a sea asleep beneath their ivory foliage, boats on the bottomless waves with sails of light, and brothers with their aureoles sitting among hives and golden bees?

SAINT HUBERT

Will there not, Lord, be massive gold cathedrals, thick vaults in stone, stained glass windows made from a flap of your robe? Will there not be, in the surroundings, silver birches and ash-trees, and marble balconies overlooking a river six times as wide as the Rhine in Cologne?

SAINT BERTHE²

Will there not, Lord, be children fast asleep, whom you will rock endlessly in your arms above the clouds? Will there not be souls in ivory cities, in which the tears of a rose will live for a hundred years?

THE ETERNAL FATHER

I have already told you that before creating another star, I want to make known and explain to you the mystery of the world whence you have come. You have lived there without knowing what it is. Some have seen it in the Holy Land, others in Brabant, some for ten years, others a hundred; but not one of you has held the fruit fallen from my branch in your hand to seek the gnawing worm; not one has lifted the seal of the seas and the ruined cities and the tombs of peoples that I always heap up to hide my treasures; not one has bent down to see the seed of my new crops verdant in the abyss, beneath the cloud of the earth.

SAINT HUBERT

Lord, I traveled in Europe and Africa a long time ago, where I've seen orange-trees higher than great oaks; around monasteries, waves bluer than your only son's tunic; on the road to Jericho, spangles and silver sands; on the trees of the desert, gum and the incense of the mage-kings; and in the roses of Joppa, crystal tears. Is it possible, divine Creator, that beneath those myrtle woods, those transparent rivers and streams, you had put more marvels and magical treasures than any man has seen or touched?

THE ETERNAL FATHER

It's a long story, which oppresses me. My Seraphim will celebrate the terrible mystery before you; everything will have its place therein; every time, every century that I shook, one after the other from the folds of my cloak, will be explained by them in its own language. Mountains and plains will open like flowers; find a voice to speak the secret that that you have kept so well in the depths of your calices. Dead and newborn children, repeat here, in their mothers' bosoms, your dormant thoughts, your embalmed dreams. Earth, open up to display your genius. The choir of angels will repeat your words with to the sounds of trumpets. Let the stars shine like a night-lamp full of oil. Come, troop of the elect, like mown grass, to pile up around me; lean over without fear from your every cloud, look into the abyss and be attentive; the spectacle will last approximately six thousand years.

² The reference is probably to Berthe d'Avenay rather than Berthe de Blangy or Berthe de Bingen, but it make little or no difference. I have not Anglicized the name because "Saint Bertha" is often used to refer to the Kentish Saint Aldeberge, who is surely not the person intended.

THE FIRST DAY OF CREATION

I.

THE OCEAN

Thank you Lord, enough accumulated waves; your urn is full, it is overflowing drop by drop as it emerges from the spring. The trough is full; when will the herds come to drink? Your breath is exhausting me; you are whipping my flanks and tearing my rump; I cannot run any faster, nor bound to lick the fleeing sky with my waves more often under the spur of your whip. I cannot span the abyss any better with my streaming feet, nor shake my mane of foam and further, nor roll my breast and my flanks any harder. Where are you going, Lord? For a long time I have been driving and heaping up my waves, without ever arriving; still I hear nothing but my waves whinnying; still I see nothing but myself in my immensity. Yesterday, when a nascent ray of moonlight chanced to skim the summits of my waves, that was a cause for celebration: I thought that your hand was caressing my breast and wanted to tie me down with a golden thread, or that a wing of flame was passing through my tangled mane; but as soon as it had touched me, the ray trickled like a spring and erupted in foam. Oh, if I ever found a shore, a world other than me, I would make myself a bed there of white foam, the dust of pearls, coral crystals, algal roots and red seashells; my waters would be suspended there, Lord, like the blade from your belt. All night long I would kiss the sand on my shores; my panting waves would swell up without a murmur; there is only you who could say: It is there that they sleep.

LEVIATHAN

launching waters over firm ground

Who has hurled me out of the gulf? Who has given me my polished scales, my gaping jaws, my tail the color of the vegetation of the strand? Water is crawling over the beach, islands are crouching in the mist, the abyss is opening its maw, the wind is mewling in the rocks, the waves are swelling into teats, the wavelets are jostling like a litter of crocodiles hanging on to their mother; the crests of mountains are shining like scales crunched between the teeth of Leviathan.

THE VINATEYNA BIRD³

Lower, Ocean, transparent sea, much lower; fold up your vast waters as I fold my wings when I want to stop; more, more! Let me see all the way to the depths of your bed how beautiful my golden feet, my golden beak and my twenty-cubit wingspan are; you, who know everything, tell me where I am this morning. Have I, then, curled my neck beneath my wing on the edge of chaos, or was I sleeping in my down on a silver rock? Tell me who has come to take me from my nest, who has set me on a cloud; since that time I have been flying, flying without rest; look, it is from my beak that the seeds of life are falling, one by one, that will make plants and forests; I let the water-lily fall into the valleys, the tamala on to the mud, the baobab into the plains, the vine-flower into the hollows in the rocks, the willow-flower at the edges of springs, the heather on mountain-tops. The leaves quiver, the reeds rattle, already the stars are flying like a flock of birds with golden wings setting out for distant lands.

THE SERPENT

Oh, if I had wings like you, before speaking, I would climb up to the highest cloud, I would find out what is around us; since it is necessary, it will be me who will rear up from the mire to see whether the universe has been born; behind the tree of the world, I shall climb around its trunk, knot myself around its branches. Look! My tail is touching the earth, my thousand heads are standing at its summit; above its foliage my tongues dart their venom at the four winds; who wants to pick those bloody flowers? But truly, I see nothing but mountains folding up their coils, nothing but rivers sliding

³ This was the name given to the giant bird that carries Vishnu, the god responsible for maintaining cosmic order, in the French translation of the Bhagavad-gita published in 1787. Most English translations refer to it as the Garuda bird, Garuda being Sanskrit for eagle.

like grass-snakes through the forests, nothing but the horse Séméhé⁴ racing without ever stopping under the claws of djinn; he is sweating blood, the wind is shaking his silver tail; in his breast two eyes are blazing; at every moment his color changes; he is pale he is black, he is as blue as the sky, bruised like the venom that falls from my mouth. Oh, it's a pity!

LEVIATHAN

Look toward the sea again.

THE SERPENT

There too I see nothing but the fish Macar,⁵ who has stolen his trunk from Behemoth; if I had fins bound to my coils, I would know what is growling in the depths of the sea before you had taken a single step.

LEVIATHAN

So, you see nothing that is greater than us; we are still the masters; creation has stopped at us. Oh, I shivered for a long time in the fear that the rocks, in rising above us, might vomit up a master with scales of stone, and that he would force me to go back into the abyss from which I have emerged. But you—you have seen nothing?

THE VINATEYNA BIRD

I have gone up as far as the highest branch of the world-tree; I have followed in its flight the most rapid of stars; I have descended into valleys to depths where the rain does not fall; I have found nothing anywhere but the morning lark, the djinn with black wings; the loriot that hangs two threads of silk from her nest and rocks her fledglings above the nascent world.

LEVIATHAN

And you, tell us what you have seen at the in the watery deeps.

THE MACAR FISH

With my trunk I have sounded the whirlpools of foam. To the utmost depths I have plunged into the gulf of the sea; there is nothing to be heard but the roaring water, nothing to be seen but the waves painting palaces of coral green.

LEVIATHAN

So we are alone. Neither here, nor there, nor on high, now down below, is there anyone but us. The mud has been formed so that I might leave my footprint at every step. The world has unfurled so that the serpent might envelop it with his coils. Now that the eternal vulture is carrying it away in its claws, fleeing with its prey at full tilt, everywhere, in all the heavens, we are the gods.

ALL

Yes, Leviathan, you have said it; we are the gods.

THE OCEAN

Search, continue searching. Life the branches of the forests; divide the waters of the springs more carefully. Dig deeper, ever deeper, into the mud. Who has rummaged in that marble crack? Who has shaken the fold of that cloud? It is there that he has hidden himself in order to listen to you. When you came, I was talking to him. Leviathan, there is a blade that rings truer than all your scales; bird with the golden beak, there are wings more capacious than yours; serpent with a thousand heads, there are bites more venomous than those of your mouth. Before the daylight, all through the night, he drives

⁴ The horse Séméhé is an invention of Quinet's; its addition to the legend of the Wandering Jew seems distinctly anomalous, and the logic of its inclusion is as obscure as the name's etymology.

⁵ The Macar fish is another derivative of Indian folklore.

my waves before him as the sea-lion drives his cubs. He woke me up when everything was asleep; he disappeared as soon as the sun began to shine.

ALL

Liar! A curse on your waves, greener than the venom of vipers. May the djinn dip their wings in our foam! May the Tchinevad Bridge⁶ collapse over your waters. Let us mingle together all our cries: the rubbing of scales, the flapping of wings, the sliding of coils. Let the talon be sharpened on the trunk, the beak on the branch, the ivory on the granite; let the hoof resonate on the sand, the fin on the waves, the tail around the flanks. Murmurs of leaves and savannahs, burning nostrils, bounding manes, screeches, whistles, howls, let the noise grow louder and be prolonged, let the rock quake, the avalanche slide. Tell us, old Ocean, if his voice is more powerful than ours. The devas⁷ are circling in the air; the gryphon is hollowing out the crests of the clouds with its horn; eternity is putting its crown on the head of lions. Life is swarming, life is buzzing, life is streaming; rumps are bounding, sweat is pouring from nostrils like light from the nostrils of the sun. More manes are fluttering in the wind than there are lianas in the woods; variegated feathers, crawling pearls, gazes falling from the clouds on to the shadow of a leaf, thirsty for life, thirsty for death; tell us, Ocean, whether that is not enough to be a God. Days will come, time will accumulate, but a time will never come that will see our claws worn down, nor the tips of our wings soiled with mud, nor their colors washed out by the rain. After a thousand years, the drying spring will reflect, as today, our nascent feathers, our down that had molted. We shall always pass by the same route without ever tiring; we shall always extend our wings in the clouds without ever furling them; we shall always be setting forth on the same voyage. Let the birds begin to form a point to cleave the wind; let the lightest take flight. Three days and three nights let him fly straight through the sky; let him cry to the four winds: "Where is the king of worlds?" And Leviathan will descend crawling into the marshes, and reply from the gulfs of the earth: "We are the gods."

⁶ The bridge of Tchinevad above the gulf of Hell separates the earth from the heavens in the Zend-Avesta, the central scriptural text of the Zoroastrian religion; souls are judged when they pass over it.

⁷ This term has slightly different meanings in Hindu theology, where it can refer to any deity, and the Zend-Avesta, where it refers to evil spirits, akin to the Arabic djinn to which reference is also made in this section of the text.