

PART ONE

Chapter One THE TWO CULTS

I

Late in the day, the old king soothed his ennui wordlessly, walking alone on his balustraded terrace, from which the vast expanse of the sea could be seen. The waves were blue, ornamented with white foam, and no ships ever passed by except, once a year and far out to sea, a flotilla laden with merchandise from Taprobane. The coarse mariners hastened past this commerce-free haven; their gross ships seemed to the king to resemble fragments of papyrus rolled by a clam and pleasant wind. That was all, for the year, until the same habitual and quasi-ritual seekers of gold appeared again on the clear threshold of the horizon, to constitute a futile white stain there.

The most frequent visitors to the gloomy king on his solitary terrace, where mosaics of small stone retraced the features of Theano, Mobed and Glyphtis—who was once Helen¹—were the white swans and agile swallows for which bowls, jars and nests were periodically prepared.

In the marvelous silence of the Sun, and its golden powders on the white sand, the grains of which were amber, agate and lapis lazuli, the old king lived a very solitary life, and every day the black men of his bodyguard, unoccupied and otiose, played interminable games with blue and white pebbles. They only varied that occupation of interested relaxation to polish their weapons, made of the most beautiful metal, and to make sure that the serving-women had laundered the cloth of their tunics to the necessary whiteness.

And all the surrounding territory was as calm as the dream of its king. The ancient gift that he had made of all wealth to all the poor kept him and them safe from any invasion of thieves—and besides, the world had the Roman Empire at which to gnaw away.

For years now, the old king had not left his solitary palace, where his meditations focused more intently on his own mystery. His former ministers, each retired to some royal residence in which they exercised their tastes as they pleased, did not weary him with any questions, for similar rules regulated subjects haunted with the same desire: to live simply, to work very little, to dream incessantly. The only animation that stirred the petty kingdom, on King Balthazar's birthday, was the urgent and competitive choice of gifts of marvelous beasts, wine and vegetables to restock the contemplator's larder.

Inside the palace, almost all the rooms of which were permanently locked, a few pale servants muffled the sound of their footsteps on thick carpets and animal fleeces. They lived on tiptoe, and their wise speech was taciturn. Only one among them served and approached the king, and the lethargy of the old citadel of colored marble was uninterrupted, save for the occasional click of dice in the doorways.

The high vault of the church dedicated to the gods of chance and the unknown were abandoned, and the organs no longer accompanied hymns; only the servants sometimes murmured the ancient melodies rhythmic with infinite hope, as if they were old marching songs. Sometimes, a tremulous voice murmured:

*It is from the giant flowers of the origins
that it is necessary to demand the fading secret
of the ambush from which souls trail
from church to church, from portal to portal.*

or:

My soul has seen the chariot of God pass by,

¹ Presumably Helen of Troy.

*his right hand sowing seeds
over the world,
and his foresight adorns the world beneath the skies
with living flowers on the saddest walls
and gilds the fields and multiplies the oxen.
His will raises islands in the seas
which no human has ever fathomed,
in order to provide a refuge when bitter ills
have crushed old worlds beneath the heels of war.²*

King Balthazar had nailed the doors of the churches shut and silenced the organs, and the God of his fief of the world of the Spirit was Silence.

Silence, radiant reparative force, slumber of life, brief glimpse of the mountains of faith
Silence, original to the beginning and the end, overwhelming law
Silence beneath the arpeggios of the Sun on serene coasts
Silence of the coralline cities of submarine depths
Silence of the time when, weary of its futile sleep, the Sun drapes itself, and the clots of its blood stain the quotidian and temporary crosses of the ether
Silence, promise of Erebus, and of the lairs of inspired seers
Silence, sole word among the blind who dream the worlds
Silence, of which only the tortures of hunger draw the iron talons from the excoriated prophet
Silence, liturgy and panacea,
Silence, thou the hope all the days of the world, Silence, father of the night of our over-feverish and excessively ambulant dreams.
Silence, unique and necessary bed of Speech,
of the Speech of one who gets up to say the fundamental words, the only short words, that indicate the cult,
the cult of absolute silence.
Silence, god persecuted by tyrants and plebeians
God massacred since the dawn by the carts of rubbish-collectors
God starred with the bloody wounds of speech, impatient
dense and ambitious, which the poor name the Word
Silence on the ultimate terrace of the world
That which the rising seas of the waves of the deluge has not reached
transporting words of love, words of glory and trumpeting of war
Thou holdest the strange and supreme cup,
The marvelous everyday philter against the gods of activity,
against the machines deified with glory or terror by famished crowds,
Thou holdest it without ever extending it
and it is necessary to scale the asperities
of all the somber paths of mortal checks,
in order, deprived of pride, to attempt therein
the supreme chance of happiness,
in thine incarnation, Silence.

And that final word, that final hymn, King Balthazar no longer communicated, for the adepts of his faith discovered it for themselves, and those to whom his advice might have been a beacon for life

² Considering the meaning of these verses to be more important than their rhyme-schemes, I have translated them directly, without making any attempt to reproduce their poetic formalities. All of Hahn's *vers libre* is partially, but never entirely, rhymed, and sometimes exhibit a fugitive scansion, but translating it without rhyme or scansion does not pervert it unduly. The poetic sequence that follows, undistinguished by font or positional setting, similarly contains a few rhymes. I have reproduced its dearth of punctuation precisely, although I am not at all certain that it was fully intended, and I have taken the liberty of adjusting the punctuation of some of the subsequent poems and "songs," where greater orthodoxy seems to have been attempted.

succumbed in their ardent gaiety, in inns, to the overexcitement of their strength, or sought repose in deceptive philters that were poisons, the futile ambushes of Azrael.

For the King, death is something for which it is necessary to wait. The ultimate lucidity of an absolutely calm soul can only attain its original word—to wit, the meaning of vague words exchanged during its brutal or amorous and charming conception—when, every other individual being set aside and all affections extinct, “for affections are merely ornaments of life, marching songs and the distant music of the traveling fair, and the music of two hectic lutes,” the dying man sees coming, not the mirage of the avaricious Azrael, but the white specter that paints for humans every evening the truth of their ideal beneath their eyelids, and then, after the light descent of the black curtain, shows them the stars in sheaves upon the horizon, and then throws them a dream of hope in which pure nymphs sing with Paraclete voices in colonnades of fire and joy.

The absolute canticle of being, the pivots of which are the love of pure form and the voice, reflections of an *empyrean without dissonances*, cannot be attained by the body alone; the bushes of Horeb³ only awaken when the fermented bushes have defeated the desires of interest, ambition and capture that carry humans away in their squares and their crossroads, behind their bed-curtains and in their heroisms; that is why Mobed the benevolent has spread the poppies of wine in the great churches of joy; but the scoriac hymn of felicity rings its changes with such stymphalic notes that the joy has quit the wine, conquered in any case by merchants, like gold, like dancing-girls, like the entire divine figuration of our planets.

Now Azrael, the evil minister of the Demiurge, has, alongside dolors, tempted mortal souls, and human beings have exhausted, with their atavistic desires for power and gold, the gifts of drunkenness, profound amulets, symbols of the embrace of Pan, mute contemplations, solitary dominations amid the serious fictions of life, and humans have forgotten God, the silence that holds the cup without extending it, in favor of the noisy demons that unroll the gifts of evil, and speak their language, and thus persuade them.

II

The gentle pallor of night expanded over the violet Earth. The terrace where, beneath the maternal caress of night, the old contemplator of everything remained awake, allowed itself to be invaded by the avant-garde of darkness, and only in the distance, near the exit door, was the light of a torch gleaming. The perfumes of the divine night took flight from sleeping flowers, and nothing troubled the quietude of the resemblance, the austere daily consecration of the Silence, but the animated face of the Moon, pale with suffering, like the hollow eyes of a solemn vision of eternal misery. The gardens of the sky were devoid of the gigantic mirages profiled by worlds in birth, and the emotional human, now that the pallor was extending the gentle word of sleep over the hemisphere, was able to perceive the flowers of Eden, perhaps apparent, that the god of illusion projects in the illuminated Heavens.

The vesperal coolness of an autumn in the sultry zones brought, upon the soft fans of breezes, the great residues of the fresh perfumes of marine plants, and the opals of the altar of the god Silence radiating conflagrations of a joyful soul from the depths of the universal tabernacle.

This was the unique demonstration of that cult lost in the sands; it was necessary to flee the cities to perceive the magnificent grandeur of the mirage lavished by solar force, and the consoling peace that night poured out, those two clear appearances of the opaque fact of existence. In the corner of Ethiopia where King Balthazar reigned over a few peaceful sages, the sunlight lavished the shadows of apparitions upon the stroller, as on the dazzling surroundings, the palaces and cupolas, but the evenings raised up the charm of slow avenues of meditation for him.

The King blessed all the corners of the horizon. He blessed with his palms of despair those who were agape before the new word, those whose ulcers were deceptively aggravating the old words of the world proffered before wooden masks and stone effigies. He blessed those who adored the book in the Ark, without knowing that its old counsels of blood and localized privation are the work of Azrael. He blessed the sons of Iblis who attack cities where bright-faced girls are walking in order to steal and

³ Horeb was, in some versions of the story, the mountain in which Moses received the Ten Commandments, so the “awakening” in question is to possession by divine fire.

sell them in ports where black kings, helmed in silver, await them impatiently. He blessed the conscienceless pirates who commit their souls to the stormy sea in order to bring girls as yellow as the rising Sun, whose tresses enclose the mystery of the birth of night, to markets where blond, pale man idly stroll. He blessed the people of the Archipelagoes, who days are spent mixing the divine wine with base products of naphtha, to augment its weight and sell it at a higher price.

He sympathized with the giants who precipitate themselves upon empty lands, whose former prosperity seduces them, crying: this is mine; and with the decimated who, from the fissures in the mountains, watch for an opportunity to surprise the thieves, when prosperity has rendered them defenseless, in a bed that is too soft and too large. He mourned for the cunning and deceitful folk who live in the great cities, and the faithful who weep and mourn for themselves in desert spaces, invoking the eternal Immanence because a vow of poverty and asceticism will exasperate their nerves and destroy their physical being.

This is the hour in which the Pontiff-King suffers for all the souls on Earth, for the miners and the mariners, the agile people of the cities and the feeble toilers in infertile fields, for the deserving hypocrites of false gods, the illuminates of charity, for everyone who speaks and moves, for everyone who amasses and calculates, for all those who do not know that what is necessary is to listen one day, in the bosom of profound silence, to that which one ought to say to oneself—a sensuality equal for the criminal and for the benefactor, since it is justice to which one listens, attenuation by days of repentance for the humble who know not, infinite praise for one in whom feeble enlightenment and habitual self-knowledge have allowed a few benevolent attributes of the taciturn world to flourish.

And if the people of the pale castle could hear the last hymns, their memories would be furnished with such refrains as:

*Meditative indolence beneath the fronds of palms
shows us the way to the good spring
where the honey of life is never seasoned
with the cruel gaze of the last scruple
of those who do not know thy law.*

*Thy law is to wait for the infinite dawn,
that which sleeps over the sources of life
awaiting the wise benevolent awakening.
While beneath the festival stars and the trellises
of wines of wisdom and forgiveness for all sins*

*the fortunate sage of the benefits of silence
will speak to the simplest, the infinite word;
then the sage dressed in light and equipped
with the dazzling procession of the humble
will climb the hard ramps of capitals.*

*And the weapons of those who gesticulate
and the arrows that ornament the dusks
of old people hardened to suffering
will fall before the true word
that will cause to germinate in all the intoxication
of the sleeping world of noise
the slow meditation of silence.*

*O Silence, contemplative god of the world
who forbids offense,
O Silence who determines the virtues
among the solitary, in the headstrong universe
whose power reigns until death over the round
of caprices lost in the errors of ambience.*