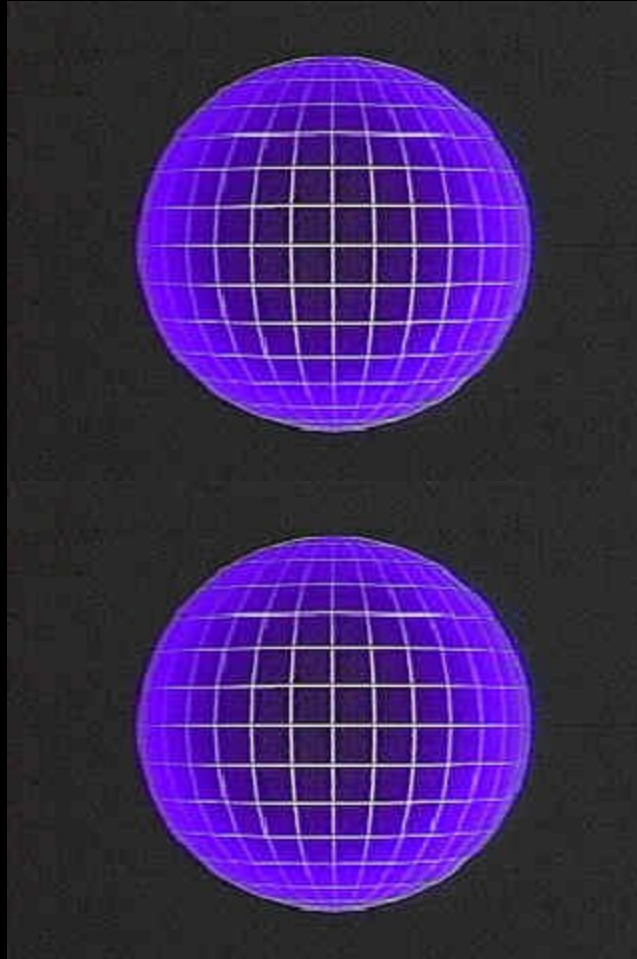


FIXED LIMITS

BY

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OF CENTRETRUTHS DIGITAL MEDIA



CDM Prose

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FRIDAY 17th SEPTEMBER, 1976

It has just gone 7.00pm and I am sitting in my armchair, casually contemplating the thin strands of tobacco smoke which rise, halo-like, from my half-consumed cigarette. My throat is sore because of the smoke and my lungs feel as though they were on fire, but I can't pretend that these little physical inconveniences particularly bother me. After all, one has to suffer something. In fact, I have only recently started smoking again, so there is plenty of time for me to get used to the idea. When I'm on the verge of bronchitis I will probably give it up and make a fresh resolution, like the one I made at the beginning of the year, in order to safeguard my health anew. I have rarely smoked more than ten cigarettes a day anyway, which is probably just as well, considering how depressed it makes me feel afterwards. Besides, smoking only appeals to me occasionally, as a supplement to food or drink. I could never be a chain-smoker.

God, these cigarettes are ghastly! They burn down far too quickly. No sooner have you begun inhaling them than the wretched things disappear in a cloud of smoke and fire of creeping ash! You wonder why you bothered in the first place. Actually now I come to think of it, they are virtually the cheapest brand available, so I guess that was the guiding factor in my buying them. But I couldn't really afford to buy any dearer brand at present because, being a poverty-stricken writer with a limited income, I simply don't have the money to spare on luxuries.

These cigarettes are marked MIDDLE TAR, though it wouldn't really bother me if they were something worse. I guess I'm secretly indulging in a form of self-punishment as well. At the beginning of the year I made what I now perceive to have been a foolish New Year's resolution. I said to myself: "You've been smoking like a chimney for well over six months (a slight exaggeration on both counts, but never mind), your health isn't very good anyway, and you're bored with cigarettes and dying for a change. Make this year somehow different!" So I stopped buying cigarettes and started buying confectionery instead. For a while I felt like a saint or, at any rate, like someone saved. Then to consolidate my change of heart with a change of health, I began doing press-ups, no more than twenty at a time, because my arms weren't strong enough to support me initially, but just enough to make it worthwhile, to mark a beginning.

Well, that resolution lasted about three months and almost killed me.

In retrospect it surprises me that I could have persevered so persistently, taken it all so seriously, considering that I didn't really feel much better afterwards. But, strangely, it never once occurred to me to think objectively about what I was doing; I just acted. When I staggered out of bed in the morning the first thing I did was attend to the press-ups. I acted like a robot. And before I climbed back into bed last thing at night it would be the same thing: more damn press-ups. It must have been like somebody saying his prayers and paying his worldly dues at the same time. Yes, but at least I might have profited a little from these exertions; for it seemed to me that every attempt I made at becoming stronger only succeeded, eventually, in making me weaker, in removing my ability to extend the number of press-ups. By the time I got to the twentieth one I was a physical wreck. My nerves twitched as though they had just received an electric shock, my tongue shot out backwards and forwards like a jack-in-the-box, my breathing became hoarse, and my arms felt like putty. They became noticeably weaker for all the exercise I gave them!

Well, so much for all that! These days I am back to smoking again. Indeed, I might even be fatuous or outrageous enough to regard it as a form of slow suicide, a sort of long-term investment policy with death. It doesn't feel very much like pleasure, anyway. There is nothing particularly sensational about it - not, that is, unless you are prepared to regard a pair of constricted lungs as something of a sensation. But I would be deluded, all the same, to assume that my life could be done away with so easily. It might take another thirty to forty years, during which time I would probably continue to drift in and out of tobacconists with the residue of an insane resolution in my head: to do away with myself at any cost! No, I don't really feel I possess that amount of patience or resolve, least of all at the moment. It certainly takes a lot to kill a man. If we could all be disposed of that easily, there wouldn't be many of us left here now. In relation to life we are as stubborn as mules - absolutely fanatic! It would definitely take more than a few thousand cheap cigarettes to finish me off, money or no money. So there is evidently little consolation to be had there!

This ashtray amuses me. Indeed, I don't think it was actually intended as an ashtray at all, since it is too pretty. In actual fact, it is an Italian souvenir marked *À PAVO*, evidently its place of origin. I don't even remember where I got it, but somebody must have made me a present of it some years ago, because it's not the kind of thing I would buy myself. I absolutely detest its formality!

To begin with, it is a piece of oblong plastic measuring some 6" x 4". The edges are curved slightly upwards, no more than half-an-inch (as might

be expected from an ashtray or tiny fruit bowl), and the interior, if such it can be called, contains the reproduction of a colourful painting which depicts five medieval knights who are seemingly paying court to someone in front of and slightly above their gazes, though to whom, exactly, I haven't a clue because he/she doesn't form part of the picture - at least not as it stands here. Perhaps the title of the original painting would enlighten me on this score? But I don't possess an encyclopaedia of Italian art and really don't wish to put myself to the trouble of finding out. I mean, there isn't actually all that much to get excited about when you think of it, is there? These five gentlemen are evidently the cynosure of the work. However, if by some miracle they knew that someone was using them for an ashtray they probably wouldn't look so proud of themselves. They would more than likely take offence and unsheathe their swords specifically with a view to reigning blows and imprecations upon the offender. Indeed, they might even get hostile with the manufacturer for putting them on a souvenir which could be used for such base purposes.

But all this speculation is obviously of small account. I don't even know whether or not they were originally painted from real life, though they look plausible enough anyway. What particularly amuses me, however, is that the fellow at the rear of the group - a man, incidentally, who looks somehow wiser and more experienced in courtly protocol than his companions - is staring rather higher than the others, much as though he were at a private audition, while the third one from the front, a rather effeminate-looking character in headgear, is wearing a sort of peeved expression on his face which stares directly at the painter, or where one imagines the painter should be, instead of straight ahead of himself like all the others. You get the impression that he considers himself a cut above the rest and that the tedium of having his portrait painted is gradually becoming too much of a strain, in consequence of which he would like the painter to damn-well hurry up and finish the job as quickly as possible. Well, that may or may not be the actual case, but it is essentially to him, and in part to a more manly-looking fellow to his left, that I owe the privilege of a few irreverent diversions.

In mentioning all this, I took the precaution of wiping away the accumulated ash of an evening's bum smoking from them. But now that I have lit myself another cigarette and am consequently obliged to deposit fresh ash somewhere, I am gratifying my sadistic impulses by carefully depositing some of it on the effeminate one's face, rather like those fiendish little delinquents who take a perverse pleasure in effacing the more salient contents of billboards, public notices, and anything else suitably vulnerable

to derogatory amendment. What surprises me, however, is that I actually experience a sense of *fulfilment* from crowning his little naked and vaguely arrogant chin with a bustling outgrowth of beard-like ash. It is almost as though I had actually *achieved* something by so altering his demeanour. Why, with this funny little beard, he could almost pass for Ezra Pound, even with those doleful eyes! At least you would never take him for a woman now - not, that is, unless you noticed his bright red tunic.

As for the sharp-nosed fellow nearest to the painter, who appears to be kneeling on the ground and resting his hand on the arm of the chair or couch upon which the foremost of his four companions is seated, it's not so much his face that concerns me as the overly centrifugal nature of his striped dress which, reaching to the ground, suggests a strongly autocratic disposition. With two swift dabs I'm able to obliterate it and lend him a more knightly appearance which, however ragged the ensuing armour, seems to do his sheathed sword slightly more justice.

Aggravated by the childishness of it all, I stub-out the remains of my cigarette on the front one's neck and disgustedly push the 'ashtray' to one side. It has ceased to amuse me. In fact, it might be better employed, in future, as a soap dish, so that I can obliterate its courtly contents in a cleaner and less hazardous fashion. From now on I'm going to do something more *constructive* with my time!

At the moment, it is raining heavily. I can hear rainwater spurting down the drain outside my french windows. There are also regular dull thuds against the panes, though I can't see anything because the curtains are drawn. Nevertheless it reassures me to hear such sounds. I am reminded that there are other things than people in the world. On these wet days I like to think that people are too diverted by the weather to have much interest in anything else, least of all in individuals like me. Its inclemency acts as a kind of shelter against humanity, a refuge for sick and outcast souls. Things become more subdued, the streets appear to withdraw into themselves as though in a silent conspiracy against nature. They remind me somehow of a dog that doesn't want to be washed.

Now this torrential rain will certainly make the ground easier to dig next week. I was beginning to despair at the prospect of how much additional back-breaking labour I might be in for, by digging over the back garden on the landlord's behalf. Admittedly, I only managed to do about half-an-hour's digging there each day last week, but that was quite enough! At times it seemed as though the fork would break from all the pressure I was obliged to put it under, in view of the stony nature of the ground. After this, I only hope it doesn't rain all week. My room becomes frightfully

depressing after a few days of solitary confinement.

For the time being this stillness is agreeable to me; I don't want to ruin it. If I were to practise blues runs on my acoustic guitar or play some rock albums on my stereo, the neighbours would more than likely take offence and quickly find some means of retaliating or, at the very least, defending themselves. They would regard my activity as a sort of infringement of their rights, the rights to a given quantity of silence, to a couple of hour's tedious repose in a bath of somnolence, to a little mutual vegetation. Quite frankly, I don't wish to bring that kind of vindictive tribunal to bear upon myself this evening; I have already suffered quite enough noise for one day. If I were now to stretch my self-indulgent pleasures beyond a certain low-key level, the neighbours would probably think me barbarous and summarily accuse me of behaving like an adolescent. It would definitely be wiser to share in the half-life of the community for a while. Then they can testify to my self-restraint.

If my eyes didn't hurt so much from reading I would read a little longer this evening. But I have had enough of it and, besides, you can only do so much of a given thing. Beyond a certain point you come to feel that the world is too narrow, that the sanest thing to do would be to take a week's holiday or have a few days' break just to make a change. If variety is really the spice of life, then mine must be pretty tasteless! Sometimes I get the impression that I'm actually suffocating from culture, since the stereo only leads to the bookcase, the bookcase to the notebook, the notebook to the typewriter, the typewriter to the guitar, and the guitar to the radio ... in a vicious circle of enforced intellectuality. When you feel like that, you might as well destroy everything, since the world has evidently become too narrow. However, as far as today is concerned, I'm most definitely suffering from an overdose of culture. I badly need an antidote. Ideally, the best thing would be to get drunk and chase after women. But I haven't got the money for it and, besides, there aren't that many women around here whom I would consider it worth my while to chase after. In the end, I would only humiliate and disgust myself. Well, the next best thing - other, of course, than to smash furniture or to burn books - would be to turn-in for the night. But as I won't be able to sleep for at least another two hours, and it is now only 10.45pm, I may as well persevere with things a while longer.

I abandon the writing table (scarcely a desk) and shuffle over to the bookcase. There is an 8" Venus statuette on the top shelf which immediately catches my attention. Actually I think it's an Aphrodite statuette because, although the shopkeeper I bought it from said "Venus", the hairstyle is of that slightly erratic nature especially favoured by the ancient Greeks. Why,

it's almost a mess! But that is precisely why I like it so much; this goddess is approachable.

Like a good many other such symbols she has taken the trouble to turn her head to one side, so that one gets an enchanting view of her fine brow and long nose. Surprisingly, her mouth is exquisitely beautiful in its refined sensuality, and farther down, in the exact spot where her nose seems to be pointing, we discover the indisputable cynosure of this mythological effigy to be an exposed left breast, the very breast which the questionable modesty of her raiment has permitted her to reveal to us humble mortals in order, presumably, that we might have a sufficiently cogent criterion by which to acclaim her sexual prestige as the goddess of love.

The aesthetics of the thing momentarily overwhelm me. For an instant the insane desire to smash it possesses me, and I grab her in my left hand as though to dash her against the opposite wall. But something checks me; the act would only bring me remorse later, particularly if the nearest neighbours decided to take offence. No, I have destroyed enough things for one day as it is! And quietly. My diaries are in shreds in the waste-paper bin, and so, too, is my latest notebook. I don't see that I shall benefit myself all that much by also destroying this harmless statuette. I replace it on the top shelf of my bookcase. The eternal woman is re-enthroned, her sexual sovereignty inviolable. When she has gathered enough dust I shall wipe her clean and place her in a different position - for instance, rump foremost. Actually I'm not at all convinced that she shouldn't be viewed from the rear anyway; you see more of her body then. Until now I have been fairly content with a frontal view. It didn't occur to me that she might benefit from a contrary perspective. I ought to have swivelled her around a bit.

I abandon the goddess of love and automatically fish out a rather cryptic-looking booklet from the bottom shelf of my bookcase. It has a black cover and measures about 8" x 12". Strangely, you wouldn't know which was the front and which the back just by looking at its cover. In fact, you wouldn't know whether it was upside down or not either. The most significant thing you can say about this enigmatic cover is that it's incredibly scratched. Its surface literally glistens with tiny silver threads which criss-cross it in all directions, lending it the vague appearance of a relief map. If I really wanted to know exactly where I stood with this cover, I would have to study the scratches and count the dots. But so much attention applied to such an insignificant item strikes me as crazy, the sort of behaviour one might expect from a lunatic, and I certainly don't regard myself in that light - at least not at present. So I immediately stifle the idea, since my life has quite enough crazy little idiosyncrasies and obsessions already.

I have thrown the booklet onto the bed and am now sitting down beside it. As a matter of interest, it is a souvenir from a Grateful Dead concert of several years ago. Officials were giving them away free and I just happened to be in the right place at the right time to collect one. You couldn't ask for more. There are about thirty glossy pages in this memento, a majority of which are dedicated to close-ups of each of the musicians, a few group photos, and a number of facts and quotations. These days I don't remember all that much about the concert, but I can certainly recall that it took place at London's Lyceum, off the Strand, in May 1972. Anyway, as this booklet is quite large, it serves as an ideal place to deposit photos, and that is precisely why I have opened it this evening.

At present, there are some ten photos in it, photos or, rather, photographic reproductions of young female models which I carefully selected and cut out from various men's magazines several months ago. Now these photographic reproductions, which are in colour, are all different sizes. Whenever I take the trouble to look at them, these days, it is purely from boredom or for some ostensibly aesthetic and even poetic reason. The initial erotic quality which some of them once possessed for me has long since faded away; I am much too familiar with them. However, the most significant thing which now strikes me about these models is that they are mostly wearing some form of clothing, even if only a pair of nylon stockings or the briefest of briefs. There are only two of them who are completely nude, but they look silly to me, since all you can see, in each case, is a bare rump. There is nothing particularly individualistic about them - not, that is, unless you were prepared to utilize a magnifying lens in order to study the minutiae of their respective behinds. Of the rest, a few are pretending to indulge in what my little Oxford Dictionary defines as 'self-abuse', their fingers busily probing between their legs. To judge from the smug expressions on their heavily made-up faces, you would think they were thoroughly enjoying themselves. But I'm not altogether convinced. Or, rather, I don't understand how any person, even a woman, could get worked-up like that over so insignificant a sexual commitment. Doubtless they exaggerate their pleasures in order to make personal sex appear as satisfying as possible, to create a sort of irresistible bait - the pleasures of 'self-abuse'!

Well, whatever the case, their self-indulgence leaves me cold. I much prefer those models that have opened their legs a little and are lying back on the bed, as though waiting for a lover to approach them. Somehow they strike me as being a more agreeable and less narcissistic type of female; they haven't turned their back on men. However, as for those who are purely aesthetic, whose casual postures seem to suggest the utmost complacency,

affluence, and restraint, I have to confess that they generally leave me cold, too. It is as though, already well fixed-up sexually, one could afford to pay merely for the sight of naked back, breasts, or thighs, anything more revealing being considered *infra dignum* or, at the very least, quite unnecessary.

I have had enough of photos for one evening. After a while they all look the same. You might as well tear them up, for all the good they do you. Naturally, when you see them for the first time in any given magazine it is a kind of novelty, you are visibly surprised. You secretly hope to discover someone really worth looking at, someone who transcends the fully-dressed conservatism of the majority of neighbourhood women, granting you a degree of voyeuristic intimacy. If you're lucky, you may even encounter the spectacle of a model who truly appeals to you, gives you a momentary thrill as she seduces you into admiring her. After which you might cut her out, as though to distinguish her from the ruck of other models, and pin her up somewhere or, failing that, hide her away in a large black booklet for future reference. But if there is no-one who particularly appeals to your aesthetic sense, you might end-up throwing the entire magazine in the dustbin. I suppose that depends on your temperament and idiosyncratic bent. Though if you're like me (and I can't be all that unique) you probably avoid reading anything. You may consider it too 'feuilletonistic', too much of an imposition to wade through the sordid facts of somebody else's sex life, too perverse because, in reality, there is nothing in it for you and, anyway, you would know the kinds of things to expect, so what matter? Everyone according to his tastes and insights! The dustmen may reap a gratuitous reward, assuming they don't automatically consider such magazines a waste of frigging time and consequently set about having them disposed of, in the usual fashion, as quickly as possible.

I return the booklet and its extraneous contents to their allocated place on the bottom shelf of my hard-pressed bookcase, squashed in-between a couple of large hardbacks, one of which just happens to be a largely pictorial biography of Henry Miller. That, it seems to me, is quite enough pleasure for one evening! If I suddenly had the good fortune to experience knowledge of a greater pleasure, I would probably end-up feeling sorry for myself. "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise," said the poet Gray somewhere, though I can hardly regard my condition as blissful.

All of a sudden I begin chuckling to myself. The sight of some old LPs reminds me of the fact that I once sold someone a record without realizing I had left about fifteen similarly erotic photos between the inner sleeves of its cover. It was one of those single albums that open out like a

double, and in the spare section, as it were, of the cover (which had somehow come unstuck along the outer edge) I had previously secreted what I imagined to be a quintessential distillation of choice erotica. What amazes me is that the photos remained hidden away during the transaction. For the shop assistant made a careful inspection of both the disc and cover without in the least suspecting anything. I am only too glad that I didn't remember about them at the time, otherwise I would almost certainly have become quite visibly embarrassed! He considered the album worth a quid anyway, so I didn't quibble with him. Indeed, it wouldn't have surprised me if he subsequently discovered that he had acquired a special bargain. Nothing but those photos could have elevated the album to a higher plane!

SATURDAY 18th SEPTEMBER

This morning I didn't feel like getting up. It seemed much safer under the covers. For one thing, I hadn't decided what to do with myself, and, for another, I could sense the approach of autumn. The effort required to stagger out of bed and eventually sit at my writing-table-cum-desk seemed immense. I wondered whether I hadn't turned into a fairy overnight or gone mad, or something. Admittedly, there were voices, footsteps, and radio noises impinging upon me from other parts of the house, but that didn't exactly encourage me. On the contrary, I felt as though I had been subjugated by a world of indolence. Indeed, as though I might even have left the human world altogether and possibly become a polyp, irrespective of the fact that the cold air on my arms indicated that I still *resembled* a human being, even if I didn't exactly *feel* like one. It was as though my life had inexplicably become divorced from those all-too-human noises and it annoyed me to think that I would inevitably be forced to do something similar in due course, to act like a marionette dangling from the ends of bedsitter-conditioned strings for another twelve or more hours. I honestly didn't want that to happen, since things seemed better off as they were - without any interruptions.

To begin with, I wasn't annoying anybody by just lying still; for, in all probability, the neighbours would have been quite oblivious of my prone proximity to them. But if I were to clamber out of bed and start scratching around, brushing my teeth, hunting for clothes, etc., and then endeavour settling down to record, on my electric typewriter, some new ideas for my forthcoming novel, the chances were pretty high that the upstairs tenant would begin making more noise than I could tolerate, that she would begin to distract me by dropping things on the floor, shoving armchairs about, rubbing the water heater's rubber pipe against the metallic tap of her sink unit, stamping backwards and forwards as though doing the highland fling or suffering from St Vitus's dance. If possible, I wanted to avoid that sort of friction today. It disconcerted me to think that I should be the butt of such flagrant abuse.

What exactly it was about me that annoyed her, I couldn't imagine. But it seemed all too evident that she didn't like men of my sort. True, she couldn't have read any of my writings, since none of them had been published. But that wouldn't necessarily prevent her from sizing me up, as it

were, from my appearance (both sartorial and physiognomic), from the kind of music I usually listen to, from the fact that I don't have a girlfriend, never speak to her, am studiously preoccupied, and so on. Perhaps she imagines I spend a lot of time busily plotting the future downfall of some worthy institution or, worse still, writing critically about her for being so boorish, philistine, and heavy-handed. I don't honestly know, though, being the sort of person she is, I wouldn't even put it past her to become annoyed with me because she can't use me, because I possess a sort of innate obduracy and social aloofness which prevent anyone from getting close to me without my express permission.

However, a couple of days ago she was making even more noise than usual, which was more than I could reasonably be expected to endure. She used as many resources as she could find - those I have already mentioned and some additional ones besides - and she persisted so indefatigably and with so much inane vindictiveness ... that I felt compelled, on at least three occasions, to hurl a leather boot up at the ceiling. In fact, I can still discern the indentations looming above me now, scarring the soft ceiling with ghastly one-inch cracks. Indeed, there is also a rather nasty black mark above the fireplace, where the boot struck the wall after ricocheting off of the ceiling. I tried to rub it off with the aid of as much elbow grease as could be mustered, but it still persists in existing, and with as much stubbornness as a permanent fixture, as though the wallpaper needs it there. The most sensible thing for me to do now would be to put a large poster over it, perhaps something surrealist. But that would inevitably mean staring at a poster instead which, despite certain aesthetic predilections on my part, doesn't really appeal to me in view of the fact that there are already four small posters on the walls anyway, posters which I have no desire to either move or remove. I certainly don't feel I could possibly tolerate the sight of another one, no matter how small. For it would undoubtedly make this room appear too much like an art gallery, and a rather eccentric one at that! Still, one has to look at something attractive. Too many blank walls are depressing.

As I was saying earlier, I didn't feel like staggering out of bed and subsequently throwing myself into a noisy scene again, granted that there were quite enough little disturbances going on already. I would have preferred to remain mummified between the twisted sheets of my bedding, temporarily innocuous. To be sure, my contribution to domestic goodwill hadn't amounted to anything very impressive over the past few weeks. But, even so, I certainly had no intention of reducing or negating it this morning. So far as I'm concerned, domestic antagonisms ought to slacken off a little

on Saturday, enabling the house to assume a sort of semi-relaxed atmosphere freed from the bonds of weekday pressures. Yet when you are dealing, as here, with somebody who evidently finds one day pretty much like another, who doesn't appear to look forward to the weekend, who is naturally heavy-handed and thick-skinned to boot, and who bears you an unshakeable grudge, then those sorts of concerns are completely gratuitous and only succeed in making you feel foolish. You might as well try appealing to the moon, for all the good it would do!

Anyway, when I finally succeeded in forcing myself to get up, at 10.30 this morning, it was partly on account of an empty stomach and partly on account of my mind which, in accordance with well-established tradition, was beginning to exasperate me. When you mostly let yourself go like that, when you just lie there and think about nothing in particular, the chances are pretty high that your mind will take the law into its own hands, as it were, and proceed to wander off at an intellectual tangent. You would never believe that this mind was yours; that, freed from the vigilance of the ego, it would be capable of such arbitrary decisions and/or aberrations. For one thing, it is almost unintelligible, it babbles on like an over-active brook, and, for another, it doesn't appear to lead anywhere, but follows a kind of wayward course through uncharted psychic territory.

If you were to attempt plotting this course, you would soon find yourself lost in the middle of nowhere and probably have to dispatch all the common sense at your disposal in order to bring yourself back from the brink of insanity to the everyday world of concrete phenomena. When, for example, I began listening-in to it this morning, the impression I got was of someone who had forgotten to switch off the motor, in consequence of which my mind would burn itself out and either leave me with a shattered brain or, failing that, a severe headache if I didn't soon take serious measures to rectify the problem. So I clambered out of bed in a panic, got washed and dressed as quickly as possible, pulled back the curtains, discovered it was still raining, and thankfully felt my equilibrium return. The sight of so many external objects had evidently given my mind something with which to preoccupy itself, for it went straight from one extreme to another. Now when that happens and I am pondering over what to write, I usually find myself wondering whether I've got a brain at all, because it seems a devil-of-a-job to drag anything worthwhile from it, to cultivate anything like a positive or imaginative response to things. Of course, I'm well aware that my life isn't particularly exciting, that a man as solitary as myself, who hasn't had as much as half-an-hour's intelligent conversation with anyone in over five years and who hasn't even so much as kissed a woman in nearly

six, can't reasonably be expected to bubble with intellectual enthusiasm, like an ambitious college student. But, then again, I would at least like the consolation of some intellectual preoccupation, however attenuated.

So I sit at my desk, waiting patiently for something to click, for a penny to drop, as they say, only to discover that my brain prefers to lie low as though waiting for a divine signal, a special cue, an incentive to spring into action like a rabid predator and tear the page apart in a fury of raging intent. Though what the requisite signal, cue, or incentive ought to be on such occasions I haven't the foggiest, because I might sit there with an empty head for over an hour sometimes. The week before last, for example, was a fairly typical occasion. I had only a short while before finished typing-up my first novel, an innovative little project which leaned heavily on interior monologue, as befitting a writer as solitary and introverted, not to say Joycean, as myself, and was now stuck with the problem of how to proceed with the next one. At the height of my incertitude in this matter, I realized that I would either have to come up with a solution to the problem pretty fast or seriously consider finding myself a clerical job instead. Now since the latter alternative didn't particularly appeal to me, in view of my preference for literary work and knowledge that there were precious few clerical jobs to which a person of my restricted experience and dubious expertise could reasonably apply with any hope of tangible success, I quickly dismissed it as unwise and straight-away set about amassing notes for my next novel, whatever it would eventually be. For the best part of two weeks I sat in psychic darkness, so to speak, scribbling out as many notes as I thought fit to include in a character's conversation or reflections - the sort of ideas one might loosely associate with metaphysical speculation, humorous hypotheses, ideological fantasies, intuitive perspicacities, and religious controversies: in short, a rough-and-ready *Mon Coeur Mis a Nu*, which would hopefully serve as a repository of significant ideas into which I could dip my languishing imagination as the need arose, thereby drawing the relevant inspiration for my forthcoming themes.

Well, by the end of that time I had amassed something like 150 medium-sized pages of these notes, incorporating everything from a supposition that old people could often understand young people better than their parents did because, being old, they reminisced more, to my mounting distrust of women who, for reasons best known to themselves, habitually hid their legs behind long skirts or dresses; from a fantasy concerning Oscar Wilde, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Charles Baudelaire, the author of the above-mentioned journal, seated together in a café and conversing animatedly in French about the relationship between politics and

religion, to my recollection of the humorous and almost surreal incongruity established by certain unlikely juxtapositions of shops, viz. a Scripture Press shop wedged in-between an antique dealers and a turf accountants on the one hand, and an undertakers wedged in-between a butchers and a tobacconists on the other; and from my opinion concerning the baseness of conversationalists who only use their interlocutor as an excuse to talk of themselves, to reflections upon a moth that happened to turn acutely narcissistic, one evening, on encountering its reflection in the bathroom mirror.

Now in compiling these and other such notes, my imaginative faculty eventually tired of the immense spiritual effort required to plumb the intellectual depths, so to speak, and retrieve such buried treasure as was down there, so that the final attempts I made to exploit it overwhelmingly led me to the conclusion that I had brought as much intellectual treasure to the surface as could reasonably be obtained for the time being, and that the feeling of an empty hole or shell which I now experienced would only be good for receiving such self-contempt as I might fall prey to if, in proceeding with my prospective novel, it gradually dawned on me that I hadn't compiled enough of the right sort of notes, but too many irrelevant and largely undesirable ones!

However, not being as ardent a masochist as I had formerly supposed, I was able to mitigate the psychological anguish of this worry by consoling myself in the knowledge that such deep mental excavations weren't to be treated flippantly, since one couldn't raise too many profound thoughts to the surface of one's mind in such a short space of time when thoughts of that nature were more often the product of a gradual awareness or momentary intuition than the result of systematic burrowing. If I had formerly regarded literary creativity as fairly spontaneous, I had at least been corrected in my rather naive and false regard. I had also learnt that one can't be creative without first being uncreative or reflective, without sitting in the psychic dark every so often in order to check one's spiritual compass and simultaneously allow for the build-up of fresh material, fresh experience. If the mental dam suddenly burst, one day, so much the better! But it wouldn't burst from an empty vessel. This quiet, mysterious, and almost imperceptible build-up of material under the surface, in the murky depths of the psyche, was the price one ordinarily paid for feeling bored on or above it. If I had lost patience or confidence in myself and subsequently abandoned the wait, there might not have been another chance. I would have misunderstood the terms of engagement, or so I presumed.

By this time next week I shall be on my way to visiting an old friend

in Merstham, Surrey. In theory it will be a social weekend, the sort of thing which occurs only once every six or seven months. But, in practice, he and his girlfriend are fairly laconic, so I won't have much of an opportunity to become involved in deep conversation. Still, it will be a refreshing change to have some kind of company for a couple of days anyway, to partially relive the good old semi-provincial days before I became an exile in the big, bad, friendless metropolis - another victim of the pollution, noise, congestion, and overcrowding to be encountered amongst its so-often decrepit or derelict streets. But that is still another whole week away and, since I don't really have any friends here, I must first of all tackle the rest of this weekend. Naturally it will pass, like all the rest of them have, but slowly, heavily, unostentatiously, in keeping with my solitary lifestyle. After I have written as much as I can for the day I will just drift with the tide of urban life, content to have earned a short reprieve from the exigencies of my literary endeavour. If I continue to record notes, impressions, memories, and diary-like ramblings it is simply because I prefer doing that to standing on my hands, watching football, squandering money at the local cinema, gazing blankly at the walls or, worse still, wandering aimlessly around town. It is quite a useful method of passing the time and, besides, I even occasionally get a thrill out of it!

Tomorrow, however, I know from experience what I will probably do, but I'm not absolutely sure how I may feel about it. That will depend on my mood. Yet I know for a fact that I will get up at 10.00am or thereabouts, tidy up my room a bit, have breakfast at the local café, buy *The Observer*, and then come back here and begin reading it. Of course, I won't read everything, since that would be a waste of time. But I will certainly glance through the pages and mentally latch-on to anything that particularly arouses my interest.

Last week, taking the arts review into account, I must have read at least a quarter of all the printed material. Now that was a sort of record in itself, considering that I rarely get beyond the headlines. Indeed, sometimes I don't even read *them*; I merely look at the pictures. I flick through the pages with a sort of fanatical determination at the back of my mind not to be taken-in by anything, and whenever I encounter what I can only regard as misguided or overly impartial information on a subject about which I have highly partial views, something inside me clams-up and I hear a little voice, the voice of my ideological conscience, caution me against making a fool of myself by reading things which will only mislead or confound me - political opinions, economic forecasts, literary criticisms, and social commentaries that I might just as well do without.

Now this happens virtually every time I buy a newspaper, which is to say, every Sunday morning. So I observe the pictures, scan the main headlines, and discard those kinds of articles which won't necessarily make me a more enlightened person or, for that matter, a better citizen (though I am officially an Irish, not a British, citizen), but will more than likely frustrate and irritate me by taking me for a ride that either contrasts with my better judgement of the situation or has to do with subjects about which I haven't the slightest interest or sympathy, in any case.

If there is one kind of intellectual I detest above all others, it's the person who has to know something about everything as though his very existence depended upon it. The one who always appears to know exactly what is going-on in the world even though he is no less powerless than the rest of us to do anything about it, and who exudes, in consequence of this obscene curiosity, a sort of childlike enthusiasm for facts and figures quite divorced from the pain and emotional anguish which usually accompany them, about which, in any case, he has only a limited capacity for experience. Indeed, the very justification for this childlike enthusiasm applied so indiscriminately to a variety of unrelated contexts is highly questionable. You get the impression that such a person is either duped by facts, victimized by his brain, mad, or all three together. What-on-earth, you wonder, can he possibly gain from so indiscriminate a perusal? Is it that it gives him something extra to talk about, to satisfy his egotistical gluttony and thereby accord him an intellectual advantage over his less well-informed fellows? If that were the case, I shouldn't wish to listen to him! It would remind me of what one of my aunts used to say about the importance of reading the papers every day in order to always have something in common with others, to be able to talk about the latest news. Admittedly, one usually learns the latest news from someone or somewhere anyway. But to actually make a point of it, to actually suppose that you can win friends or influence through it - well, I would rather leave such an ambition to her!

Yet if that was hard to stomach, what she said to me about general knowledge was virtually unpalatable - namely, that a person who spent lots of time wading through various encyclopaedias, dictionaries, reference books, etc., in order to acquire greater knowledge was obviously very clever and on the road to enlightenment. People on quiz programmes, for example, were obviously very clever because they seemed to know so much, could answer so many difficult questions, questions undoubtedly beyond the reach of most ordinary people.... Now although I was prepared to believe that some people on quiz programmes were indeed very clever, I felt absolutely no compulsion, in spite of my good aunt's persistent admonitions, to follow

suit, to bend my head over an encyclopaedia or whatever every day, as if that constituted the only criterion of enlightenment or confirmation of cleverness! Quite frankly, it didn't matter in the least to me whether the highest mountain in the world, the longest river, or the biggest lake were to be found in Asia, Africa, or South America. It didn't interest me in the slightest to know the number of American presidents or English monarchs to-date, and how this compared with the ancient dynasties of Asia Minor or the Far East. That kind of knowledge invariably leaves me cold. If a so-called brain wants to spend the greater part of his time rummaging through the dustbins of obsolete or useless knowledge, good fucking luck to him! But for someone to tell me it is a road to cleverness and greater enlightenment - well, I would rather remain ignorant, and happily so!

In fact, now that I consider the matter, it was exactly the same story at school. I didn't make the top grade because I could never force myself to take an interest in anything I disliked or considered superfluous, and there was plenty of that. If I encountered a subject that left me cold, I did what I could to pass muster but no more. However, whenever I encountered something I liked or in which I could believe, I set about doing my best in it and usually came top or near top of the class. Besides certain aspects of history, music, and English (in that order), I was also pretty good at geography and did fairly well at examination time in those aspects of any particular subject which seemed meaningful to me. But when it came to subjects like technical drawing, physics, woodwork, metalwork, and engineering science, I was a failure, a rebel, and a wastrel all rolled into one. I saw absolutely no reason to exert myself. Indeed, it seemed as though the school authorities were primarily interested in churning out a given number of duplicated achievers every year, in making most of their pupils so intellectually generalized and malleable that they would not only all think alike but be able to adapt themselves to just about any task, irrespective of whatever preferences or innate predilections for one subject over another individual pupils may have had.

Well, idealist that I was (and still am, for that matter), I did what interested me and left school with fewer qualifications than those whose academic commitments extended right across the board, in a sort of balanced respect for the general curriculum. I don't in the least regret the fact!

Just as I am writing all this down in my journal, the girl upstairs has come down and is speaking to someone at the front door. I can't make out exactly what the other person, evidently a man, is saying, but he has apparently come to the wrong address, since she has such a reassuring air with strangers. You would think she was the most serious person on earth.

She is telling him that someone who used to live here has had all his mail forwarded-on, and that there is absolutely no-one by name of Erickson living here at present. Her composed, authoritative, and slightly imperious tone-of-voice puts everything into place straight-away. There is absolutely no possibility of a mistake!

I cease listening to her because she annoys me. I have heard all this nonsense before anyway. It is too theatrical to be worth taking seriously. She changes her mask when and where it suits her - at a moment's notice. However, earlier this week she was anything but the composed, authoritative, and slightly imperious citizen you could easily take her for today. She was like a little schoolgirl at the awkward age. Indeed, you would have thought, by the amount of noise coming from her room, that there was a kindergarten upstairs.

Yes, and her current boyfriend - a rather unassuming and reserved type of bloke who nevertheless usually acknowledges me whenever I encounter him in the hall - is more or less terrorized by her most evenings. She calls him every damn name under the sun just for an excuse, I suppose, to calm her highly-strung nervous system down a bit, to ease her psychic tensions by revelling in the power of her belligerent and somewhat strained voice. I don't know how he takes it all, but he still manages to give her a damn good lay from what I can judge by the absurdly violent way their mattress creaks at night. Maybe sex provides him with the only opportunity he gets to dominate her? Though even that is by no means certain!

Whether or not he enjoys being made to feel a fool, I haven't a clue. But he keeps coming back for more punishment all the same. Why, they are virtually a pair of sadomasochists! In fact, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he is secretly afraid of her. At least that would seem a reasonable supposition when you bear in mind what he has to go through most nights. She wouldn't get away with so much verbal abuse if she were dealing with one of my sort, though. Yet the chances of a man like me getting involved with a cow like that are pretty slim; I am far too sensible.

Anyway I think that, generally speaking, most women have this advantage over us; morality or, perhaps I should say, sexual deference prevents us from thrashing them. Now whenever I bump into her companion on the stairs or in the hall we remain fairly cordial, not simply because we don't particularly dislike each other but almost as though we were also subliminally aware of the physical violence we could inflict upon each other in the event of either or both of us losing our temper for some reason. But where she is concerned, nothing in the world could prevent her from being abusive if she felt confident that her gender protected her from

retaliatory violence. This, I believe, is the crux of the matter. She exploits male deference in her desire to dominate her boyfriend, and comes out top dog nine times out of ten. He evidently tolerates being abused, presumably for some ulterior motive.

However, although that is how it appears to me at present, I wouldn't stake my life on it, by any means! They only concern me insofar as the noise level is concerned and if that were kept down to a bare minimum, I wouldn't blink a speculative eyelid.

Now I think it's time for me to take a stroll around town and get myself a bite to eat. Enough writing for the time being!

SATURDAY EVENING

Since it was still raining I didn't go to the West End, but stayed fairly locally. Quite frankly, I lacked the courage to tackle the more crowded parts of town. Yet I wasn't feeling particularly happy about it, partly, I suspect, because I still hadn't got over the ignominy of being duped the other day. I went out feeling like a fool.

How shall I explain? Well, it all started last Thursday, when I received some money through the post from my long-suffering aunt. Considering that I hadn't even remotely expected anything of the kind, I was momentarily placed in a state-of-mind bordering on euphoria; I could have kissed somebody, even the upstairs neighbour. Since there was nobody around to kiss, however, I thanked my lucky stars and quickly got ready to go out. For some weeks I had been living on the borderline, resigned, in the absence of literary recognition, to having just enough money on which to scrape by. But this little surprise - evidently in response to the letter I had earlier written my aunt informing her of my dire financial straits - would now enable me to buy myself a record or even a new shirt, depending how I felt.

Since I already had enough shirts in the wardrobe, I opted for some music and duly headed towards the local record shop which had the widest selection of the sort of music I had in mind. My contribution to the proprietor's financial well-being would undoubtedly meet with a favourable response. He would welcome the money as though his very survival depended on it. After all, I would only be doing my bit to keep the economy turning, to put money into circulation instead of hoarding it like a miser, hiding it under the mattress or somewhere. It was bound to favour somebody.

When I eventually got to the shop, which happens to be in Muswell Hill, I straight-away proceeded to hunt among the hundreds of classical sleeves on display, having previously acquired a taste for French piano music, especially that of Ravel and Debussy. However, there were so many records from which to choose, so many I didn't want, and so many I hadn't heard before that, in my increasingly perplexed state-of-mind, I eventually settled for an album of piano sonatas by Scriabin, that little-known and rarely-played Russian composer. For one thing, it was piano music and, for another, its dignified cover readily appealed to me. Besides which, I was

beginning to feel a trifle dizzy, a shade uncomfortable about hunting around from one pile of sleeves to another without actually getting anywhere. I even felt slightly intimidated by the proprietor's suspicious glances, by his occasional optical stabs in my direction, which seemed to suggest that I was taking an awfully long time in deciding what to buy and that, if I wasn't an outright crank or a roguish and possibly none-too-experienced schemer who just might be a danger to the condition of his record sleeves, I could well be something worse. It seemed that my presence there was beginning to annoy him. Even so, that shouldn't have bothered me. Ordinarily I am anything but an easy customer to satisfy. I must have walked in and out of this particular shop on at least five previous occasions without having bought anything. Shopping annoys me, not least of all when it comes to music. Why, I'm virtually paranoid! About half the total records - and more than half the cassettes - I ever buy always end up either being sold to someone or, failing that, thrown in the dustbin. They fail to please me.

Well, I continued to nose through his selections, pulling out sleeves all over the place, looking at the pictures (if any), biting my lower lip, and generally making a fool of myself and perhaps also, unwittingly, of him. I had moved from the piano section to the concerto section, from the concerto section to the symphony section, from the symphony section to the organ section, from the organ section back to the piano section, from there to the vocal section and even, bizarrely, to the film section. It seemed as though I would never make up my mind, that I would gradually become a sort of permanent fixture, albeit one that was capable of a limited degree of autonomy. Strangely, it didn't appeal to me in the least to ask the proprietor to play something, because the chances were that I wouldn't like it, would tell him to take it off and play something else, only to discover, much to my disgust, that I didn't like that either.

To be sure, there had already been enough problems in my life with rock and jazz albums, without the necessity of my now adding so-called classical music to it as well. That would have been the last thing I wanted! So I shuffled back from the film section to the piano section, impulsively fished out the Scriabin, and rather self-consciously slapped the sleeve down on the proprietor's counter.

Something about the look the elderly man gave me, however, indicated that things weren't quite shaping up to his expectations. I wondered, for a moment, whether I hadn't made a mistake, whether it wouldn't be wiser to suddenly change my mind, fish out a cheaper or better one, though, to be honest, I didn't think it would be too expensive and was more concerned about the nature of the music. But before I could do or

suggest anything of the kind, before I could even move my lips, he had picked up the sleeve and begun searching for its record. As on other such occasions, he gave the disc, once found, what appeared to be a thorough inspection, taking due account of the grooves on both sides and even going so far as to take a measured vertical view of it, doubtless to ensure that it wasn't warped and therefore wouldn't start bouncing up and down on my turntable when I eventually got round to playing it. No, that condition was reserved for me, when he informed me, in his customarily suave tone-of-voice, that it would cost £4.99p. I almost fainted! I had unwittingly let myself in for one of the more expensive recordings. My former rather too optimistic expectations were rapidly deflated. I had naively imagined that the price would be somewhere in the region of £2.99p, like the previous record I had bought in his shop - a selection of Ravel's piano music, and a by-no-means bad selection either! But this record was obviously quite another story, and one that I could ill-afford, even with ten quid to-hand. Had he not made such a show of checking it, the crafty old devil, I would have informed him it was too expensive or, at any rate, musically unsuitable and that I would therefore have no option but to select something else. But his unassuming politeness had lulled me into a false sense of complacency, so I reluctantly fished out the note from my pocket and nervously handed it across the counter to his outstretched hand. After all, I had only myself to blame!

Well, as can be imagined, I beat a demoralized retreat and headed straight back home, oblivious of the book and wine shops which would otherwise have arrested my attention and possibly even secured my humble patronage. Somehow, I knew from the moment I bought this cursed record that I had made a dreadful mistake; the rest of the afternoon was against me. Even the leather bag in which I had hidden it wasn't really protective enough. Every glance from other people would inevitably condemn me. I walked back rather hurriedly with my head bowed most of the way; for I didn't want to see or to be seen by anyone, least of all anyone whose face was familiar to me. But when I got indoors and tentatively, nervously, almost reluctantly placed the disc on the turntable, turned-up the volume, put on my headphones, and sat down in my creaky armchair, everything was gradually revealed to me; I *had* made a dreadful mistake! Never in my life had I encountered such an appalling row, never before experienced music so far removed from my tastes.

When I came to my senses I was in a fit of rage; I could have smashed something - the Venus statuette, for instance. The room became as lugubrious as the music, the clouds pressed heavily against the window

panes, and I cursed to myself, as though complaining to an imaginary audience: "To think that there are so-called cultured people who are actually impressed by this sort of noise! They're all mad, absolutely mad!" So saying, I stamped my foot on the floor in Hamsun-esque vein and then exasperatedly threw myself onto the bed. Yes, I had certainly put money into circulation all right, but, for once, I had duped myself in the process. Things were looking awfully down that afternoon!

Largely on account of my financial constraints, I don't buy records or cassettes all that often these days. But, whenever I do, I'm usually fortunate enough to be able to appreciate the greater part of what I hear, particularly the classical music which, for reasons of economy, I almost invariably buy on disc. On Thursday, however, the law of averages was against me. I certainly couldn't appreciate the greater part of what ...