

I

[11] THE PRIEST NARRATES

On All Souls' Day the doctor and I rode into town in order to pick up Clara in the evening, Clara having traveled in a few days earlier in the company of my two daughters.¹ As we came to an opening that framed the pretty town, lying midway or so up the mountain within the backdrop of the broad plain, we saw a crowd of people thronging toward a gentle incline that lay to one side. We guessed immediately where this train of people was headed and we joined them so that for once we, too, could watch the moving festival dedicated to the dead that is celebrated this day in Catholic towns. We found the whole area full of people already. It was peculiar to see life on the graves, forebodingly illuminated by the dully shining autumn sun. As we left the trodden path, we soon saw pretty groups gathered around individual graves: here girls in their bloom, holding hands with their younger brothers and sisters, crowned their mother's grave; there at the grave of her children lost so young a mother stood in silence with no need for consecrated water to represent her tears, for tears sanctified by sweet melancholy flowed gently down to freshen the mounds. Here and there men stood seriously and contemplatively in front of individual graves that held an early departed friend or perhaps a girlfriend they would never forget. Here, all of life's severed relationships were revived for the spectator who was familiar with the people [12] and the circumstances; brothers came again to brothers and children to parents; at this moment all were one family again. Only the loved one who had had her beloved snatched away by death could not appear in this crowd; she had perhaps chosen the early hours in which to cover the beloved place with her tears, all alone with the morning dew. The beautiful monument of a youth who died here as a stranger was decorated with flowers in such a delicate and thoughtful way that it must have been done by loving hands. How moving this custom is, my companion said, and how meaningful it is that the graves should be decorated with species that are late flowering: isn't it fitting that these autumn flowers should be consecrated to the dead, who hand us cheerful flowers from their dark chambers in spring as the eternal witness to the continuation of life and to the eternal resurrection.

In the middle of the square stood a small chapel incapable of holding the crowd. Soon after our arrival it had filled up so much that a long queue formed

from the doors way across the graves. We sat to one side on an old and mossy gravestone whose inscription had long become illegible and we listened to the festive office, whose course we could follow only from the reactions of those who stood outside. We sat sunk in silent melancholy. How many of those who were now walking on the graves would be lying beneath them in the following year?

Where might our friend be tarrying? A few times we thought that we had seen her from afar, but without really being able to identify her or to get any closer to her in the crowd. We remembered that we still had a long way to go. She had told us that, in any case, we would find her at the time of departure at the other end of town, in a Benedictine cloister on a hill. We saw that it was time and we left in silence.

In the town everything was empty and deserted; we only stayed long enough to get some refreshments and then we climbed up to the [13] beautiful cloister. On arrival we were shown into the library, where a young, well-educated clergyman awaited us who seemed to have the duty of receiving guests and making conversation with them. We soon learned from him that the recently deceased prince had sent him on various journeys and that he had now become both the supervisor of this collection of books and the teacher of the philosophical sciences in the cloister. He showed us several rarities that were entrusted to his care. However, we were more drawn to the magnificent view from the windows, which looked out onto the distant plain and up to the hill where we had been earlier, than to these dead treasures. The plain was covered with towns and villages and the powerful river wound through it, becoming visible in places as if it were only a thin, silver ribbon [Band].²

He had already told us beforehand that we would have to wait here for Clara, who still had to speak to the prior of the cloister about certain affairs; several of the cloister's goods were locked up with those of her family, and some of her forebears' goods, too, were to be found in the care of his most excellent benefactor. Some of the portraits that were hanging in the hall, he explained, were of those very forebears; even the brother of one of them was portrayed in his monastic habit. We learned that he had sincerely dedicated himself to his profession and that he had died and been buried here. Had we doubted the clergyman in the slightest, the striking resemblance between the picture and our friend would have been enough to have persuaded us of the truth of what he was saying. We couldn't express enough amazement about this resemblance coming back two centuries later, and the clergyman opined that such a sight could well provoke belief in the transmigration of souls.

What is even more peculiar, I said, is that perhaps just as great a resemblance prevails between the fates of these two distant relatives as between their external appearances, and from the latter one would take them to be at least brother and sister. Who knows what led this earlier brother (for such I must call him) to these solitary walls and drove him to see out his days in seclusion. [14] Perhaps they were circumstances similar to those that make our friend prefer the peace of our quiet valley so much to life in the world or even in a larger town. Both of us have

often requested that she move, for we believe that the solitude that continually keeps all her memories alive will undermine her health in the long run.

So, the clergyman said, she still lives in that secluded house where I visited her six years ago?

The very same one, I answered. Years ago a stranger had bought the land for it and built it; while fleeing six years ago she found it lying empty, bought it at a relatively low price, with the garden and vineyards that belonged to it, and she is living there again, for she has been expelled once more from the paternal estates.

At that time, the clergyman said, she had no relationship with our cloister; I had to steal the visit in secret, driven by a curiosity blended with silent respect. Certainly they were painful circumstances in which she found herself; and the late prelate of our cloister, who had always had a lot of influence on the family, was particularly against the marriage with a Protestant, as was, indeed, the whole of the Catholic nobility in the neighborhood—for, as the last heiress, through her all the beautiful goods passed on to the other side. Today is the very first visit that she has paid to our cloister, which, if I remember correctly, she had entered only a few times as a child with her parents. The sole ownership of such considerable goods, which she has now disavowed, changed things perhaps; besides, the present director is more open-minded and he has a better judgment of these times, in which everyone should be thinking about mutual deliverance rather than about feeding secret disputes.

The doctor, who until now had been spending his time enjoying the various pictures, broke in here with the words: It seems to me that the difference between our times and the previous ones becomes no more apparent [15] than in such a collection of portraits. These princes from the Thirty Years' War and earlier—how solid their heads are, how cultivated and proud they are from every angle.³ Look at the foreheads and eyes that these soldiers have, as do those distinguished for their actions, and whom we now see here side by side! I would like to know whether any single one of the last male offspring of these families carries such an expression of great spiritual feeling and strength of character in himself as this head does, and whether the dying out of the lineage hasn't simply brought the forbears' higher traits into the female form instead?

At that very moment Clara entered the room in the highest of spirits, and only now did the resemblance become so frighteningly apparent that we all had to stop ourselves from betraying what we were feeling. For I don't know why each of us avoided sharing this observation with her or, alternatively, why we let it only be guessed. The direction of her eyes drew me toward the open window, and as she caught sight of the blue and remote hills, her eyes filled with tears and she said: Behind those hills yonder, which will become bluer and bluer and over which the sun is now about to sink, there lies buried everything I have. Oh Albert, Albert, we had to leave the quiet sanctuary that united us on this side, only to be separated for so long—oh, who knows how long. Hardly have I lost you when I am chased away yet again, and I am torn away even from that small area of ground that covers you, which was the very last thing I had of you. Robbers desecrate the

graves of my fathers; yet you slumber with them. Today even the poorest people go to visit their loved ones' graves; I alone could not go to adorn yours. Yet my tears flow here peacefully and purely; whatever part of the earth receives them, they penetrate their way to you by a magical force and refresh you in your grave.

I was alarmed by such a quick and unexpected passion and I hoped to cut it short by trying to link the discussion to general things. I grant you, I said, this commemoration of the dead has had a strong effect on me. It has become [16] so clear to me again how the life that we now live is a completely one-sided one and that it will become complete only if what is more highly spiritual could combine with it and if those, whom we call deceased, were not to stop living with us, but were simply to make up, as it were, another part of the whole family. The ancient Egyptian practices have something terrible about them, but they are based on a thought that is in itself true and correct.⁴ We should support all festivals and customs in which we are reminded of a connection with the world beyond.

Forgive me, broke in the clergyman, who had drawn closer in the meantime and who had heard the last words, but I feel I have to express another opinion here. Now, today's commemoration, for example, certainly has something moving about it; however, if its purpose is to support the thought that we can be connected to the inhabitants of that other world, then I would hold this commemoration to be one that is almost detrimental and I would submit that it be abolished in your church, as so many others have been. Since no one responded, he continued: We who are living are allocated to this world only once; here we should do as much good as we can, we should show our every love and trust to those to whom we are close and we should do so for as long as we remain with them on their path. And we would certainly fulfill this duty to each other far more closely and conscientiously if we were continually to remind ourselves of their mortality—that at their death any connection we have to them will be removed and that then neither the passion of our love can reach them nor that of our hate, our low disposition.

Perhaps, Clara replied, the lower cannot act on the higher, but it is more certain that the higher can act within the lower, and thus the thought of some community would not be so inconsistent.

If, that is, the clergyman continued, both of them are within one and the same world, as spirit and body belong to one world in our present life. However, the deceased are quite dead in respect of this sensible world and they can't possibly bring forth an effect in a region for which their tools are as limited as their receptivity.

[17] Your speech, I said to him, reminds me of the explanation which our philosophizing theologians give today of the wonder of God's extraordinary effect on the sensible world, without thinking how much of this world is itself completely nonsensible.

Nevertheless, he replied, we must honor these old divisions. A reasonable person could see only with regret how these divisions are shifting, that everything is now flowing into everything else without any differentiation at all, and that soon we will not be completely at home in either one world or the other.

But you yourself grant, Clara said, that at least in us something else lives, something that is other than a mere material essence: the spirit. You will therefore also have to admit that through this latter we really do have a link to that world and that, even if we accept that the material is cut off from the spiritual, there is no proof against a possible connection between what is spiritual in us and the powers of another world.

Granted, he answered, if our spirit really could ever rise up to pure spirituality. That is, if, through its link to matter, the spirit were not completely separated from the purity of the world to which it is supposed to rise only after this tie has been broken.

With such a complete separation, I replied, you must also reject any concept of that higher world.

Indeed, it is so, he answered: any concept of it that reason or understanding may want to form. We have within us a single point that is open and through which heaven shines in. This is our heart or, to be more precise, our conscience. In the latter we find one law and one purpose, a purpose that cannot be from this world, for more often than not it is in conflict with it. Thus, for us it serves as a pledge from a higher world and it raises him who has learned to follow it to the comforting thought of immortality.

And to nothing more? Clara responded. The word "immortality" [18] seems to me to be far too weak for the impression I have. What do cold words and merely negative concepts have to do with ardent [*heißer*] longing?⁵ Are we satisfied in this life with a purely bleak existence? Does nature make us put up with such generalities?

Belief is simple, he answered, as is the duty from which it comes.

You make out that you are basing the greatest or highest certainty within the heart and yet you don't give the heart any credit at all. We cannot watch an old friend go away, whose duty calls him far away from us, without our thoughts following him to those remote places, without our vividly imagining his location and surroundings, without our wanting to know whether he has kept his old habits or whether he has changed them.

A separation in this life is one thing, he said, and the transition into a world with nothing in common with this world is another.

For me it seems otherwise, I said. The opposite is itself precisely what is nearest. Deserts, mountains, distant lands, and seas can separate us from a friend in this life; the distance between this life and the other is no greater than that between night and day or vice versa. A heartfelt thought, together with our complete withdrawal from anything external, transfers us into that other world, and perhaps this other world becomes all the more hidden from us, the nearer to us it is.

I do not deny that, he answered. The spiritual world may merge with us, but our lives do not merge with it. Our view always remains restricted to our inner being and it cannot follow the destiny of departed friends, which I regard anyhow as a kind of selfish love.

How so? asked Clara.

Even in this life we so easily imagine that our friends and companions through life are *ours*, when really they are only God's; they are free beings, subject only to the One. We enjoy them only as a gift; death reminds us of this even if nothing else does, although it would seem wise always to remember even in life that there isn't anything we can call ours in the true sense of the word, that the vows of poverty, [19] deprivation, and in particular obedience are vows taken in relation to a higher and hidden will and are vows that each person should take upon himself. Although we would become all the more cautious about making the goods that we use completely our own—particularly, however, those finest goods of all, which we call love and friendship—if we remembered that the essence of the soul—which we may indeed draw unto us with the full force of our spirit and our heart, and yes, if it were possible, which we would fuse with our existence—is only in God's hand and that it is to God's hand that we must sooner or later entrust it. A moment nevertheless comes when the soul no longer belongs to us, but belongs once more to the whole, when it returns home into its original freedom and perhaps, in accordance with God's will, begins a new course that will never meet our own again and that serves to fulfill a quite different purpose from what it fulfilled here in working to develop our inner being and ennobling our essence.

So, Clara said, you don't believe that in friendship and love there is something that is by its very nature eternal, a tie that God has joined that neither death nor God himself could break. Thousands of relationships may break apart in this life, perhaps they only ever affected our inner being in a hostile or at least disturbing way, but the tie of a truly divine love is as unbreakable as the essence of the soul in which it is founded and is as eternal as a word from God. If children had been given to me and then they were all taken away, I could never consider it as chance or a temporary fortune to have been the mother of these souls; I would feel—yes, I would know—that they belong to me eternally and I to them and that no power on Earth or in heaven could take them from me or me from them.

Certainly, he answered, that is the true maternal feeling—yet, even here, in itself the natural relationship doesn't produce that eternal feeling, rather it is the feeling that makes the relationship eternal; for how else could there be so many unnatural mothers? This shows us that only our attitude is truly eternal. And if we can consider those natural relationships with some devotion [20], those relationships that arise despite ourselves, that an invisible hand joins, that have for themselves a divine confirmation—

Don't you believe, Clara interrupted, that other higher relationships, such as love and friendship, are also of a divine nature; that a quiet, unconscious, but thereby all the more compelling, necessity draws one soul to another?

I do not deny, he said, the workings of such a natural power, although I don't quite understand it. But once man has come into this conflict and contradiction with nature—and this I understand just as little, too—but once a deep depravity has taken root in man's nature such that he no longer has the capacity to draw purely from one or the other source of life and it is almost as dangerous to direct

man toward freedom as it is to direct him toward necessity—as regards this I confess that after such an aberration I am highly doubtful about any relationship in which freedom plays even only a part and I do not venture lightly into this labyrinth. I let justice be done to the warmth of each beautiful heart, only let us take care not to shape the inspiration of feelings and the inventions of longing into general truths; for then there will no longer be any divisions. The grim and unruly mind will have the same right as the bright and ordered one, and we know what monsters have arisen from this drive to realize creatures from uncontrolled longing or from wild imagination.

The doctor, for whom this discussion hadn't seemed to be right for some time, spoke up here and said: You are right, only the most ordered minds should occupy themselves with the question of a life hereafter, only bright and joyful minds should approach these regions of eternal joy and peace. No one should devote themselves to this investigation until they have gained a firm and solid ground here, within nature, on which they can base their thoughts. Only those who understand our current life should speak about death and a hereafter. Any skimming over of our current condition, any knowledge that hasn't developed purely from what is present and real and that tries to anticipate something [21] to which the spirit wouldn't naturally have led is reprehensible and leads to fanciful imagination and error.

In this way, said the clergyman, would you reject all knowledge about things in the hereafter, as I do; for who, indeed, could say that they have understood life?

I do not know, the doctor replied, whether anyone can say that; but I do know that I don't consider it to be absolutely impossible. We simply mustn't seek it too high up, we mustn't cut the root off right at the beginning, which draws strength, life, and substance into itself from nature's soil and which can then, indeed, push its blooms right up to the heavens. And we must especially give up the thought of deriving life from something different and higher, as if we were simply wanting to grasp that. Not "top down" but "bottom up" is my motto. And, I believe, this motto is also quite appropriate to the humility that is so fitting for us in many respects. However, he added, I see that the sun is already setting behind the hills and I am concerned about our friend and the autumn evening air; so let us set off.

Clara quickly bade farewell with a glance toward the distant hills, and once my daughters had been picked up from town we rode back down again toward the mountain entrance and our valley. We sat together in silence and Clara was quiet and pensive. Finally, the doctor brought up a discussion about monastic life: Why do people usually think that monastic life is so pleasant and beautiful? Is it because everyone likes to think that behind the monk's habit there lies the ideal of a clear and peaceful person who has found his own equilibrium; an ideal that everyone wants to realize, but which they nevertheless don't know how to? For certainly only the mob can be influenced by external motivations, the life of luxury, the carefreeness of this state, and similar such things.

Only the beautiful location of the cloisters could win me over, Theresa said, the hills on which they are so often built, the fertile valleys that surround them.

[22] Isn't it the case, I said, that each of us has the vague feeling that bliss lies in not possessing anything, for possessions cause worry and responsibility. And because poverty and privation are hard and painful things, monastic life has to appear as a true ideal, for there everyone lives a happy and leisurely life without possessing anything.

It seems to me, Clara said, that anything that is unchanging inspires us with a feeling of deep respect, just as its opposite decreases our esteem. People whom I see living normal lives always appear to me to be essentially fluctuating and uncertain. Who knows whether the person, whom I now see acting with greatness [*groß*] and truth, will not subsequently be bowed down by the force of circumstances and will later act timidly [*kleinmütig*] and against his heart.⁶ Who knows whether the person who today appears clear, free, and pure will not sooner or later become eclipsed, shackled, and torn apart by a violent passion. The person who makes a resolution about his whole life and who makes it in such a way that he calls God and the world as his witness, who makes this resolution under conditions which stamp it with the seal of indissolubility, and if I understand him as acting levelheadedly and through his own free will, it is *this* person who will always waken my respect. Why else do we say that prior to death no one is blessed apart from him, we might say, who dies while living—and what else is this solemn vow of deprivation and renunciation of worldly things other than a death in the living body?

It surprises me, I said, that none of us has cited the beneficent effect that a carefree seclusion could have on the arts and sciences.

Could, answered the doctor, but that it hasn't had for some time now; and then we would only have learned works and the hard work of those who put together collections to cite as proof thereof.

Nevertheless, I answered, the arts and learning would suffer more than a little if all these rich cloisters with their magnificent buildings, their considerable collections of books, their churches [23] with their many altar pieces, their murals, and their artistic wood carvings were to disappear.

Yes, said Theresa, and the whole area would become dreary. Indeed, I don't know what sight is more beautiful than a magnificent building with towers and domes rising up in the middle of nature's riches, surrounded by rippling cornfields with water, woods, and vineyards in the distance, where everywhere everything is alive with the hustle and bustle of people. The most beautiful town does not have this effect on me; it represses nature such that only at some distance from the city can nature come to be found once more. But the simplicity of mixing the unbounded richness of a country district with what is magnificent and great, this alone is what is true and fitting.

But then, I said, my Theresa would have to include castles and the nobility's beautiful country seats, too.

Oh no, she answered, above all I love constancy, where I see things keeping or staying together. Even in our time goods pass from one hand to another, one family dies out, nobility moves into the city, and if they ever move out of the city

it is only in order to offend the peace and quiet of these beautiful valleys with their contrasting way of life and their loud entertainment.

You are right, my child, I responded, but don't forget that your point of view on the subject can't be the one that is generally held, at least not in the wild times we are facing now. Of the significance that these institutions once held, they have perhaps kept only the picturesque. However, one will find it easier and more agreeable to close down the institutions altogether than to restore them in accordance with their original aim in a way that would be appropriate for our times. When I see such a quiet cloister down below in the valley, or go past one on a hill from which it looks down, I have often thought to myself: if one day the time should come for all these monuments of a bygone time, please let at least one of our princes think to preserve one or two of these sanctuaries, to keep the buildings and their goods together, and to endow them to the arts and sciences. [24] However, only he who really lives within the spirit—the true academic and artist—is truly spiritual. Merely exercising piety as a way of life, without combining it with lively and active scientific research, leads to emptiness and eventually even to that mechanicalness devoid of heart and soul that would itself have belittled monastic life even in times such as ours. In those centuries when knowledge did not spread far, when monks were the only depositories of science and knowledge, they were also the true clergymen, the truly spiritual; since then the rest of the world has outstripped them so powerfully that they have increasingly ceased to be spiritual any more. The sciences have the same end as religion; their best times were and are those in which they are in accord with it. However, if there are countries in which the cloisters were reordered into schools when the change in faith came about, then that is not what I meant.

So what do you mean? the doctor asked.

What I meant was this: it is here on this hill that the next great German poem should be composed, it is here in this valley that a Platonic academy should gather, like that in Cosentina. Men from all of the arts and sciences should live a truly spiritual life here, in harmony and free from worry: they shouldn't be locked up in towns, in the constrictive conditions of society and far from nature. For the German spirit loves solitude as it loves freedom; anything conventional oppresses it. Unlike the tame scholar or poet who puts on whatever appearance so-called society desires and takes its praise and applause, the fodder of vanity, from society's hands and lips as he also takes the fodder of his physical needs, the German spirit loves to roam through woods, hills, and valleys, suckled only by nature's breast. The German spirit is not like a regular river that is dammed in and flows through only prescribed banks and countries; it is like the moistness in the earth whose secret pathways no one explores. This moistness nevertheless penetrates and stimulates everything wherever it goes; it gushes forth clear and free, unconcerned whether someone happens along this path and refreshes himself therein, but strengthens and refreshes him who does not shun the [25] solitary mountain tracks, the cliffs, and the remote valleys. It is a shame that after fully developing all of this in my head, I often have to tell myself that it will all remain only a pleasant

dream, for the Germans seem to have been destined never to be treated in accordance with their own characteristics. The Germans have to have foreign standards forced on them, because those who could change this situation so seldom have the heart to be as they truly are—for what would the neighbors say if one wanted to treat the Germans as German!

So, the doctor said, let us congratulate ourselves anew on our fortunate situation in which we can spend our days in continual traffic with nature without thereby being cut off from the world. I have seen the most beautiful cloisters in the world. I have often been moved by a longing for the contemplative life that seems to pass so eternally and peacefully in places such as on Monte Cassino, in the woods of Camadoli, and in the beautiful cloisters by the Main and the Rhine. But I always changed my mind when I noticed how far away from nature that whole way of life leads, how a tediousness and even disgust towards nature came about as a consequence of the self-torment that is imposed upon the committed as a strict law. Out of all possible orders there is only one I wish to be maintained, one that appears to me to fill a need in human society. It is the Carthusian Order.⁷ Under this order's statutes so many people have been able to continue lives that would otherwise have become quite unbearable. It is the only sanctuary for those who are truly unfortunate, for those who have a hasty deed or error to bewail to which the enthusiasm of youth or social circumstances drove them, and whose consequences are dreadful and can no longer be rectified. The world and its hustle and bustle that takes anyone in its grip who doesn't cut himself off from it, the very participation therein that awakens their fate would break their heart. Life itself would be a humiliation to them had they not already entered a place of peace and seclusion here, a place similar to the one to which we go after death, where the pain about what is irrevocable fades into melancholy and into a general recognition [26] that there is no longer anything desirable in life for the person who has overcome it and a recognition that the fate of a mortal person is above all a sad one. Nowhere have I made more interesting acquaintances than in the Carthusian cloisters, particularly those in France; nowhere have I gained a more profound look into human life and its manifold intricacies. What refuge other than the grave would remain open to him who was so unfortunate as to have been blamed for a wrong he did not do, and thereby to have forfeited his happiness in life, if this charitable society didn't open its arms to him. Underneath its outward appearance of sheer austerity, this society nurtures the most benevolent intentions. It is where life, as it were, flows timelessly by and the quiet existence of the plants is the only existence in which the cloisters' members still take an active part, holding up to them a lasting picture of calmness and seclusion. I even learned a lot about my own craft from the members of this order, for by observing generally, and plants in particular, over a long period of time they have learned about the wonderful relationships plants have to people.

It is true, I said, I have often been surprised at how much you achieved with things that appeared to be minor and inconsequential and that appeared to bear absolutely no relation to the danger of the situation.

—and just because of that, he added, I couldn't have used them in a city where people are best acquainted with the most dangerous remedies and where they have no belief in those simple things.

Thus, Clara said, would you have thereby preferred a residence in a small country village to one in a city?

Not just as a consequence of that, he answered. The natural scientist belongs in the country. I have learned more about physics from the farmers than from the academics' lecture halls. Observation is still the best. How much there is to observe from early morning right up to the complete silence of nightfall outside, from living through one long summer's day, whose end one does not think one will live to see. Here I have observed things about the most universal effects of nature; I have observed things about light, sound, the role of water on the earth and in the clouds, the coming and going of natural forces; I have watched animal life, [27] but in particular I have observed things about plants that no academic could have told me. Whosoever does not see natural life as a whole, who doesn't come to understand its language in its very details, also does not know the extent to which the human body is itself truly a smaller nature within a larger one, a smaller nature that has unbelievably many analogies and links to the larger—links that no one would think to exist had observation and application not taught us that it is so.

I am often terrified of these links, Clara said here, and of the thought that everything is related to man. Indeed, if another power within me didn't balance out this horror of nature, I would die from the thought of this eternal night and retreat of light, of this eternally struggling beingness that never actively is. Only the thought of God makes our inner being light and peaceful again.

At that very moment the lights of a nearby house not far from her home shone into the carriage that itself came to a stop just a few minutes later. Theresa went up with Clara and we others all went our own ways home.