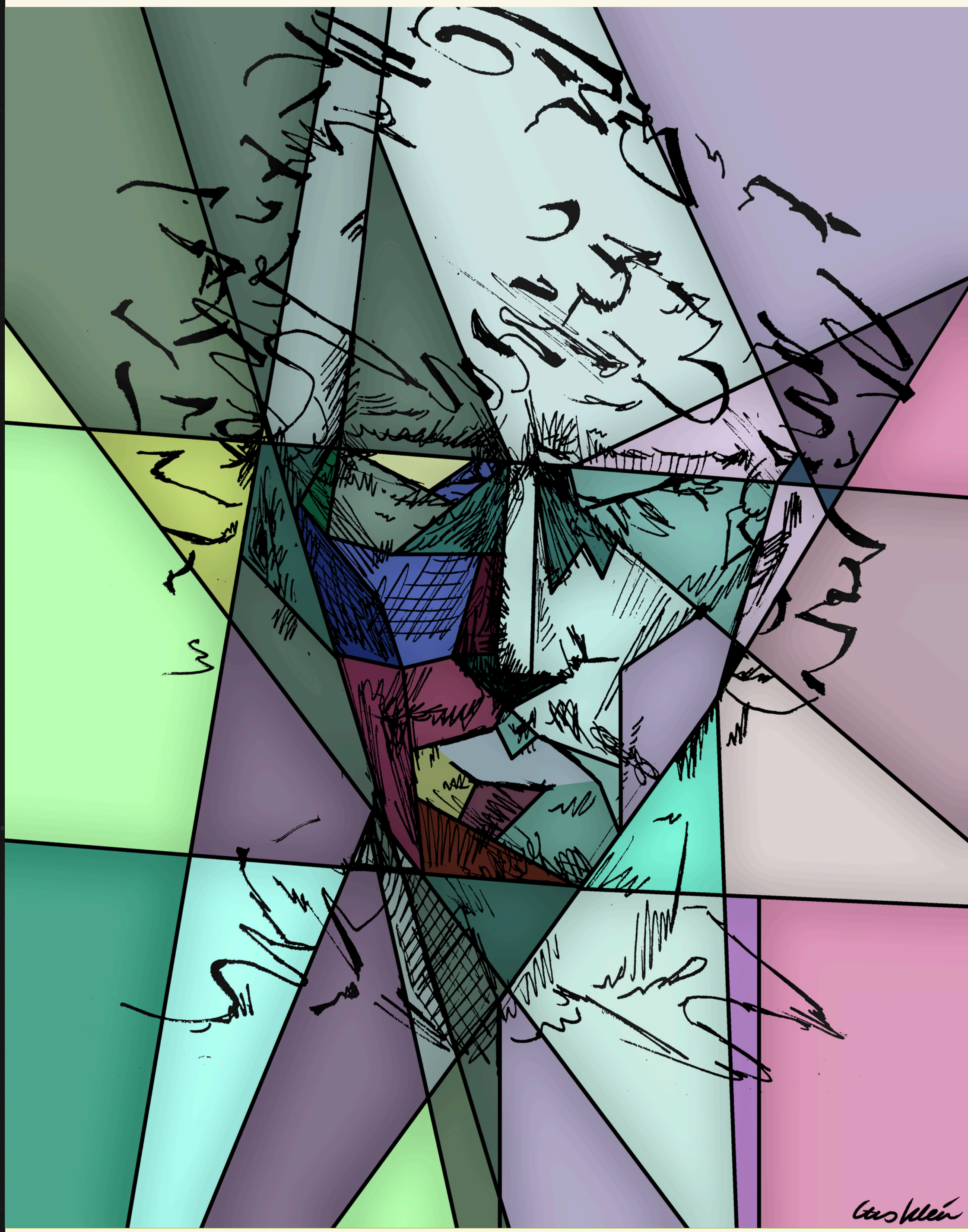
ERASMUS

Edition 9



think deeper.

SEPTEMBER 2024 - SOLSTICE MEDITATIONS

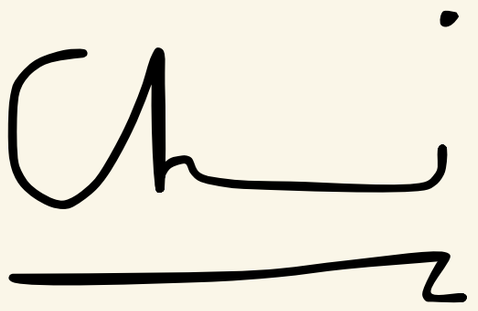
Dear voyager...

Welcome to this little space where ideas abode and abound.

Welcome to a reading experience devoid of topic, time and word constraints - just as our writers are devoid of topic, time and word constraints.

Welcome to *Erasmus*.

I hope you enjoy your stay with us,
and I hope the ideas in these essays will stay with you.



Chenrui Zhang

Cher lecteur...

As I enter another year bustling with Erasmian thoughts, I could not have spent part of my summer doing anything better than editing this month's edition of Erasmus, *Solstice Meditations*.

Without further ado, this edition begins with an Erasmus regular, Elias Turing, on the exciting possibilities of quantum entanglement in history and for our future. Maisie's interdisciplinary essay follows, full of stimulating ideas on autobiography and self-portraiture. Guillermo's fascinating essay on the travels of a Swiss physician in search of dragons will make you think twice about the stories we take for granted. *War and Peace* will no longer be just your doorstopper after reading Andrei's pensive reflection on a certain prince created by one of the greatest and most influential authors of all time. Chenrui ends this edition with her fruitful musings on the paradox that is modern-day happiness.

In shaping the insightful essays that follow, as editor me, I am but a cog to make the wonderful Erasmus machine work; the honour and pride as editor is still truly mine, so I would like to thank all of the writers, Chenrui and our very talented artist, Otto Klein.

In reading this edition, you are giving these wonderful creators the time and space to be, as previous editor Charlotte put it so well. So, hoping that you draw, if not wisdom, at least some Erasmian inspiration from what you are about to read, I can only end in thanking you, our dear reader.

Jolina Bradley
our constructive deconstructivist
and September editor

The dance of quantum entanglement & its wonderful afterparty

Imagine two particles, separated by light-years of empty space, communicating instantaneously with one another, in perfect harmony. Now this is not science fiction, but the strange, quasi-magical reality of quantum entanglement, one of the most profound phenomena in the natural world. To understand it is to peer beyond the veil of classical physics into a universe governed by uncertainty, potentiality, connection. At the heart of entanglement lies an idea that, once grasped, truly transforms our perceptions of reality. The world, as we think we may know it—predictable, contained, and deterministic—is, in fact, far, far stranger and much more interconnected than we ever imagined.

Quantum entanglement defies not only our intuitive understanding of the universe but also the very laws that classical physics has relied on for centuries. However, in order to fully appreciate this marvel of physics, some

understanding on its discovery may be necessary, if not a merely helpful starting point: in the early twentieth century, as scientists began probing the world of the smallest units of matter, they quickly discovered that classical physics with a Newtonian basis—neat, orderly descriptions of motion and forces—was inadequate when explaining subatomic behaviour. That is until the discovery of quantum mechanics. Now, this is all information you can gather from a first watch of Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023) but let us unearth quantum physics' non-atomic-bomb implications: the set of rules governing the tiny particles making up our universe (electrons, photons, other elementary particles) were turned on their head. One of its most counterintuitive propositions deemed it impossible for particles to have fixed properties until observation. An electron, for instance, does not definitively exist in one place or another, but rather exists in a state of superposition, where all possible locations and speeds exist simultaneously. It is only when we observe, measure and look at the particle that it 'chooses' a definite state. This alone is a mind-bending notion, but that is before quantum entanglement enters the scene…

When two particles become entangled, their fates are intertwined in such a way that measuring one particle immediately affects the state of the other, no matter their distance from each other. So if one particle spins in a certain direction, its entangled twin will instantaneously spin in the opposite direction. Albert Einstein famously disparaged this as 'spooky action at a distance' as it violated the very cornerstone laying the base for his theory of relativity: that nothing, not even information, can travel faster than the speed of light. And yet repeated experiments

have shown that entanglement is real; and the universe, it seems, operates with a level of connectivity and synchronicity stretching beyond the reach of classical physics.

To fully grasp the impact of entanglement, its implications on our understanding of space, time, and causality cannot be ignored. In classical (pre-quantum) physics, objects are assumed to exist independently of one another, with definite properties that do not depend on observation. Entanglement simply demolishes this assumption. It suggests that particles don't have independent existences at all. Their properties are intertwined with those of other particles, and these connections persist across vast distances. It is as if the universe itself is a network of interdependencies, with every particle affecting every other in ways that are not immediately visible but profoundly real. This radical interconnectedness is a concept that finds echoes in philosophical and spiritual traditions, which has long chartered the universe's interrelated vastness. In certain Eastern philosophies, reality is not seen as a collection of isolated, discrete entities, but as an interconnected web where every action has its influence (like the butterfly effect, but better). Quantum entanglement gives a scientific backbone to this idea; and suggests that any idea of separation is merely illusory, that even particles light-years apart remain bound together in deep, mysterious ways.

Beyond its philosophical implications, quantum entanglement also opens up new technological frontiers. Scientists are already exploring its potential in quantum computing, a field that promises to revolutionise the way we process information. Unlike classical computers, which

process information in binary (ones and zeros), quantum computers leverage the superposition of quantum states, allowing them to perform many calculations simultaneously. That is not to say quantum computers do, or cannot use binary code, but quantum computers use qubits (quantum bits, instead of the bits of classical computers) to store exponentially more information. In short, qubits process information differently from classical computers; and entanglement plays a key role in this, enabling qubits to be correlated in ways that classical bits could never be. This could, and most likely will, lead to a computing revolution where the unsolvable problems of today are tackled in mere moments compared to the millennia that it would take classical computers.

In a way, this is already happening, but in the reverse: quantum cryptography uses entanglement to create unbreakable codes. In classical encryption methods, a key is needed to unlock an encoded message with the Achilles' heel being that this key can be intercepted or copied. However, with quantum cryptography, any attempt to intercept this key would disturb the entangled particles, alerting the communicating parties of the intrusion (remember the widely interconnected web?), resulting in a perfectly secure channel of communication.

Quantum entanglement may play a role in biology too. Some scientists believe that processes like photosynthesis or even the navigation of migratory birds might involve quantum effects. If this turns out to be true, the implication that follows is that life itself, the biology of our very existence, is entangled with the strange, uncertain rules of quantum mechanics. As a result, quantum entanglement

does more than just add a complicated wrinkle to our understanding of physics: it destabilises and revolutionises our essence of reality.

The traditional worldview that might see the universe as a vast collection of separate, independent entities has been, and will continually be, replaced by something far more intricate and wonderful. At the quantum level, reality is not a series of isolated events but a deeply interconnected nexus where distance is irrelevant, the flow of time working in unexpected ways. Quantum entanglements reveals a universe much stranger than we ever imagined, a universe where the lines between the sharply defined here and there, now and then, blur into a single, intricate dance. It has the world explode into wonderous afterparty— like something out of *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022).

In a post-covid, postmodernist world of polyphonic symphony, perhaps this is not so difficult grasp, let alone imagine celebrating. However, looking at this dance through the prism of quantum entanglement, even upon catching a glimpse, the world never looks quite the same again…

Elias Turing
our experiment

On Self-Portraiture

Autobiographies and self-portraits offer a creator the most authentic, intimate and indeed natural form of representation—or do they? After all, surely there are no experiences, no emotions easier that a writer can convey most genuinely than those that they have lived themselves? No image easier to convey more honestly or personally than the one that they see reflected at them in the mirror?

Within his seminal *De Pictura* (*On Painting*, 1435), Leon Battista Alberti theorises that painting was invented by Narcissus, the man who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. The artist's desire to mirror images that they perceive within themselves onto the canvas indeed form one of the biggest forces behind painting's visual artistry. Within the context of today, social media content reflects our continued preoccupation with self-representation and image. In portraying the self, one must consider many factors: how, where, with whom, the perspective chosen, as well as what's both included and excluded from the image. Creators often[1] employ distancing techniques, particularly temporal ones, to capture moments more clearly. This concept of distance between the creator and the self they create is expressed by Lejeune's definition of the

autobiography as a fundamentally "retrospective" [1] work. On the one hand, the insistence on this retrospective nature of autobiography acts not only an attempt to distinguish the genre of autobiography from other similar forms of writing (like that of a diary) which also seek to conjure the image of one's most immediate emotional response to a given situation.

On the other hand, the autobiographical writer—as a narrator and artist, in being so separated from the realm of the narrated self-subject—may be able to conduct a post-mortem-like level of self-dissection, thus only in retrospect can they uncover the psychological insight into their own life that was once hidden.

In his genre defining study of verbal self-representation, Lejeune's titular notion of the *Pacte Autobiographique* (*Autobiographical Pact*) separates autobiography from adjacent literary forms. He also expresses that the reader must agree that the text that they read is the true story of the writer's lived experiences. For Lejeune, the first-person autobiographical subject and the retrospective auto biographer (whose name is credited on the cover) must also share the same identity. It is thus the role of the auto biographer to use rhetoric as a means of convincing their readers to enter this pact. However, the very same year that Lejeune publishes *Pacte Autobiographique* (1975) come the

[1] "Récit rétrospective en prose qu'une personne réel fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité [Retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of their own existence, when they focus on their individual life, in particular on the history of their character]." Translations are my own.

experimental autobiographical works of *Roland Barthes par [by] Roland Barthes* and George Perec's *W ou la souvenir d'enfance* [*W or the memory of childhood*], both of which undermine Lejeune's very theory, as well as our general understanding of narrative continuity and coherence of the self. These examples of experimentation within generic presentation of autobiography from the latter half of twentieth century reflect a wider shift of modern literature and art to the ambivalence to genre.

However, these texts also champion a more general spirit that was growing within postmodern art: that lived experience is unpredictable, amorphous, chaotic. For Barthes and Perec do not lay out clear autobiographical truth from the first page but it is rather through their experimental autobiographies that the very act of self-representation becomes a means of assigning structure to life, as well as our very sense of being. Both writers and artists alike set about the task of exposing the artifice of stylistic cohesion through innovative, experimental means. Indeed, the triptych often plays an important role within the sphere of narrative self-representation.

One of the most iconic, controversial examples of an autobiographical triptych is a series of texts by Marguérite Duras known as the Indochina cycle, composed of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (*The Sea Wall*, 1950), *L'Amant* (*The Lover*, 1984), and *L'amant de la Chine du Nord* (*The North China Lover*, 1991). And if we are to realise the true creative power of autobiography and self-portrait, perhaps we ought to consider the genres of autobiography and self-portrait as a means of pursuing the self, rather than a concrete assertion of it. This pursued self doesn't

necessarily pre-exist act of self-representation; in fact, writers like Duras go as far as to ascertain that the self and the linear narrative of one's life are artificial constructs, belonging to the realms of fiction and fantasy. For example, within a passage from the beginning of the 1984 bestseller *L'Amant*, Duras's narrator disrupts the *Pacte Autobiographique*'s adherence to the importance of telling the truth about one's life as she insists that "l'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas [The history of my life does not exist]". This rejection of the notion of a constant self whose life story can be chronologically traced and sequenced like a narrative allows Duras the freedom to reflect on, but also constantly and retrospectively reinvent, her life story. Her preoccupation with repetition is her most clear technique in doing so. Within each new iteration of the Indochina Cycle, in recounting the same cycle of events, a new form is adopted. The first novel, a style of social realism à la Hemingway or Steinbeck, whilst also the spirit of writing Sartre described in his 1947 work, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?* [*What is Literature?*], as *littérature engagée* [2].

Written during the height of the First Indochina War (1946-54), Duras's autobiography's realism thus offers a blistering indictment of the French colonial regime. Though the cycle's first instalment, Duras seeks to unearth damning historical truths: in *L'Amant*, finally, the 70-year-old Duras is able to claim the narrative of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* as her own, albeit with a few key differences. Retrospectively, she finds herself able to break her silence on details that she was unable to express 30 years prior.

[2] A notion popularised in the immediate post-World War II era, this literally (and somewhat obviously) translates to 'engaged literature', but rather communicates a literature of commitment.

Towards the beginning of *L'Amant*, she compares the narrative to her 1950 novel, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, this time pledging to write autobiographically:

Ce que je fais ici est différent, et pareil. Avant, j'ai parlé des périodes claires, de celles qui étaient éclairées. Ici je parle des périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse, de certains enfouissements que j'aurais opérés sur certains faits, sur certains sentiments, sur certains événements.

[What I'm doing here is different, and the same. Before, I talked about the clear periods, those that were brought to light. Here I'm talking about that same youth's hidden periods, the burying of certain facts, feelings and events.]

(*L'Amant*, Les Éditions de Minuit, p. 14)

So *L'Amant* seems to reveal autobiographical truths. However, where *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* portrays only one brother resembling her beloved younger sibling, there is a second, sadistic older brother in *L'Amant*. Compared the 17-year-old Suzanne in the *Un barrage*, *L'Amant* discloses that Duras was 15 during her affair with the wealthy Chinese lover. The narrative structure is also more abstract, featuring chronological shifts and alternating between first-person and third person perspectives, a narrative split seen by critic Sharon Willis as a literary smokescreen.

The final instalment, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, seeks to reveal an even more shocking confession: that Duras was not 15, but 14 during the affair, also divulging her incestuous relationship with her brother who is this time named.

Naturally, writers are interested in the relationship between concrete past events and a retrospective consciousness. Rousseau's depiction of the uniqueness of the individual experience pushed his autobiographical *Confessions* (1765–1789) past the religious revelations of Augustine's iconic autobiographical text (397-400 AD) of the same name. For example, in his description of the act of self-narration itself he writes: "je peindrai doublement l'état de mon âme, savoir au moment où l'événement m'est arrivé et au moment où je l'ai décrit [I will paint the state of my soul in two, to know the moment when the event happened to me and the very moment that I described it]." What is crucial for Rousseau is the link between the act of knowing, narrating one's history and the creation of a self-portrait as a soul.

But what is the soul, according to Rousseau? To grasp this concept, we must first understand Rousseau's broader notion of philosophy as an act of self-realization and self-elaboration. Throughout his life, Rousseau had been preoccupied with the instability of his self-image. Indeed, as he began writing his *Confessions* in the December of 1765, the public image of Jean Jacques Rousseau was under intense scrutiny. Perhaps most damningly, it had been revealed five years prior, by charges brought against him by his philosophical rival, Voltaire, that he had abandoned his five children in a Paris foundling hospital.

In light of this fierce public scrutiny, Rousseau felt that committing the act of self-narration was the only means of erasing the widespread counterfeit image of himself, replacing it with his own Sentimental truth. The notion of Sentimentalism lies in our innate human power as specifically not our capacity to think, but to feel.

Rousseau's foregrounding of the individual experience as one based on personal emotions came to lay the foundations of the Romantic sentiment that would come to define early nineteenth century European literature and art.

The notion that self-representative works are not necessarily a reflection of any fixed sense of self, but rather a means of experimenting with their creator's craft that apply to the autobiographical works of Rousseau. However, they also apply to the self-portraiture of Rembrandt Van Rijn. Rembrandt's earlier works are often described as 'tronies': a style of art depicting exaggerated, heightened or distinctive facial expressions, that were intended as studies of expression or physiognomy.

In Modern and Postmodern visual art, we can also trace the image of the self as immaterial and inconstant with the additional step of distortion. This challenges Alberti's idea that artists drive to create is rooted in a preoccupation with self-image. Indeed, self-portraiture wasn't always necessarily seen to capture the artist with any sort of emotional authenticity. Often, artists would turn to self-portraiture when other models were unavailable or to showcase their technical skills, rather than provide personal insights. Critics have come to understand the importance of works of self-portraiture by those artists such as Rembrandt and Picasso who created almost an 'autobiography in art' throughout their lifetime from their constant readapting of their self-image. This is evident within the various works of self-portraiture by the twentieth century Irish-born painter Francis Bacon. In a 1975 interview with British art critic, David Sylvester, he remarks:

"I loathe my own face . . . I've done a lot of self-portraits, really because people have been dying around me like flies and I've nobody else left to paint but myself". This reflects his biographical tragedies which permeate Bacon's later works. In his *Three Studies for Self-Portrait* (1979) the warped, swollen, self-images allow "only for ruminations on the face itself—its ravages, its psychological depth". One of many examples of Bacon's preoccupation with the triptych study, Bacon unveils a dynamic, ever-evolving self, impossible to capture within one mere static image.

Duras and Bacon's preoccupation with repetition as reinvention appears to be a broader theme within the process of self-representation undertaken by Dutch Golden Age artist Rembrandt van Rijn. Throughout his 40-year career, Rembrandt constantly returned to self-portraiture: he sketched, painted, and printed around 100 different versions of his own face, capturing an overwhelming breadth and depth of emotion. Though his trademark palette of soft browns and caramel shades remain a constant throughout his self-portraits, Rembrandt documented his face as it was weathered over time by both age and experience.

Let us consider Rembrandt's *Self-portrait Aged 51 Years* (see figure on next page) as an example Rembrandt's later self-portraits as a changed man. The immensity of his grief following the death of his beloved wife in 1642 prevented him painting altogether for two years, and particularly from making another self-portrait fora total of ten years, reflecting a long period of silence in Rembrandt's pursuit to represent the self. In the 1650s, the self-portraits that eventually broke the artist's silence took on a new

darker and more sombre tone, reflecting much about how the artist now saw himself. Just one year before he made this painting, Rembrandt was forced to file for bankruptcy, and indeed the burdens of this hard-lived life marred by grief and poverty are etched poignantly into the lines and furrows of Rembrandt's careworn face, particularly his deep, dark eyes.

Whilst Rembrandt's diverse body of self-representative works maintained a certain sense of continuity, no artist utterly reinvented themselves with each new self-portrait quite like Pablo Picasso. Norman Mailer assessed Picasso as "the great Narcissist of Modern painting". This likely responds most immediately to the damning depiction of the artist's controlling, borderline sadistic tendencies revealed

in the testimonies of ex-partners, such as Françoise Gilot's memoir *Life with Picasso* (1964). However, perhaps this comparison to Narcissistic tendencies links Picasso's preoccupation with forging, and at times appropriating, new identities for himself within each new act of self-representation to Alberti's concept of Narcissus as the original painter.

Unlike Rembrandt who consistently used a similar colour palette throughout his self-portraiture, Picasso, went through intense, but momentary monochromatic phases, particularly in earlier works. His Blue Period is a notable example of this. In his *Self Portrait* of 1901 (see figure on the next page), the 20-year-old Picasso appears gaunt, with sunken features shaded in a deep, melancholic blue. This was during one of his first harsh winters living in poverty as a young artist in his new Paris home and followed the loss of a friend to suicide that went onto inspire Picasso's Post-Impressionist *The Death of Casagema*s in the same year. The contrast between the dark, monochromatic shades of the artist's oversized coat and hair against the bright, light shades of his face almost give the effect that the face is in some way detached from his darkened, obscured body and the deeper melancholic shade of the background, Picasso using this as a means of hollowing out the contours of the artists face.

This perhaps foreshadows the recognisable, realistic form of Pablo Picasso the artist wasting away before he descended into a pursuit of a more abstract, expressive self, without the strict formal and geometric constraints that Neoclassical portraiture sought to embody.

It is within his Cubist self-portraiture that Picasso truly starts to defy boundaries of self-portraiture as a mirror reflection of the outward self-image, but as a true deconstruction and reinvention of artistic portrayals of the self. The 1907 Cubist self-portrait, from the same year as his polarising *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, has Picasso reduces his outward self, and most strikingly the face, to the visual for which he is known: pure geometric form. The mask-like facial compositions and the distinctive style of eyes that appear inspired by ancient Iberian art define these early works of Cubist portraiture. He claims that these were his attempts to extract and amplify the most basic origin, the essence of painting as a means of expression.

However, the appropriation of West African masks and artwork is evident. His paintings were displayed around the French capital within various twentieth century colonial exhibitions, like those held at the Palais du Trocadéro and such exhibitions are known to have been attended by Picasso. On one level, Picasso's constant revaluation and recreation of himself through his various styles and sources of inspiration represents an insatiable pursuit of the seemingly infinite opportunities for the visual representation of a constantly changing self.

However, we must also retrospectively recognise the blatant issues that arise with a white Spanish artist who takes inspiration from traditional West African masks and artwork, living and working in a colonially ambivalent France that both mercilessly ridiculed and exoticized West African culture. In doing so, we must challenge the problematic nature of the critical fascination and celebration of these works as an exploration of the 'primitivist' aspects of the self and of art as a means of expression. Picasso's self-portraiture reflects a relentless pursuit of artistic reinvention, challenging traditional notions of self-representation while raising complex questions about cultural appropriation and the nature of artistic inspiration.

To conclude, let us revisit the concept of the self as a space for experimentation. While Rousseau and others have criticized Visual Art's staticity and limitation of expression to a single moment, many artists have since worked to overcome this perceived limitation. Artists often embark

on an almost obsessive pursuit of the self, namely, to capture the constant, yet immaterial quality of the individual, with each new iteration of self-analysis revealing more provocative, innovative, at times problematic details that shape the creator. Despite his own reliance within *Confessions* on painting as a metaphor to describe his act of self-narration, Rousseau criticises the painting as an art form. This broader conflict between the rejection of and reliance on pre-established literary or artistic structures has come to define literature and the visual arts within a twentieth and twenty-first century context.

Maisie King
our resident flâneuse

ERASMUS

SEPT.

LISTEN TO THE DRAGON

GUILLERMO ALGARABEL

Listen to the Dragon

There is no more disturbing sound in the summer winter than the screams of the souls that burn under the volcano or the frigid whisper of the Dragon when all the voices around you have been silenced.

Switzerland, 1706. One of its most celebrated compatriots, Zürich-born palaeontologist and geologist, Johann Jacob Scheuchzer felt the call to undertake one of the most dangerous feats in human history. He ventured to the narrow valleys and perpetual snow of the Alps in search of the fiercest creatures ever chronicled in history. Solitary beings that, despite their evil reputation in literature, the sciences, arts and religion, are shrouded in a mystery; a mystery that continues to attract the fascination of the curious who have been brave enough to approach them. Brave enough to face the risk of facing the uncertainty of what lurks in the dark...

Scheuchzer lived to tell the tale; in 1723, he published the Herculean work, *Travels to the Alpine regions of Switzerland*, which includes a large set of engravings illustrating his findings of geology, botany, palaeontology, and even legend. His feats counted on the financial support of the English Royal Society, which funded his work on

numerous occasions. Thus, in between 1702 and 1711, and before the final compendium of 1723, Scheuchzer undertook not one, but nine journeys to the Alps. The specific journey that will be discussed next will be his third, that of 1706, which drew the particular interest of the president of the Royal Society. This man remained in this role until his death in 1727, and he was none other than the most intelligent man in history— that is, Newton.

The journeys we undertake have something amazing about them [...]. Most of us are made in such a way that we admire and revere the foreign while neglecting what is in our everyday view [...]. Our blind curiosity extends to the point that many times we accept fables and fictitious things as if they were true.

This is how the work by Johann Jacob Scheuchzer begins. Imagine, it is 1706; none of his experiences have been written and Scheuchzer starts his travels in the valley of Glarus, where enormous floods devastated the valley's communities. The naturalist, recalling the works he had written previously, knew that the inhabitants of the Alps commonly attributed the presence of strong torrents to the fact that "a dragon has flown" from the peaks. Scheuchzer then senses that it was probably the torrents that gave rise to the fable of the many dragons mentioned in Swiss stories, such as the large dragon killed by a noble from the Winkelried family, freeing his homeland from the feared beast. Fables and prose poems stood alone, but Scheuchzer wondered if there was something more…

So, after careful consideration, Scheuchzer decided to dedicate this journey in the search of real dragons, trusting the accounts of his compatriots and rejecting the notion of

dragons as mere fable or fiction. Newton also had an interest in the outcome of these Swiss investigations, for he too-- the most intelligent man in history-- believed in dragons, as experts like Fernando Arrabal affirm. However, this was not the case for many of the Alpine inhabitants, who, according to Scheuchzer, doubted the existence of such creatures, considering them both as the mere tricks of deceptive charlatans. Scheuchzer was nonetheless enchanted by the mystery, sensing that there was some truth in the rumours. In his own words:

Here the Swiss provide me with a convenient opportunity to explain the entire history of dragons in Switzerland. The rarity of the topic invites me, as does the very circumstance of the place, given that many from the Lucerne region have been witnesses.

We too will search for dragons, and more precisely, for the Dragon par excellence, a figure that unites all that is to come, from Scheuchzer's testimony to etymology, theology, alchemy and legend. Several clues point to the existence of dragons and their historical omnipresence, a quality shared with many other elusive entities that science has not (yet) been able to prove. In fact, a large part of the cultures of this world have, or have had, dragons amongst their stories or symbols. It only seems fitting to start at the beginning: from the Mušḫuššu of Babylon to the mythologies of the rising Sun, there are references to dragons from the earliest civilizations. In his own book, Scheuchzer adds direct testimony:

Johannes Tinner, from Frümsen, an honest and worthy man, testified to me that twelve years ago, in April, he found a horrendous serpent on a mountain near Frümsen, which had a

minimum length of seven feet […] and a head similar to that of a feline, but without legs. Tinner also reported that, before the reptile was destroyed, it fed on cows and its presence was confirmed by neighbours, although the author was never located, but the author ceased after the dragon was killed.

Throughout Swiss geography, there are many monuments whose legends also point to the existence of dragons: Burgdorf Castle; the caves of Beatus of Lungern; even *dracontia*, the mysterious gemstone obtained from the dragon's head; or a chapel, according to Scheuchzer, consecrated to Saint Margaret near Bern—the very place where two brothers, Syntram and Beltram, killed a dragon.
That makes Scheuchzer not the only one who went in search of these creatures. Athanasius Kircher's *Mundus Subterraneus* (1665) exhibits tomography of the igneous channels that could connect volcanoes and other tunnels to the dragon's original lair. Kircher tells a testimony that Scheuchzer also collected: in 1649, the prefect of Lucerne observes a dragon "with a long tail and a head shaped like a serpent, at night […which, while flying,] emitted sparks."

Whilst Scheuchzer may not have found any dragons during his travels, that does not mean dragons do not exist. Let us continue our search to findthe aforementioned capitalised Dragon. Should we be alarmed by its whisper? The Dragon's story can be unlocked when tracing its etymological origins: from the Latin *draco*, rooted in the Greek *drákon*, literally meaning 'one that stares intently'. Is that why we visualise the Dragon as an eyelid-less reptile, staring intently and incessantly? Holding by that vigilant warning, it is then no coincidence that certain Greek myths have the Dragon as a guardian of treasure; for example, Ladon, the hundred-headed dragon who guarded the golden apples of the garden

of the Hesperides and was defeated by Heracles, amongst other Greek myths. Fantasy books often have the dragon represent the hero's main obstacle within the wider formula of the Hero's Journey, where the hero would have overcome all the trials and tribulations, physical and spiritual, in order to gain the knowledge sufficient to transcend chaos and promote the syntropy of his world. Only then is he reborn as a new man.

To trace the Dragon's origins even further back, one of the earliest sources lies in ancient Egypt, where dragons symbolically appeared in the initiatory journey of priests. In such trials, it was believed that the initiates had to be swallowed by the dragon to reach the beyond, making it a spiritual door or little death. Compare this to doctrines such as Buddhism or Taoism, dragons are symbols of spiritual power and enlightenment. They are often portrayed as protectors of sacred teachings, and their voices symbolise the awakening from an illusion in which one is immersed.

Like the hero, there is always moment towards the end of the journey when you will be asked to solve a riddle. By then, remember that the solution is the force that favours the homogenisation of the universe; others might call it entropy in a more or less accurate way, a force that leads to disorder, chaos, confusion. A kind of mountain of ash that covers a dead lizard. That is why the Dragon must be listened to, to prevent, or at least, hamper the great trend of the universe from crushing us into chaos and confusion.

The Dragon encompasses many different types of dragons across many disciplines. Beyond those we have already explored, let us now delve into a completely different and

more enigmatic concept of dragons—one that is obscure and darker in nature. In Hermetic symbolism, the black dragon is a symbol of complete corruption, and in alchemy, a discipline that is closely related to it, this dragon is the unpurified antimony par excellence, a fact well known by a scholar who has already wandered through these lines: Isaac Newton. The figure of the black dragon is probably the genius's most studied; for Newton describes alchemical dragons the first time in his alchemical dictionary of 1666.

According to Gale Christianson's *In the Presence of the Creator: Isaac Newton and His Times* (1984), in around 1670 as part of his quest for philosophical mercury, Newton was investigating a substance called 'regulus of antimony', the centre of his findings in Hermetic arts. Philosophical mercury is a concept that represents the primordial substance necessary for the transmutation of metals into gold, the achievement of the philosopher's stone. The regulus of antimony is the state after which antimony, as found in nature, has been purified: to achieve this, its main ore, antimonite, must be heated along with charcoal or another reducing agent (a metal such as iron, lead, or silver); and once purified, a star-shaped substance called regulus is obtained (note that in the constellation Leo, Regulus is the brightest star, the heart of the lion).

This fascinated alchemists like Newton, trying to establish a relationship between this substance and the firmament:

Newton believed that the spirit of the black dragon of antimony was purified and released during the creation of its regulus. He felt the consciousness of the alchemist played an important role in capturing this powerful presence hidden in the black metal. […] He went on to create the regulus of

iron and regulus of silver and used them as reflecting mirrors in a telescope to peer deep into space. (Dennis William Hauck, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Alchemy,* 2008)

Thanks to telescopes, Newton was able to compile in his famous Principia of 1686, setting out both the law of universal gravitation and infinitesimal mathematics where regulus of antimony composed *The Key* (*Clavis* in Latin). Worthy of the wordplay, the very title of the manuscript has Newton describe how to obtain philosophical mercury from the regulus of antimony: fuse antimony with iron to create a starry regulus; amalgamate with common mercury; the regulus then undergoes a repeated process of heating, grinding, and washing until it is purified, to finally be distilled. If you are truly interested to find out how to acquire the philosopher's stone, the rest of the process can be read in *The Key*; and it is thanks to stories like this that we know how imperative it is to listen to the Dragon.

In *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Alchemy*, Hauck also discusses the figure of the dragon as a symbol in alchemy. Dragons are substances related either to the properties of mercury or the application of vital force (or energy). This leads us to the Taoism's conception of the dragon, in which there are three types: the black dragon symbolises putrefaction; green the spirit of metal; and red the beginning and end of the alchemical work. It is the chaotic energy of the raw material at the beginning which transforms into the philosopher's stone at the end. This concept is symbolized by the Ouroboros: a dragon often depicted eating its own tail, signifying the end that connects

to its beginning. According to Jose Ramón Gómez in *Dragons and Alchemy*, the Ouroboros is both a manifestation of infinite movement and absolute stillness. The Ouroboros also links the internal with the external in the soul of the alchemist, who has already embarked on the initiatory journey with which the dragon is so closely associated. Its motto: "Everything starts from the One and returns to the One, for the One, by the One, and in the One" which is, in turn, a metaphor for the transition from linear-sequential time (*Kronos*) to cyclical-spiral time (*Kairós*).

The figure of the dragon in the alchemical realm is further illustrated, amongst other manuscripts by Newton, by number 15 of the Keynes collection, where an alchemical treatise describes the process to follow when dealing with the Dragon:

In the name of God this secret to attain. […] With the sharp teeth of a dragon finely bring them to dust. The next must be had the true proportion of that dust truly. In a true balance weighing them equally with three times as much of the fiery dragon, mixing all together. Then hast thou well done thy substance thus together proportionate. Put in a bed of glass with a bottom large and round, in a heat equipollent to a hen on her eggs. […] After the first & second right fermentation of mercury crude turneth it to fine gold.

Out all the dragons that have been described, there may be one that, in being different to all the rest, is the fiercest and most destructive. It is captured under St John's plume in the Book of Revelation: 'a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the Sun, with the Moon beneath her feet' (12:1). The woman symbolises the people of God as

the moon (and thus the night) in the Old Testament, and as the sun in the New Testament. This woman stands for the Church founded by Christ, enlightening every generation and prevailing above all corrupt institutions. Then another sign appeared in heaven: ‘a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven crowns’ (12:3). This dragon would be the embodiment of Satan, who has grown in power and cruelty since his initial appearance as an infamous serpent in Genesis. The red dragon represents the great shedding of blood that Satan has caused over millennia. Its physical description ties it to the beast of the sea and the Antichrist, as the three are one, while the seven crowns symbolise the glory of the royalty of the seven Caesars of Rome, a symbol of tyrannical power.

The woman is about to give birth to a child which represents the strongest and most faithful members of the Church, those whose strength is essential for its survival; and it is the dragon’s intention to devour the child, as is Satan's to dissolve the Church and triumph in the kingdom of God. Such a situation causes a confrontation in Heaven between the dragon, the Archangel Michael and their respective armies. Defeated, the dragon is then cast out of Heaven to Earth, where the dragon pursues the destruction of the Church, that is, the woman and her child:

And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns […]. And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority. […] And I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spoke as a dragon. (Revelation 13:1-2, 11)

The two beasts of Revelation then appear: one from the sea and one from the earth. The sea-born beast, the Antichrist, symbolises the oppression of historical power structures; the leopard represents Alexander the Great; the bear, the Persian monarchy of Media; and the lion, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II, who, according to Biblical accounts, commanded the construction of the mythical Tower of Babel.

In contrast, the beast from the earth, which appears as a lamb but speaks like a dragon, represents a false prophet who deceives and confuses the people, making it impossible for them to know the truth.

To date, Newton has acted as a veil covering discourse, and regarding St John's Revelation, he could not be less so. In manuscripts 1.4 and 5 of the Yahuda and Keynes collections respectively, Newton interprets the dragon of the Apocalypse as a symbol of oppressive political power in both Egyptian pharaohs and Roman emperors and represents a spiritual threat corrupting the people. From having published the first alchemical work mentioning dragons in 1666, Newton later identifies the Western Roman Empire with the dragon and the Eastern one with the beast of the sea. However, what is even more interesting is Isidro Palacios's interpretation based on a series of collectibles published in the Spanish magazine, *Más Allá* (1989-1990):

The dragon, the beast, exists in our time. And for this, we will allude to five virtues that have defined the characteristics of the dragon in medieval literature. (1) It is a devastator of nature. (2) It is immense, powerful. (3) It is a kidnapper of the lady, the prototype of the soul in man. (4) It punishes the

peoples who believe in traditions. (5) It acts as an enveloping intelligence that captures us. What embodies these five virtues today? Evidently, the system. There are no beasts or dragons like those of fantasy, but there are their effects and their systematic actions.

'But you are a shameful anarchist for saying this,' reproached the alchemist André Malby to Palacios. And he was probably right, but the scope of the Dragon always surpasses singular interpretations. Its figure so fickle, the Dragon easily adapts to whatever role the writers has reserved, whether that be mythological being, alchemical symbol, guardian of knowledge, or Satan...

For it can even align with the system and entrenched in Western alchemy and Eastern thought, the concept of the Dragon encompasses so much more. In any case, we must listen to it, as Newton did. Good or bad, it depends on the prism from which it is viewed, but above all, the Dragon is an elemental force of the universe.

To any readers expecting a tight conclusive grasp on certainty, I apologise to have disappointed you all: I will not reveal what the Dragon is—to follow the code of the Hero's Journey, I will instead give you a clue so that you can find the Dragon among the lines of this conversation and refute my central thesis with a more truthful one. The clue is as follows: *the thesis has already been mentioned explicitly*. However, any of the theses presented will become more or less mere speculation in their own right, until, as Scheuchzer intended, the very day we see a real dragon. Then, all myth will be shattered, and all previous academic interpretations will become meaningless, as the Dragon's true essence is finally given a voice.

For if dragons exist, they will have their own singularity that transcend any singular conceptualisation. Remember that dragons really could be still living in Switzerland, in Germany's Drachenfels or in any other place…

Guillermo Algarabel
our seeker castellan

Grosklein

АНДРЕЙ БОЛКОНСКИЙ

ВОЙНА И МИР

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ТОЛСТОЙ

Tolstoy's Prince Andrew Bolkonsky in *War and Peace*[1]

'[Your theory] is not that which can convince me, dear friend — life and death are what convince.'

A friend of mine pointed out to me that 'living in the moment' also means living in the future, since the present moment inevitably contains an anticipation of the future. The human psyche cannot be stripped of its time-ranging faculties.

We might even say that the more one lives in the moment, the more also one will grasp the wider implications of that moment upon past and future.

Tolstoy's Prince Andrew is observing a mass of soldiers cooling themselves in a lake shortly before the battle of Borodino in 1812. His thoughts are worth noting:

Flesh, bodies, cannon-fodder!' he thought, and he looked at his own naked body and shuddered, not from cold but from a sense of disgust and horror he did not himself understand.

The bathing soldiers, inebriated by this distraction and gasping for refreshment of body and mind, present themselves to Andrew as a terrible panorama of the upcoming inferno, that is, of war, an event 'opposed to human reason and to human nature', in Tolstoy's words.

[1] Andrew as spelt in the translation by Louise and Aylmer Maude. The original in Russian is 'Andrei'.

No artist with his brush could have made the present scene more suggestive and more chilling. In general, those who are sober by disposition are less apt to engage in creative imagination; but here, in the character of Prince Andrew, we are reminded that in certain extraordinary cases it is possible to find the human trait of imaginative sobriety.

On the eve of that same battle we receive a verbal and doctrinal expression of the cannon-fodder scene. Once again it seems Prince Andrew alone can grasp the insanity of the actions about to be undertaken. Andrew is a prophet: he sees what others do not see and attempts to communicate it. And prophets have a way of inviting both the sympathy of the reader and the indifference—or hostility—of their contemporaries.

Let us hear what this prophet has to say. First, he dismisses both the scientific and the frivolous conceptions of the event of war: a battle is not like chess, with fixed rules and outcomes, nor is it a game at all. The outcome of war, he says, depends ‘on the feeling that is in me and in him and in every soldier’. But lest we think Prince Andrew’s sentiments approach the idealized or the heroic, we are served a second doctrine, this time properly terrifying:

I would not take prisoners. […] As it is we have played at war – that’s what’s vile! We play at magnanimity […] They talk to us of the rules of war, of chivalry, of flags of truce, of mercy to the unfortunate, and so on. It’s all rubbish. […] Take no prisoners, but kill and be killed! He who has come to this as I have through the same sufferings…

Then comes the final blow, striking down our petty moralism and filling us with horror but also with strange admiration:

War is not courtesy but the most horrible thing in life; and we ought to understand that, and not play at war. We ought to accept this terrible necessity sternly and seriously.

We recall the images in our mind of Napoleonic warfare —organized lines of well-dressed men, rhythmic and menacing marches even under fire, drummer boys and baton twirlers, a general mass of civilized brutality— and we start to understand Andrew's revolt against war as play. But the problem Tolstoy has created is that Andrew is sober to the point of cruelty, and elicits an awful mixture of admiration and revulsion in the reader. We love him for his lucidity and force of vision; we are terrified by his bitterness and inhumanity.

This seems to be a general talent for Tolstoy and no doubt for all good writers: to invite our affection and devotion towards characters who are morally broken, or at least very complex; and Andrew remains in this position to the last minute of his life. In the meantime it is not only his solemnity for which we love him; it is also his youthfulness. As a prime symptom of this trait, he discovers the splendour of the sky. More than once he gazes at the sky with childish rapture and longing for the beautiful and the everlasting. First as lay wounded after the battle of Austerlitz:

'Where is it, that lofty sky that I did not know till now, but saw to-day?'

Later, having been taken by Napoleon to his dressing station, we read that

So insignificant at that moment seemed to him all the interests that engrossed Napoleon, so mean did his hero himself with his paltry vanity and joy in victory appear, compared to the lofty, equitable, and kindly sky which he had seen and understood...

But is this really so youthful? It seems that enchantment with the heavens is tied with contempt for the terrestrial; if Andrew has lifted his gaze upwards it means he has drawn it away from the base and insignificant affairs of the earth, represented here by Napoleon. In my view this is the same kind of ambivalence that we witness before Borodino, the same marriage of nobility and inhumanity. He looks at the sky with the mysticism of a child and at everything else with the ascetism of a hermit.

Children are often spellbound by the sky, but Prince Andrew's trance at Austerlitz hardly appears childish to us; if anything, it is a confirmation of that single-mindedness and contempt for the frivolous that is so characteristic of him. But further episodes will alter this impression. Later in the book, after conversing with another protagonist, Pierre, about the aims and meaning of their lives, we hear again the strains of that rousing tune:

He looked up at the sky to which Pierre had pointed, and for the first time since Austerlitz saw that high everlasting sky he had seen while lying on that battlefield; and something that had long been slumbering, something that was best in him, suddenly awoke, joyful and youthful, in his soul.

Behind that impregnable face and upright body there lies a child, and he is now awakening from his sleep. The reader is stirred: what brilliant possibilities of transformation await this man, if to his present fascinating qualities could be added the joy of life, laughter, compassion, and forgiveness—that same virtue he not long ago deemed unfitting for a man? After all, children, even when selfish, are inclined to forgive.

Possibility soon turns to reality: Andrew's great and solemn entrance into childhood takes place at the battle of Borodino. As a shell is about to explode before him, he realizes the strange fact that he loves life, loves 'this grass, this earth, this air', and so allows his gaze to comprehend much more than just the lofty sky. The vision is now universal. He is wounded, more badly this time, and is taken to the dressing station, where after a brutal operation he is inundated by memories of his childhood, the 'happiest moments of his life', when his nurse would sing him to sleep. Just as in the Christian imagination Jesus is wrapped in white both in the manger and in the tomb, so does Prince Andrew receive the same haunting lullaby at the start of his existence as on the eve of his death. Thus, death is a second birth. Then follow childlike tears, the astonishing sight of his sworn enemy on the bed next to him, 'ecstatic pity', and an explicit discovery of evangelic love, all dressed in the pangs of joy, regret, and unbearable suffering.

In the lives of most families, it is only a matter of time before the joy of a newborn child is replaced by the joys of a growing child, and even later by the trials of a child developing in ways divergent from the family's upbringing. In Andrew a child is born at Borodino but very soon we find something else taking effect on him, some power foreign to that high joy and compassion discovered in the hospital. He lives on for about a month after receiving the wound; and the force that shapes him in this period is the presence of illness and the expectation of death. Like many intelligent people, he acknowledges a paradox: that to love everything and everyone means to love nothing and no one. A dream confirms to him that 'death is an awakening', and he is inhabited by a 'strange lightness', but we very much feel that in these final hours Andrew is still, after all, fixedly staring at the sky, with nothing but penetration and single-mindedness:

[After] they told him to bless [his son], he did what was demanded and looked around as if asking whether there was anything else he should do.

We as readers feel a parental pain at this indifference. Yet it could not be otherwise; having such a man die in another way would be like getting a statue to lift a different arm.

They wept with a reverent and softening emotion, which had taken possession of their souls at the consciousness of the simple and solemn mystery of death that had been accomplished in their presence.

We wonder whether Andrew himself could have perhaps written these words.

Such, then, is the character whose father preferred the pain of grief over the shame of a son unworthy of his name; such is the man who when in love quickly loses the 'poetic and mystic charm of desire' and is overcome by fear of his beloved's devotion and an oppressively joyful sense of duty. We have difficulty imagining Prince Andrew doing anything frivolous: his special ability is to expand himself beyond a situation and be possessed by the true and solemn meaning of things. Faced with Tolstoy's creation of this enormous personality we feel various and contrary emotions. We are wont to adulate him and detest him; admire him as a model and dismiss him as an anomaly; and just when we deem all this solemnity and singlemindedness cruel and impossible we find ourselves secretly trying to emulate it.

Andrei Lambert
our petit philosophe

THE HAPPINESS PARADOX

CHENRUI ZHANG

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art by Otto Klein

The Happiness Paradox

On a recent Tuesday afternoon, while sipping an overpriced latte in a café that prides itself on single-origin beans and minimalist décor, I found myself thinking about our modern preoccupation with happiness. In an age bustling with mindfulness apps and gratitude journals, happiness seems to have evolved from a state of be into a commodity to quantify, perfect and chase after.

Just think of poor Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to roll the same boulder up a hill forevermore. Albert Camus famously suggested that we must imagine Sisyphus happy, finding meaning in the ceaseless labour. His is a Sisyphus who, leaping into our age of contemporary self-help literature, would have attempted to rebrand his toils and tribulations as high-intensity workouts, complete with snazzy merchandise.

But if we take happiness to be more than fleeting pleasure, we return to the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia*, often translated as ‘human flourishing’. Aristotle argued that true happiness comes from a life of virtuous activity in accordance with reason - a far cry from our current fixations that would have us chase the dopamine high of social media.

So flourishing, the language of nature, gives us one metaphorical mould with which to evaluate happiness. The world of theatre gives us another: in *As You Like It*, Jaques declares: 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.' If life is but a performance, then happiness lies in embracing our roles, however transient, and delivering our lines with conviction before exiting stage left.

Or perhaps not. In our quest for happiness, we often overlook the wisdom of history's less sanguine observers. Take, for instance, Voltaire's Candide, who endures a series of increasingly absurd misfortunes with the conclusion that we must 'cultivate our garden'. A call for pragmatic contentment over philosophical speculation, Voltaire's suggestion is that happiness is found not in striving towards life's grand pursuits, but in tending to the tangible soils of the present.

Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich might agree: titularly lying on his fictional deathbed, he realises too late that his pursuit of societal approval is hollow at best, self-destructive at worst. His tale is a cautionary one: do not mistake success for fulfilment. Unfortunately, this resonates more than ever in our achievement-oriented culture of hedonism-fuelled capitalism. So, perhaps the secret to happiness isn't found in climbing the corporate ladder but in stepping off of it entirely.

Yet, despite the abundance of advice available, anxiety and depression rates continue to climb. Tantalus was eternally grasping for fruits just out of reach—and so are we. Only now, we're reaching for self-actualisation seminars and artisanal kombucha.

Despite millennia of philosophical and literary discourse, we seem no closer to a consensus on what constitutes happiness. The Stoics advised to accept what we cannot control, whilst the Epicureans suggested that pleasure in moderation constitutes the highest good, hedonism being the key to human behaviour. The stage of happiness set, contemporary psychologists would gesture to the hedonic treadmill: the rapid, if not eventual, return to a relatively stable baseline of happiness. But instead we are running in circles, measuring steps and calories, yet going nowhere.

So perhaps the problem lies not in our pursuit of happiness but in our understanding of it as an isolated state of being. We've conflated happiness with pleasure and success, even moral superiority. We've even turned the pursuit of happiness into a competition, with success measured in economic, cultural and social capital.

But that won't do. After all, happiness is not a predefined state that we 'achieve' but a personal narrative to construct. Sartre might really have been onto something with his existential angst: if existence precedes essence, then happiness not something we find but something we create: moment by moment, one choice at a time. Life seems to be about embracing the absurdity of life, as Camus suggested, and finding joy in the simple act of being. Or, as I stare down at my rapidly cooling coffee, the simple act of sipping. In the end, happiness is most akin to a shadow: chase it, and it eludes you; turn towards the light, and it follows naturally.

Chenrui Zhang
our thinking buddy

This is just to say...

Not that I ate the plums in the icebox, as William Carlos Williams did, but that every work here remains the intellectual property of its writer.

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Thank you, dear reader.

C.Z

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think deeper.