

*D'un monde où l'action n'est pas
la soeur du rêve*

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

I

A few words, seemingly quite trivial when spoken, over time have become identified with one of the climactic moments in my life. What I'm thinking about occurred during a period so frivolous I'm embarrassed to describe it; nevertheless, I must describe it.

That whole period is very distant now, but I remember it well, well enough to tell about it reliably, which is not at all unusual. People often remember past events in detail; the hard thing is to recall what you were like then while you're recalling now, to summon, from experience, knowledge, and disillusion, an exact remembrance of not knowing, of innocence. That's very difficult and that's what I want to achieve, especially the recollection of innocence, because ignorance actually increases with knowledge—experience and disillusion make it much easier for us to ponder the extent of our ignorance. Innocence is not extensive, though: innocence either is or is not.

Well, the fact is, my innocence definitely *is* no longer, but I remember well the exact tone it gave my life when it *was*, and I must admit that its tone can be tolerated only when you're quite young.

No. This path will definitely lead me in the wrong direction. One more metaphor and I'll slip into irony, the very thing I want to keep out of these pages entirely. Not one bit of irony: I must face up to the fact that my story is very banal and be brave enough to confess that without adopting the attitude of someone who's already on top of *everything*. I'm

not on top of anything; on the contrary, *everything* is on top of me. And my goal in starting this account is not to get out from under that weight, but to get what's on top of me in front of me. So I should go to my tale itself, without embroidering or paraphrasing with flowery profundities. To my tale of the most foolish, common things, in order to place on record—these pages are no more than a simple act of recording—that my life, what I experience inside as a seismic phenomenon, when seen as bare facts was in fact nothing more.

In the spring of 1932 about two years had passed since I returned from Europe. My absence had lasted almost as long as my entire life—when I left Buenos Aires I was only a few months old. Even so, even though that period was not clear in my mind, the idea that I had been here was always with me. The idea? Why not the memory? A memory is passed on, inherited, adopted. Yes, I always remembered having been here and always felt certain I would return. I knew I'd return to the city and the house where I'd been born, knew what the furniture was like in that house, and everything I did when I was very young—the trips and studies—was something I started so as to have it done with before I returned. Then once I was here, it was a question of recovering things, not of becoming acquainted with them.

I don't know if that initial premise has determined the way I am, because, the thing is, even in other, completely unfamiliar cities it's always seemed that I was searching for my own footsteps.

But this is already thoughts, reflections, and what I've proposed is to make that time, that naturalness, which was so comfortable, present now. I was a boy from Buenos Aires who studied and lived like any other boy, except I had a history. It was a history completely forgotten, not with the unfaithful kind of forgetting that tosses everything overboard, but with a forgetting that had come to be like a state of some body—mine: I had solidified in a body, but all the fluid things composing it were circulating within its tranquil mass, releasing their waves, their currents.

No, no, that's not it! I simply lived on Juncal and studied chemistry. I lived alone, and I had few friends; my only close friend was Javier Molina, a distant relative. I didn't have much family.

The first signs of spring had appeared, which had happened other years, but this is about that spring, the spring of 1932. It was late August, and I remember thinking about spring as I crossed the Plaza San Martín. It was beginning to get dark, and a wonderful light seemed to be walking across the grass. Dusk is so short here you can watch it go past. A warm breeze goes by, the sky, very clean and pearly, gives off a bleak light, which slips away toward the trees to hide in the branches, and suddenly, in the shadow of the trees, there's the glow of a newly lit streetlamp: dusk is gone. At that moment I bought *Crítica* and continued toward Santa Fe.

Why did I buy *Crítica* as I was contemplating the plaza? It's quite unusual for me to read a newspaper, but a kid came up to me, insistently waving a paper. It's highly unusual for me not to dispatch someone rudely if he happens to interrupt me at such a moment, because I was *truly contemplating* the plaza. I was standing on a corner, waiting to cross, but I'd hesitated there on the green slope, since I wasn't in a hurry, and the kid came up to me, shouting right beside me: "*Crítica! Crítica!*" His shouts didn't bother me or annoy me, which is how I usually react to any kind of shouting. I let it become part of my contemplation and looked at the boy. I think it was to apologize for my lingering gaze that I took out a few coins and bought the paper. Then, when I reached the La Santa Unión I went into the café, sat down, and started leafing through the paper.

On the cultural page there was a long article about the Ballet Montecarlo. I was skimming it quickly, when suddenly I saw one name: Elfriede Pabst. I read closely and learned that Elfriede Pabst was one of the secondary figures in the troupe, which would arrive that week in Montevideo.

From that moment on I can no longer recount the events step by step, nor is that necessary. The name Elfriede Pabst appeared in the August twilight, fifteen minutes after I stood on a corner thinking about spring. I kept myself very busy that whole week, since I could hardly set out right on the spot.

The ballet was to open on Saturday. Friday night, as the boat pulled

away, I stood at the stern watching the varied lights of the port recede into the distance, followed by the river coastline, the Costanera, ablaze with lanterns. I recalled how at other times I'd leaned on the stone balustrade and watched the boat depart, imagining that it was probably filled with happy people, themselves filled with fantasy and adventure. Seeing the boat from the Costanera, I'd always thought it looked like a shining caterpillar advancing toward the darkness, and at that moment, as I leaned overboard, it pleased me to think that maybe there was someone watching this boat pull away, now that I was the traveler I'd imagined at other times.

But was I truly like those happy people in my imagination? No, I was not exactly the same, I was happier in a way, because I knew that I wanted to be happy. Or maybe you're happier if you're happy without knowing it? I wouldn't try to guess. The thing is, it was happiness I aspired to. Maybe happiness was my true city of origin, because I ached to return there. Since I was very healthy and my physical makeup was quite normal, I must have been richly blessed with happiness at birth; but in the first years of my life that wealth went astray, rather, it became buried as the result of unquestionably serious events, and all I had left of it was nostalgia. I said I aspired to happiness, but that's not what it was, because aspiration's a very lukewarm word: happiness was my missing amor, I desired it furiously, ached for it melancholically.

However, I don't mean to say I went through life feeling sad or pensive. I lived by making use of all my small everyday pleasures and, if I confess this did not satisfy me, someone will argue that I could have sought better incentives that would have brought me inner satisfaction. Obviously I didn't do that, but not because I looked at human problems indifferently; on the contrary, I often thought about the most dramatic of those problems, but such pondering was confined to the zone linked to effort. Separate, exempt from everything, untouched, was the pleasure zone—weightless as sleep, but real. For me, that was the supreme adjective: the *real* happiness, the *real* pleasure. As opposed to the glibberish about “Vanity of vanities” . . .

I'm straying too far from my story. This whole thing seems more and

more like a theory, and I wasn't formulating a theory as the boat crossed the estuary: I was thinking about Elfriede, raising the entire structure of her memory so I could add another piece to it the next day.

There was a south wind blowing; I was leaning over the railing, looking at the water, the foam splattering my face with cold drops that helped me recall the rain in Berlin and Elfriede in the rain, the snow, or the forest fog. I recalled how she used to dress like a student—sweater, wool cap and scarf—which is exactly what she was wearing the day I met her beneath the sieved light of the museum. I recalled her skating on the neighborhood rinks in the January afternoons, dancing at night in the cabarets or at the fiestas held on Alexander Platz.

In the days I'd spent waiting for the moment of my trip, I'd imagined a thousand times how our meeting would be, imagining the things I would tell her and all the possible vicissitudes of our new adventure, but that night, as I was actually on my way to her, I made sure my memory of her was very current, as if I were going to take an exam. Not that I expected her to ask, "Did you think about me often?" No, ours hadn't been that kind of relationship. I hadn't thought about her at all, or very little. She wasn't going to ask for a flattering account of my thoughts, and I wasn't going to offer her one, but it seemed discourteous just to appear like that, without giving any notice, without knowing if she wanted to see me. I could have sent her a few lines—but I didn't—instead of carrying with me an intense memory that would legitimize my appearance to some extent. I was sure that I'd find noticeable differences in her—the climate, the season, her professional success would all have combined to make her look very different, and I didn't want to feel disconcerted by that difference. Did I feel uncertain about how well our meeting would turn out? Maybe that was it. Maybe I was bent on making the past current so I could impose on it whatever eventuality might arise in the present.

That was the cause of everything. If I'd spent the time on the boat sleeping peacefully, I would probably have behaved differently, but I didn't want to sleep, I wanted instead to awaken all the impressions I could still recall from those two months experienced four years earlier

and now almost forgotten. I was delving into a very deserted zone and my memory had the same kind of power as an undegraded element. It was if I were telling myself a passionate story. I stood alone on the deck, all I could hear was the water lapping against the side of the boat, all I could see was the brilliant black of the moonless night, and I relived the serene light in the Altes Museum. I saw myself entering with two other boys who were studying chemistry, and Elfriede was sitting on a step beside the Altar of Pergamum; she smiled at one of my friends, we went over to say hello, and she joined our group.

I had to laugh as I recalled how brazenly I held forth in French, knowing I could get away with it since the others had only a relative understanding of what I said. Their scientific French was hardly good enough to follow my lively comments about artistic subjects, not delivered in an organized, academic way they would have found accessible but abrupt opinions, linked according to my own system. Elfriede's French was limited to a couple dozen words, and I assumed they included the adjectives commonly used to praise artists—when they'd introduced us they'd told me she was a ballerina—; in fact, those words were the only things she understood in my whole lecture. Like a snake charmer, I fascinated her, immobilized her, cornering her against that frieze, forcing her back into it until she seemed like one more figure in the poignant relief. If she tried to escape, I would say "*Superbe, grandiose!*" and she would be still. Besides, there were the other two boys, whose gazes were guarding her attentively, and I forced them to converge on her. We were talking about the barbarian physique copied by Hellenistic sculpture, and I had them compare Elfriede's head with that of the Nyx, as much like flesh, as human as any girls you see on the street in Berlin. Then I took her over to the large, sorrowful head of the mother of the Titans and had the boys note that Elfriede's forehead was identical. Using my index finger, I followed the line of the frontal bone that borders the deep sockets of the statue's eyes, and with the greatest self-assurance I stretched out my hand to Elfriede's head, drawing the same line on it with my finger. Elfriede started a little, but she got a grip on her nerves, and I realized that she was surrendering her hard-won serenity to me.

Impatiently, hastily, I seized the treasure I'd snared. We left the museum and my artistic harangue came to an end. She and I looked for a different atmosphere that would give us more privacy and let us express ourselves more openly: for two months we were inseparable.

Little by little, as I recalled her in other places we'd lived enthusiastically, I began to recall the music from that time: the waltzes flung by a loudspeaker onto the ice rink; the fox-trots and tangos from the cabarets at night. Elfriede danced with the rigor you find in professionals, and I would abandon my weight to her strong, lithe body until I felt the vertigo you feel when you're lying in a hammock being driven violently back and forth; if the source of that driving is in you yourself, it surrenders you to the power of an irresistible rhythm.

As I thought about this, I suddenly looked at my watch and was surprised that without realizing it I'd spent three hours leaning on the stern's railing. I'm sure my moment of absence had been the moment I recalled the rhythm of the dance, which may have been suggested by the rhythm of the water. One after the other I'd reviewed all the previous memories but on that memory I stopped, got lost. I might have spent two or three hours reliving the beat of a fox-trot, and I'm tempted to say reliving it without repeating it. Nothing but the time in which I thought of those notes that in one fast whirl had abandoned us to inertia. Nothing but those few notes making me press myself tightly against her so we could move totally within that drive—her hair was driven loose from her neck, sideward, like a heavy tassel, and there could have been a light laugh or a quick breath in response to our brief frenzy. Nothing but a violent levity in the semi-dark room, for a few notes. As I contemplated that moment in the solitude of the deck, three hours stopped or condensed into one unextended point; three hours turned into one fast whirl. Then I decided to go to bed.

I think that when I returned to my cabin I also recalled those nights in her room, when she prepared the cups for coffee and spread butter on the black bread, as the *bouilloire* spewed its torrent of steam toward the ceiling. Elfriede would be maneuvering around the room, moving in ways she moved only there, with the slow self-assurance of a woman at

home. And I would be sunk in an armchair, watching her and thinking, nevertheless, she is a ballerina. Sometimes she'd be wearing heavy boots made specially to withstand the clips on her skates, and thick woolen socks, but none of it could hide the beauty of her athletic legs.

I recalled another thousand things, but finally I fell asleep and woke up when it was daylight.

On my way to the hotel I indulged in no further evocations, because I was clinging to something that was not an idea, it was a reality with one shore in the past and the other in the current moment, and I was immersed in it, even though at various times I thought I was paying attention to other matters. This was the important thing: the thousand incidents that arose in the outside world were not enough to wipe out the fixation responsible for my mood nor to replace the atmosphere created by my reverie. In other words, if I were to relate only the facts, I would have to say that the next day, in the morning, I seemed to be in that clear, wide-awake moment when one forgets the dreams of the night before, since I don't recall relating them consciously to any of the situations that followed—not even my meeting with Elfriede.

Our meeting was almost trivial, and somehow it seemed artificial: what was real remained deeply latent.

As soon as I arrived at the hotel—I'd found out from an agency where she was staying—I saw Elfriede appear in the hall, on her way out with three other girls. When she saw me, she made a gesture of exaggerated surprise. She came toward me, stammering, and began to say that she'd been so shocked to see me she'd been left speechless. Finally she decided to give me a very theatrical embrace. I tried hurriedly to formulate a plan, but her day was going to be exhausting. She had rehearsal in the afternoon; in addition, some problem or other had arisen with her wardrobe. We arranged to meet in the theater.

I was awake during the event. That is to say, I paid attention to the ballet and especially to Elfriede's performance, which I thought was excellent. At intermission I went to see her, in the midst of the human throng trying to get near the artists, but all she could do was extend a hand to me over a dozen heads. After the performance, the audience

began to disappear, but several men remained, standing guard, more or less journalists or managers, who felt it was their right to monopolize the troupe until the dancers collapsed totally—they were taking them right from the theater to a party someone was holding in their honor. In the second that Elfriede and I had to speak, we decided to meet for lunch the next day.

Later, I've recalled that when I told Elfriede how happy I was to see her fulfill her ambitions, she answered me somewhat skeptically: "I don't know what to tell you; everything's hanging by a thread." I attributed this to tiredness or, rather, it didn't register on me. I went back to the hotel on foot, walked in circles around my room, and read a magazine before I went to bed, sitting in the middle of the floor under the one abominable light. The hotel was full, and I'd been given one of the worst rooms.

Did my dreams recur? I'd say instead that they continued until I fell asleep, while I slept, and when I got up, quite late, as I was getting dressed. The thing is, though, that's not exactly how it was. My thoughts changed. I had seen Elfriede in her new look: she was spring-like at the hotel, and classic, super perfect on stage, with a tutu so sheer it made you forget her serious head. But underneath my thoughts something remained unalterable: our fast whirl in the semi-dark room. That was what gave my mood the tone I couldn't change. No matter what my ideas were, what prevailed was the climate of that moment.

I woke up with just enough time to get ready before the time we'd agreed to meet, so I wouldn't have to wait—I'm always afraid other people won't be punctual. But almost before I was dressed, Elfriede's knuckles rapped on the door and she burst into the room. When I saw her walk in, I saw that reality was beginning; I saw Elfriede, finally, the way I was expecting her, although at the same time, as soon as I looked at her, I saw in her face how frustrating the whole situation was.

Elfriede began to speak. I can't say that I heard absolutely nothing of what she told me. It was something about a contract extremely important for her, something that had come up the night before, very late,

and in the morning she hadn't wanted to phone from her room; she'd preferred to come in person and explain it to me.

On the dresser there was a nail file, a pipe, and a brush. Leaning against the dresser, I picked up the pipe and began to smack it against the palm of my hand. Even today it seems unbelievable to me that I would have fallen into that commonplace, that I would have committed such a stale action, reproduced the most worn out cliché imaginable. And conscious that I was doing something shameful.

Elfriede's words didn't penetrate into my ear. All I heard were the hollow smacks of my pipe in the palm of my hand; I was choked by annoyance and bewildered by embarrassment because I was doing that without being able to avoid it. My entire attention was monopolized by the repugnance I felt at the sound of those smacks; I don't know why, but it reminded me of those fish that puff up like bubbles in order to defend themselves. That hollow noise seemed to betray a bubble of anger puffing up larger and larger in my throat.

Nevertheless, I of course managed to smile and assure her that it made no difference, that any other day, whenever she wanted . . . I'm sure my tone of voice was not natural, because Elfriede's reaction certainly was not: she felt intimidated and also began to do false things. When she arrived, her bearing had been extremely open and unaffected; suddenly she started to maneuver around the room, trying to mime a doleful departure. She was attempting to trivialize the situation with comic poses, with poorly executed dance steps: I didn't see her. Just as a few minutes before I'd been unable to hear what she explained to me, I couldn't see what she was doing as she circled around in the hotel. I was aware only of hearing the smacks of my pipe and of my effort to smile.

I don't know how long that scene lasted, but I know my imagination ran through all the thoughts of the day before, and Elfriede's story came alive in my memory once again; except this time the dominant tone was not the warm half-light of the dance hall but the white light of the museum, one now crude, desolate, and beneath it, my emphatic voice, masked in a language almost inaccessible to my audience, kept repeating, "*Déjà chez Lysippe . . .*" That was the most embarrassing phrase, I don't

know why, it was like an accomplice or an accessory to the capricious adjectives she intuited—she now spoke French fluently—and it made a hollow sound that filled the entire expanse of the museum.

Suddenly, in one of her turns, Elfriede stopped sharply and raised a hand to her forehead. I remained impassive, believing it was part of her dance. But I saw that the lamp—a shade of counterweighted white glass hanging from a thick wire cable—was askew and swinging very low, and then it registered on me that I'd just heard a short, vibrant *smack*. I tore myself away from myself and ran toward Elfriede, who still had her hands on her forehead. There was a stream of blood running down her cheek and dripping onto her collar.

She had a cut a few inches long slightly above her left eyebrow, clean, like the cut made by an axe. I'd probably left the light in that low position the night before, when I was reading in the middle of the room. I tried to treat her with something I had in my overnight bag. As soon as I'd bandaged the cut she made an effort to leave, repeating and stressing her words: "I told you *I have to go*: I will go even if my head is split open."

Her hands were shaking and she was very pale. I begged her to rest for a minute, and she agreed to sit in the armchair.

In order to hold her there, I began trying to remove the blood spots from the collar of her white *tailleur*—something I knew was impossible—using a piece of white cotton dipped in alcohol, and I began making stupid comments. I wanted to distract her, to quiet her agitation, which had dissipated my own. At that moment I'd become completely calm and the only thing I wanted was to make her feel how much I regretted the mishap, how annoyed I felt about ending up in that situation. What bad luck, I said, all our plans were ruined! My intentions for today were so different . . . She looked at me as she never had and so truly, so deeply that she also seemed to be placing her entire history in that gaze. It's hard to find words for this, but she looked at me as she had never looked at me and as if that were how she always should have looked at me, as if she were looking at me from before, or *through* before. It seemed to me that her gaze and her silence were lasting a long time,

but they weren't, because she responded to my exclamation immediately: "Your intentions! You'd better watch out for your intentions!"

Her answer made me shiver with something similar to fear: I thought it had made me feel uneasy because I didn't understand it completely. There was nothing at all mysterious about the sentence, but I noticed in it some incomprehensible dimension. What intentions was she referring to? She spoke as if she were wounded by my intentions, as if we'd just fought to the bitter end and she'd fallen, defeated by the force I'd felt turning agonistically inside. Because the fact was that a few moments before a boundless force had convulsed within me. It had been something disproportionate to its cause, a squall over a drama in which neither love nor hate played a role, something like a bull strangled by a silk cord. But some kind of black beast, some kind of hooves had indeed drawn sparks from the deepest part of my being. I felt as guilty as if I'd kicked her, and this made me feel an enormous respect for her.

Without moving away, I tried to look at her from a new distance, because at that moment, I don't know why, I realized for the first time that she was a foreigner. I invented a rather imploring smile so she would let me look deeply into her eyes. Their blue seemed more intense than ever and very distant, deep in those large sockets I admired so much. I realized that she saw me very well from that distant blue; maybe as I looked at her that way I dropped my usual cover, letting her see things even I myself could not discern but things that she, from her point of view, perceived with total clarity. Maybe she always knew them. A foreigner's gaze is sometimes blind to very obvious things, but it can also perceive things concealed from those with conventions in common, and from awareness, which itself acquiesces to common conventions.

I sustained Elfriede's intense gaze for a while, sitting on the arm of the armchair, holding her two hands in one of mine and, with my other hand, arranging the hair on her forehead, which had become damp. Freed now from the previous violence, I could caress her as always, and that contact reconciled me with her. I held her there only a few minutes. Then I accompanied her to her room so she could change her clothes,

and I called a taxi but let her leave by herself. That night I took the boat and returned home.

When the ballet arrived in Buenos Aires, Elfriede was not listed in the cast.

This incident occurred many years ago, and I've neither seen her nor heard from her since. It's true that on my part I did nothing to make that happen, because I wasn't really in love with Elfriede. Elfriede never stood for anything important in my life. Never anything more than what's been told so far. Nothing more than that, but that's the beginning of everything.