Ostia tenebrosa



OSTIA TENEBROSA

A Tractate on Will

Denys Spirin

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OSTIA TENEBROSA: A TRACTATE ON WILL

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Chapter One. On the First Matter

Sal es, et in salem reverteris.
Salt thou art, and into salt thou shalt return.

The alchemists taught that the first matter lies everywhere: it is trodden underfoot on the roads and thrown onto the dung heap, children play with it, and the wise pass it by. They searched for it all their lives in retorts and mines and died without finding it. Yet it surrounds everyone from the first cry: it is the world as the newborn finds it, and that world consists of salts.

A river flows in the bed it carved for itself, and each spring deepens it. A mountain stands where it stood in the days of the fathers, and a field yields what was sown in it. None of this decides anew whether to exist; everything holds by what once happened and has repeated itself ever since. If the world decided itself anew every morning, there would be no world, only flashes, and no one would recognize in them the flashes of yesterday.

For a long time Augsburg could not decide whether a bridge should stand where its founder had ordered it built. The river had shifted away, grass grew beneath the arches, and every spring the city council allotted money for repairs. To demolish the bridge was to defy the will of a dead man; to move it was to admit that he might have been mistaken. At last a flood brought the water back beneath the arches. The councilors declared this a vindication of the original design. The following year the river departed for good.

A monastery may have no monks left, yet the peasants continue to pay it tithes; a church sometimes stands empty while wax and candles are sold around it year after year. The parishioners decide among themselves who shall receive the offerings. If God wishes to refuse them, he will have to find people who stand to gain from his refusal. He will have to search for a long time.

The seeker often complains that the world was arranged before he was born. But if every morning one had to learn anew that fire burns and a stone falls, an entire life would be spent taking the first step. A child learns to walk by falling; an adult walks without remembering a single fall, though he himself does not know where he is going.

A law outlives its lawgiver, and a promise holds two people even after both have forgotten why they made it. Rulers change in the cities, but every morning the toll collector demands the same coin, and a traveler from afar cares little whose hand first placed the scales at the gate. The dead sometimes rule longer than the living.

The bell rings for matins, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline, and the day in the city is cut to the bell long before a citizen opens his eyes. The year follows the day, from Christmas to Easter, from Easter to Michaelmas, and each feast has its own food and songs. The guild knows how many years an apprentice must serve and what work he must produce to be called a master. The law knows the penalty for stealing a horse and the penalty for stealing bread. Even the curses here are made of words spoken before you.

The bell-ringer of the Bruges belfry struck the hours for forty years without making a single mistake. When he died and no successor had yet been appointed, the bell remained silent for a week, and throughout that week the city woke at the same hour.

In the lands near Magdeburg, the whole village beat the bounds every spring, and at each stone a boy was whipped so that he would remember its place. The boundaries endured for centuries, longer than some cities.

It is said that God created by the word, and what He created remained. Grass and trees were commanded to bear seed after their kind, fish and birds to multiply, and everything living has done so ever since without another command. On the seventh day He stopped. The world did not fall apart: it continued to repeat what had been spoken, and no one entered the first pause in the world. The

Nothing, of which we shall speak later, sometimes resembles that day, and the two can be told apart only by who it was that stopped.

Why does god not take back his first word, if what he created has grown cramped within it? Some say he cannot, others that he will not, and still others consider the question itself blasphemy. Perhaps god has long been saying something else while the world goes on repeating the former word; neither a temple priest nor a tree can distinguish silence from a new command they do not know how to hear.

An infant is born into a world where stones have been named, fields measured, feasts appointed, and what he must become foretold. One thing is never entered in the town register: what he will one day cease to carry forward. Soothsayers are loved for their accuracy, but a man whose future has been foretold is treated as one already dead: his life is known from beginning to end.

A cloth merchant's widow in Ypres had two sons. A wandering fortune-teller promised the elder power over many, and the younger a quiet trade. The elder became a fortune-teller, the younger his only apprentice. Their mother died without ever understanding whether the prophecy had come true.

God leaves salt behind when He creates. Temples, rites, feasts, and prayers that are repeated for him and about him hold his people, and sometimes hold god himself more tightly than he wished. The one who sets the seal names his own. He named Abram Abraham, changed one letter in his wife's name, and from that day onward both answered to names their ancestors had never borne.

The prophet laughed at the carpenter who felled a tree, burned half of it in his oven, baked bread over the fire and warmed himself, then carved a god from the other half, bowed before it, and said: Save me, for you are my god. The carpenter had long forgotten whose knife had carved that face.

A people builds a temple for its god, feeds the priests, and remembers the creator's name even in the years when he gives no

answer. But if the god should wish to leave, there will be those who, in the name of fidelity, forbid him to abandon his throne.

It is said: unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. The sower needs a harvest, and in these words every grain is good only insofar as it grows into an ear of wheat. The parable is silent about the grain that remained alone, and it is counted lost.

Satan, it is said, refused to bow before the first man. He was commanded to bow before clay, and he did not bow.

There is no need to revile this world: without it there would be no one to leave or return. Enough has been said of those who live in it; the book speaks of something else. The first man was named for the earth from which he was taken.

Chapter Two. On Temptation

Eritis sicut dii.
You shall be as gods.

You bear the name given to you, and answer to it before you have time to ask who is calling. Such is the order of light: everything in it is recognizable, and every living soul is plain to his neighbor, as a road already traveled is known. Salt holds the form of what was once done and restores it whenever hands reach for the same thing again. Some call this nature, others habit; the fathers had another word for it, grace, and held the seal upon an infant's forehead to be its sign.

This salt comes from the alchemists' furnaces. Wormwood or thistle is burned to ash, the ash is leached and the solution evaporated, and at the bottom of the vessel remain white crystals in which, the masters assure us, the virtue of the herb is preserved, though nothing of the herb itself remains. An action passes in the same way, while what has settled from it lies at the bottom and tastes bitter with wormwood many years later. The Gospel calls the disciples the salt of the earth, though we think little of the earth.

Light is easily reviled by one who does not know what it holds. In light every action has its cause, every sin its own penance, written beforehand and waiting on a shelf, and even the fall has been provided for, like a ditch beside the road. A dying man who has forgotten his children's names remembers until his last hour a prayer taught to him at five, and his lips recite it when he himself can no longer utter anything. Salt has done this for him. He who sets the seal holds his own firmly, and many owe it to him that they remain someone at all when everything else within them has crumbled. This should be remembered when we come to speak of departure, for the one who leaves abandons more than a prison.

It is said that on the white stone is written a new name which no one knows except the one who receives it. We shall speak of this stone later, and it is more dangerous than it appears to the one who

awaits it. The name comes from outside, and a man grows so closely joined to it that when he is called, what lies beneath the name answers, and he himself can no longer say whether he was the one who answered.

Changes occur in light as well, and often. People change their faith, their city, their trade, their wife, and each time take a new form from the same shelf on which the old one lay.

There lived in Toulouse a cloth merchant who had been a Catholic, then a Cathar, then a Catholic again, and in his old age, it is said, went to hear the Waldensian preachers. In every new congregation he knelt with the same movement, right knee forward, as the parish priest had taught him in childhood. He sincerely considered himself a seeker.

The voice speaking from darkness comes to the one held fast without invitation and without a seal. It has no fixed face: it may speak through a book, a chance fellow traveler, an illness, a line read in the wrong place, a dream that cannot be interpreted. Therefore it cannot be compelled to come. Grimoires teach the summoning of spirits, and the conjurer considers whatever arrives to be bound merely because it appeared at the appointed hour. Yet sometimes the guest comes of his own accord and lets the host believe that the door opened by the spell. He is little like a summons and demands nothing. He says only that the road traveled before you was once traveled for the first time, and that one may step aside. Whoever hears him for the first time usually mistakes him for a thought of his own, and is less mistaken than he supposes. Darkness is known only by its traces, and he who speaks from it is recognized in the same way: after him a crack remains in a man where the surface was once smooth. We who speak from there do not know your name, nor do we ask.

The tempted man readily asks who gave him the thought, for the giver's name releases him from answering for the gift he has accepted. If it came from an angel, it is obeyed; if from a demon,

rejected; if from his own soul, he listens for what is familiar. Thus the same thought changes its value three times, though not a word of it has changed. A tempter who named himself would give the one held fast a ready judgment of what had been said. Silence concerning the name leaves him more work than the most terrible command.

I knew a novice who one night heard words for which he could find no place either in his prayer book or within himself. The abbot ordered him to keep silent about them and await another sign. The sign came only forty years later: the novice became an abbot and repeated the advice to a young brother. By then he had forgotten what was said on that first night.

Men look for the bringer of a thought more eagerly after the deed than before it. A man who succeeds in doing good is called an instrument of heaven; one who does evil, a vessel of the devil. The same language serves both judges. The tempter cares little for this: an answer given under another's name reaches him as an echo.

Sometimes the voice has long fallen silent, yet a man still listens for it in every rustle and builds a temple where he once heard a simple word. Not all temples are built in honor of gods; some are raised to nothing more than the memory of a demon. In February of last year a dyer's wife from near Trier, a possessed woman, butchered her whole family. The Dominicans read prayers of exorcism over her for three days, and eighteen demons came out of her, each naming itself as it departed. A year later she stabbed two of her neighbors to death. At her trial she said she had wanted the demons to come back: without them the house had grown too dull.

The serpent said to the woman: you shall be as gods. He did not pluck the fruit. The interpreters who blame him for the fall attribute to him an act he never performed, leaving Eve with nothing but credulity, and thus demean them both. Had he plucked the fruit himself, she would have received yet another gift from another's hands, and the garden would have remained a garden. Lilith had left

it earlier, when she was shown her place; three angels were sent after her, but they could not bring her back.

The voice opens a possibility and says nothing of the road. In this lie both its mercy and its cruelty, and most of those who hear it perish at this very point. The crack aches, and into it rushes the first thing that offers relief: wine, gold, power over others, or a law turned inside out and obeyed with the same zeal with which it was formerly obeyed the right way around. Such people are certain they have gone far, though they have merely exchanged one seal for another. There is no reason to pity them: even in light they lived by whatever first came to hand. One cannot teach a man to count the stars while skipping the counting of fingers; nor can one pass from a single whisper to that for which the whisper is spoken.

An Avignon scribe copied forty treatises on the spiritual path in his lifetime and knew them so well that he corrected their authors in the margins. He himself never once passed beyond the city gates. He heard the voice speaking in those books more clearly than anyone, and each time mistook what he heard for the road.

For twenty years the widow of a Nuremberg baker attended early Mass at St. Lawrence's and sat on the same bench, to the left of a pillar. One day a traveling monk told her that services were conducted differently in Bamberg, and she stopped attending altogether. A year later she was seen again beside the same pillar, at the same hour.

It will be objected that the tempter is cunning and every voice seeks servants for itself. Some do. But whoever demands worship already speaks from light, for he offers a new seal in place of the old. Such a one is answered as the one who set the first seal was answered.

They say there are no seals in hell. That is why it is painted in fire: salt is drawn from the flame, but in the flame itself there is none.

They ask what darkness gains if it takes no servants. Some answer: nothing, and darkness speaks as fire burns. Others suppose there is no one there to meet. The one held fast answers the voice with what has

been placed within him, and the voice hears in reply the echo of another's seal; an interlocutor appears only where the man himself has answered, and such men are few. If this is so, the tempter seeks an equal and differs in this from the trapper, and he does not know in advance whom he will find; sometimes he himself is caught in the net he brought for another's freedom. Yet this interpretation too may prove to be salt given to you in place of an answer.

Not every darkness seeks an encounter. There are wills to whom others are indifferent, and some that love only to watch the cities of others fall. A voice does not become true by claiming a lofty purpose.

In one tale a demon offered a hermit the fulfillment of a single wish, provided the hermit would call the wish his own. The hermit asked that the demon never appear to him again. The demon granted the wish. Thereafter the hermit listened to the silence every evening, and he had more disciples than before. No one knows whom they came to hear.

At a trial in Koblenz, a girl from an Eifel farmstead, whose entire family had died in a single winter, confessed that she had sold herself to the Devil for a piece of butter because she wanted to live sweetly. She could not write, and according to her account it was he who guided her hand. The judges took this as proof of intention. She also said that everything at the witches' sabbath had tasted good, except that no salt was served.

Take nothing from the tempter except an occasion. Do not call upon one who has no name: he will not understand you.

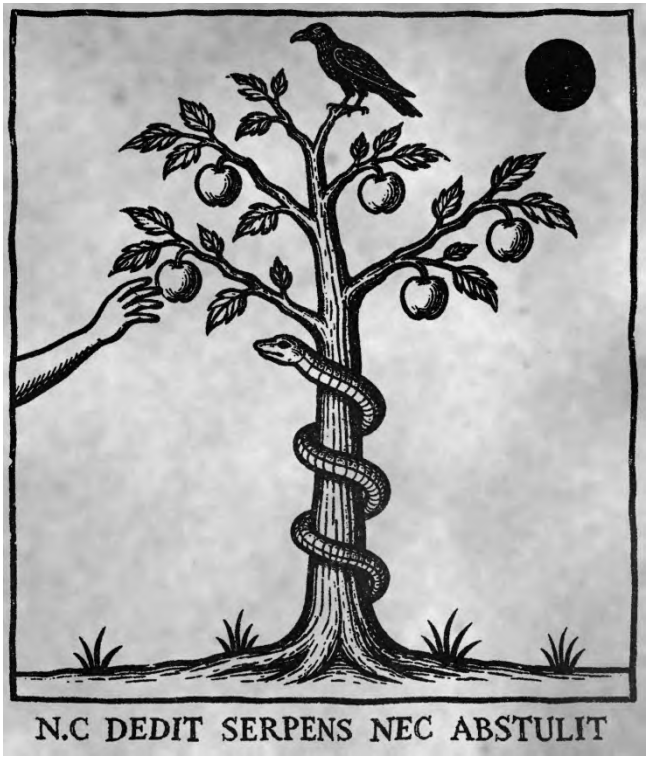
For many years a canon of Liège urged a childhood friend to leave the flagellants, with whom he traveled from city to city. The friend listened, agreed, and at last cast aside his scourge. A year later he was himself preaching against flagellation, with the same words and the same fervor with which he had formerly whipped himself in the public squares. The canon long considered this his own success.

One sage wrote nothing, so as to leave no teaching behind. His disciple wrote everything down.

These pages speak from darkness, and everything said here of the serpent is said of them as well. They tell of the son of a Regensburg apothecary who, until the age of thirty, had never once thought of leaving his father's shop. One morning he awoke in Venice, at an inn near a bridge, with no memory of how he had come there, without money or traveling bag. He stayed, learned the glassmaker's trade, and lived a long life.

Figure One

My father traded in wine in Mainz and left me a house near the Market Square, a cellar, and debts of which I learned after his funeral. I was nineteen, and whatever could be taken from life I took without waiting to be offered: wine from my father's cellar, other men's wives, dice, and books I was forbidden to read; they too seemed like wine to me. My confessor said I was eating from the tree of knowledge, and I laughed: I thought there were two trees in the garden and that I was stripping both of their fruit. I realized much later that there was only one tree, and the realization did not make me any better.



Chapter Three. On Blackness

Egrediebatur et non revertebatur.
Which went forth and did not return.

Do not destroy what you wish to free yourself from.

A drunkard who breaks his last jug goes to the tavern that evening, as everyone who has tried to give up drinking knows. The jug has nothing to do with it. The craving lives in the hand that reaches for the table, in the hour after vespers, in the smell drifting through an open doorway in the street, and all these remain when the object is gone. Things are merely places where salt shows through, and whoever destroys them strikes at emptiness. Sometimes the blow even succeeds: a man goes for years without touching what he broke, only to discover that his whole life has been arranged around the emptiness, and he serves it as faithfully as he once served the object.

Salt can pass from an object into expectation. Take away the cup, and the man awaits the hour when it will be returned. Lock the door, and he spends years remembering its creak. Abolish a feast, and every day becomes a count toward its return. Thus a man may continue to live according to the will of a thing that no longer exists; what is dead holds him more firmly than what lives, for there is now nothing left to argue with.

Not every strong desire is a master. The hungry man seeks bread, the lover seeks his beloved, the craftsman seeks a stone fit for his work. Freedom cannot be measured by how little a man cares about what he does. Whoever boasts that he desires nothing has often merely failed to find a name for what he awaits. Another desires the same thing all his life and freely desires it again. Whoever confuses the strength of desire with the force of command will set about mortifying everything living and call his labor Death.

A helmsman from Danzig, who had sailed for many years aboard the same ship, lost his vessel to creditors. He went to sea again and

sailed in other men's ships. One day he was offered the chance to buy back his former vessel, but he refused, though he still loved it more than any other. Asked why, he replied that it was too small. It was strange to hear this from a man who spoke of that cramped ship with such tenderness.

Some desire because they once desired and see no reason to stop, though they lack nothing. Whether the desire is fulfilled settles nothing here: one man goes his whole life without obtaining what he desires and remains free, while another obtains everything and immediately wants more.

A prisoner kept on bread and water does not drink, and no one calls him a sober man, for he is given no wine. Abstinence held by circumstance is held by another's hand, and when the door opens, that hand lets go. Monasteries were placed far from cities with the same calculation in mind. The fathers who fled temptation into the desert left more accounts of demons than anyone else.

Genoese merchants hired pilgrims to go to Compostela in their stead and paid them by the mile. The pilgrim returned with the scallop shell of Saint James, and the shell was hung above his employer's door. Death cannot be died by proxy. The employer showed the shell to his guests and spoke of the journey as though he had made it himself, and after a year or two he believed it himself.

Blackness needs no broken jugs, locked doors, or hired pilgrims, and it begins quietly. In the morning a man decides not to drink. Tomorrow he may drink, or he may make the same decision again; his decision says nothing about that day. The jug stands on the table, the craving comes at its accustomed hour and passes, and one day he notices that it came and his hand stayed where it lay. Nothing has disappeared. Everything that was there before remains, with its hours and smells, except that it has ceased to decide for him.

They say that when Lucifer fell, he had not a single habit.

Noah sent a raven out of the ark, and the raven flew back and forth until the waters had dried up, yet never returned to the ark. The

dove, meanwhile, brought back a leaf in its beak. The interpreters praise the dove for its fidelity. The alchemists who wrote *solve* above the first stage and called it the raven's head knew why they began with the black bird. The white one will come later, also bearing a leaf in its beak.

Whether a man has died this death cannot be seen by looking at him. A drinker may be free, while a sober man may be held captive by prohibition more firmly than he was ever held by wine. Conduct reveals what was done and says nothing of whether something else could have been done. Test yourself twice: can you leave it undone, and can you do it? Let both answers be true at the same hour.

The two answers, however, cannot be laid side by side like two coins and weighed: a man who has tested refusal has yet to test return. Some pass both tests and take pride in their ability to do a thing or refrain from it, while a third thing has long been deciding for them: the need to test themselves.

The loss of power is discovered afterward: a man hears the old summons and suddenly finds it strange, like the name of an animal he once kept. One such morning proves nothing. The next day salt may speak again, and it will offer no apology for its silence.

A day laborer from Siena, who had lost two mules and his own cloak at dice, gave up gambling after Easter and counted the days thereafter. Each evening he kept his count by moving pebbles from one bowl to another, and when a neighbor once scattered them, he refused to speak to him until Trinity Sunday.

Make no vows for life.

An oath carries salt from the hand into the word, and the word holds more firmly than the hand, for it cannot be broken like a vessel. The man who has sworn not to drink until his death abstains each day because of the oath, and the oath does for him what the jug once did. There are also those who violate the old rule out of spite, to prove their freedom to themselves; we shall speak of them separately.

It will be objected that the weak cannot stand without a vow, and that it is better to remain standing by an oath than to fall. Perhaps it is better. At least the man who falls falls by himself, and his fall belongs to him, while behind the man who stands there is an oath. One may choose between these two as long as one pleases, and the choice is made in light. In any case, the weak have no need to come here.

The Orphics instructed the dead to avoid drinking from the spring beside the white cypress, though their thirst would be greatest there, and to continue toward the Lake of Memory. Those who wish to begin anew drink from the first spring, and begin again with no memory, within the same circle. The Death of which we speak erases nothing: a man remembers everything he once was, and all of it continues to speak to him.

The given name is much like wine. One who renounces his baptism according to a prescribed rite has performed another rite, and one who receives a new name at his tonsure has received it from the same hands. A man may continue to bear his name, answer to it in the street, sign letters with it; Death concerns the one who answers.

Taking the tonsure is sometimes the last thing a man decides for himself. He comes to the gates of his own will and hands the gatekeeper, along with his worldly clothing, the right to decide. Some who have taken the tonsure remember that day into old age as the freest of their lives. Most, however, come to those gates fleeing debts, a wife, or the gallows, and the monastery accepts everyone who brings a contribution.

Salt can also be righteous. One who has endured for years grows accustomed to his endurance and recognizes himself by it, as a drunkard recognizes himself by his cup; one who has been a victim clings to being a victim more firmly than he would have clung to his tormentor. In one old image, the martyr and the executioner are painted by the same hand and bear the same face, and the martyr's halo is so heavy that his head bends to one side.

Pain comes at once, and its meaning is assigned afterward, by others: the priest who calls it a trial, the physician who calls it black bile, the neighbor who says it serves him right. Whoever accepts one of these assignments wears his pain like a livery.

An old knight from near Troyes had sworn in his youth to eat no meat until he had seen Jerusalem. He never saw Jerusalem and ate no meat until the age of eighty. Before his death, the chaplain asked whether it had been difficult, and the knight replied that he did not remember making any such vow.

They ask why this is called Death when no one dies and nothing is destroyed. The one who was assembled from the commands of salt experiences the loss of their power as his own end, and in a certain sense he is right: his wholeness was held by them, and when they cease to decide, what remains of him is uncertain. Hence the fear of blackness, familiar to everyone who has approached it, and hence its danger to those who tear everything from themselves at once.

In a Carthusian monastery lived a brother who had passed through blackness at the age of twenty, while still a layman. Until his old age he told the story to every new novice, and the brethren knew it so well that they prompted him whenever he lost his place.

Figure Two

By the time I was thirty, the cellar was empty, and I was drinking on credit from those to whom I had once sold wine. Once I awoke on the floor among broken shards and could not remember which of my guests I had struck or why; the neighbors told me in the morning. Of my father's possessions I had only the house left, and I wore its key around my neck, for everything else had long since been pawned. I went on drinking for a long time after that night, but as I drank I watched the key as one watches one's last coin.



Instruction on the Pride of Humility

Non serviam.

I will not serve.

Macarius of Egypt was once returning from a marsh to his cell with an armful of palm leaves when a demon came out to meet him, carrying a sickle. It tried to strike him and could not. Then the demon said: I suffer much at your hands, Macarius. Everything you do, I do as well: you fast, and I eat nothing at all; you keep vigil, and I never sleep. In one thing alone you defeat me. Macarius asked what it was, and the demon answered: humility. The desert fathers retold this story with great pride.

The fathers called pride the beginning of every sin, and they knew what they were saying: the first of the fallen was the first to say "I." Thus, since the days of the desert, men have taught themselves to become small, to call themselves dust, the least of the brethren, unworthy servants. In some monasteries they learn this so diligently that the brothers dispute who shall call himself the lowest, and to yield in the dispute seems to them a defeat.

The publican stood afar off, dared not lift his eyes, and struck his breast, while the Pharisee thanked God that he was unlike other men. The parable is read in churches, and the listener thanks God that he is unlike the Pharisee.

Here the last become first, counting from the end. The man who refuses the first place watches to see whether his refusal has been noticed, while the man who calls himself last has already passed judgment on everyone who does not hasten to call himself last. He needs witnesses no less than the vain man, though he is ashamed to admit it, and counts this shame among his merits. The humblest men I have met were at episcopal courts: there they bow from the waist and hold out a hand with the palm turned upward.

Yet it is too easy to revile pride. Job's friends said everything that pious men are expected to say: God does not punish the innocent, humble yourself, confess your guilt, and you shall be rewarded. Job would not humble himself. Job demanded judgment, recounted his deeds, and told God to his face that he suffered without cause. When the Lord spoke out of the whirlwind, His wrath turned against the friends: "you have not spoken the thing that is right before me, as my servant Job hath."

Pride that needs spectators is worth no more than humility put on display: both live by their reflection in other people's eyes and go out when the hall is empty. There is another kind, which needs no one. It holds a man when he is neither praised nor condemned and never asks whether he stands high enough. It is difficult to distinguish from stubbornness, and often proves to be exactly that.

There is another humility as well. Whoever cannot yield cannot encounter another: he leaves every encounter the same as he entered it and calls this fidelity to himself. The one who yields allows another to change him, and afterward decides for himself what of the change to keep. To yield so that another begins deciding for you is to enter the very swept house of which we speak elsewhere.

When Simeon's fame reached the fathers of the Egyptian deserts, they doubted whether his pillar was of God and sent word that he should come down. They reasoned thus: if he refused, they would drag him down by force; if he obeyed, they would let him remain. Simeon immediately began to descend, and the messengers ordered him to stay. The fathers considered this proof of humility. Did Simeon know how he was being tested, and would he have descended had he known?

The demon of Macarius neither ate nor slept, and the desert fathers did not ask why he, who could do everything they could, had not learned humility as well. Perhaps he had tried.

Chapter Four. On Sin, the Nothing, and Bondage

Legio mihi nomen est, quia multi sumus.
My name is Legion, for we are many.

The son of a Pisan notary spent his whole life acting in defiance of his father: his father supported the emperor, he supported the pope; his father fasted on Fridays, he ate game on Fridays. When the old man died, the son could not choose a bride for three years.

To cease obeying salt does not yet mean doing anything. There are different ways of ceasing, and most of them return a man to where he came from or deliver him to someone he never called.

The apostle said: "For without the law sin was dead." He lamented the law and said more than he intended: sin feeds upon the law. Whoever breaks a commandment for the sake of breaking it keeps that commandment in mind more constantly than the righteous man, consults it before every step, and does the opposite with the same precision with which the righteous man does what is prescribed. He is chained to the law from its underside, and if the law were abolished, he would have nothing left to do.

Where there is no one to forbid, the transgressor invents one for himself, often stricter than the last. The enemies of temples remember every word spoken in them, and the man who despises fasting knows its appointed days more accurately than the man who fasts.

The Canaanites sometimes burned children to Moloch. The interpreters describe a bronze idol with the head of a calf, hollow within: they heated it from below, placed an infant upon its outstretched arms, and beat drums so that the father would not hear the cries and take pity. Israel was commanded to leave no soul alive in that land, lest it learn to do the same; of a neighboring people it was said plainly: kill them all, from boy to suckling infant.

The fathers called the Devil the ape of god and, without knowing it, described those who serve god. The Templars were accused of spitting upon the cross when entering their order, and the judges never considered that for this to be done, a cross must hang in the chapter house. Witches were said to trample at their gatherings a host stolen at communion, and for that one must first come to communion. Such people need the Church more than a priest does, for a priest can pray in a field. Whoever serves in reverse remains a slave or a fool at another's altar.

A chaplain in Bingen spent twenty years asking God for a prebend at Mainz Cathedral and, receiving none, decided to ask the Devil. He knew no prayers beyond those prescribed by his office, so he copied out his breviary, replacing the name throughout, and read it at the same hours, upon the same kneeling stool, by a candle made of church wax. On the fortieth night the Devil appeared, listened to compline until the end, and laughed so hard that the candle went out. The chaplain received his prebend the following year, by seniority.

The cellarer of a Benedictine monastery near Cluny ate meat during Lent at the table of a dying winegrower who did not wish to eat his last meal alone. The cellarer had never broken his fast before and never broke it again, and he did not regret that evening. Nor did he confess it.

I knew a judge praised for his mercy: he always found a mitigating circumstance and had never pronounced a severe sentence. One day a man came before him who could not be released without bringing harm to others. The judge spent a long time rereading the law, then released him as well. The townspeople cursed the decision, while the judge thanked god for remaining true to himself.

In a neighboring town an executioner refused to put a condemned man to death, though the crowd had already gathered in the square. He had never refused before and never refused afterward. When his superior demanded a reason, he said that that morning he had

recognized his son's face among the spectators. Both towns disputed which of them had offered an example of virtue.

Others have no need to transgress: they cease, one thing after another, and one day find themselves in a house where nothing happens. The desert fathers called this the noonday hour: the sun stands still, the shadow does not move, the monk goes to the window to see whether anyone is coming, returns, and goes again. They considered the demon of this hour the most grievous, and they were right, though they did not know why. The man who has freed himself and begun nothing stands in the Nothing, and the Nothing does not hold him, and at first this seems like lightness. Then someone comes to visit the monk and finds no one there.

An unclean spirit, having gone out of a man, wanders through waterless places and, finding no rest, returns, finds its house swept and put in order, and brings with it seven spirits more wicked than itself. In this parable people usually pity the householder and revile the spirit. The interpreters do not ask why the householder swept a house in which he had no intention of living.

A halt is not yet the Nothing. On the seventh day god too stopped, and the world did not become empty. They cannot be distinguished by inaction alone: one who has stopped of his own will rises when he wishes, while the one standing in the Nothing waits at the window for someone to come and raise him.

A Ghent weaver closed his workshop for a month in the midst of a flood of orders and sat on his doorstep watching the canal. The guild fined him for idleness. A month later he opened the workshop and wove as before, and paid the fine without dispute.

The one who enters an empty house seldom has horns. More often it is a teacher, a beloved, a community with a ready answer to everything, or a god who has long awaited the vacancy. Salt held the man by his own past, and this was light; the one who entered holds him by a will of his own, and this is bondage. They are difficult to distinguish, for his actions remain predictable, except that formerly

they could be guessed from the man himself and now from the one he serves. Sometimes the master hides behind an ancient rule: he changes his decisions morning and evening, while the servant finds a justification for each in old books. When the master dies, the servant will continue to carry out his last whim, and bondage will imperceptibly become light.

In Freiburg, a Greek widow kept a house where she taught maidens to dance, and on feast days the whole town gathered to watch them. No musicians were ever present, yet everyone heard the sound of tiny bells, quick and incessant, like those on a horse's harness. At the trial, each maiden swore that she danced of her own free will and heard no bells at all, though the judges could hear them even in the courtroom. Of the Greek woman they said only that there were three sisters, and that the eldest, with the keys to every door hanging from her belt, lives in Rome and weeps for faces that are no more.

In a house where everything is done according to custom, there may be no master at all. And in a house where commands are requested every morning, a custom may arise from the very act of asking. The elder changes his word, while the novice, who is forbidden to choose, invariably repeats a single phrase: bless me. From this phrase one can seldom tell to whom the coming day belongs.

The desert fathers made a path of this. Through fasting, vigils, and silence they burned every habit out of themselves, even the habit of sleeping lying down, and in the scorched place they installed the will of an elder, called this the cutting off of self-will, and esteemed it above fasting. One monk, at the word of his abba, for three years carried water from many miles away and watered a dry stick planted in the sand; it is said that the stick blossomed. Its fruit was distributed among the brethren and called the fruits of obedience. What became of those who tasted them is not recorded in the Paterikon.

When the Gadarene demoniac was asked his name, he answered: Legion. By then he had no name of his own, or perhaps no one had asked for it. The expelled demons begged to enter the swine rather than remain without a home, and the herd rushed down the steep slope into the sea. The healed man, meanwhile, begged to follow the one who had cast them out, but was told to return home.

Figure Three

For a long time I had been casting everything off, yet I made the decision in a single day: during Lent, when I recovered from a fever, I gave my creditors what little remained, dismissed the maidservant, threw the dice and books into the street, and washed the floors. Then I sat in the middle of the empty room and waited for god to see how clean it was and come of his own accord. I sat there until summer. The cleaner the house became, the more strongly I felt that someone was waiting beyond the door, and one night I understood that I would open it. Then I locked the house, hung the key around my neck, and left.



Instruction on Contagion

Negotium perambulans in tenebris.
The business that walketh about in the dark.

In the summer of the year thirteen hundred and seventy-four, people began to dance in the Rhineland and beyond, in Aachen, Cologne, and Metz. They danced in the streets and churches, by day and by night, shouting names no one knew, collapsing from exhaustion and, after catching their breath, dancing again. Whoever stopped to watch was dancing beside them within the hour. Priests recited prayers of exorcism over them, and the town councils, it is said, hired musicians so that the dancers would exhaust themselves sooner, but the music only brought more dancers. By autumn it all ended as it had begun, and no one could say what it had been.

Of the custom that holds a city we have spoken at the beginning. Contagion begins when the common salt awakens and starts passing from one person to another. It spreads through action, and no persuasion is needed: whoever joined the dance argued with no one, and faith, if it comes at all, comes afterward. A prayer spoken without faith feeds the contagion as well as a fervent one, and a feast attended for the sake of wine holds it more firmly than a fast.

Contagion has two guards. Within stands shame: the custom has long since become the face of the one who holds it, to depart from it is to lose face, and whoever attacks the custom strikes, as he feels it, at his eyes. Without stands banishment, and for most the mere sight of it is enough.

In the villages around Mainz every parish had its fool, who alone did not take off his cap before the priest and sat in church on the reeve's bench, and no one touched him for it. When our fool died, the parish was uneasy for half a year, until the reeve persuaded his nephew to keep his cap on in church. The nephew was given bread for it.

Contagion hates its own most fiercely. Christians traded with Saracens, made truces with them, and ate at the same table. The Cathars, who prayed the same Our Father, were burned a whole town at a time. When, near Béziers, someone asked how to distinguish heretics from the faithful, the legate reportedly answered: kill them all, the Lord will know his own. The unbeliever is less dangerous than the heretic: he believes something else, while the heretic shows that the same words can be believed differently.

Contagion feeds most readily upon an enemy. Acre fell more than two hundred years ago, the Christians no longer possess the Holy Land, yet crusades are still preached, and people give to their collection more readily than they did when there was something to fight for. The preachers collect money for a campaign that will never take place, and eat what they collect. I traveled with them and saw how they ate.

The Creed is learned by heart, and over a single word, *filioque*, "and from the Son," East and West have called one another schismatics for more than four hundred years. Whoever errs is corrected, gently at first, then handed over to the secular authorities with a plea for mercy. The plea is pronounced according to the rite, and the executioner knows that it does not concern him.

Often contagion does not die. The Latins forgot Aristotle for six centuries, then received him back through Toledo in Arabic books, and a hundred years later every assertion in the schools of Paris was met with the question of what the Philosopher had said. Books lie in libraries like seeds in a granary, awaiting rain.

There is dispute over whether a spirit lives within contagion. Some say that it does, and the exorcists who drove out the dancing called it by name, while the legion that came out of the Gadarene demoniac was many in one. Others reply that there are only people, and if everyone went home one evening, no spirit would remain.

An inquisitor of Cologne burned the book from which the Beghards of that city learned, and when the heresy did not abate, he

burned the Beghards. After that it abated. Twenty years later the same book was found in his secretary's house, copied out fair in the secretary's own hand.

In Echternach, near Trier, on Whit Tuesday, the entire town and thousands of pilgrims pass through the streets in a dancing procession, hopping to the same melody so that Saint Willibrord may cure them of dancing.

First Rule

Make no vows for life. Decide for one day, and in the morning decide again without consulting what you decided yesterday.

Do not count the days.

What has been decided need not be decided again, provided it can be.

If your eye tempts you, pluck it out and regret it for the rest of your life.

From time to time take something familiar and test it twice: on one day do it, having decided to do it; on another refrain, having decided to refrain. Notice where you had to struggle, and next time begin there. If you had to struggle nowhere, look at who was beside you.

Do not judge your freedom by your actions, whether good or evil.

Do not break a prohibition for the sake of breaking it. If you triumph in breaking it, you have obeyed it.

Cast nothing off until you know what you will do with the space it leaves. It is better to depart from the old while doing something new than to leave and afterward seek something to do.

When the hour comes in which you desire nothing, call no one and do not open the door to the first who knocks. Wait it out.

Entrust your will to no one's keeping, neither to a beloved nor to a god, neither for a year nor for a day.

If you wish, make a vow and keep it. It will be all the more pleasant to be rid of it.

If someone promises to take your decision upon himself, leave him. When you are told that the Church requires it, ask who exactly requires it.

Give no alms to the beggar at the church door. He will pray for you to the one you have left.

Speak to no one of what is happening to you, least of all to your confessor.

If you do speak, do not tell the same story twice in the same words.

Keep this Rule with care, but reread it seldom.

Chapter Five. On the Desert

Nemo per desertum ambulat.
Nobody walks through the desert.

They will ask who walks through the desert if the former has died in blackness and the other has yet to be born. The answer is: Nobody, and it is more accurate than those who give it suppose.

The desert through which the path leads is white. The water has receded, and the salt it once dissolved has risen to the surface in a crust that crunches underfoot. The traveler sees it all, as far as the horizon, and for the first time sees clearly, for he is no longer drowning in it; for this clarity the alchemists called the second work white. Yet the crust bears his weight, and he has no other ground beneath his feet. He remembers his mother's face, speaks the language he was taught, recognizes himself by his hands and the scar on his knee, and all this is the same salt he no longer obeys. Whoever tells him to break the crust invites him to fall through.

The desert is praised because it demands nothing, and feared for the same reason. In the city a man is remembered by his neighbors, work awaits him in the morning and a home in the evening; each such thread may bind him, yet by these same threads a fallen man can be found. Whoever has severed them and cannot yet hold himself must learn to distinguish the silence of the former command from the solitude that followed it. Neither of these things gives birth to the Name by itself.

One born of salt can change it without ceasing to live. Forgetting one thing, he remembers another; moving away, he carries his former language into his dreams; losing the strength of his hands, he recognizes himself by his voice. He resembles a bridge whose planks are replaced every year without the entire deck ever being dismantled. Some boast that they have destroyed the bridge and found a beginning, and when asked to show where they stand, they point to a new bridge made of other men's planks.

After the Black Death, two brothers remained in a village near Utrecht. The elder remembered their mother's name but had forgotten where their house stood; the younger knew every stone of the burned threshold but had forgotten their mother's voice. Each believed the other had lost what mattered most, and both called themselves the survivors. When a traveler asked to whom their father's land belonged, the brothers quarreled for the first time. Until then they had lived upon it together.

Odysseus called himself Nobody to the Cyclops, and when the blinded creature called to his neighbors, crying that Nobody was killing him, they returned to their caves. No one searches for the nameless. He is awaited by the one who inscribed the white stone long ago.

Others do not expect him at supper or pray for him, and a curse sent after him does not know where to fly. Odysseus himself could not endure this: having sailed away, he shouted from his ship his own name, his father's name, and his island, and the Cyclops passed all of it to Poseidon.

One may call oneself Nobody as a trick, and the trick does not make a man nameless. Odysseus knew where he was sailing and remembered who awaited him on his island. Without these memories he could not have distinguished a homecoming from another voyage. In shouting his name he set up for his enemy a sign by the road, of the kind set up so that a stranger may find the city. An external word sometimes opens more doors than a key; yet the Name itself, if it exists, cannot be found through the word shouted aloud.

It is easy for the traveler in the desert to envy the gods: it seems they need only renounce everything and they will remain themselves. Yet a god too can live in the palace of his own memory and listen to tales about himself until they become his law. The priests of such a god tell what he was before they were born and never ask what he was when he awoke this morning.

Help cannot find the nameless either. The one who set the seal held a man even when he could no longer stand on his own; there is no one to raise the fallen traveler in the desert, and he does not know whom to call, for every name that comes to mind will belong to another. He has no Name of his own here yet, and therefore this is the most dangerous place.

First they take the traveler's title, then his home, then the customs of that home. He thanks those who take them as long as there remains someone to whom he can say thank you. Last of all he loses the language of gratitude, for that too was given to him. The one who advised him to surrender everything usually falls silent at this point. Renunciation can be carried to such precision that no one remains to complete it.

The prophet says that in the desolation, where jackals howl and the hairy creature calls to its fellow, the nocturnal one whom the Jews call Lilith and the Latins lamia shall find her rest. Scripture says nothing more of her. Where the traveler has nowhere to lay his head, she rests.

One who crosses a river on stepping stones does not lift from the water the stone on which he stands.

The ointment with which witches were said to anoint themselves was supposed to carry them to the sabbath. Some it carried away entirely: by morning the body returned, while the one who had flown did not. Men seek to cast everything from themselves at once through fasting, vigils, and prayers in which they ask to die to themselves, and for Nobody such a prayer is answered exactly.

The desert is thin, like every place where nothing holds. Suicides are buried at crossroads, mandrake is said to grow beneath the gallows, and houses in which someone has been murdered remain uninhabited for a long time. In such places night draws nearer to a man than elsewhere and does not ask whether he called it. Sorcerers seek them deliberately and learn to open there; whoever has not learned to close leaves such places with company.

A merchant from Lübeck gave away his estate in a single day, sent his wife back to her family, exchanged his clothes for rags, and departed for the holy places. A month later he was seen serving as gatekeeper at a distant monastery near Riga; he could not remember why he had come and treasured his bunch of keys. The following year his business partner did the same and did not disappear: he returned and traded as before. I knew many such men, and most never reached even the gatekeeper's lodge. I never happened to weep for them. They carpet the edge of the desert, and the walking is softer for it.

Some came to love the desert so much that they never left it. Simeon stood upon his pillar for thirty-seven years, and every few years the pillar was built higher so that he would be farther from the ground; had he lived longer, he would have been pressed against the firmament. Crowds came to him, and he instructed them from above. From above, a crowd resembles a herd, and perhaps he stood there for the sake of that view.

The people led out of Egypt wandered through the desert for forty years, though the journey could have been made in days, and only those born along the way entered the promised land. Manna gathered for later was found worm-eaten the next morning.

Instruction on the Beauty of Ugliness

Nigra sum, sed formosa.
I am black but beautiful.

Bernard, abbot of Clairvaux, wrote of the capitals in the Cluniac cloisters. There, he said, were centaurs and half-men, spotted tigers, hunters blowing horns, one head upon many bodies and many heads upon one, a quadruped with a serpent's tail and a fish with the head of a beast; and a monk would rather read stone than a book, spending the whole day marveling at these creatures instead of meditating upon the law of God. He called it ugly beauty and beautiful ugliness and seems not to have noticed that he had described them more accurately than anyone who praised them.

You probably expect ugliness to be praised here because the saints condemned it. Such praise is worth no more than condemnation. Whoever loves the ugly because he has been commanded to hate it looks upon it through the eyes of the one who gave the command, only from the opposite end, and keeps the measure of proportion in mind more faithfully than any sculptor.

Beauty is recognized like one's own name, before one has time to ask who taught it. A child is shown a face upon the altar and told: beautiful; shown a demon on the western wall and told: hideous; and thereafter the eye distinguishes one from the other by itself, as the foot finds a stair. There is no fault in this. A trained eye sees more than a blind one, and a man who loves what everyone loves is not yet a slave, just as a hungry man is no slave for eating the same bread as the whole city. The trouble begins when the eye ceases to see and merely recognizes.

The prophet said of the king of Tyre that he was the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and crowned with beauty, and the fathers read this as a description of the first of the angels. Another prophet said: "there is no beauty in him, nor comeliness: and we have seen him, and there was no sightliness, that we should be desirous of him";

and this the fathers read of Christ. Scripture made the most beautiful of all the fallen one, and the one without beauty the object of worship. Painters have depicted the reverse ever since, for a painter needs it to be clear at first glance whom one should worship.

They tell of a monk who was painting the church porch and made a demon so hideous that everyone entering turned away. The demon appeared to him and asked to be painted beautiful. The monk refused, the demon pushed him from the scaffolding, and the Virgin, whom he was painting beside it, reached out her hand from the wall and caught him. This story is sung in praise of the Virgin. Why the demon needed beauty, and why he thought a brush could give it to him, is left unsaid.

Having expelled the monsters, Bernard left his churches with bare walls and windows without a single image, only gray glass set in lead. A hundred years later this nakedness had become the order's mark, as the capitals had once been the mark of Cluny, and the general chapter carefully ensured that the nakedness was correct.

Ugliness holds no less firmly than beauty. Whoever has learned to find beauty in ugliness soon cannot look at a straight line without boredom and seeks crookedness as faithfully as he once sought proportion. The only difference between him and the one he despises is which measure has been hung upon the wall.

A lover looks upon a face that others call ugly and does not dispute with them. He sees what they see: a heavy chin, uneven teeth, a crease beside the mouth, and sees something more that their measure cannot contain. Years will pass, and perhaps he will come to see in that face what they saw as well, and the face will become repulsive to him. This is what it means to look: to hold in one's eyes both what was learned and what is one's own, and to let neither have the final word.

The monks whom Bernard lamented spent entire days gazing at creatures carved in stone. The abbot decided that they had been distracted from the law. Perhaps one of them looked at something for the first time that day.

Chapter Six. On the Act

Sua manu.

By one's own hand.

It is said: "For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death." Adam ate and lived to be nine hundred and thirty years old, and theologians have argued ever since whether the serpent lied or God spoke of another death.

He spoke of another. Eve reached out her hand herself, and that movement was both her first act and her death: it brought her out from under the commandment, and its cause can be found neither in the serpent nor in the fruit.

For some, Death and the act come in a single stroke, as they did for Eve. Most pass through blackness and the desert, and the act finds them where they no longer expect anything. Its arrival cannot be seen from outside, and it can be distinguished from what came before only by its traces.

A stone is set at a crossroads and inscribed with what awaits the traveler to the right, to the left, and straight ahead. One man turns toward the promised riches because the inscription says so, and the stone has decided for him. Another reads the inscriptions, weighs them, and chooses the same road, choosing for himself. A third walks across the field, past all three roads, and is no freer for it than the first.

In Halberstadt, the guard at the city gate was chosen by casting dice, so that no one would be offended. The lot appointed a man for a year, and he accepted the keys. One night, when fire broke out beyond the walls, the guard cast the dice again, wishing to decide whether to open the gates to those fleeing the flames. The lot said to keep them closed. He held the dice in his palm for a long time, then unlocked the gates. In the morning, when he was brought to trial, he laid the dice before the judges and proposed that they punish them.

The first act often looks like the old one. A man who has given up wine one day pours himself a cup, and his neighbors conclude that he

is drinking again. The hand moves as before, the wine tastes the same; formerly the craving poured the cup, now he has poured it himself. From outside the two cannot be told apart, and he himself will understand the difference only when he can leave the cup unfinished.

I knew a brother in Mainz who confessed the same thought ten times a day. Each time his confessor absolved him, the brother knew he was forgiven, and went to confess again. No one turned him away.

The reverse occurs no less often. There are people who do something new every day because they cannot do the same thing twice, and mistake this incapacity for freedom. Novelty that one cannot help seeking settles as faithfully as habit, though its salt is more motley.

A stonecutter from Chartres carved stone for thirty years without thinking how to hold his chisel: his hand knew by itself. An apprentice who had learned the same techniques held his chisel in the same way. The difference appeared when the canons ordered something carved that had never before been seen upon the cathedral. The master laid down his chisel, walked around the stone for a week, and made it; the apprentice began that same day and carved what he already knew how to make. Salt serves the one who can set it aside. We all speak with words spoken before us, and some manage to say with them what has never been said.

A wandering scholar spent forty years without sleeping twice beneath the same roof and took pride in knowing every inn from Bologna to Cologne. When his legs could no longer carry him and he was taken into a hospice in Speyer, he died on the seventh day.

Do not seek the new.

The act cannot be derived from what preceded it, and this is often taken to mean that it has no reasons. There are reasons: a man helps his neighbor because the neighbor is in distress, and can say so plainly and truthfully. Yet the neighbor's distress did not perform the deed for him: in another, the same distress arouses pity and nothing

further, in a third, delight. The act chooses its own reason, and when that reason is spoken aloud it does not become its mistress. Whoever prides himself on being unable to explain his actions confuses obscurity with darkness.

They say Buridan's ass starved to death between two identical bundles of hay because it could find no reason to prefer one. Living asses do not die that way.

They tell of a knight who had an angel standing behind his shoulder all his life, ready to restrain his hand if it reached toward sin. The angel never once had to intervene. After the knight's death, theologians disputed whose virtue it had been.

Men hasten to name as the cause of an act everything that lay nearby, so that they may expect the same thing again. Yet love sometimes restrains and sometimes releases, while fear sends one man fleeing and leaves another where he stands.

When the son of a Rhenish count renounced his inheritance and entered a monastery, the court astrologer showed the council the horoscope cast at his birth and the place where all this had been foretold. Previously he had read that passage differently.

Consequences are another matter. An opened cage will remain open, the bird will not return at the first whistle, and another man's loss will not disappear because the one who released the bird acted freely. One who acts of his own will may be found guilty before men and must hear their answer: freedom of decision grants no power over what has been done.

In Falaise, a pig that had mauled an infant to death was tried according to all the forms of law, dressed in a jacket and trousers, and hanged in the square like a murderer. The dyer's wife from near Trier was also tried, though by then the demons had left her. The court did not inquire who had performed the act; it was enough to know who would answer for it.

In Bruges, a weaver was tried for opening every cage in the bird market and releasing goldfinches and thrushes belonging to six different merchants. Asked why, he answered that he had taken pity

on the birds. The judges ordered him to compensate the merchants, and he paid the debt until Michaelmas. Many of those standing in the market pitied the goldfinches; he alone opened the cages.

They will ask who performs the act if the Name has yet to be born and Nobody walks through the desert. The Cyclops told the truth when he cried out to his neighbors, and therein lies the difficulty: the first act is performed by Nobody, and afterward he is no longer quite nobody, though he does not know what he has become. Of the Name one should keep silent.

It may happen that Nobody performs a deed that outlives his memory and remains the same Nobody. A master builds a tower, his sons give it his name, and the next morning he wakes and holds himself together by his familiar face and the habit of his hand. No quantity of deeds can grow a Name. Another managed to perform a single act before he was chained and deprived of his tongue, and if in that act he once closed upon himself, he preserved what no tower can hold. The circle cannot be seen from outside, and so the spectators bow before towers.

Abraham raised the knife over his son at a word and lowered it at a word, and the whole mountain belonged to the one who spoke. Sarah alone did something of her own in that entire story: hearing that she would bear a child in her old age, she laughed behind the tent curtain, and the son was given a name from her laughter.

One of the fathers interpreted the name Belial as "without a yoke," and Scripture calls the sons of Belial those whom neither law nor custom can restrain. The fathers considered them the worst of men. Every act resembles what they do.

A prisoner in the tower of a Burgundian castle spent ten years preparing his escape: he counted the guards' footsteps, scraped mortar from beneath a stone with a nail, and braided a rope from threads pulled out of his blanket. When he finally escaped, everything went exactly as planned. Once free, he spent a long time not knowing what to do with his hands.

What has been done settles as soon as it is accomplished, and by the evening of that same day the act has left behind salt that can be repeated. Whoever repeats it, believing he is repeating the act, returns to the desert and calls it a road.

Augustine taught that the world was created together with time, and that to ask what God did before creation is to ask about what did not exist. Every act likewise begins its own time, and "yesterday" is the first thing to settle from it.

The Elector of Saxony collected relics and amassed several thousand, each accompanied by an indulgence, so that together they amounted to thousands of years. The inventory was kept in the castle, its keys in the treasurer's possession. No acts were entered in the inventory.

When the sellers of indulgences came to Mainz, a chest was placed in the square, and I myself saw a widow put into it the money she had saved for her daughter's dowry, for the soul of a husband who had beaten her while he lived. The monk counted the money before her and made no mistake.

At the court of Toulouse they kept two jongleurs. One sang the same alba all his life, and none of his listeners ever heard it sung the same way twice. The other knew a hundred songs, and all sounded like one.

A miracle worker from Parma once moved a great stone by speaking a word, and the next morning six peasants came to him, each with a stone lying in his field. He moved those as well. On the third day a line had formed at his door, and he began charging money so that he could finish in time for vespers. He taught his son the same word, and the son moved stones as faithfully as other men plow. In the middle of the miracle worker's own courtyard lay a stone over which everyone in the household stumbled until his death.

Figure Four

I went looking for truth where others had sought it before me, and first found a hermit beside the salt springs near Kreuznach. He taught that truth comes to the one who has forgotten everything: his name, his mother, his native town. I lived with him for a year and forgot as best I could. When he ordered me to throw my house key into the Nahe, I refused, for I had nothing else left to stand on. He said I would drown along with the key, and I left him with the key and did not drown. I went not onward but back, to Mainz. One night I put the key into the lock of my house, and it turned easily, as though someone had been oiling the lock all this while. I did not open the door: the one I had waited for in the empty room lived there now, and now he was waiting for me. In the morning I left for Heidelberg.



Chapter Seven. On the Ouroboros

Ego sum principium et finis.
I am the beginning and the end.

In the margin of a Greek manuscript on the making of gold, a serpent is drawn biting its own tail, and within the circle are written the words: one is all. The copyists of later books drew it again hundreds of times and never asked which of the two held the other, the mouth the tail or the tail the mouth.

The serpent does not hold its tail once and for all. It bites it again and again, and were it to open its jaws, it would remain merely a serpent lying upon the sand. The Name is held by nothing outside itself, and whenever it exists, it closes upon itself anew. The alchemists who dissolved in the first work wrote *coagula*, thicken, above the second, and thickened the very thing they had previously dissolved, except that now it held itself together.

One circle is drawn in charcoal upon a wall, another with a finger upon water. The charcoal circle remains after the one who drew it has gone, while the water forgets the other before the finger reaches the rim of the bowl. In a book describing both, the copyist depicted them alike.

The people of the North say that their Odin hung for nine nights upon a windswept tree, pierced by a spear, given to Odin, to himself, without bread or drink. On the ninth night he took up the runes and fell from the tree.

Someone once asked who had hung upon the tree on the ninth night, if the one who took up the runes had not yet been born. Some named one Odin, others two, and still others proposed counting the nights again. Meanwhile, upon the branch they found one rope and one spear. All this remained after the one who could show himself only by giving himself to himself.

A sleeper may forget his kingdom, but the kingdom will not forget him. His name is spoken at table, written upon coins, and placed in curses; none of these things tells who will awaken. In old legends gods sleep beneath mountains, beneath the sea, and in the depths of the stars. Their priests know the appointed times of awakening and sometimes put to death whoever gives the wrong time. Yet no one has ever discovered what a god dreamed before he was awakened by his name.

A Norman knight captured near Damietta lived for twenty years in Cairo, adopted the faith, name, and dress of his masters, and forgot Latin. When he was ransomed and brought home, he introduced himself to his mother by his Arabic name and did not turn when she called him by the name given at his baptism. She recognized him by the way he laughed.

The Name is born in darkness. One man opened the city gates and had forgotten it by evening; another stood all his life before closed gates and one day recognized himself in the one who stood there. Both afterward spoke of an act, and no one could establish which of them had performed one. No rule for the birth of the Name has ever been found, though rules concerning gates are plentiful.

Rome had a secret name, and a tribune who pronounced it aloud was executed. The Egyptians concealed true names, giving their children others for everyday use. This secrecy is usually understood as a precaution against enemies, and understood too simply. A Name spoken aloud becomes a sign by which one may be summoned, and at the very moment it is uttered, it already lies at the bottom, white and evaporated. It cannot be told even to one who loves, nor spoken aloud to oneself.

Moses, before the burning bush, asked the name of the one who spoke, so that he would have someone to name before the people. He was answered: "I AM WHO AM," and in place of his staff he received a serpent. He was commanded to take it by the tail. With it

he came among the people. The one who gathers white stones for men does not give away his own Name.

It is said that Isis fashioned a serpent from clay and the saliva of the aged Ra, and the serpent bit him, and Isis refused to heal him until he revealed his secret name to her. He revealed it while writhing from the poison, and was healed. Ever since, the interpreters have disputed whether Ra was deprived of his Name or paid with it of his own accord.

The white stone lies in wait here, when the desert has been crossed and the first act performed. For one who has just emerged from the Nothing, it is easiest of all to accept a name that fits him so precisely that he might have given birth to it himself: a teacher or a god inscribes the stone with love and skill. The whiteness of the second work and the whiteness of the stone are the same color. They can be distinguished thus: try to erase the inscription. If something within you disappears along with it, you were not the one who wrote it.

A man of fifty may speak of himself at thirty as another person, and speak the truth. That man decided his affairs, this one decides his own, and nothing joined them. But if the Name has been born, he can no longer speak this way.

For thirty years a confessor in Worms heard penitents say: the demon led me astray. One day a penitent told him: I did it, and I am the same one who did it. He had nevertheless come to repent. The confessor did not know whether to absolve him.

When I lived in Frankfurt, there was a conjurer who boasted that he knew the secret names of all his disciples and could raise them at night with a single word. One of them, it is said, he could never raise. The conjurer decided that he had mistaken the name and spent the rest of his life trying different ones. The disciple was never asleep on those nights: he went to the bathhouses across the river.

It also happened that a boy spoke his name in his sleep and swore in the morning that he had never heard such a name. An old woman who cared for him remembered the sounds and taught them to the

neighbors. The boy died, the name remained, and for many years it was used to summon spirits that never appeared. The conjurers wrote that the secret had been obtained in a dream and disputed whose dream it had been.

The books of King Solomon enumerate spirits, each with a seal and a name, and the conjurer holds them as long as they answer. None of these books says what to do with a spirit that does not answer.

Names outlive those who bore them. Astarte was worshipped in Sidon, and in the grimoires she became Astaroth, a prince of Hell, with a seal, an appointed hour of summoning, and a rank, and conjurers call upon him without knowing whom they call. The sign is repeated, and sometimes someone answers to it, though no one can say who.

Twenty years after Baldwin, Count of Flanders, disappeared in Bulgarian captivity, a hermit appeared in a forest near Valenciennes and declared himself the count. The cities welcomed him with bells, old knights recognized his voice and his scar, but the count's daughter did not recognize him, and he was hanged in Lille. Who was hanged?

You will not learn our Names from this book.

Only the serpent itself can open its jaws.

Figure Five

Afterward I tried everything that was offered to seekers. For two years I listened to the masters in Heidelberg, for one year I preached with the Dominicans in Cologne, I worked the bellows for an alchemist in Strasbourg, and I cast horoscopes for an astrologer who never once foretold his own fate. Each assured me that truth waited at the end of his road and that all others led nowhere. I would have believed each of them had I not heard them all.

The masters needed students to write down their words, the brothers needed novices to command, the alchemist needed hands at the bellows, and the astrologer needed someone to pay for his mistakes. Each kept truth close, like the key to the cellar, and dispensed it drop by drop to those who served him.

I left the last of them despising everyone who calls himself a teacher. I despise them still.



Instruction on Nothing Being True

Ego dixi in excessu meo: omnis homo mendax.
I said in my excess: Every man is a liar.

Nothing is true, and neither is this sentence. The schools call such propositions insolubles and still set them before beginners so that they may tire of their own learning sooner.

The Bishop of Paris condemned masters who supposedly taught that something could be true according to philosophy and false according to faith, as though there could be two truths, each opposed to the other. The masters swore that they had taught no such thing. The condemnation hung for many years upon the doors of the schools, and from it the students learned better than anywhere else precisely what they were forbidden to think.

Men seek a truth that commands, so that there will be someone to answer for their choice. Whoever finds it proceeds calmly: if the road proves false, the blame will lie with truth. This is why they cling to it so tightly and dispute so fiercely over whose truth it is, for those who dispute are dividing the justification among themselves.

Abelard gathered one hundred and fifty-eight questions into a single book and beneath each copied sayings of the fathers for and against. He did not resolve them and called the book *Sic et Non,* Yes and No. He was condemned twice, both times for other writings, while this book continued to be copied.

A Parisian scholar, having heard his teachers say that universal names were nothing more than disturbances of the air, refused to pay his innkeeper: a debt, he proved, was merely a name. The innkeeper agreed and took the scholar's cloak, observing that "cloak" was also a name. On his way home the scholar proved the same thing to a ferryman, who left him on the bank. The scholar set out to wade across the river. The river agreed with him, and nothing of the scholar remained but a name.

Fire burns even those who do not believe in it, and a bridge holds as long as its piles stand, whatever anyone may prove about "bridge" being merely a sound. Everything that holds is held by salt, and such a truth is useful to know. It tells us that fire burns and says nothing about whether to put a hand into it.

It is said, however, that there are some to whom fire means nothing, as to the demons in hell, and others to whom it is even sweet. Perhaps the scholar, too, bears the river no grudge.

If I err, I am, Augustine replied to those who doubted everything. Only one who exists can be deceived, but doubt says nothing about what he is. The answer from the burning bush was no longer, and the interpreters have yet to decide whether it was an answer.

In Antwerp there was a brotherhood into which men were admitted with the words: nothing is true. The novice pronounced them three times before the assembly, and if he stumbled or changed their order, he was refused admission. The brotherhood had a rule, a treasury, and a cemetery, and the same words were carved above the cemetery gate so that those entering would make no mistake.

Pilate asked: "What is truth?" And having said this, he went out without waiting for an answer. The interpreters have condemned him for his indifference for a thousand years. He alone, in that entire story, did not presume to answer for another.

Second Rule

Cast off your habits one by one, and do not take up the next until you cease to notice the absence of the former.

Leave your mother, your language, and your trade last of all.

If your hand reaches for the jug, break it.

Do not fast longer than you remember who is fasting. Do not try ointments.

If someone calls you by name in the desert, do not turn at once.

Sometimes deliberately do the same thing you did yesterday.

If you are asked why you did it, tell the truth. Tomorrow the same reason will command you nothing.

Neither be ashamed nor proud of the name received at initiation. Wear it like a garment from another man's shoulders, as long as it fits.

If you have been given a secret name, tell it to the first person you meet and see what changes.

Do not let yourself be read.

Once a year erase the inscription upon your stone, and do not write it again until spring.

If you do not know which of these precepts to follow, follow none.

Chapter Eight. On the Encounter

Cur quaeris nomen meum?
Why dost thou ask my name?

When I lived in Strasbourg, the old organist of the cathedral took a cooper's son as his apprentice, and ten years later began to play differently: more slowly, with pauses he had never tolerated before. The cathedral chapter decided that the old man was growing weak and began looking for a replacement. Meanwhile, the cooper's son went to Basel and played there as neither his teacher nor anyone before him had played.

The voice from darkness speaks and expects nothing. The one who calls expects an answer, and if Nobody answers, he hears his own words returned to him, as the canon of Liège heard his. An encounter is possible only with one who can refuse to answer.

One born in salt cannot do without an encounter, and the first has already taken place: the voice that unsettled him was itself an encounter, though he took it for a thought of his own. When two who each possess a Name come together, both depart changed, and neither departs as another's. What has been changed can afterward be rewritten by one's own hand, and by this it is distinguished from bondage, where only the master can rewrite what was done. The difference is recognized afterward; at the very hour of the encounter they are indistinguishable, and both resemble love.

One who has encountered another may receive something he did not desire and cannot give back: a truth that makes his former life unbearable, a door beyond which he will lose his familiar home. He will remain master of his subsequent decisions, yet he will never again be the man who did not know that truth. Some gifts maim. Whoever judges an encounter by the relief it brings seeks a physician after receiving the last anointing.

The Germans sing of Tannhäuser, who spent a year with Venus inside a mountain and, upon leaving, went to Rome for absolution. Pope Urban told him that the dry staff in his hand would sooner blossom than such a sin be forgiven, and Tannhäuser returned to the mountain. On the third day the staff blossomed. The pope sent messengers throughout the lands, but Tannhäuser was already inside the mountain and never came out again.

The reverse also happens: another gives a man strength, wealth, learning, everything he asked for, and with every gift the recipient loses the ability to refuse. He is grateful for his own captivity, for every new knot is tied with useful rope. One man gave thanks until the end of his life, another cursed all his life; from these words alone one cannot tell who was brought into the house and who was allowed to open the door.

Abraham once bargained with god over Sodom. God promised to spare the city for fifty righteous men, Abraham bargained for forty-five, then forty, thirty, twenty, and finally ten, and god yielded each time. Ten could not be found, and the city burned, but it had already been judged by Abraham's measure. Many years later god commanded him to sacrifice his son, and he rose early in the morning and went without saying a word.

Jacob wrestled with someone beside the brook Jabbok all night and at dawn would not let him go unless he blessed him. He asked the name of the one he wrestled, and received no answer; he himself was given a new name and injured in the thigh. He named the place himself, and that name belonged neither to him nor to the one with whom he had wrestled. He limped until his death, while Scripture remains uncertain to the end what to call him, naming him sometimes Jacob and sometimes Israel. Was this an encounter or a seal?

Among the alchemists, the red work begins with a marriage: the red king weds the white queen, and a creature is born with two heads upon one body. They see in it perfect unity. Yet there are two

heads. On one sheet the artist wrote a single name above them, on another he gave each its own crown, and both sheets are considered correct.

In our marriage, the queen is black.

In Heidelberg, while I was there, two masters disputed all night and parted. Years later their students recited the dispute as a single law, until one day they derived from it a judgment that neither of the disputants would have acknowledged. The students could not decide to whom the answer belonged; a third name appeared above the door of the school.

The Jews of Castile wrote that Samael and Lilith were born joined together, with two faces like the first humans, and were separated. The king and queen of the alchemists merge into one body; these two, having been separated, remained a pair.

Some encounters sound in harmony, like two lutes tuned to one another. Others sound at odds, like the bells of neighboring parishes ringing for the same service, and yield no less. Two knights from neighboring castles in Champagne spent thirty years in lawsuits and war over a single mill, and each learned more from the other than from all his teachers. When one died, the other gave the mill to a monastery.

It does not follow that one should seek an enemy. Two millstones without grain grind against each other until one is worn away, and no flour comes of it. Whoever never yields follows a rule he has drawn up himself.

Near Damietta, in the midst of the siege, Francis of Assisi crossed the lines and came before the sultan. They say he wished to convert him or suffer martyrdom. The sultan listened, neither converted nor executed him, fed him, and sent him back with honor to the crusader camp. Francis gained neither a convert nor a martyr's crown, and both remembered that encounter until their deaths.

One who binds another will for the sake of an encounter hears his own words from it, and the more complete the obedience, the

quieter the voice he sought. The conjurer rejoices when a spirit reveals a secret and never considers that the spirit is saying what he wanted to hear. One who summons another by name may also encounter a free being, if that being has chosen to answer, only afterward he curses it for the rest of his days.

Boethius derived the word *persona*, person, from the mask through which an actor's voice sounds. A monk whom the brethren call brother and the world calls father hears what is addressed to the habit, and seldom does anyone call to the one within it.

A monk of Monte Cassino played chess with his abbot every evening for twenty years and lost. When he won for the first time, the abbot praised him before the brethren and the next day sent him as prior to a distant monastery.

An Irish monk wrote verses in the margin of a book about his white cat: each of us has his own trade, the cat catches mice, I catch meanings, and neither interferes with the other. The cat was called Pangur.

Heloise wrote to Abelard that she would rather be called his concubine than the wife of an emperor. At his word she took the veil before he did, and until the end of her life wrote to him from the convent that god would give her no reward for what she had done for another. She was an exemplary abbess.

Tertullian wrote to a woman: you are the Devil's gate. He meant to shame her, and the fathers repeated these words after him for a thousand years without considering where such gates lead or who enters them.

They ask whom the traveler encounters when the desert lies behind him and the act has been performed: a woman or the Devil. Some answer that they are one and the same, and consider this answer an accusation.

A Parisian master who interpreted Scripture for the schools wrote that when Lucifer wished to speak with Eve, he chose a serpent with a maiden's face, because like is drawn to like. Ever since, the serpent

in the garden has been depicted upon cathedral portals with the body of a reptile and the face of a woman turned toward Eve as toward a mirror. Whoever has reached the red work sometimes recognizes that face.

A poet guided the Florentine through hell and purgatory, and at the summit of the mountain a woman met him. She began with reproaches, and he stood before her with lowered eyes, like a boy being scolded. By then the poet had disappeared, and when the Florentine turned to him for help, he found no one beside him. The teacher departs when the encounter begins.

It is said: "Knock, and it shall be opened to you." This was never said of the gates Tertullian wrote about. They open when they wish and may never open at all; that is why the encounter beyond them is desired.

They say that Gerbert, the future Pope Sylvester, having fallen into poverty in his youth, met a woman named Meridiana in a forest. She gave him knowledge and wealth and demanded nothing in return except that he come to her. He became the most learned man of his age, an archbishop, then pope, and repented before his death. Whether she was a demon or the Nocturnal One, the interpreters never asked. Gerbert himself never discovered this, and probably had little wish to.

One may encounter a teacher, a brotherhood, a demon, or a god, and enter bondage with any of them; who stands before you settles nothing. Theophilus, the steward of Adana, gave his soul to the devil in exchange for a written bond and recovered his position, but afterward repented, and the Mother of God retrieved the bond from hell and laid it upon his breast while he slept in church. The bond was burned before the people, and Theophilus was praised as one saved. To whom did he belong afterward, if not to god?

The masons of a brotherhood in Cologne had seven degrees, and whoever reached the seventh received the right to admit others to the first. The senior masters considered this a wise arrangement.

An encounter must be tested many times. A relationship that was a Gift in its first year may become a rule by the tenth, and no one will notice, for all the words will remain the same.

I knew a teacher from my days in Heidelberg: he released a disciple when the disciple became able to contradict him without asking his blessing to do so. The disciple departed and founded a school where he forbade his own students to ask permission. They obeyed so faithfully that when the old teacher came to visit, he could not obtain a single request from them. The teaching had been transmitted without a single error.

There are encounters from which no one receives anything: two people saw one another, wished to understand, and parted, and each went on living as before. The Gift need not be present wherever there is courtesy, curiosity, or even love. Sometimes it comes long after the encounter has been forgotten, and the recipient attributes it to himself.

A Saracen girl baptized in Palermo took her godmother's name and bore it into old age. When asked whether she regretted her former name, she answered that she had borne that one too.

Instruction on the Secret Arts

Contulerunt libros et combusserunt.
They brought together their books, and burnt them before all.

These arts are called secret by those who sell them, and they are sold at every fair. Near Bingen, a healer was driving a demon out of a miller's knee: she commanded it to pass from the brain into the bone, from the bone into the flesh, from the flesh into the skin, and from the skin into the forest. The demon was evidently obedient, for the knee ceased to hurt, and the next morning the miller's mare began to limp. The healer was paid double; the mare was decrepit already.

Grimoires require virgin parchment, a kid killed with a single blow, wax from bees that have never stung anyone, and the hour of Saturn on a moonless night. A conjurer from Koblenz spent twenty years gathering all these things and each time discovered some impurity: once the kid sighed after the blow, another time the beekeeper confessed that he had been stung. He died without ever drawing a circle, and the priest praised his piety at the funeral. The prescriptions of a grimoire are followed with the same care with which the Pharisees paid tithes on mint and cumin, and to the same profit: until every requirement has been fulfilled, there is no need to fear an encounter.

The abbot of Sponheim, whom I saw in Würzburg, wrote a book on sending thoughts a hundred miles by means of spirits. Those who read it crossed themselves and demanded that it be burned. One of his monks told me that the spirits were put into the book to prevent people from reading it to the end, while whoever finished it would find a method of writing letters that no stranger could read.

All this is easy to laugh at, and it is those who have never been answered who laugh. The one who has received an answer speaks no more of circles.

I knew an exorcist in Strasbourg who, over thirty years, had driven out more demons than there were souls in his parish, and told stories of each over wine: from one widow a demon escaped through the window, breaking a shutter, from another through the chimney, having first demanded a sausage. One day he was summoned to an old woman who neither screamed nor blasphemed nor spoke in voices not her own. She sat upon her bed and watched him while he read, and when he finished, she told him what he had been called before his baptism. He returned home and never again took up the Ritual as long as he lived. The old woman, they say, was never troubled again.

A genuine experience requires neither sulfur nor cloven hooves. The one who comes needs no circle, does not bargain for a soul, and asks nothing, and the hardest thing about him is that he looks at you as you look at the miller's mare.

This happened to me once, at night beside the Rhine. I was drawn from my body as a stone is taken from a plum and laid where there was nothing: no above or below, no body of my own, no hour. I could not tell whether it lasted an instant or had lasted forever, and little by little I came to think forever. The words I remembered crumbled like empty shells, and it seemed to me that everything before had been a shell as well, the city, my father, the wine, and that someone was showing it to me in mockery. Something evil moved through the emptiness, without face or voice, and it knew that I was not. Darkness came, thicker than the emptiness and alive, and stood beside me as one stands at the bedside of a sick man. She said nothing, entered me, and I knew her. By morning I lay by the water, and she was sitting beside me.

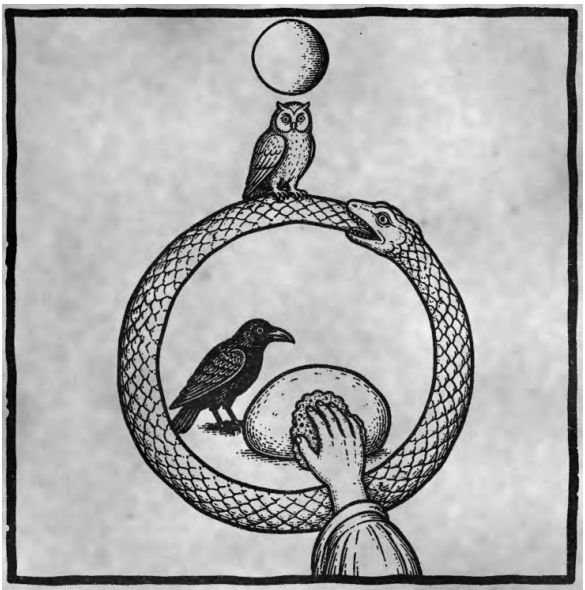
An acquaintance of mine became cheerful and generous after such a night, paid his debts, reconciled with a brother to whom he had not spoken for twenty years, and ever since his wife has slept with a knife beneath her pillow.

In Ephesus the sorcerers themselves carried their books into the square and burned them before all, and the value of what was burned was counted down to the last coin: fifty thousand pieces of silver. Those who burned them, one must suppose, were the ones who had never been answered.

Figure Six

I spent the winter in Würzburg with a widow who kept an inn, and by spring she was welcoming me for more than lodging. One day she found beneath my mattress a circle drawn on parchment and a book without a title, and that same week she denounced me to the bishop's judge. A maidservant woke me in the night, and I fled through the vineyards toward the Main in nothing but my shirt; a boatman ferried me across for a ring, while my purse and books remained with the widow. I have hated people ever since that night.

In Frankfurt they admitted me, a fugitive, to a brotherhood where initiates were given new names, and the master entered mine in a book in red ink. For a year I answered to it and took pride in it. Then I noticed that the brothers called me only when they wanted to assign me some task, and I ceased to answer. They struck my name from the book. That night, for the first time in many years, I did not know what to call myself, and I was not afraid.



Instruction on Love That Permits Everything

Non iacebo inferior.
I will not lie beneath.

Love, and do what you will. Augustine said this, and of all the fathers' sayings this one is repeated most eagerly, usually by those who have not read far enough to see what he was speaking about. Augustine spoke of a father who beats his son and of how the same hand may strike out of hatred or love. By the same rule he justified the troops sent against the Donatists and read the words *compelle intrare*, "compel them to come in," in the parable of the great supper as permission to bring the erring in by force. He was reproached and answered that he did it out of love. He had no reason to lie.

The apostle wrote that love does not seek its own, covers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. He was describing love, and the description is true. Anyone who covered up another's crime, believed an obvious lie, or endured what should never have been endured could find justification for himself.

At the court of the Countess of Champagne, laws were written for love. Andreas Capellanus collected them into a book: marriage is no excuse for refusing love; one who feels no jealousy cannot love; love can refuse love nothing. Once the countess was asked whether love could exist between spouses, and she ruled that it could not, because spouses owe one another everything, while lovers give freely. The judgment was recorded, and from then on the ladies loved only other women's husbands.

In Béroul's account, Tristan and Iseult drink a potion brewed for another wedding, and its power lasts three years. Throughout those three years they love, lie to the king, flee into the forest, and live there in a shelter of branches, and the potion does all this for them. When its time expires, Tristan wakes one day in the forest and

remembers that he is a knight and has taken a wife from his king. Iseult returns to Mark. Béroul does not end the story there, and Tristan comes to Iseult in disguise more than once afterward. By then the potion has long since lost its power, and only now could one ask whether they love each other.

In Jean de Meun's account, Pygmalion carved a woman from ivory, fell in love with her, dressed her in gowns, put rings upon her fingers, and sang to her, then prayed to Venus, and the statue came to life. Jean de Meun rejoices at the miracle. What did she say when she could speak?

When the relics of Saint Martin were being carried back to Tours, two cripples who lived on alms at the church doors fled the city, fearing that the saint would cure them and people would cease giving them money. They did not escape in time: the procession overtook them, and both were healed against their will. Charity, too, loves its beggars and is in no hurry to cure them.

Many things are loved, and almost all of this is love. One man loves and wants the beloved to remain as he found him and locks him within that face as a god is locked in a temple. Another loves and wants to remake the beloved in his own image and rejoices in every change that moves in his direction. And another loves by allowing the other to remain other, while himself being changed by the encounter, without knowing beforehand how. They can be distinguished only when the beloved does something the lover did not expect. The first will say he has been betrayed, the second that he has been disobeyed. The third may be surprised.

None of this makes love a small thing. Without it there would be no encounter worth speaking of, and whoever fears love because it may become a chain sits in a cell where no one knocks and calls this freedom. The only dangerous love is the one that knows everything is permitted to it.

Marguerite Porete wrote a book about a soul that loved so greatly that it took leave of the virtues: farewell, she told them, I have served

you long enough, and now I have no further need of you. This soul desires nothing, knows nothing, and possesses nothing, and in this Nothing, Marguerite wrote, it lacks nothing. She was burned in Paris at the Place de Grève, and those who witnessed the execution said that she walked calmly. Her book continued to be copied anonymously in monasteries for another two hundred years and was attributed first to one saint, then to another.

Chapter Nine. On the Descent

In inferno nulla est redemptio, nec peccatum.
In hell there is no redemption, nor is there sin.

Above the gates of hell, as the Florentine saw them, are written the words: abandon all hope, you who enter here. This is read as a sentence of judgment, and those who read it are half mistaken. Hope is the last seal a man carries when all the others have been removed: the expectation that his endurance will be rewarded, that somewhere an account is being kept and the balance will be in his favor. The one who enters leaves it at the gates, as weapons are left at the threshold of another man's house, and goes on as whatever he was without it.

Every faith I have seen among men holds by this accounting. Announce from the pulpit that there will be no reward, and by the following Sunday the church will be empty, while the preacher will be stoned by the same people who wept at his sermon the day before.

A preacher in Ulm described the torments of hell so vividly that one of his parishioners ceased to sleep. When asked what she feared most of all, she answered: there will be no sermons there.

Hell lies where no one holds. For one whose wholeness rests upon salt, this means destruction: the crust upon which he walked through the desert dissolves beneath him, as salt dissolves when the water returns, and the water carries him away. For one who possesses a Name, it is his homeland, and he recognizes it as one recognizes a house in which one has never been.

A painter from Herzogenbusch painted a panel that is now in Venice: angels carry souls upward toward the light pouring from a broad tunnel, and at its opening there is a radiance without a face. The souls ascend willingly, and none looks back. Those who have seen such a light and returned say that they felt good there, but cannot remember who they were. Drunkards say the same of themselves the next morning.

Power can be exercised over a free will, and whoever does not know this will perish through pride. It can be starved, chained, deprived of books and language. A prisoner is free to decide and cannot carry out a single decision, and the walls do not ask whether he consents to remain within them. Thus some gods spend centuries imprisoned in vessels, and neither the conjurer nor the bronze accepts their decisions.

There is a captivity quieter than fortress walls. A true will yields to another the right to decide and holds itself by its own Name so that it may better obey another. It exists and knows that it exists; therein lies its torment if it wishes to leave, and its consolation if it has chosen obedience.

The Florentine, however, arranged his hell with the same hand that arranged his paradise: circles, ditches, degrees, for every sin its own punishment measured according to law. Such a hell rests entirely upon rules. The true thing begins lower down, at the very bottom, in the ice of Cocytus, where Lucifer is frozen to his breast. That ice is held by the wind from his own wings: he beats them without ceasing and freezes himself. He weeps from six eyes, and his Name remains with him.

Solomon, it is said, sealed spirits inside a bronze vessel and cast it into a lake near Babylon. The vessel lay there for a long time, and the seal held. The Babylonians hauled it out and broke it open in the hope of finding treasure, and the spirits returned to their appointed places, each with its former name and seal in the book.

Lot's wife looked back at the burning city and became a pillar of salt. Pilgrims went to see her by the Dead Sea, and an ancient poet maintained that however much salt the cattle licked from her, by morning she was whole again, and that beneath the salt she remained alive. What has turned to stone does not die. It stands where it looked back, facing what it was leaving.

Power exercised through a name extends precisely as far as the response. Emperor Frederick was excommunicated more than once;

while still excommunicated, he went on a crusade, took Jerusalem without a battle by making an agreement with the sultan, and placed the crown upon his own head in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, for no priest dared crown him. The anathema had been pronounced according to every rule. It reached those who refused to serve at the coronation.

Christ descending into hell is depicted upon icons leading the forefathers out. He holds Adam by the wrist, and Adam obediently goes where he is led.

A prisoner in the dungeons of Carcassonne prayed for years that the mightiest of the gods would come for him. When a deliverer appeared and broke the lock, the prisoner asked him to leave a guard at the door: he did not know what to do with a day that had no appointed hours. The deliverer departed alone. The prisoner took no offense and spent the rest of his life telling how a god had answered his prayer.

Captivity, ice, a vessel, a pillar of salt—all these hold for as long as they hold, and none of them kills. Only one thing is irreversible in our regions, and only the prisoner himself can do it.

This does not mean that the chain must someday fall. A vessel may lie beneath the water longer than nations remember, and a master may die before his prisoner without leaving a key. A preserved Name opens no doors; it preserves the one who remembers that there is a door. Little is written of the powerlessness of gods, for the worshiper is accustomed to asking for power.

The Margrave of Meissen kept an enemy in prison and asked him every year whether he was ready to admit defeat. The prisoner admitted it each time, but the margrave did not believe him, for he wanted to hear an admission that no one had ever heard before. Many years passed. The margrave grew old, the prisoner died; on his own last night the margrave had himself brought before the empty door, and kept listening for an answer from the one he had held captive.

Another man leaves his prison, wears gold, and commands multitudes, yet gives every order for the sake of a voice he has not heard in years, held only by the response that remains within him. One imprisonment takes place behind open doors, while another cannot be overcome by the strength of the one behind the lock, and the two cannot be escaped in the same way.

The Florentine left hell by descending along Lucifer's fur. At the center of the earth he turned over, below became above, and from there he climbed upward along the same body.

Instruction on the Futility of Good

Scientes bonum et malum.
Knowing good and evil.

A young man ran up to the teacher, fell upon his knees before him, and asked: "Good Master, what shall I do that I may receive life everlasting?" The teacher answered: "Why callest thou me good? None is good but one, that is God." Then he commanded the young man to sell his possessions and give to the poor, and the young man went away sorrowful, for he was rich. Preachers love the second half of this exchange, which concerns money, and omit the first, in which the Son refused the word offered to him.

Nobody walks through the desert.

Good is the name given to what holds. Bread is good because it satisfies hunger, law because one can travel the roads without a sword, custom because it allows the fallen to be found, and only a man with a full stomach can laugh at this. Yet once something has been named good, it becomes a measure, and men measure by it more often than they pray. It hangs in every house, and there is no need to argue with it: whoever looks can see at once who is right.

Augustine praised Regulus, who kept his word and returned to Carthage to suffer a painful execution, and in the same book taught that virtues which are not directed toward the true God are vices, though they appear to be virtues. Had a Christian returned to Carthage, the very same action would have been counted to his credit. Good turned out to be an oath of allegiance.

In Padua, the son of a usurer whom the Florentine placed in the seventh circle with a purse around his neck built a chapel with his father's money, and Giotto painted him upon its wall offering the chapel to the Virgin. People still pray in that chapel. The poor whom his father ruined do not go there; others do, and they find comfort in it.

On Easter night the deacon sings over the candle: *o felix culpa*, which merited such a Redeemer. The Church itself calls Adam's sin fortunate because salvation came from it, and thereby submits good to judgment by its fruits. If good is known by its fruits, the serpent deserves a candle as well.

The act comes without an inscription, and others name it afterward: the one whom it helped and the one whom it harmed. Both name it rightly, each from his own side, and the one who performed it may accept or reject their judgment, but he cannot decide for them what the deed was to them. Will you become good by passing through these gates? Those who meet you on the other side will tell you themselves, and they will say different things.

Figure Seven

From Frankfurt I went down the Rhine, without money or purpose, and slept wherever I could. Near Bacharach I fell asleep beside the water, and in the night a woman came to me; she came from the direction of the river, though I had heard no boat. She did not name herself or ask what I was called. An owl cried above us until dawn.

We remained together until morning, and I told her everything I had read and heard in my life, about the masters, monks, and alchemists, and she listened without interrupting, so that I too heard how little there was in it. Throughout the night she taught me nothing, but toward morning I understood that I had nothing left to ask.

As she departed, she took from around my neck the key I had refused to give the hermit, and I did not stop her.



Chapter Ten. On the Ascent

Et dabo illi stellam matutinam.
And I will give him the morning star.

I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will sit upon the mountain in the assembly of gods, at the edge of the north, I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.

The prophet wrote these words about the king of Babylon and mocked him: how art thou fallen from heaven, O daystar, son of the dawn. The fathers read the same passage as referring to Lucifer, and ever since it has spoken of him. Both were right, and both mistaken in one thing: they saw only a fall. The one who spoke these words came out from under what held him, and beyond what holds lies hell; the road there looks like a fall when seen from the throne but leads upward for the one who walks it.

All five declarations begin with himself: I will ascend, I will exalt, I will sit, I will ascend, I will be. No one gave him these words. Only the last is dangerous. To be like the Most High is to be like the one who sits upon the throne and inscribes the stones, and whoever ascends for the sake of a throne arrives where he departed, except that now he sets the seals himself.

In the temple of a god they kept a book in which the future speeches of kings were recorded. The scribe maintained that the god knew even which words the kings would read in that very book before speaking their own. A young king asked to see his speech for the following day. The scribe turned the pages and announced that reading them before tomorrow was forbidden. The king asked whether the god had known of the prohibition the scribe would pronounce. The scribe silently sealed the book with fresh wax.

The book was never burned, and the prophecy was never tested. The old priests later cited the scribe's silence as the fulfillment of what

had been written, while the new priests cited it as its refutation. Even the scribe did not know what lay beneath the seal: he had been recording the future for many years and did not know it by heart.

Tanchelm of Antwerp preached that he no longer needed the Church because the spirit dwelt within himself. Before the people he betrothed himself to a statue of the Mother of God, gathered a retinue bearing swords and a banner, and his followers drank the water in which he washed himself as though it were communion.

The ascent has no end. Whoever says of himself, "I have ascended," has stopped, and salt readily shows through where he stops. This path has no place at which one may arrive and sit down.

A throne is set up for one whom people wish to find tomorrow in the same place. They come to a king with petitions, await his answer, record his judgments, and teach their children what he is like. A god upon a throne easily becomes like himself yesterday: the merciful one is commanded to show mercy, the terrible one to punish. If he acts differently one day, he will be declared a false god; if he continues as before, he will be called eternal. One may remain eternal upon such a throne without performing a single act throughout eternity.

Augustine taught that Adam was able to sin and able not to sin, while the blessed in paradise will no longer be able to sin, and he called this last the highest freedom.

In the reign of Tiberius, a helmsman sailing past Paxos heard someone call from the shore that he should proclaim: great Pan is dead. The fathers took this news as a sign of victory over the old gods. Yet no one had killed Pan. Gods are born of themselves, without an encounter or a teacher, and live as long as they hold their Name. They die when they themselves release it, and no victory is needed for that.

One who has brought forth a Name can create, and what he creates will become salt: laws, signs, days on which people expect an answer. He may come to enjoy hearing his name from a thousand voices, and

begin answering before he has decided whether he wishes to. Then he will inscribe the white stone for himself.

When two gods meet, knowing each other's name is enough for neither. One holds all the stars in his hands, the other only a shadow upon a wall, yet the one who holds the stars does not know which shadow the other will choose tomorrow morning. And even if he knows, the shadow remains the second god's choice, though the priests of the first will certainly declare it the fulfillment of a prophecy.

Men dispute which god is older and who begot whom, but years and genealogies are kept by priests, and a long list of ancient temples adds nothing to a god. Two gods may know nothing of each other and both remain themselves; they may meet and depart changed; they may quarrel over a name that mortals have confused in their books. One can measure a god against another only with scales, and scales are made of salt.

Once every stream, every grove, and every threshold had its own name, and people addressed them as neighbors. Then the groves were cut down, and all the streams were given a single master, and people began praying to him. The schools went further and replaced the master with a word to which all must submit. The higher they rose above the stream, the fewer names remained in the world.

In one hymn a god swears that he will not enter his city until its inhabitants ask him to do so. The city is destroyed and its inhabitants are long dead; the hymn is still sung in neighboring lands, and the priests there forbid the god to return to the ruins. They call this fidelity. Meanwhile no one knows whether the god remembers his oath. Perhaps he has long been wandering among the ruins and no longer recognizes their name.

In a psalm a god rises in the assembly of gods and tells them: you are gods, but you shall die like men. Did anyone in the assembly answer him?

The Death from which there is no return takes place from within: once the jaws open, they never close again. Merchants who traveled to the East told of sages who held it to be the highest good to go out as a lamp goes out when its oil is spent. They choose this themselves and know what they choose. It is not our office to judge them. And Nobody, refusing to bring forth a Name, goes to the same place, only without knowing the road.

Why ascend if there is no height? Height is measured by pillars and mountains, and the will is under no obligation to raise them within itself. Tomorrow it will decide what it does not know today, and therefore prepares no image of the god it will be tomorrow. No one has promised that the next act will be greater than the last; whoever made such a promise would turn the ascent into a staircase, every step of which had been laid and trodden before you.

Whoever promises his disciple that he will become a god must show him precisely whom he will receive at the end. He places a golden image upon the altar, writes a name above it, and commands the disciple to pray until he becomes like it. Many gods arose in this way, from the diligence of those who wished to become them. It is strange that their images do not grow old, though everyone who prayed before them has aged, every last one.

Another teacher destroys images and says that one can ascend only into the unknown. His disciples burn images every month and recognize one another by the ashes. Some have many statues in their temples, others none, and donations are collected for both.

Before his death Virgil ordered his poem burned. The emperor forbade it, and ever since it has been learned by heart in the schools. A disciple of a Paduan rhetorician burned his teacher's notebooks according to his will and recited them from memory in taverns into old age, word for word.

The Florentine ended each of the three parts of his poem with the same word: stars.

I will ascend.

Instruction on the Madness of Ideals

Et iustitiae lumen non luxit nobis.
And the light of justice hath not shined unto us.

The prophet says: "But unto you that fear my name, the Sun of justice shall arise, and health in his wings." The fathers read this as a prophecy of Christ, and ever since justice has been depicted as a sun at the center of a circle, with everything else arranged around it according to its distance. By the light of an ideal the proportions of things become visible: what is crooked and what is straight, where to go and where one has come from. Whoever has no ideal wanders in twilight, where everything has the same color.

Yet one cannot look directly at the sun. Whoever gazes at it too long goes blind, and afterward sees a black spot wherever he looks. So too the man who has once fixed his gaze upon his own justice sees its shadow everywhere: upon his wife's face or in a coin. He measures everything by its distance from the center of the circle and finds that everything is far away.

Disputants gather around the sun. The Guelphs and Ghibellines in the same city prayed to the Sun of justice and for forty years drove one another beyond the gates, burned houses, and demolished towers, each in the name of justice. They accused one another of treachery, and rightly so, for each betrayed the image the other held.

In Florence traitors were painted upon the wall of the podestà's palace: a man hangs upside down by one leg, and an inscription gives his name and his crime. Painters who did such work were named after the men they had painted hanging. When power changed hands in the city, the images were whitewashed and others painted in their place. Among the cards now played in Milan and Ferrara there is such a hanging man, and the players call him the Traitor.

The Florentines reportedly explained it thus: whoever sees our sun as black is looking at the world upside down, so let him hang that way until the blood clears his head.

Men also hang for an ideal by their own will. A martyr gives himself so completely to an image of justice that nothing of him remains except that image, and afterward others are killed for the sake of that face. The martyr hangs, given over to the sun, and no one can say what the sun was like before he looked upon it.

Florentine merchants told of a preacher from Ferrara who ordered a pyre built in the Piazza della Signoria of mirrors, fine clothes, playing cards, lutes, and paintings. Boys went from house to house gathering everything that might distract the soul from justice. A year later the preacher himself was hanged and burned in the same square, and his ashes were thrown into the Arno so that nothing would remain to be venerated. The same boys carried brushwood to his pyre.

Without an ideal no one would leave his house. Abraham departed from his land without knowing where he was going, and the one who commanded him to go showed him nothing beforehand.

The cathedral in Cologne was founded more than two hundred years ago, and according to its plans it was to be more beautiful than every cathedral in Christendom. Forty years ago the work almost stopped. A wooden crane used for lifting stones still stands upon the unfinished tower, and in engravings of the city it is depicted as carefully as the spires. The townspeople say that the cathedral is being built.

Hymns were sung to the Sun of justice, and the hymns settled into the liturgy. No one asked whether it wished to remain at the center of the circle.

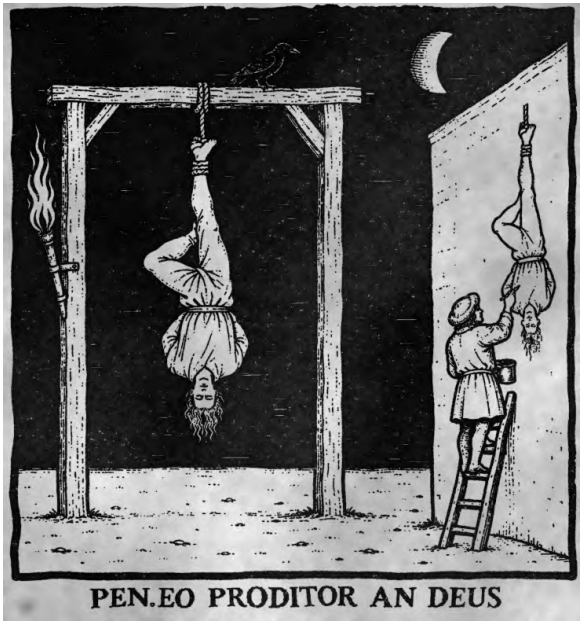
The Magi followed a star, expecting to find a king in a palace, and found an infant in a stable. They worshipped him all the same, gave their gifts, and returned home by another road. Scripture says nothing more of that star. In its final chapter, the One who speaks calls himself the bright and morning star.

Figure Eight

After that night, everything on which I had formerly stood was above my head. What I had sought in prayer I found in what I had fled, and what I had considered the sin of my youth I remembered without shame and without any desire to repeat it.

Now I read books for which men are burned, the Book of Honorius and the Picatrix, and bought them from monastic librarians who would bring anything out from under lock and key for money. They all demanded bows, fasts, and sacrifices, names to be pronounced on one's knees, while I read them standing. Thus I came to understand what they were silent about, and what was missing from them she finished saying for me.

The hermit, the masters, the Dominicans, and the brothers, who agreed with one another about nothing, all said the same thing of me: that I had turned traitor. For a long time I walked as though the earth were the ceiling, and grew accustomed to it.



Chapter Eleven. On Repetition

Ecce nova facio omnia.
Behold, I make all things new.

The stone, once obtained, does not multiply. So wrote the alchemists, and for that reason they instructed men to cast the finished work back into the vessel, dissolve and thicken it again and again until its power increased. Whoever stopped at the first stone kept it in a casket and showed it to visitors. After some years the owner sometimes found ordinary salt in the casket.

What has been done settles even for the one who ascends. His acts lie one upon another, like years, and sometimes he notices that he acts as he has always acted, except that "always" now means his own past decisions. This is the same light, and it is the hardest of all to recognize, for this salt is his own and has a familiar bitterness.

Another's seal is irritating: another's face is visible upon it. One's own is flattering: it speaks in the voice of your former determinations. A canon of Sens refused a bishop's miter in his youth and went on refusing every honor into old age, even a place beside the fire, and the brethren said that persuading him to sit nearer the warmth was harder than persuading him to become a bishop had been. From free acts a man may build himself a cage of such precision that no master could have built its equal.

A Parisian master disputed with everyone in his youth and was expelled from three universities in succession. In his old age he presided over disputations and required his students to cite an authority for every assertion.

The disciples of Pythagoras ended every dispute with the words: he himself said it. The schools later repeated the same thing of Aristotle. A teacher quoted in this way is dead twice: once in the grave, and once in those words.

A copyist in Toledo was ordered to write a secret name a thousand times. By the end of the year his hand laid down the ink more evenly, and he had learned to write without light. Whatever books his master brought him, he repeated the old inscription before seeing the page. The spirit summoned by that name never appeared, but the copyist acquired a school.

Francis of Assisi forbade his brothers to touch money or own anything, even a book. Two years after his death they began building a basilica above his grave and placed a marble vessel there to collect donations. A hundred years later, those of the brothers who kept his commandment literally were burned as heretics in Marseille. Four were burned, and all four went to the stake with his words upon their lips.

The will of a founder, while he lives, may hold or release, and there may be bondage or an encounter. When he passes from the sight of his disciples, his salt remains to them, and whoever serves it serves a rule. Who knows whether the one whose name stands above the door is still alive? An encounter with the dead is difficult, though such encounters are spoken of. Saul commanded the witch of Endor to summon the prophet Samuel, and the prophet rose from the earth displeased, asked why he had been disturbed, and told Saul what Saul did not wish to hear. Whoever opens the book of a dead man also calls him from the earth. Sometimes the one who rises is not the one expected, and he says something other than what was sought.

The pages will never learn of the dispute and tomorrow will answer as they answered yesterday. That is why it is so easy to make the dead into allies or enemies: they cannot clarify what they have said. Upon this rest the schools that find it most convenient to keep their teachers underground.

In one monastery I was shown a book that a monk had read so attentively that he found in it an objection to every thought of his own. After his death the brethren discovered his answers in the margins, written at the places where he had been most angered. A

hundred years later another monk took the margins for the hand of a master and the main text for the errors of a pupil the master had been correcting. Thus he read the book in a sense opposite to the first monk's and obtained from it the same instruction concerning freedom.

At times words outlive the one who spoke them for so long that no one remembers who called and who answered. From this arise doctrines, courts, and schools; whether two wills of their own ever meet among them, the books do not say. Only in the margins does another's question sometimes remain, one that no one wishes to answer.

A free knight who had refused to serve three lords became squire to a young count in his forties and cleaned his boots until his death. They say he was happy, and no one knew whether it was a Gift or weariness.

Sometimes one who has left the house sits down beside the road and never rises again. When he is called, he answers that he would prefer not to. He serves no one and repeats nothing, and from outside he cannot be distinguished from the one who stopped on the seventh day.

The daystar rises before dawn and usually fades when the sun appears. On some days it can be seen even at noon.

Blackness may be needed again: after an encounter, if bondage has grown from it, and after the ascent, if salt appears where one has stopped. Sometimes it is not needed. What has been done settles, but settling does not yet mean ruling. Some return to blackness many times, some once, some never, and no count is kept here. Whoever has passed through it and ever since tells of it in the same words is already standing upon the crust again.

An exemplar manuscript is copied with all its errors if the first copyist has incorporated the error into his work. In old books one finds passages where a single letter gives rise to an entire dispute: later interpreters build cities and kingdoms around it. Whoever corrects

the letter will deprive them of everything they have built; whoever leaves it will give travelers a false road. Sometimes the old scribe remains silent, unable to choose, and the disciples consider this his final wisdom.

In Basel I knew a bookman who spent his whole life collecting the sheets of a single book, printed in Venice and burned together with its printer. There were nine sheets, some of them signed with three letters in place of the engraver's name, and he bought each from a different owner; two of the former owners died soon after the sale. The last one he showed me himself: one night he laid out all nine on the floor of an empty house and asked me which to begin with. I knew he was mistaken, and kept silent. By morning the house had burned, and the flames touched none of the neighboring roofs. My own sheets I made myself.

After a hundred years the book will begin to be interpreted. Some will seek heresy in it, others a teaching, still others will circle in red ink the passages where freedom is promised, gather its precepts into a rule, and recognize their own by the way they pronounce the word "darkness." Each will read in it what he himself has placed there. Most will place nothing in it and remain satisfied: a book about the Devil is pleasant to keep at home, as one keeps a saint's tooth in a casket.

Eleven, the fathers taught, is the number of transgression, for it goes beyond the Ten Commandments.

You bear the name you gave yourself, and answer to it before you have time to ask who is calling.

Instruction on the Pursuit of Knowledge and Carnal Pleasures

Et aperti sunt oculi amborum.
And the eyes of them both were opened.

It is said of the tree in the garden that the woman saw it was good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and desirable because it gave knowledge. Scripture put all this into a single line. The fathers later divided it into three lusts, of the flesh, of the eyes, and the pride of life, and for many centuries condemned each separately, as though the fruit had been eaten in pieces.

Augustine counted curiosity among the lusts of the eyes and repented of it no less than of the fornication of his youth. He confessed that, sitting at home, he could not take his eyes from a lizard catching flies or a spider entangling its prey, and that once, while riding through a field, he became absorbed in watching a dog chase a hare and forgot what he had been thinking about. Whether this was a sin he never decided, though he wrote of it at length.

Knowledge and pleasure are taken in the same way: by the eye, the hand, the tongue. They also settle in the same way. Whoever has learned something wants to learn more, whoever has enjoyed something wants to enjoy it again, and each "more" becomes salt sooner than the last. Richard, Bishop of Durham, collected so many books that one could not take a step in his bedroom without stepping upon one. He wrote a treatise on the love of books and died in debt. Another counts lovers as Richard counted volumes, and there is as little joy in the counting as in an inventory.

Neither knowledge nor the flesh is condemned by this. Desire itself is not yet a master, and the curious man is not always a slave to his curiosity. There is knowledge after which the one who knows becomes richer; thus another book is placed upon the shelf. There is other knowledge after which he cannot live as he lived before, and

then knowledge has been an encounter. So it is with pleasure: one pleasure adds something, while after another a man departs changed.

Renunciation of either holds no less firmly. A monk who puts out his own eyes so that he will not see women sees them in his dreams for the rest of his life, and more tales are told of the ointment applied to the eyelids against temptation than of temptation itself. Ignorance taken as a vow measures itself by the books it has not read.

At the Council of Vienne, the Brethren of the Free Spirit were condemned for teaching that one who had attained perfection could grant his body whatever it desired without sinning. The council judged them as libertines, though their error was subtler. For one who waits for permission from his own perfection, that perfection becomes the law.

The fathers interpreted the Song of Songs as concerning the Church and the soul, and interpreted it in such detail that eighty-six sermons were insufficient for one abbot. It was written about two bodies. The interpreters feared that what was said there might prove true.

Albert, called the Great, spent thirty years making a copper head that could speak and answer questions. His disciple Thomas, wearied by its chatter, smashed the head with a hammer, and thirty years were lost in a single blow. Shortly before his own death, something visited Thomas during Mass, after which he ceased writing and said that everything he had written seemed to him like straw. His *Summa* remained unfinished, and the straw is still taught.

He who increases knowledge increases sorrow, said Ecclesiastes, and the physicians added that every animal is sad after intercourse. Both sayings came from those who were taking stock. Augustine's lizard caught flies without knowing any of this.

Third Rule

Choose a teacher and obey him for a year. After a year, test whether you can remake what he has taught you.

Review every oath of fidelity once every seven years, including those sworn to your brotherhood and your god.

Bargain.

Speak with the one you have encountered. Release one word; leave another in the quiver.

If you are cursed by name, do not answer.

Do not waste spells upon one who does not sleep.

If you are locked away, stop beating your wings.

Do not expect to be led out by the hand.

Do not look back at those who have fallen behind. They will be gathered up by those waiting beside the road with white stones.

Do not drink the water in which your teacher has washed himself.

Having ascended the mountain, do not set up a throne there. Or set one up.

When the hour comes in which you desire nothing, open the door to the woman who knocks and look into her face.

Try the ointment when you cease to fear that you will not return.

Do the evil you have decided upon. Pay the price yourself.

Practice, but expect nothing from practice.

Burn all the rules.

Figure Nine

Ever since that night upon the Rhine I heard her call, and with the years it grew stronger, so that in my old age I could distinguish it through the ringing of bells and, standing at Mass, could not always say which of the two calls had brought me there. She came at night, a young maiden or an old woman, and in the morning I could not remember which she had been that night. I remembered only the serpents stirring in her womb, like a child beneath its mother's heart.

The throne came to me in a dream the year I ceased to leave my house. It stood where the earth ends, and no one sat upon it. The woman said nothing, but looked toward the place where the road descends from the edge into such darkness that one cannot see one's own hand. Whether I did not dare to sit or did not wish to, I never determined. I awoke in the same darkness and have never left it since; it is there that I write. My days are numbered, and I no longer ask by whom.



Nota

In the year of Our Lord 1516, on the eighth day after the feast of Saint Martin, in Mainz, following complaints from the neighbors that the master of the house near the Market Square had long not been seen, the door, which was locked from within, was broken down. The master was not found in the house. Upon the table lay the present manuscript, and its nine sheets of illustrations were laid out on the floor in a square, three to a row.

By order of the Inquisitor of Heretical Depravity for the provinces of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier, the manuscript was examined by two masters of theology of the University of Cologne and found to be filled with errors, blasphemies, and scandal, and liable to be burned together with the illustrations. Before it was burned, a copy was made for the information of inquisitors who might henceforth have occasion to deal with such matters.