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The Evening with Monsieur Teste

Vita Cartesii res est simplicissima

STUPIDITY is not my strong point. I have seen many persons; I have visited several countries; I have taken part in various enterprises without liking them; I have eaten nearly every day; I have had women. I can now recall a few hundred faces, two or three great spectacles, and the substance of perhaps twenty books. I have not retained the best nor the worst of these things: what could stay with me did.

Such arithmetic spares me any surprise at growing old. I could also count up the victorious moments of my mind and imagine them joined and blended, composing a *happy* life. . . . But I think I have always been a good judge of myself. I have rarely lost sight of myself; I have detested and adored myself; so, we have grown old together.

Often I have supposed that all was over for me, and I would begin ending with all my strength, anxious to drain and clarify some painful situation. This made me aware that we appraise our own thought too nearly as others *express* theirs! From that moment, the billions of words that have buzzed in my ears have rarely stirred me with what they were meant to mean; and all those I have myself spoken to others, I have always felt them become distinct from my thought—for they were becoming *invariable*.

If I had decided like most men, not only should I have felt superior to them but should have appeared so. I pre-

ferred myself. What they call a superior man is a man who has deceived himself. To be astonished at him, one must see him—and to be seen, he must show himself. And he shows me that he is possessed by an inane infatuation with his own name. So every great man is flawed with an error. Every mind said to be powerful begins with the mistake that makes it known. In exchange for the public's dime, he gives the time required to make himself noticeable, the energy spent in conveying himself, preparing to satisfy someone else. He goes even so far as to compare the crude sport of fame with the joy of feeling unique—the great private pleasure.

At that time I dreamed that the most vigorous minds, the canniest inventors, the most precise connoisseurs of thought, must be unknown men, misers, or those who die without confessing. Their existence was revealed to me precisely by those brilliant individuals a bit less *solid*.

This conclusion was so easy that I could see it taking shape from moment to moment. All that was needed was to imagine the usual sort of great men free of their first error, or even to base oneself on that error in order to conceive a higher degree of consciousness, a less crude sense of the mind's freedom. So simple an operation opened curious perspectives before me, as if I had gone down under sea. Along with the neglected creations produced every day by commerce, fear, boredom, or poverty, I thought I could make out certain *inner* masterpieces, lost amid the brilliance of published discoveries. It amused me to extinguish known history beneath the annals of anonymity.

Invisible in their limpid lives, they were solitaries who knew before all the rest. It seemed to me that in their obscurity they were twice, three times, many times greater than any famous person—they, in their disdain for revealing their

luck and their personal discoveries. They would have refused, I believe, to consider themselves anything more than things.

These ideas came to me during October of '93, at those moments of repose when thought takes pleasure simply in existing.

I was beginning to think no more about them, when I made the acquaintance of Monsieur Teste. (I am thinking now of the traces a man leaves in the little space he moves in every day.) Before I came to know Monsieur Teste, I was attracted by his special ways. I studied his eyes, his clothes, his slightest muffled words to the waiter at the café where I used to see him. I wondered whether he felt observed. I would turn my eyes quickly away from his, so as to catch his following me. I would take up the newspapers he had just been reading, I would rehearse in my mind the sober gestures he made unawares; I noticed that no one paid him any attention.

I had nothing more of this kind to learn when our relations began. I never saw him except at night. Once in a sort of. . .house; often at the theater. I was told that he lived by frugal weekly speculations on the stock market. He took his meals in a small restaurant in the Rue Vivienne. There he would eat as if he were taking a purgative, with the same quick gestures. Occasionally he would allow himself a fine leisurely meal elsewhere.

Monsieur Teste was perhaps forty years old. His speech was extraordinarily rapid, and his voice low. Everything about him was unobtrusive, his eyes, his hands. Yet his shoulders were military and his step had an astonishing regularity. When he spoke he never lifted an arm or a finger; he had *killed his puppet*. He never smiled, nor said good morning or goodnight; he seemed not to hear a "How are you?"

His memory gave me much thought. The signs by which I could judge led me to imagine incomparable intellectual gymnastics. This was not, in him, an excessive trait but rather a trained and transformed faculty. Here are his own words: "I gave up books twenty years ago. I have burned my papers also. I scrape the quick. . . . I keep what I want. But that is not the difficulty. *It is rather to keep what I shall want tomorrow. . . .* I have tried to invent a mechanical sieve. . . ."

After a good deal of thought, I came to believe that Monsieur Teste had managed to discover laws of the mind we know nothing of. Certainly he must have devoted years to this research; even more certainly, other years and many more years had been set aside for maturing his inventions, making them his instincts. Finding is nothing. The difficulty is in acquiring what has been found.

The delicate art of duration, time, its distribution and regulation—using it on well-chosen things to give them special nourishment—this was one of Monsieur Teste's great experiments. He watched for the repetition of certain ideas; he sprinkled them with numbers. This served to make the application of his conscious studies in the end mechanical. He even sought to summarize this labor. He would often say: "Maturare! . . ."

Certainly his singular memory must have retained for him almost solely those impressions which our imagination, by itself, is powerless to construct. If we imagine an ascent in a balloon, we may with shrewdness and force produce many of the probable sensations of an aeronaut; but there will always remain something peculiar to the real ascent, and that difference from what we imagine expresses the value of the methods of an Edmond Teste.

This man had known quite early the importance of what

might be called human *plasticity*. He had investigated its mechanics and its limits. How deeply he must have reflected on his own malleability!

I had a glimpse of feelings in him that made me shudder, a terrible obstinacy in his delirious experiments. He was a man absorbed in his own variations, one who becomes his own system, who commits himself without reservation to the frightening discipline of the free mind, and sets his pleasures to killing his pleasures, the stronger killing the weaker —the mildest, the transitory, the pleasure of the moment and the hour just begun, destroyed by the fundamental—by hope for the fundamental.

And I felt that he was master of his thought: I record this absurdity here. The expression of feeling is always absurd.

Monsieur Teste had no opinions. I believe he stirred his passions when he willed, and to attain a definite end. What had he done with his personality? What was his view of himself?...He never laughed, there was never a look of distress on his face. He hated sadness.

He would talk and one felt included among things in his mind: one felt remote, mingled with the houses, the magnitudes of space, the shifting colors of the street, the street corners....And the most artfully touching words—the very ones that bring their author closer to us than any other man, those that make us believe the eternal wall between minds is falling—would occur to him....He was wonderfully aware that they would have moved *anyone else*. He would talk and one realized, though unable to discern the motives or the extent of the taboo, that a large number of words had been banished from his discourse. Those he used were at times so curiously sustained by his voice or lighted by his phrasing that their weight was altered and their meaning renewed.

At times they would lose all sense, seeming merely to fill a blank for which the appropriate term was still in doubt, or not provided by the language. I have heard him designate a concrete object by a group of abstract words and proper names.

To what he said there was no reply. He killed polite assent. Conversations were kept going by leaps that were no surprise to him.

If this man had changed the object of his inner meditations, if he had turned upon the world the controlled power of his mind, nothing could have resisted him. I am sorry to speak of him as we speak of those of whom statues are made. I am sure that between "genius" and him there is a quantity of weakness. He, so real! So new! So free of all deception, of all wonders! So hard! My own enthusiasm spoils him for me....

How can one not feel enthusiasm for the man who never said anything *vague*? For the man who calmly remarked: "In all things I am interested only in the *ease* or the *difficulty* of knowing them and doing them. I take extreme care in measuring the degree of each, and in remaining detached.... And what do I care for what I know all too well?"

How can one not be won over by a man whose mind seemed to transform for itself alone every existing thing, a mind that *performed* everything that occurred to it? I imagined it handling, combining, transforming, connecting, and, within the field of its knowledge, able to cut off and deviate, illuminate, freeze this or heat that, suppress, heighten, name the unnamed, forget at will, subdue or brighten this or that....

I am grossly simplifying his impenetrable powers. I don't dare say all that my subject suggests. Logic stops me. But in myself, every time the problem of Teste arises, curious formations appear.

On certain days I recover him quite clearly. He reappears in my memory, sitting beside me. I breathe the smoke of our cigars, I listen to him, I am *wary*. At times, reading a newspaper brings me up against some thought of his now justified by an event. And again I try a few of those experiments in illusion that used to delight me when we spent our evenings together. That is, I imagine him doing something I never saw him do. What is Monsieur Teste like when he is sick? In love, how does he reason? Is he ever sad? What would frighten him? What could make him tremble? ...I wondered. I held the complete image of this rigorous man before me, trying to make it answer my questions.... It kept on fading.

He loves, he suffers, he is bored—like everyone else. But when he sighs, or heaves an elemental groan, I want him to bring into play the rules and forms of his whole mind.

Exactly two years and three months ago this evening I was with him at the theater, in a box lent to him. I have been thinking about this all day.

I can still see him standing beside the golden column at the Opéra; together.

He looked only at the audience. He was breathing the great burst of brilliance at the edge of the pit. He was red.

An immense copper girl separated us from a group murmuring beyond the dazzlement. Deep in the vapor glittered a naked bit of woman, smooth as a pebble. Numerous ladies' fans were independently alive over the audience, dark and bright, foaming up to the top lamps. My glance picked out dozens of small faces, alighted on a sad head, rippled over bare arms, over people, and finally flickered out.

Everyone was in his seat, free to make a slight movement.

I liked the system of classification, the almost theoretical simplicity of the audience, the social order. I had the delightful sensation that all who breathed in that cube would follow its laws, flare up in great circles of laughter, grow excited in sections; feel in *groups* things *intimate—unique*—secret stirrings, rising to the unavowable! I strayed over those layers of people row by row, in orbits, fancying that I could bring together ideally all those having the same illness or the same theory or the same vice....One music touched us all; it swelled to abundance, then became quite small.

It vanished. Monsieur Teste was murmuring: "One is handsome or extraordinary only to others. *They* are eaten by others!"

The last word arose from the silence created by the orchestra. Teste drew his breath.

His face, flushed with heat and color, his broad shoulders, his dark figure splashed with light, the shape of the whole clothed block of him propped against the heavy column, struck me again. Not an atom escaped him of all that was becoming perceptible, momentarily, in that grandeur of red and gold.

I watched his skull making acquaintance with the angles of the capital, the right hand cooling itself among the gilt cornices; and in the purple shadow his large feet. From the far reaches of the theater, his eyes turned toward me; his mouth said: "Discipline is not bad....It's at least a beginning...."

I found nothing to reply. He said in his low quick voice: "Let them enjoy and obey!"

His eyes were fixed for a long moment on a young man seated facing us, then on a woman, then on a whole group in the upper galleries—overflowing the balcony in five or six

glowing faces—then on the whole audience, the whole theater filled like the heavens, tense, fascinated by the stage we could not see. The stupor that held all the others told us that something or other sublime was going on. We watched the dying light reflected from all the faces in the audience. And when it was quite faint, when the light no longer shone, all that was left was the vast phosphorescence of those thousand faces. I saw that the twilight was making all these souls passive. Their attention and the darkness, both increasing, formed a continuous equilibrium. I was myself attentive *inevitably*—to all that attention.

Monsieur Teste said: "The supreme simplifies *them*. I wager they are all thinking, more and more, *toward* the same thing. They will be equal at the climax or common limit. Yet the law is not so simple...since it does not include me; and—here I am."

He added: "The lights hold them."

I said, laughing: "You too?"

He replied: "You too."

"What a dramatist you would make!" I said. "You seem to be watching some experiment on the frontiers of all the sciences! I would like to see a theater inspired by your meditations...."

He said: "No one meditates."

The applause and the house-lights drove us out. We circled and went down. The people passing seemed free. Monsieur Teste complained mildly of the midnight chill. He alluded to old pains.

As we walked along, he was muttering almost incoherent phrases. Although I tried, I could barely follow his words, and in the end merely recalled them. The incoherence of speech depends on the one listening to it. The mind seems

to me so made that it cannot be incoherent to itself. That is why I was careful not to classify Teste among the mad. Besides, I could vaguely make out the thread of his ideas, and I noticed no contradiction in them; also, I should have feared too simple a solution.

We were going through streets made quiet by the darkness, turning corners in the void, finding our way by instinct—wider, narrower, wider. His military step dominated mine.

"And yet," I replied, "how can we escape music of such power! And why should we? I find a special excitement in it; must I reject it? I find in it the illusion of a tremendous work that might suddenly become possible for me... an illusion that gives me *abstract sensations*, delightful images of everything I love—change, movement, mixture, flow, transformation. ...Will you deny that certain things are anaesthetic? Trees that make us drunk, men who give us strength, girls who paralyze us, skies that strike us dumb?"

Monsieur Teste raised his voice in reply:

"But, Monsieur! What does the 'talent' of your trees—or anybody's—matter to me? I am at home in MYSELF, I speak my own language, I hate extraordinary things. Only weak minds need them. Believe me literally: genius is *easy*, *divinity* is *easy*....I mean simply...that I know how it is to be conceived. It is *easy*.

"In the past—some twenty years ago—anything above the ordinary achieved by another man was for me a personal defeat. At that time, I could see nothing but ideas stolen from me! How stupid!...To say that our own image is not a matter of indifference to us! In our imaginary battles, we treat it either *too well* or *too badly*!..."

He coughed. He said to himself: "*Que peut un homme?* . . . What is a man's potential?" He said to me: "You know a man who knows that he doesn't know what he is saying!"

We were at his door. He invited me to come in and smoke a cigar with him.

At the top floor of the house, we went into a very small "furnished" apartment. There was not a book in sight. Nothing indicated the usual sort of work at a table, beneath a lamp, amongst pens and papers. In the greenish room smelling of mint, there around the candle was nothing but the dull abstract furniture—a bed, a clock, a wardrobe with a mirror, two armchairs—like creations of the mind. On the mantelpiece a few newspapers, a dozen calling cards covered with numbers, and a medicine bottle. I have never had a stronger impression of the *ordinary*. This was any room, like "any point" in geometry—and perhaps as useful. My host existed in lodgings of the most usual sort. I thought of the hours he would spend in that armchair. I was terrified by the infinite dreariness possible in that abstract and banal place. I have lived in such rooms—I could never believe, without a shudder, that they were my final destination.

Monsieur Teste talked about money. I cannot reproduce his special eloquence: it seemed to me less precise than usual. Fatigue, the silence deeper by the hour, the bitter cigars, the relaxation of night, seemed to overtake him. I still hear his voice, softer and slower, fluttering the flame of the single candle burning between us, while he cited very large numbers, wearily. Eight hundred ten million seventy-five thousand five hundred fifty. . . . I listened to that extraordinary music without following the calculation. He was reciting for me the fluctuations of the stock market, and the long sequences of the names of numbers held me like a poem. He

would compare events of the day, industrial phenomena, public taste and the passions, and still more numbers, one with another. He would say: "Gold is somehow the mind of society."

Suddenly, he was silent. He was in pain.

Again I looked around the chill room at the nullity of the furniture, not to look at him. He took his flask and drank. I stood up to leave.

"Stay on," he said, "you don't mind. I'm going to bed. In a few moments I'll be asleep. You'll take the candle to go down."

He undressed quietly. His gaunt body slid beneath the covers and lay still. Later he turned over and sank deeper into the bed—it was too short.

He said with a smile. "I'm a plank...floating!...I feel an imperceptible rolling under me—a vast movement? I sleep for an hour or two at most....I'm fond of navigating the night. Often I can't distinguish my thought from sleep. I don't know whether I have been asleep. In the past, whenever I drowsed I would think of all that had given me pleasure—faces, things, moments. I would bring them to mind so that thinking would be as pleasant as possible, smooth as the bed....I'm old. I can show you that I feel old.... Remember! Whan we are children we *discover* ourselves, we learn little by little the extent of our body, we express our body's particularity by a series of movements, I suppose? We twist and discover or rediscover ourselves, and are amazed! We touch our heel, or hold the right foot in the left hand, we take a cold foot into a warm palm!...Now, I know myself by heart. My heart included. Bah! The whole earth is staked off, all the flags are flying over all territories. ...My bed remains. I'm fond of this flow of sleep and linen;

the sheet stretched and folded, or crumpled—falling over me like sand when I lie 'dead' still, it curdles around me in sleep.... A very complex bit of mechanics. Along the warp or the woof, the slightest deviation.... Ah-h-h!"

He was in pain.

"What's the matter?" I said. "I can...."

"It's nothing...much," he said. "It's...a tenth of a second appearing.... Wait.... At certain moments my body lights up.... This is very odd. Suddenly, I can see into myself.... I can make out the depths of the layers of my flesh; I feel zones of pain...rings, poles, plumes of pain. Do you see these living forms, this geometry of my suffering? There are certain flashes that are exactly like ideas. They make me understand—from here, to there.... Yet they leave me uncertain. 'Uncertain' is not the word.... When *it* is coming on, I find something confused or diffused in me. Inside my *self*...foggy places arise, there are open expanses that come into view. Then I pick out a question from my memory, some problem or other...and plunge into it. I count grains of sand...and so long as I can see them.... My increasing pain forces me to notice it. I think about it! Waiting only to hear my cry...and the moment I hear it, the *object*, the terrible *object*, smaller and still smaller, vanishes from my inner sight....

"What is a man's potential? I fight against everything—except the suffering of my body, beyond a certain intensity. Yet, it is there I should begin. Because...to suffer is to give supreme attention to something, and I am somewhat a man of attention.... Let me tell you that I foresaw my future illness. I had thought with precision about something everyone else knows. I believe that such a look at an obvious portion of the future should be a part of one's education. Yes, I

had foreseen what is now beginning. At the time, it was an idea like any other. So I was able to pursue it."

He was calm now.

He turned on his side, closed his eyes; and a moment later was talking again. He was beginning to lose himself. His voice was no more than a murmur in the pillow. His reddening hand was already asleep.

He was still talking: "I am thinking, and that hinders nothing. I am alone. How comfortable solitude is! Nothing soft is weighing on me....The same reverie here as in the ship's cabin, or at the Café Lambert....If a Bertha's arms become important, I am robbed—as by pain....Any man who talks to me, if he has no proof, is an enemy. I prefer the brilliance of the least fact that happens. I am being and seeing myself; seeing me see myself, and so forth. Let's think very closely. Rubbish! Any subject at all will put you to sleep.... Sleep will prolong any idea at all...."

He was snoring softly. A little more softly, I took the candle and went out on tiptoe.