

Oscar Mandel

**From Chihuahua to the Border<sup>1</sup>**

**FROM CHIHUAHUA TO THE BORDER**

What they do out there, the mountains, is stand  
stark useless; bleach (but why?) glued to the sun;  
not one green hair grows on these rumps nor is heard  
one woosh of a wing or grumble of a throat.  
The road's a slap at them they don't know how to feel.  
They wall us up (driving north) on either side of one  
brown prostrate earth, we give them blank for blank,  
until oh God who was it winked at them?  
You, you, behind my yawn, you femurs,  
ribcage, mandibles, sworn friends to me, you  
plotting with foreigners, assassins in my house!  
No, no, we love you, chime the bones; drive on, drive on.

"Driving north." That was in the year 1959, when my wife-to-be and I spent a summer together in Mexico. The road we took both going and returning was that grim ribbon which traverses New Mexico and Mexico's inland centre arid, dusty, cutting through torpid villages where now and then a policeman directs traffic from the top of a box marked Coca-Cola.

Those were busy poetic years for me. Poetry composed itself in my very sleep. I would leap out of bed to jot down two lines. Altogether, if my reckoning is correct, some twenty years of "inspiration" were granted me—and if, in spite of the inverted commas I have prudently placed around the word, it strikes you as fatuous, bear in mind that the mediocre enjoy the same exaltations as the gifted. The difference appears in the product, the similarity in the invisible passion that made it. Dunces, in short, also leap out of bed inspired. Eventually my imagination, verve and hopefulness—even my vocabulary—began to slacken and shrink, and I was virtuous enough not to beat the weary mule.

Title and landscape notwithstanding, my poem is hardly *about* Mexico. What it *is* about I have a mind to speak of at some moderate,

unoppressive length. But to say "Chihuahua" without mulling over Mexico, and to mull over Mexico without grieving a while over human misery, is proving impossible to me. In a truly *human* being, ethics must precede metaphysics. The ultimates can always wait. Let them do so now the length of a few pages....

I am no lover of picturesque poverty. Holland is my predilection (need I say more?)—and poverty which I cannot relieve merely breaks my heart. I like a plump, green, well-watered landscape in which no one goes hungry and uncared-for in sickness and old age, where the houses are in good repair and freshly painted, the shops paunchy with merchandise, the clothing colorful and neat. Neatness—should a poet admit it?—is my predilection too. No wonder I have not gone back to Mexico for a second visit, though I live next door to it.

I am not blind to the notorious beauties of Mexico. Once one rises onto the great central plateau and enters the realm of the Conquerors, the landscape dazzles, the clouds are arrayed in voluble billows as if to pose for a Master of the Baroque, and this would be paradise were it not for the marks everywhere upon the human settlements of misery, bad health, ignorance and violence. In Mexico I renew, on the rebound, my (tempered) admiration for the singular achievements of that Western bourgeoisie which we accredited artists have been mauling so efficiently for nearly two centuries. How lustily we have pummeled the "commercial interests!" We men of letters can even boast of having made up a kind of collective John the Baptist to Marx the Redeemer. We preluded on the keyboard for him, and for his Apostles. While we pummel away, however, and clasp the poor to our bosoms—as metaphorically as possible—the poor have the excellent sense to use our pamphlets, money, novels, votes, and agitation only so far as these will help them up into the very middle class we love them for not belonging to. Once there, they gladly tolerate our lampoons, for they had rather be rich and pummeled than poor and patronized.

Here then is one reason why artists are so particularly fond of Mexico. The poor seem somehow more authentic to them, though why a brazier is more authentic than an all-electric kitchen quite escapes me. Not that authenticity (whatever that means) interests me a great deal anyhow. Some finer souls carry their fastidious devotion to the point of adopting these "primitive customs," shedding the "materialistic trappings of our industrial society," and learning to rejoice in crumbling walls, makeshift furniture, homespun rags, and gastroenteritis. They attract the stupefied attention of their barefooted neighbors, who, endowed with sense instead of genius, regard them as harmless loonies and continue to hope, pray, sometimes work, and if

possible steal in order to buy plastic goods (long live plastic goods) and large automobiles.

The genuine beauties of Mexico, apart from its natural scenery, are mostly the legacy of the wicked Spanish occupation, dispossession and exploitation. As happens so often, beauty and injustice go hand in hand, posing a moral dilemma which no one seems to notice but which has long bedevilled me. It is an inconvenient and unrepresentable phenomenon. Good art is usually a child of luxury, and luxury is seldom a child of justice. This is apparent enough in Europe to anyone who cares to reflect upon the socio-economic origins of almost all its beauties; but the unsavory truth is even more obvious in Mexico, where the Indians—to put it succinctly—toiled unto death in the mines so churches and palaces could be silvered over. In our own proletocracies, democratic or totalitarian, we can speak in a rough and ready fashion of a reliable inverse correlation between social justice and aesthetic achievement. The repulsive but well-meant housing blocks for the masses East and West provide the picture that stands for a thousand words.

Naturally these large human tides do not operate by clockwork, and there are, for reasons amenable to our reason, notable pockets of exception. But my heart goes out to nations or cultures in which an equilibrium of sorts came about between social justice and aesthetic refinement. In Holland, for instance, but also in colonial New England. In these and other places, extreme luxury and beauty were “renounced” in favor of such an equilibrium. Dutch and new England beauty fell short of Italian beauty, but Italian social justice fell short of Dutch and new England social justice. More social justice means less beauty, but that which remains is more wholesome for that very reason. It refreshes the mind without oppressing our thoughts with ideas of slave labor, intense poverty, disease, and neronism. The ethical and aesthetic reach an accommodation.

I would not care to have these historical ideas of mine examined too minutely. There is something of the useful fiction in them. But also, I hope, of usable truth.

While I was conscious of the wrongdoings of the builders of Guanaajuato and Taxco, this did not and does not to this day trigger in me any particular outbreak of love for their victims. I am free of that automatic twitch. We are always supposing that the oppressed are more admirable than their tormentors. But the little I know about pre-Columbian Mexico has failed to give me fits of nostalgia. The cruelties of the Spaniards but superseded the crimes of their victims. Today we hear grisly stories about the systematic extermination of the Amazonian Indians. But I do not turn instantly sentimental over these same

Indians, extolling their chants and stories and customs at the expense of our own dirty civilization. A few years ago a white woman emerged from the jungles of the Amazon. She had been captured by an Indian tribe before she was ten years old, had lived with them, had married an Indian, and had remained with them until the day when, fearing for her life in one of the eternal wars which these picturesque and endearing tribes fight against one another, she had finally made her way back to the whites. The perfectly artless account of her life that she gave to some Italian anthropologists was such as to make a sentimentalist break out in perspiration. Amidst a hundred tales of truceless wars and murders in these unpolluted jungles, one episode has settled for good in my mind. A party of Indians is attacked and overpowered by some enemy warriors. The men escape or are killed in combat. The women and girls become prizes (the little white girl among them). But the boys are grabbed by the feet, swung, and their skulls smashed against a tree.

The cruelties of the Aztecs are notorious, and so are those of the North American Indians. I am not refusing to believe that "savages" can live at peace with one another. But so can the Swedes. Naked or dressed, man is an inherently irritable creature and turns amiable only under a certain constellation of external factors (have they ever been named and studied?) which can occur in the jungle, the savannah, or the city. There is, at any rate, no point in beating our civilization with a primitive's stick.

Nor did I fall into an ecstasy over pre-Columbian art. I paid dutiful visits to the pyramids, the temple sites, the ruins, the museums, always "impressed," but seldom imbued with the intense joy I require of art, whether comic or tragic. Pre-Columbian art proved too relentlessly thick, gnarled, grotesque, tormented and ferocious to suit me. These are all authentic *qualities* of course; but it so happens that, mild myself, I like them in moderation, and prefer them set off against fairer qualities—say, a gargoyle in a cathedral; while I am perfectly content when these fairer qualities beckon to me without those of ferocious power. For me, the sweetness, the pity, and the complex intellectual precision sometimes achieved in our advanced civilizations are not to be bartered for the accomplishments of primitive groups, whether in the arts or in matters of wisdom. It is good to know what they have wrought, and it would be stupid to deny that they can give us lessons (as the child can lesson the adult), for every human advance comports some losses, so that a turn of the head backwards is never a waste of time—when Sèvres flood the market, an infusion of Papua is healthy—but it is sheer frowardness to hold up the primitive like a cross to lead us into battle.

While lingering among Aztec, Toltec and Mayan vestiges, I will confess in an aside that I am not your man for even the best of ruins. You will find me walking rather disconsolately amidst heaps of stones, outlines of bathhouses, recesses for kitchens, shattered columns (unless arranged picturesquely by Chance), and segments of pavement. I do not require a few shards of pottery to grow melancholy over the leveling passage of time and the evanescence of things. In Rome look for me not in the Forum but on the Campidoglio, in the evening, when it lies in its tender lights, noble, venerable, harmonious above its stairs, that grand one in the center, the other to the left of it. I had rather study a ruin in a text than sweat over it in the summer sun. After the Campidoglio you can find me with Bernini on the Piazza Navona. Aztec pyramids indeed! Think too of the unbelievable leap from those mountains in northern Mexico to the Piazza Navona. Is there a planet, among those millions of cultured and developed earths which, we are assured, wander the fearful yonders of the universe, wider and wilder than ours in its contrasts?

Many years ago I was walking along the remains of the Roman wall in England, when I met a laborer chipping away at some stones. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Mending the ruin," he replied. Mend away, friend, mend away.

As I write these pages about my summer in Mexico, I discover that I have neither the desire nor the talent to set down the dozens of intimate contours of a voyage, the flavor of a remark dropped by someone in a cafe, the colors of a marketplace, the juices dripping from a melon, the cry of a parrot, the reek of busses, a good diarrhea in Taxco, the night one sleeps all dressed in a hotel room out of sheer disgust, dinner among the flamingoes in Mexico City.... No, consult someone else, my patience fails me.

Still, I want to retrieve an experience, on a sunny and windy afternoon God knows where, that showed me the grain of truth in the Romantic vision of the wise, profound, genuine, unlettered therefore unspoiled peasant—a truth admissible only if we complete the picture, and are willing to add the dark colors—the brutalities, the diseases, the vicious superstitions. Be that as it may, Adriana and I drove up a hillock one afternoon, using a hazardous dirt road until it lost itself in a pile of grass; then walked to the top, which was flattened out. The height was modest, yet the prospect all around was ample. We stood on the site of some archaeological diggings into the tombs of ancient kings and their followers. The scientists were absent that day, their shack stood empty—we peeked inside and found it full of books—and the site was guarded by a native, a youngish melancholy man with an inevitable moustache, a wife whom we did not see, a vague but large

number of children, and merry chickens. As my wife's Spanish is excellent, and mine passable, we had no problems with our Mexican, who was glad to see a couple of visitors. He was as true and unspoiled and perhaps noble a son of the earth as one could wish to find in a moist travelogue. He spoke in a gentle voice about the ancient rulers. When they died, their wives and their retainers were dispatched for company. He thought this admirable. "If I had a master, I would die with him too," he said (more or less) with simple artless words. Every now and then, as if coming to the end of a paragraph, he would complete a portion of a story with a "según la relación de Michoacan"—so speaks the chronicle of Michoacan—as if to give his tale a certitude which it would have lacked as one man's report. This almost sad refrain has remained with me like a music. Something out of the lungs of human history was blowing over us that afternoon. We sat on one of the funeral mounds, listening to this bard of the earth. He pointed to a cemetery in the distance, abortively surrounded by three walls. A team of officials—from the United Nations, we gathered—had been to the village, and they had scolded the villagers: "Aren't you ashamed to leave your graveyard exposed on all sides; look at the cows, look at the pigs there, grubbing among your dead!" The villagers had been ashamed. They began to build the walls. Then the team left. Three walls were completed, the fourth was never built. The cows and the pigs were still foraging among the dead. It was not very decent. Furthermore the strangers tried to keep the men in the village from drinking and shooting so much. And they built latrines. Once a little girl of his had been very sick. He made a vow to Our Lady up there, far up on another hill—he would crawl on his knees all the way from the village to light candles to her if the little girl recovered. She did. He crawled and crawled. His knees were bleeding.

The afternoon wore on. Our host dabbled in sculpture. His habit was to leaf through the books of his employers, and when he had time he hammered away at the red, porous stone of the region. What he came up with was original; he clearly did not try to copy the photographs, he allowed them to give him ideas—which were authentically Mexican, of course—not Sèvres!—strong ideas and deeply his own after all. We took two of the pieces along; they stand in our garden to this day. As for the world outside, he knew it only by hearsay. He had heard that in the cities—in the capital, for instance—people had houses on top of other people—he had trouble expressing the strange notion of houses several stories high. One day he would go see for himself.....

So then I too have spent a few hours on an Aran island, and assured myself that there is indeed a poetry of the people, something beautiful

in that it has been generated slowly, "organically," without imposition from that "above" which can be the Intellectuals, or the Officials, or Big Business—we feel it at once to be as true as the call of an animal. If we do not romanticize this poetry and this wisdom, we are allowed to say that something precious is lost when we move on, and we are allowed to turn our heads backward and sigh. But to give up our knowledge of the atom's structure, to give up Bach, to give up the Campidoglio in order to return to the folk, such a thought is monstrous. For myself, I am so far gone that I would not even give up my French sauces and wines for the beauties of primitive existence. And finally, if I admired the Mexican man on the hill, it was not in order to forget that we too counter our gas-chamber rabble with a host of "beautiful souls." Simple cultures produce them, and refined civilizations produce them.

In the capital we had rented an apartment for a month on the fourth "house above house" of a new building, never quite finished and already crumbling, like all the ambitious technological goods of poor countries. One evening a mouse jumped out of the oven door just as my wife was bending over to start the evening meal. The elevator did not work and perhaps never would. We were young and sturdy and could manage the ups and downs with ease, but we worried at first about the rubbish disposal. On the appointed day, however, a little girl appeared, not quite as tall as the trashcan and thoroughly undernourished. Filled with pity and shame, but freezing my impulse to carry the load for her, I watched her drag it painfully out the door and down the stairs. Anything else would have been impertinent. She would not have thanked me. This was her appointed task. A coin or two might be had from it, dutifully delivered to her father, the concierge. Vacationing foreigners should not break in with outlandish charities. There and elsewhere (giving half-eaten rolls to beggars and the like) I also learned the rule that where misery is the rule, the well-to-do must stiffen against compassion or be annihilated by it. Misery besieges them on every side, day after day; and what is the good of confessing, "I am one of the oppressors?" This may work in the long run, it may be historically significant and useful, it may help change the nation for the better, and therefore such recognitions should be abetted, but on a Thursday afternoon, when the hundred and fifty-fifth hungry child of the week begs you for money, what do you do in order to survive yourself? What does even a revolutionary do as he crosses the town amidst the crippled beggars, the deformed old men sleeping on benches, the mothers picking at the refuse of a restaurant? He too waves them aside. Or no longer sees them.

Here nevertheless a meanness of mine comes to haunt me again. We had dined in the company of another young couple in a restaurant where some mariachi players were performing—odious music!—and felt a crescendo of vexation at the well-organized extortions practiced upon us by the management. The charges were outrageous, the extras cropped up on every side, and when it was all over we left in a sullen mood. My car was parked near the entrance. The uniformed doorman hurried up to it and performed his minor duties. I took in his pathetically baggy trousers and ill-fitting tunic—what is more abject than a *grand gala* uniform three sizes too large?—and the look—what shall I say?—not of tragic suffering—no, simply pain and resignation when I angrily ignored his outstretched hand and drove away. The face showed in the rear-view mirror for a second, perfectly void of anger. My own evaporated at once. I wanted to drive back, but could not bring myself to turn the car around, explain to my wife and friends, and issue regally to bestow a gratification on the poor devil.... How often, and for how many years, the image of that shabby *chasseur* has come back to reproach me. Was it his fault they were cheating me inside? None of their wicked gains trickled down to him.

At the end of our summer in Mexico, we drove north out of Chihuahua one morning before breakfast, and stopped at a restaurant midway to the border. There we got our last grime and peeling walls, and took our last prudent measures—no water, no butter, no milk. Then into the desert again, the vast beautiful horror of which my poem is a memory, and then, unbelievably, Texas—I think it was Texas—or was it New Mexico? And that time only, never before and never after—an exaltation of patriotism swelled in my ribcage. I could have kissed the asphalt. We halted at a bright chromium-and-plastic “Eats,” drank the water, spread the butter, poured the milk, and marveled after three months at the smiles and the cleanliness. Ah, those Indians are not a cheerful race! They are not poor in the Neapolitan way. Here was my white-toothed America again, “Hi folks, what’ll it be?”

One surge of this love of America has taught me for the rest of my life the visceral reality of such attachments; I can now reproduce the emotion of a Yank in Asia who gets news of the latest baseball score. If I were a novelist, I would not need notebooks filled with a hundred “real experiences.” Imagination’s business is to make do with one.

Although we know how moth-eaten the ancient distinction between the soul and body is, we cannot help continuing to feel it, and therefore to entertain a kind of hostility towards these bones and guts and fibers which sustain and indeed create our consciousness, and then extin-



guish it. In this support and sustenance, they are at one with that portion of Nature—the earth—which feeds and oxygenates us, and then kills and buries us. In all strictness of thought, my poem could have chosen the green hills of Northumberland as aptly as the brown mountains of Chihuahua, but the feeling of death transpires more easily from the latter, and the bones seem to be more at home there. In that setting my spirit feels more forsaken, embedded in the body, which in its turn is embedded in the bleak universe, than it does where the birds give their specious gaiety to the scenery and the saps fool us for a while into delusions of friendliness.

As I see it, we are as right to distinguish between spirit (or soul, or mind) and body as to discriminate between lungs and stomach. I am aware that spirit is thought, that thought is (almost exclusively) language submuttered, and that language is an “electrochemical” activity of the brain. I place that term between slightly ironical flicks only because in another generation or two some other word will be in fashion. The argument will remain the same, however: mind and flesh are both made of the same “natural stuff.” But this kinship does not prevent them from engaging in frequent civil wars, simply because each organ of each organism seeks to maintain its own coherence, vigor, and life. It has “its own interest at heart”—that of surviving, yes, but more specifically, that of continuing to play its own game: digesting, breathing, squirting hormones, and the rest. The brain’s characteristic game (I mean that portion of the brain which is most properly human) is to think, and our desire for immortal life is little more than the brain’s urge to persist in its own inherent function. Its dislike of death corresponds to the stomach’s resistance to rancid food. The stomach expresses itself through certain contractions and secretions of chemicals, the brain through its alarmed and defiant thoughts.

One of these thoughts is that thinking is a product of the all too mortal brain. Another is how much lovelier it would be for our thinking if thought were an eternal, distinct, insubstantial substance (called “spirit”) which only transiently condescended to occupy a room in our house of flesh. What a benefit to homeostasis that would be! Nor should we wonder that, if the brain emits thought, it also emits thought about thought, which is but another thought. Why not? The poem, in short, continues to stand under the “one substance” view of the universe: it does not imply a radical division between body and soul.

The *feelings* in which these thoughts bask take us even deeper into the “one substance” philosophy. All our feelings can be sorted out into the two categories of pleasure (favorable) and pain (unfavorable). If we translate this into a primal attraction and repulsion, we realize,

perhaps with a shock, that even our most human emotions (resentment, for example) unite us, not only with the most primitive organisms, but with the entire universe, alive or unalive. For the inorganic is also constituted and agitated primordially through attraction and repulsion, the going toward and the distancing from. Step by step up the chemical ladder of complexity, this to and from becomes, in living organisms, pleasure and pain, and eventually affection and hostility—and we could write a fairy-tale in which the negatively charged particles rushed toward the positively charged particles with a feeling of love!

But what is the ultimate and irreducible reason for the attraction and the repulsion of two units of the universe? What is the final physical explanation? After what reason given can no further reason be asked? And: are these questions unanswerable? If so, why so?

The scientific method itself, which has my full allegiance, suggests that *any* human concept of the universe collapses at the outermost edge. The totality of the universe is not even *theoretically* apprehensible by means of the senses we possess and the equipment we manufacture to stretch our senses. We know that even though we may be wanting a few senses, having three or four more would still keep Kant's Thing-in-itself out of our reach, assuming that anything can be conceived of as being in itself. Furthermore, our radical inadequacy to the universe stares us in the face as frankly as a brick wall. Our notions of time and space lead us to a ridiculous dead-end at the limits of the universe. Scientists shrug their shoulders. It is none of *their* business, they say. Well, whose business is it? Philosophers know even less about it, and surely you will not ask your local archbishop? Science pursues time, space and causation as far as its legs will run, and then turns around and runs back. For the ultimate questions are unanswerable not because we fail to see sharply enough; not because mathematicians have yet to discover the formulas; and not because our instruments need more refinement. The ultimate questions are not in the same category as, for example, the question how many grains of sand there are in the world, which is only "technically" unanswerable. No. The ultimates take us clear across the barrier of Nature as man can conceive it forever and ever from the "prison" of his own nature. This is what I mean when I say that man is *radically* limited. From which it follows ineluctably that something in the universe is itself radically *other* than "electrochemical forces" or whatever name we choose for our "one substance."

But what if this concept of radical otherness were to be applied to our consciousness too?—strange as it may seem that otherness should give a sign of its existence not only at the confines of causation, time

and space, "where words fail us," but pat in the middle of our own "living rooms," if I may so express it.

At the heart of this supposition is a distinction which I have purposely blurred up to this point, because it is not required for the poem: the poem makes sense strictly as the clash between two members of the same ontological club—an ontological civil war, in short. But now let us make trial of another idea: *thought is other than consciousness*. Even thought about thought is separable from consciousness. We say quite sensibly that we are conscious *of* thought, whereby we correctly imply that these two events are distinct. Thought (like feeling) is the "electrochemical" activity of a specific organ and as such belongs to the world of time, place, cause-and-effect along with the rest of the body; whereas our consciousness of thought and feeling appears to escape from that universal net.

I say *appears* to escape. For concerning consciousness, the first mystery is, is there a mystery?

Sometimes I am moved by philosophers and scientists who deny the otherness, the mystery. Perhaps "consciousness" is simply a word we happen to use for yet another activity of matter—or another function of energy—for example the scanning that one portion of the brain performs upon another. But perhaps this is not enough. And then I am moved by those who feel that this "internal illumination" (the expression has been ascribed to Einstein) is *strange*.

Yet to ask in what this strangeness consists is futile. We know only that our human constitution leaves us helpless to answer questions which that very constitution poses. Discourse takes us to a certain faraway point, and then a black hole swallows it: it vanishes. We can say, for instance, that we are constituted to experience the universe as a process in time, all events having a past and a future. But this Kantian "category" forces us to look in vain for a before the before the before (and so on) before which there is no before—a terminal point interdicted by that very immersion in time with which we began. Efforts to evade this impasse through infinite recurrences or circularities evade nothing at all, they only push it a little farther away. And of course the same impasse awaits us when we think of space, where again it is no solution at all to regard it as bent, returning upon itself, and so forth. Observe that we never come near the hint of an answer. We represent the universe to ourselves as *consisting* of such elements as energy, matter, space and time in cause-and-effect interaction—where vegetable, animal and human senses are modes of adaptation of some of these elements to one another; but beyond the line where discourse about this "package" vanishes, we can only posit a strangeness, and this must consist of something either not composed at all of matter,

energy, time and space, or composed of these, or some of these, mixed in with strangeness. At any rate, our palpably familiar universe betrays us at the edge and compels us to believe in a strangeness of which the only thing we can know is that it exists, and exists because our known universe runs out of explanations in its own terms, within its own phenomena. All we have is a forced journey from a palpably familiar universe to unutterable strangeness.

I am arguing here—with much trepidation—that a similar strangeness faces us as soon as we separate consciousness from the thoughts and feelings which can and do exist without it, in animals, in infants and very often in full-grown men and women. Consciousness, like time and space, seems to have one foot (so to speak) in our world of matter and energy, and the other in unutterable strangeness.

Specifically, consciousness, if it exists, is an absolute terminus. I mean: it causes nothing. It is itself obviously caused by the matter/energy of the human brain when the latter is functioning at high capacity, when we say of it that it focuses, or attends. But, uniquely among all known phenomena, it is an effect without ever being a cause. We might think of it as the useless, luxurious “humming of the machine”—provided we allow this humming to be an unutterable strangeness, since, unlike the sound waves produced by ordinary humming, it produces no effect whatsoever. Or again: we can call it the clarity in which we dwell when thoughts or feelings peak. At a certain peak of activity, the “veil is rent” (the veil that obscures the thoughts and feelings of animals, of infants, and often our own)—and the electrochemical forces are transfigured.

Remember that, even as I write these words, I remain in doubt. Is this supposed illumination but an “aspect” of neuronal activity? But all aspects of all things are co-equal perceptions that strike us (directly or through instruments) in parallel or convergently. Thus at one moment we see a rose as a beautiful flower, at another as a heap of atoms. These indeed are aspects. But while our instruments are able to catch the chemistry and electricity of our thinking and feeling, so that we can in a real sense perceive them, neither they nor our senses can catch our consciousness of these thoughts and feelings, since consciousness is incapable of acting upon any instrument. We are conscious of setting up the instruments meant to catch our consciousness, but conscious of their capturing only that which we are conscious of (namely thoughts and feelings). So perhaps this consciousness is not a mere “aspect” that we can perceive alongside other aspects. It is as though a butterfly were holding the net that is meant to catch it. Never can we get *in back* of this consciousness: it is always itself in back.

Nor is it easy to account for the oddity of consciousness by treating it as an emergence. An emergence is a quality or property of a highly complicated system which the parts of the system cannot produce *until* connected together as a system. We know that adding items to a system can sometimes do much more than merely make the system bigger. At a certain point, quite startling and unexpected properties emerge. And this seems for a moment, philosophically speaking, an adequate approach to consciousness, which undoubtedly emerges at a certain point of accretion and complication in our billions of neurons. Yet again, emergent properties *behave*; they have detectable effects; they are part and parcel of the electrochemical realities; while consciousness remains (it would seem) half in and half out of these realities. Therefore, though still teased by my doubt, I continue.

Consciousness is of thought, emotion, perception, and volition. We may think of it as their implosion, or glow, or mirror, or even receptacle, though all such terms are necessarily lame. They are lame, of course, because they necessarily belong to our "electrochemical" world; we have no "strange" terms from that "other" realm with which to describe it. We are certain only that consciousness does not disturb the world. Having no effect whatsoever, it is not subject to measurement, experimentation, alteration. We know how to snuff it out (nothing, alas, is easier), without knowing what it is. It can be left out of all scientific observations: perfectly and unalterably passive, it is incapable of modifying a result, it is never even an infinitesimal factor neglected only for practical reasons—it is a perfect zero in the world of material energy in which we move. And it has no "survival value" for the species. No wonder, says Teilhard de Chardin, that it has been ignored by science. It exists—we "see" it—but it does not behave. More: its existence is the central event of our lives. For when we say that we want the self to survive, we do not mean the mere thought, "I am I," or "I am John Doe," but the implosion of clarity in which the thought swims: the consciousness of self.

One charm of this point of view is that it does not smuggle free-will into our behaviour. Consciousness has nothing to do with the will except to register it. Volition, like emotion and cerebration and perception, proceeds in its world of material energy. It is subject to the ordinary laws of cause and effect, and is easily conceivable without its conscious reverberation, such as we guess it to be in animals and such as we know it to operate very often in ourselves. All one can say is that our illusion of free-will probably derives from our helpless thoughts concerning our consciousness.

To argue that consciousness is perfectly passive is not to decry or deny our vaunted ability to make our minds control our bodies—to

some extent. Man has always known that such control can be exercised, and this knowledge can be validated in spite of the superstitions and charlatanisms which have always polluted the "mind over matter" phenomenon. But the point is that this control refers us to thought, not to consciousness. And our thoughts are "electrochemical." So viewed, the impact of mind on matter appears as an entirely plausible interaction (within limits) of two elements belonging to the same ontological club. The stomach can act on the brain, and the brain can act on the stomach. Consciousness attends, but is irrelevant. Quite incidentally, I do not believe that thoughts can move billiard balls (and the like) any more than I believe that our stomachs can.

Does thinking exist without consciousness? It clearly does. True, our most complex cerebrations are necessarily conscious, for when the brain works above a certain threshold of intensity, it generates consciousness—what I have called the humming of the machine. But we guess that animal thinking fails to cross that threshold, we are all but sure that infant thinking is unconscious, and we know that crowds of unconscious thoughts criss-cross our brains not only when we sleep but in our waking hours too. We know it—without the help of psychoanalysis—because now and then a few of these thoughts intensify suddenly enough to awaken our consciousness. As we become aware of these specific thoughts, we also grow conscious of the diffuse magma of thoughts out of which "bubbled" the important ones that sought the light. We cannot seize these lesser thoughts, but they surround the conscious ones like an aura. For the rest, our instruments confirm our individual experience, since they show a great deal of cerebral activity during certain phases of our sleep—thoughts that run helter-skelter over our sleep-loosened circuits, and most of them destined to remain subconscious.

I do not mean, however, that once our thoughts are intense enough to create consciousness, they immediately create *full* consciousness. Consciousness has its degrees; it does not obey an on/off or an all-or-none regulation. It dims and grows brighter before vanishing at one end or reaching perfection at the other—the latter when we concentrate all our thinking on the subject of ourselves: I am I. Hence I easily admit the possibility of a beginning of consciousness—a rudimentary consciousness—in the higher primates, just as it makes a beginning in the child. The guess that animals think without it when they think at all—in images, in smells, in tactile sensations and so forth—remains reasonable, but a few beginnings of consciousness at the upper limits of primate life are not unthinkable.

As for computers, I am not much troubled by the question whether they will one day be conscious. Since I take our thinking as such to be

purely "physical," I do not see why thinking of a sort should not be physically performed by a machine we manufacture for the purpose of thinking. But what results are to be expected from the profound chemical differences between computers and human beings? We already know that their thought-capacity is unlike ours—vastly better in some ways, clumsy in others. It remains for us to wonder whether consciousness—assuming it to be more than a word—is uniquely a property of our proteins, starches, nucleic acids and so on, or whether the components of a computer can generate it too. If they can, welcome! More consciousness can do us, or the universe, no harm. I do not begrudge it to the ape, and have no reason to be afraid of it in a machine.

Inevitably, having come this far, I need to say a word or two about the "mystical" reverberations of these views of mine, however cautiously I hold them. Scientists and philosophers who strongly feel the mystery of it all sometimes keep travelling until they arrive at positions one can call more or less religious. Their opponents suspect them of arriving there chiefly because they wanted or needed consolation. The world is full of tired scientists looking for spiritual refreshment. I, unfortunately, have no refreshment to offer. My tears do not govern my thoughts. The strangeness we butt against—of causation, of time, of space, and perhaps of consciousness—simply tell me that we animals are not "adequate" to the universe. We apprehend it as the creatures we are, "provincially." We can proceed to postulate that the number of such epistemological provinces is prodigious, perhaps "infinite." Furthermore they all coexist. They do not abolish one another. Now, even *a priori* we should think it unlikely that all these realities would exist merely side by side, without the least interference, like parallel slats. No, these beams into reality must cross one another now and then, and here and there—time and space must touch other "dimensions"—and where they do, the creature that stands at the beams' junction receives intimations of the reality beyond its own—or should we say athwart its own? This is where we human beings ask our unanswerable questions. But unanswerable as they are, they do not suggest—alas!—that were an answer forthcoming, it would bring us the consolations we expect from a religion, consolations without which religion does not interest us. In other words, nothing I have said opens so much as a chink through which we might catch a glimpse of a power friendly to us, or the least promise of survival after death. And I can only repeat, with a sigh: alas. I remain as I began, the fear at my throat, in love with my consciousness and cursing it all the while; loving, that is, everything in awareness except the awareness that itself will end. For I know how easily it vanishes in us even while we are alive.

A minor relaxation in the physical activity of nervous tissue, an accident, an illness dim it and then switch it off. Here is an event apparently mysterious in its essence yet grossly physical in its origins. Must it die with the body that causes it, or shall we draw hope from the belief that it is in itself uncanny and other? By why should "uncanny and other" amount to an intimation of survival? In the Book of the Universe, the pages we cannot read are probably as bleak of comfort to us as those we absorb. My horror is intact.

Drive on, chime the bones, drive on.

#### NOTES

1. *The Book of Elaborations* consists of 16 chapters, each headed by a poem taken from the author's *Collected Lyrics and Epigrams*. The poem triggers memories and thoughts, these in turn awaken others. The chapter gradually ripples outward, and sometimes returns. Its movement is free and personal...