



*Naveen Kishore*

Soul he said. Soul as the prison of the body. Soul? I asked. What about the ones who don't believe? In soul. Or God. Or religion. The ones that understand the body for what it is. Accept its one-way journey towards the inevitable. The body as decay. Gradual ruin. Eventual crumbling. We all know this. Or those that think the 'inner core', or what I presume is a 'substitute' for the notion of 'soul', is actually just an ever-changing, evolving, fermenting mass of literature that grows. And grows. And knows freedom. And fear. And emotion. And love. And death. And every kind of existential angst that any soul worth its weight in gold would know! What about me? I asked. Or you for that matter. We who write and read and write and continue to read and write while our bodies grow old and tired. But the mind. The mind remains in a state of excitement. Constantly radiant. Its brilliance growing with every new thought. What if we substitute 'literature' for 'soul' in your proud statement so that it now reads 'Literature as the prison of the body'. Thing is that this doesn't hold. Literature cannot be a space that restricts movement. Or freedom. At least it shouldn't be. It is meant to be a liberating presence. Like its close companion. The dark. For me the dark is important. The dark as a substitute for the soul? Maybe. Darkness is essential for literature of meaning to grow and take root.



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*Reinhard Jirgl*

CAFÉ EINSTEIN: BODY AND SOUL, GOD-AND-THE-WORLD

A Fictitious Conversation Continues

TRANSLATED BY IAIN GALBRAITH

And yet, he submitted, before the things we are trying to clarify get completely lost in the dark, we should head off a couple of those important words and stop them wandering away into some mystical realm. A ‘mystical haze’ is the worst thing that can happen to writing. It robs language of all contour.

He glanced over at the waitress, impatient for the latte he had ordered. The moment it arrived, a steamy aroma wafting from a tall, chalice-like glass sporting a crown of frothy white foam, he took a sip or two and, presumably spurred on by the thrill of the fresh coffee, launched into a monologue. If the soul is the prison of the body, I thought, observing his behaviour, coffee is the body’s accomplice, smuggling a duplicate key into its prison cell to abet a temporary getaway.

Your comment borrows from Nietzsche, he began, as if he were party to my thoughts. Especially in times when discourse becomes sclerotic and opinions are unbending, you can often expose the true state of things simply by turning people’s inflexible views on their head. The standard formula, issued by Christianity with its enmity towards the body and pleasure, is: ‘The body is the prison of the soul.’ But posing and posturing is impossible when you’re made to stand on

your head; you no longer seem powerful; you have been *ex-posed*—masks slip when you're standing on your head. So in that sense Nietzsche was a true pre-Socratic. But as for your own remarks—

Before going on, he required a swift sip from his coffee glass.

We'll return to your own remarks, shall we, which began with a question about the soul and immediately progressed to bodily decay, at the same time searching for an alternative to the word 'soul', which to you seemed entombed by religion, whence you advanced to freedom and straight on to dread, emotion, love and death. And to existential fear. *Fear Eats the Soul*—a brilliant film by Fassbinder! Following that, you spoke of the gradual decline of the exhausted body, contrasting it quite emphatically with the endurance of the mind, which you see in terms of constant growth, its brilliant thoughts, even in old age, flouting the decrepit state of the body. In fact one might well reverse Schiller's dictum here and posit: the mind is the assassin of the body. Yes, and then there was darkness. Which you identify as the matrix of literature. But what have you achieved with your list?

He studied me expectantly, a barely concealed smile in his voice: What does your list really signify? This stairway to the existential? Allow me to name the stairs one by one, and I don't mean this in any kind of religious sense, but solely in existential terms. You began with *helplessness* and went from there to *revolt*; you have rejected the pairing implicit in 'Literature as the prison of the body', effectively deeming *freedom* to be *liberation*. Which is baffling, if it is true that freedom itself can be liberated. By what then? By the radiance with



which human love can suffuse freedom?—Finally there is *darkness*, which you say is essential to you. And to literature, darkness being its matrix, just as humus is for plants. So you too have changed the usual perspective on things, turning them on their head. What you have done with your sequence is in fact to reverse the accustomed order of the different phases of life, exchanging youth for age and birth for death. Welcome to the club!

His glass of coffee was still half full; he would not lack succour for the remarks that lay ahead.

Darkness, he began—all writing begins in the realm of shadows. The shades crave to drink the blood of the living, without which they cannot speak. This is what Ulysses learnt on arriving in the Underworld, where he had to sacrifice a ram to the shades in order to help them fulfil the expectations people have had of literature throughout history: that it speak the truth, prevail over time and death, predict the future. For this reason the Eleventh Book of the *Odyssey* is the very paradigm of literature.

But if Homer already said everything, why has there been a never-ending flood of literature for the past two-and-a-half thousand years? Why have writers continued to write?

Ulysses was composed and courageous solely on the battlefield; faced with the dead in the netherworld, however, he was impetuous and cowardly. Shortly before he was about to meet Persephone, the thought that she might hold up to him the head of the gorgon filled him with horror. The hero took to his heels. Which meant he returned to the world of the living with, at best, half-truths and fragmentary



tales. There has been a gap in the narrative ever since, an obscure place, an unfathomable abyss—which explains later attempts to explore the abyss and fill in the gap. And why there has been no end to new books. Why did Ulysses fear that Persephone, upon meeting him, would reveal only her darker side as goddess of the dead, using Medusa’s head to turn him to stone? Surely it was equally possible that Persephone, in her other capacity as a goddess of fertility, would return with Ulysses to the world of the living? Did Ulysses fear the goddess might exact revenge on him for Perseus’ wile in beheading Medusa, the only mortal among the gorgons? But why should Persephone do that?

Perhaps it wasn’t physical terror that Ulysses felt, I objected; perhaps it was a terror . . .

. . . of the soul? he completed, with surprised, inquisitive eyes. But we still don’t know what the soul is, never mind where to find it, since no atlas of anatomy gives it a place. What is more, the terror in question is very much of this world: Ulysses met his mother in the realm of the dead. She had died of a broken heart over her son’s apparent death. And now she was forced to acknowledge that her son was alive and her own death pointless.—

The son’s guilt over his mother’s death, I threw in.

He nodded: And that’s why he panicked. Ulysses feared that his mother, with Persephone’s help, wanted to force him to redeem his guilt in Hades—turned to stone by the sight of Medusa, he would have to join the dead as one of the living in the realm of the shadows for ever. Now, if that isn’t a reason to take flight . . . !







But that's just an example of a *symbolic* death, I retorted. And by the way, it reminds me of yet another archaic tale, when Yahweh, or God, testing his love and obedience, asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac to him by cutting out his heart and roasting it over a fire. It isn't until the murder is about to take place that a voice tells Abraham to stop, and then a ram is slaughtered and sacrificed to God instead of Isaac. According to the legend anyway, which probably postdates the *Odyssey* by some time.

Unfortunately, he countered bitterly, the twist in the story shows no moral advance over Ulysses' performance in the realm of the dead. Whether human or animal, these jealous masters got the sacrifice they wanted and the blood they thirsted for. This kind of lordship, at least in moral terms, is exemplary in its infamy and hypocrisy. But what else can you expect from the authorities?—Whereupon he returned, quite abruptly, to our previous topic: The 'soul,' he said, can be envisaged as a kind of 'black box', sending signals to the outer world and thereby revealing the essence of its inward nature. Fear of death is important for the patterning of the soul, possibly giving it its original shape.

Perhaps the notion of a pattern is already a temporary final state? Prior to its formation there is just this inward mess of scattered parts—rather like iron filings being attracted by the force of a magnet and given a specific shape? And what do you suppose this magnet consists of?

He looked at me with joy in his eyes. To a writer it consists of language. Yes, indeed, language, he repeated, not a flicker of doubt in his voice, and continued with the manifest confidence of someone who feels they are on home ground.

Our outward reality is determined by events—events happy and dreadful, but mostly trivial—that are daily thrown our way by the crude materiality of existence. The reality of the text is determined by language, which itself is fundamentally dual in nature, both in function and substance. Its function is partly to aid communication, or convey information; at the same time, however, and contrasting with the languages of journalism and science, literary language is a medium of expression, the expression of a mercurial, capricious and permanently imperilled self. Literary language is an expressive art!—

He paused for a moment, proceeding rather more slowly: The substance of language, its essence, consists in its ability to connect with the inner life of human beings—with the iron filings you were talking about. In other words, this outward, broadly rooted and previously existing construct that is language enters into relations with the human linguistic faculty and forms the mind. You see, it is language that forms the human mind, and not vice versa! And I take the faculty I am talking about to be both an ability *and* innate. Language develops a latent productive capacity in humans and reveals to language-users its super-reality, which is neither a surreality nor an irreality: it is this super-reality of language that gives shape to a counter-reality in the form of the written text. The writer of the text may be initially unaware of this, but he or she should be wary of thinking of language as some kind of mirror for the self, or as a medium for saying what one means. The unutterable, that stubbornly mute part of language which, because of the limitations of the human mind, is beyond the speaker's comprehension, iterates the parameters of human terror. 'In the powerful presence of linguistic reality, most dreams dissolve.' It



was Alfred Döblin who wrote that. Thus the writer is doomed for ever to do as Ulysses in Hades; he or she is left with an age-old terror that is born of darkness and whose intensity nourishes writing. (Is this persistent repetition of past horrors the primal source of the abysmal and quasi-natural stupidity of human beings?) In any case, this is obviously the right place to cite Kafka's remark that the created (the metaphor) is often cleverer than the creator (the author). It also seems to me that the products of human creativity are often more valuable than human beings themselves.—

He broke off and considered his glass—almost empty. Cold coffee! he snorted pointedly, and pushed the chalice aside.

I wanted to go on: But what about me? What about you? About us writers—but it was no use trying to repeat the questions with which our dialogue had begun: OK, so what about you and me and us, he interrupted scornfully. Then brusquely: What are you actually saying?!— And his voice seemed to me to echo from the walls of the cafe.

Evidently, he was already regretting the brashness of his riposte. With some embarrassment, twisting the base of his all-but-empty coffee glass between the fingers of his right hand and watching the creamy gauze of the leftover foam through the glass, he cautiously ventured: At any rate, in a world of such great diversity, we humans ought always to be aware of the irrelevance of all things human. To live as a human being in full consciousness of the insignificance of human life and still not despair, and to express this state of affairs in writing—that can presumably be counted among the most improbable cases of good fortune we know—is literature.

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