Glnin · *Robert Wexelblatt*

1

IF PROFESSOR ALASDAIR DUNDEE, one of his many admirers in Glasgow, had not smuggled a bottle of genuine Laphroaig whisky for him, Robert would probably not have slept through the noisy events of the night of November 23rd. Nevertheless, having polished off more than half the bottle by five P.M., he did. The Highland hangover with which he came to at ten the following morning did not make it easy for him to endure the pounding on his apartment door that awakened him, or the shouting of his surname as an imperative.

"Glnin! Glnin!"

"Shit," Robert grunted half aloud, as if addressing the ghost of Professor Dundee. It was a sort of pounding with which he was on terms of familiarity.

"Glnin!"

"Open up, please!"

Two voices. That cinched it. Rousing himself from the leather couch into which he had sunk so many hours before, Robert grumbled a reply.

"Get lost. I don't feel up to being arrested today."

There was a muffled conversation out in the hall. One of the goons laughed—most likely, Robert conjectured, exulting at the prospect of flattening the apartment door of Robert Glnin, a door he fancied must be famous in the service.

"Glnin! We aren't here to arrest you."

"That you, Spinkin? Since when do *you* make house calls?"

This Spinkin was at once Robert's favorite and least favorite secret police officer: favorite because he was well read, sophisticated, cultured; least favorite because, in addition to the requisite sadism, Spinkin was a pedantic bore.

"Yes, it's Spinkin." He sounded, one might have thought, just as irritated as Robert had, though he immediately mastered himself and added, with a hint of actual courtesy, "It's not an arrest. In fact, just the contrary."

Robert struggled to his feet, reeled toward the door. His mouth tasted of rotten oysters and the ash of newsprint. His eyes hurt around their entire circumference. He slipped on a bit of manuscript.

"What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously. "Not that I believe you, of course. I ask only out of intellectual curiosity. But what *is* the contrary of an arrest?"

An edgy laugh from Spinkin's partner.

"Won't you *please* open up?" Spinkin pleaded. Robert even detected a note of anxiety in his old interrogator. He sensed something like an advantage; after all, his door was still on its hinges and Spinkin himself had come to call.

"I *demand* to know what you consider the contrary of an arrest, Spinkin."

"You let us in, we'll tell you," offered the second voice, almost giggling.

Now here's something really odd, thought Robert. One of his subordinates would scarcely dare to say such a thing in such a place in Spinkin's presence. Also, there was something familiar about that second voice.

"Who's that?"

"Never mind," said Spinkin, clearly exasperated. "Just open up. Come on, *move* it, Glnin."

"Now, now, Captain," the other intervened. "Remember to whom it is that you are addressing yourself."

Robert, listening as hard as his headache allowed, thought he heard Spinkin growl at this bit of fancy grammar. Robert had to agree that it was out of place.

"Spinkin," he said, "I'm waiting."

"All right, all right. What is the contrary of an arrest? Well, surely, Mr. Glnin, you will recall the famous opening sentence of Franz Kafka's occasionally banned novel *The Trial?"*

"Oh Lord!" cried Robert. "You're not going to hand me one of your Kafka lectures, are you?"

"You want an answer or not?"

"I tell you there's no time for this," whispered the other voice and, at that instant, Robert recognized it. It was Minister Ferfatkin himself, chief of the whole rotten spiderweb. This must indeed be something special. Perhaps they meant to shoot him on the spot, with a silencer; or maybe

they intended to hang him with his own belt after forcing him to write a suicide note renouncing all his works, confessing to being a spy, and who knows what besides. Robert became frightened. Best to stall, he figured.

"So what *about* the opening of *The Trial?*" he asked. "I'm curious."

"K. is suddenly found guilty on his thirtieth birthday. Thus, he is arrested. You, on the other hand, Mr. Glnin, have been suddenly found innocent," said Spinkin flatly.

"What are you talking about? And why is the Minister of the Interior out there with you?"

Confusion in the hall. Curses. Exhortations. Threats.

Ferfatkin answered. He sounded like olive oil running down a piece of silk. "Mr. Glnin, owing to the, so to speak, surprising events of last night and this morning—"

"What events?"

A pause. "You mean you don't know? You really don't? Is it possible?" And this time Ferfatkin laughed in earnest, on all cylinders. It was a laugh full of bitterness and hilarity, the way Macbeth might have laughed when Macduff told him his mother had had a Caesarian.

Spinkin went on for Ferfatkin. "Because of these events of which you are incomprehensibly ignorant, Mr. Glnin, you have been found *so* innocent that—but look, why don't you just open up? It's cold out here in the hall."

Robert, angry because they had frightened him, spoke from the heart. "What do I care if you're cold. You mules can freeze your asses off for all I care."

"Very well, Mr. Glnin," said Ferfatkin, who had evidently mastered himself. "Here's the story. The government is, so to say, in a state of crisis. Last night certain elements of the army joined the demonstrators who filled the center of the city. There was a little, well, shooting. At the moment there is, one might say, something of a standoff. Things are . . . fluid."

Robert suddenly recalled that he was indeed to have addressed a small rally outside the Cafe Magus the prior evening at seven. This was astonishing news.

"What you say is most heartening," he said. "But what do you want with me?"

"Damn it, Glnin," shouted Spinkin, losing all patience. "You've been elected president!"

"Just for the time being, of course," Ferfatkin added in a tone at once ominous and jovial.

"Huh?" Robert gasped as the nausea hit.

At that moment the telephone rang. It had not worked for three weeks, and Robert stared at it as he might at a resurrected corpse. He let it ring three times before picking it up.

"Hello?" he said unsteadily.

It was Pleyl, the poet and pamphleteer. He and Robert had been chums since way back in grammar school. What ideas hadn't they picked over in all those years? What books hadn't they dissected? And how much beer they had put away! Pleyl was also the organizer of the Magus rally which, apart from the shooting and Robert's failure to show up, had evidently succeeded pretty well.

"Robert! Thank heavens you're there! I thought for sure they'd come for you last night. I called, of course, but the line was still dead. Frankly, I assumed you were too." Pleyl was shouting over a noise like fighting children.

"Only dead drunk," Robert remarked with his habitual honesty. "Sorry."

"What a night, Robert!" Pleyl began at once to rhapsodize. He couldn't get it all out fast enough; it was the same as when he had told Robert about his first visit to a whorehouse. "Krillip was wounded—not too seriously, flesh wound in the thigh. The streets filled completely up. Lazlo, who stood in for you, was simply magnificent. He climbed up on the statue of Prince Frunzi and shouted at the riot police, *d'après* Mirabeau, 'You may tell your Master that we will not leave this square except at the point of the bayonet!' It was electrifying, Robert. Someone in the crowd yelled, 'That's right! And not even then!' After that all hell broke loose. I've got a million things to tell you."

"Glnin!"

"Mr. Glnin?"

"There are some people at the door," Robert explained to Pleyl.

"Who?" Pleyl asked nervously. "It's not the police, is it?"

"Well, yes, it is."

"My God, Robert! Don't let them in on any account. Barricade yourself. I can have some people over there in ten minutes."

"Well," said Robert, "you see they've just told me that I've been made President."

"What?"

"Of the Republic, I think." Here Robert, understandably uncertain, called to the door. "President of the Republic, is it?"

"Yes," admitted Ferfatkin.

"Yes!" protested Spinkin.

"President of the Republic, Pleyl. By any chance do you know something about this?"

Pleyl, evidently dumbfounded, was silent for a moment.

"We'd heard rumors," he admitted. "But nobody credited them."

"Well, then, perhaps it's true?"

"Oh, Robert—"

Robert sighed, rubbed his forehead. "God, what a hangover I've got."

"Look," said Pleyl, suddenly as decisive as a boy playing soldiers, "don't move. Don't open that door. I'm coming myself."

"All right. I'll stay put. I'll only move at the point of a bayonet."

"Good," said Pleyl and, before hanging up, told Robert that he was with his Committee at the State television studio. "If your set's working, tune in," he suggested.

"Please, Mr. Glnin," begged the Minister of the Interior. "I have my orders. I'm to bring you to the Parliament building, you see, and right away. People are waiting for you right now. The nation is calling. And I'm not a well man, Mr. Glnin. I'm in the middle of an attack of shingles. I should be home soaking in the tub."

Robert went to the door. "You can stay in the hall, if you like, but be careful not to scratch; it only makes it worse, you know," he said in a friendly whisper. "As for me, I'm going to watch television."

As Ferfatkin whined and Spinkin blustered behind the door they did not dare to smash, Robert switched on the set and put on the kettle. He was annoyed that he had no coffee and would have to make do with some of the Iranian tea Cybele had left behind.

At length a picture materialized, as if reluctantly. It was blurred so that Robert had to concentrate to an unpleasant degree.

He saw a long table without a cloth; it looked rather like his mother's endlessly polished pre-war dining room table. A young man sat on its further side and appeared to be speaking directly to the table, like an abashed child refusing to eat his peas. You could see his nose and the top of his head which, Robert couldn't help but reflect, was as thick with black hair as his own had been ten years before. Behind the young man stood two soldiers, at least as young. They wore full battle gear and held submachine guns. Farm boys, Robert judged, no more than halfway through their hitch. He could see that they were jumpy as hell; they kept looking left and right like bodyguards in a hostile crowd. And perhaps they were also excited about being on television, curious about the equipment. As the boy read his overwrought statement other people walked in from left and right. Sometimes they went straight across, at others they met on screen and exchanged papers or hurried whispers. Robert thought he recognized some of them but it was so much like looking through a February blizzard that he couldn't be certain. He tried to focus on what the boy was saying.

". . . found in voluntary associations are, we believe, those on which we shall build a future for our nation, or rather on which the nation may rediscover itself; for the nation is neither more nor less than the sum of all the individuals, high and low, who make it up at any historical moment, including, of course, these individuals' myriad links to the past—to ancestry, to history—from the ancient tribes, the dark ages, through the crucible of the Reformation and the riches of the Renaissance, right up to the terrible wars of our own century, and this latest dark age of inward slavery and wholesale alienation. The compulsion those of my generation have been under all our lives to form an inhuman community void of authentic human communion, the command to belong on penalty of persecution, to assent to every banal lie, every deceit, every false slogan and mindless directive, to sing on cue both figuratively and literally . . ."

The kettle began to boil, to sing both figuratively and literally.

"I'm about to have some tea now," Robert said to the door on his way to the kettle.

Ferfatkin tried a new tack. "So, Mr. Glnin, we may take it that your refusal to come to the Parliament building—indeed, to open this door—means that you decline election as President of the Republic? Is that not so?"

Robert poured the water into the teapot as he replied. "That is far from

a simple deduction, Your Excellency. First of all, I haven't said yes and I haven't said no. Second of all, you've presented no proof of this putative election which, you must admit, appears improbable. You might be lying. After all, you're a government minister. Third, I'm puzzled by your confident use of the key word *election.* It's true that I slept soundly last night, but I don't recall any balloting either yesterday or the day before. In fact, I can't remember being nominated, speaking through a megaphone; I can't recall interviews by the foreign press, meeting with campaign workers, debating my opponents. Shall I go on?"

Spinkin, furious as ever, answered. "No doubt you *can* go on and on, Glnin. I've heard you do it often enough. You're no joy to interrogate, I can tell you, between your Oscar Wilde whimsy and your Aristotelian logic. But as it happens, this is a simple matter. You were elected by Parliament after your predecessor resigned and, to be candid, left town. If you don't want the job, say so. We're busy men."

"I appreciate that, but at the moment I prefer to drink my tea."

The phone rang again.

Annoyed, Robert answered with as much friendliness as the receptionist at the Writers' Union. "Glnin."

"Mr. Glnin?"

"You expected someone else?"

"Mr. Glnin, this is Cornelius Wertheim, Speaker of the House of Deputies. I'm calling from my office here in the Parliament building. Has the Minister of the Interior stopped by your place, by any chance?"

"He and his shingles are out in the hall right now."

"I see. And has he perhaps let drop something about an election?"

"Yes, something along those lines did come up."

"Well, Mr. Glnin, speaking for my colleagues as well as myself, I should like most earnestly to encourage you to accept the post. We are quite sincere. The vote was virtually unanimous."

There was a noise which might well have been a semi-distant explosion.

"So, I'm supposed to save your hides, eh?" said Robert.

There was a brief pause and a sound, as of Wertheim rising from under a large piece of furniture.

"Mr. Glnin, the situation is serious."

"Well, I'll certainly give it due consideration, Mr. Speaker."

"But—"

"Sorry. Frightfully busy at the moment. Goodbye, Mr. Speaker."

Robert had just poured out a cup of tea and was sniffing at it when Pleyl and his friends arrived, making a great racket out in the hall. It occurred to Robert that people naturally tend to carry the mood and even the noise level of one situation into the next. Just as schoolchildren after a recess will continue shouting in the classroom, so, after the excitement of the television studio and the streets, Pleyl ran heavily up the stairs and spoke at the top of his lungs, as if to make himself heard over a bombardment.

"Robert! We're here!"

There was scuffling to be heard, like that of incompetent dancers.

"That's nice, Pleyl. But please don't yell so loudly. Mrs. Sturmzi is only hard-of-hearing, not deaf."

"Sorry. Look, we've taken these two into custody. You're quite safe now."

"They've got us at gunpoint, Mr. Glnin," Ferfatkin protested in a rather high-pitched version of his voice.

"Pleyl, in case you haven't met, allow me to introduce Minister of the Interior Ferfatkin and his colleague Captain Spinkin of the Spiderweb."

"Robert," said Pleyl, "open up. You've got to come to the station right away."

"No," Ferfatkin objected, "you're wanted far more urgently at the Parliament building!"

"I think," said Robert aloud, but very much to himself, "it really is about time I woke up."

2

But, as we all know, Glnin was not dreaming, at least not in the oneiric sense. More likely, I am.

The 102nd aphorism of Klaren Verheim: "What a wonder is Art! When we become too placid, it braces our sleepiness with the tonic of chaos; when too disoriented, it alone can slake our thirst for order." Well, if so, bully for capital Art.

In his early essay "Art, Truth, and Corrosion" Robert Glnin himself wrote: "Two kinds of art, that of flesh and that of bone. That is to say,

there is an art of surfaces and one of essences, actuality and reality, happenings and their clean structures. I confess to a preference for the skeletal sort because of my beliefs about the nature of truth, or, more accurately, what I would like to believe about the shape and feel of truth—that it is hard, articulated, angular, formal, unmitigated, unforgiving." The many citations of this passage end here, of course, as does Glnin's essay. In the holograph, however, Glnin added something: "But do I believe in my beliefs? That is quite another question."

I keep finding things like that. At first it was exhilarating, I admit, but now they are merely annoying. My fellowship proposal did not anticipate such perplexities. Bad enough that Glnin forces one to hop back and forth across the frontier between history and literature without all this unlooked-for skepticism, this fogginess of his corrosive truth-telling. A hero? An *homme moyen sensuel?* Father of fictions? Author of his country?

The word history derives from the Greek for inquiry, Professor Samartini was excessively fond of reminding us graduate students. But what *is* an inquiry exactly? I mean, once you discover some facts, how should you arrange them? And what of the facts you may not have discovered? Besides, into *what* do you inquire? Where do you stop? Is it necessarily less important to know how often a man brushed his teeth than his view of Hobbes or Marx? Moreover, only an inhuman inquiry would avoid all speculation. Is speculation history too? an inquiry? Can you see anything on earth without looking through our humid atmosphere? Are the structures of happenings ever completely naked?

There is no statue of Glnin in this city. He forbade it in his will. And yet you feel him everywhere, or at least the official story of Glnin. But there is a false note for me in the story which is owing to the national compulsion to make a myth out of it. Historians are of two minds about myths, as Glnin was about art. On the one hand, since they originally preceded history, myths are the strawmen of inquiry, that which the inquiry is to explode; on the other, myths are just as often the consequences of what historians themselves write. One has to approach myth cautiously, like a box which might contain either a bomb or a birthday present.

What have I invented? Practically nothing. For example, I found a telegram to Glnin from Alasdair Dundee announcing his arrival on November 23rd. The thin paper still bears the tan circular stain of a wet glass bottom.

The prolix memoirs of Sergius Spinkin can be cited, *mutatis mutandis,* for the prolonged standoff outside Glnin's door on the morning of November 24th—he even compares it to the opening scene of Kafka's *Metamorphosis.* The break with the actress Cybele Chatuchat, also her fondness for Iranian tea, Paul Krillip's minor flesh wound, Lazlo Povric's public appropriation of Mirabeau, even Mrs. Sturmzi's partial hearing loss—all can be substantiated from the record, now that Glnin's private papers have been made available to scholars like me.

The discrepancies are really not factual, but personal. It is Glnin himself and not what happened to Glnin or what he did and said that puzzles me. Perhaps this is just a loss of confidence on my part; I mean a corrosion of faith in my discipline as the surest pathway to the truth. *Note Bene:* I know full well that the Objectivity of Truth is a kind of giant buffoon slain by hordes of earnestly bespectacled pygmies armed with quiversful of good, sharp arguments a century or more ago. Nevertheless, I feel a fondness for this dead giant, this punctured phantom, just as if he had once existed. The loss of belief in objective truth is a crisis faced by all young educated people, I think. In fact, it is an indispensable portion of their educations. Most simply give up on it, which is at least logically consistent, even if they persist in arguing as if it were knowable. As for me, though, I see objective truth as the unattainable after which one ought ceaselessly to strive, all the while being mindful that it is unattainable. It is this that makes my profession both tragic and comic—which is to say, fully human. Like Glnin.

"Among crows," says Verheim's 80th aphorism, "scavenging is the most respectable profession."

3

Insofar as it is possible for a woman with a serious head cold to blow her reddened nose in a sexy fashion, Cybele Chatuchat did so. Benedikt admired the short, almost refined noise she made, the tiny contractions of her bare toes, the gentle swell in the convexity of her abdomen, the slight roll to her hips, the way her long dusky hair fell forward from her shoulders and over her cheeks as though it had been carefully trained to do so. Benedikt loved to watch Cybele at such moments, adored her most when

she performed the homeliest of tasks: brushing her teeth, combing her hair, bathing, dressing, undressing, sneezing. Like a falcon he had a keen eye for any natural movement, and with Cybele such gestures were rare.

"Don't *look* at me," she said with a frown and a laugh. "I'm *frightful.*"

Benedikt did not reply. He merely sat on her upholstered easy chair with his legs crossed at the knee and looked at Cybele on her outsized bed with its ten different-colored pillows.

When he arrived on the morning of November 24th the first thing he had done was to turn up the electric heat because of her cold and because he did not want her to put on too many clothes. Cybele was cheap about certain things.

"There's a revolution going on," Cybele had exclaimed at the door, her eyes shining, "and I've got a cold."

Benedikt, smiling as he saw to the heat, gave a mock-gallant answer. "The latter news is more weighty than the former," he said, and took off his brown fedora, grey overcoat, and yellow muffler.

"Where are you coming from?" asked Cybele, only brushing his freshly shaved cheek with her own. "The hospital?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I was there all night."

"Oh! Are there many casualties?"

"Many is a relative term. I'd say more than the government will admit, fewer than the opposition will claim."

A specialist in the disorders of the skin, Benedikt practiced medicine with a degree of detachment that most of his patients felt as both unnerving and reassuring. Had they come to him with complaints about more vital or intimate organs, they would probably have found Benedikt's detachment repellent; but, as it was only their skins, his impersonal, clinical manner, his looking at their surfaces, so to speak, and never below, gave his patients confidence in him. He knew all about their pustules and rashes; only some of the women wished him to know about their lives and, excepting Cybele and three or four of her predecessors, Benedikt rejected these intimacies brusquely.

At the hospital on the night of November 23rd and 24th, he had been of real help to those bothered by tear gas and abrasions, and he had even worked for a while on a gunshot wound. At nine in the morning, when things had become quiet, he had walked home through the littered, dan-

gerous streets, taken a shower, shaved, changed into a fresh suit, and come right to Cybele's.

"I'll make us some coffee," he said. Benedikt was dying for a cup of coffee.

"What do you think is going to happen, Benedikt?" Cybele asked anxiously.

He observed how her wet eyes implored, invited, complained all at once. She wore the white silk nightgown he had given her. It suited her well, even with a cold, he noted with satisfaction.

He shrugged.

"I've had the television on all morning. Students are giving unintelligible speeches, professors are making wild claims, colonels give assurances but look worried, union leaders make contradictory remarks. A man I know, Hrska, even claimed the President's fled the country."

"Anything's possible," Benedikt remarked indifferently and got to his feet with a weary sigh. "Where's the coffee?"

"I think in the refrigerator. Good stuff. Tula gave it to me. And there should be bread and preserves. Aunt Bemoise sent the preserves to me last week. Benedikt?"

He was already in the little kitchen, intent on the coffee—he was charmed by the rapidity of her imported coffee-maker—and didn't hear her. She took advantage of the moment to enjoy a really good blow.

"Benedikt?" she called again, using her diaphragm to project as she did on stage.

"What is it?"

"Don't you really care?"

"What about?"

"Revolution, politics, the fate of the nation?"

"No."

Cybele frowned and turned back to the television, which she had neglected to turn off, thus saving electricity.

"Oh!" she cried.

It was Robert, looking perfectly awful. He must have been in the thick of it all night, she supposed.

"These preserves are really excellent!" Benedikt called to her. "Brava, Aunt Bemoise!"

Robert was speaking in his customary manner, without any formality and with that unpleasant expression of his that challenged you to find fault with what he was saying. He looked straight at the camera, at Cybele. She caught a characteristic phrase: ". . . politicians who tell you that they, rather than you, are responsible for your happiness and that you are, thus, by definition, happy . . ."

She had not seen Robert for over two months. Before that, they had been together barely two weeks after he came out of detention. How horrible he had been then, cold and gloomy as a long November rain, sleeping half the time and grouchy the rest. It was, in fact, Robert's behavior, she believed, that had produced that attack of nervous eczema. Before she could concentrate on what he was saying, Benedikt was back, balancing a plate and two cups. He too looked at the set.

"Ah, your old boyfriend," he said. Cybele hid nothing from Benedikt, neither her skin nor her past. "Here, drink this. I made it good and strong."

"Shh, I want to hear," she said.

Robert was talking about truth-telling, his favorite subject, his *idée fixe.*

". . . to start with not a political question; for me, it is an artistic question. However, in a country where one is repeatedly arrested, boringly interrogated, ludicrously tried, and nastily imprisoned for telling even imaginary truths, art becomes political, so to speak, against its will. On the other hand, the peculiar prestige with the general population of our dissident film-makers, poets, dramatists, painters, and novelists—along with that of our nonconforming physicists, biologists, and mathematicians—derives from their own *non*political relationship to the truth. To me, it is a great irony that the politicization of the nonpolitical should be the final consequence of all this idiotic repression. And it would be a self-defeating irony too if the political goal of the dissident community were not what I hope it is: namely, to de-politicize speech-acts, at least to the degree of allowing people to think, feel, and say whatever they wish or must.

"But all this is rather parochial. Less so is my belief that liberty is a necessary, though by no means sufficient, condition of wealth. Wealth interests virtually everybody, even dissident artists and scientists. Now there are people, perhaps many people, who want to be free only so that

they can be rich. If someone should convince them that they could be rich in another way, they'd give up their freedom quickly enough. Only then they'd end up both poor and enslaved. Free people work harder than slaves—and to far better effect . . ."

"This is boring," Benedikt complained. "And do stop rubbing your nose like that, Cybele. It's already raw."

"It's funny seeing Robert on television. It makes him look less skinny. Don't you think he's making sense?"

"Whenever I hear words like Freedom and Truth I begin to yawn. Can't help it; it's a reflex. Currency that's passed through too many hands and gotten thin and soiled."

"Robert's not really political, you know. It's as he said. He tried to keep out of it and couldn't. Still, after his second prison term he began to think about it more. In fact, I've just remembered something rather funny. An idea of his that we had a laugh over."

Benedikt put down his cup, moved to the edge of Cybele's bed, and began to rub her back through the cool white silk.

"What's that?" he asked.

"It was in January, I think, or February. Winter in any case. We'd gone up to Tastaya, to my place in the mountains. He'd only been out two or three days and wanted to get as far away from the city as possible. He said he couldn't stand to see cops on the corner or people cringing in front of traffic lights or to breathe the foul air. There was a tremendous snowstorm which made him happy. He sat by the window all afternoon just watching it come down and reciting poems about snow. The more the snow buried everything the jollier he got."

"This was before the eczema, I take it?"

"Oh *years* before. When we first—"

"Yes?"

"Well, Robert said he had this idea for an absurdist novel. Seeing him giving this speech reminded me of it. The novel was to be about a novelist—"

"So many of them are," sighed Benedikt.

"Yes, that's so. But this one was to be different. This novelist—a dissident, like Robert, and, like him, essentially nonpolitical—is suddenly made president of the country. Let's see. I remember he kept laughing the

whole time he was telling me about it. Just a little lower, Benedikt. Yes, there. Let's see. The joke was that he's incompetent, of course. But he had this great reputation with everybody. Just as Robert does now."

"For what? Integrity?"

"Yes, I suppose. And that was the serious part, I mean why people *wanted* him to be president. He said that in a country where truth is outlawed, only outlaws tell the truth."

"As they see it," Benedikt remarked.

"Well, anyway, once he becomes president anybody can tell the truth, and everybody thinks they know what it is."

Benedikt cupped Cybele's round breasts. *"My* truths," he whispered in her ear.

4

Cybele's anecdote about Glnin's fanciful, but astoundingly prophetic idea for a novel—to be precise, an *absurdist* novel—is not itself fanciful. There is a half-page about it in his notebook from that period:

> A rakish fellow (perhaps an academic, seducer of students, maybe an artist, a writer) is unexpectedly made mayor (president?). There's been some sort of revolution. He has missed it (cf. the man who slept through the earthquake that destroyed his town). A dissident who suddenly finds himself with real power. He takes all bribes (none?). Is he any use? Clever, incompetent? Perhaps retrospective. Young enough for appetite, old enough for wisdom. K.'s story of the bad student who, on the day prizes are awarded, mishears and thinks that his name is being called.

I found this two days ago, or rather it was pointed out to me by a sixty-ish man who is also working on the Glnin collection. I have seen him every day, clucking over the papers. I didn't like his looks, though ordinarily I am well disposed to the type of the elderly scholar, instinctively respectful, shabby old-fashioned suits and all. But he had the air of a fanatic ideologue about him—shining eyes, derisive mouth—and, in a

sense, this impression is accurate. Also, he was unpleasantly insinuating, nodding at me in the reading room like an old homosexual. I might have guessed he is currently "between appointments." His name is Johannes Pilkrohmer and he has an *idée fixe* far narrower, far less noble than the one Cybele Chatuchat ascribed to Robert Glnin.

He accosted me at the door of the reading room as I was leaving for lunch. He put his hand on the door, virtually blocking my way.

"Obviously we are both interested in Glnin," he whispered with a smile more contemptuous than ingratiating, an expression which seemed to imply his superiority to the interest he was claiming we shared.

"Mrs. Gulwich informs me you are American?" He stated this as a question, as though the stern and punctilious librarian Mrs. Gulwich were not to be trusted in such matters.

"Yes," I said. "I'm here on a fellowship."

He looked envious. "Ah," he said. "Perhaps we could have lunch together? Discuss what we have found in this treasure-trove? Compare notes?"

I would have liked to avoid lunch with Pilkrohmer but could see no way out. As soon as I acceded, he insisted on a vegetarian restaurant which turned out to be five blocks away. Of course I paid. I had a fellowship.

Pilkrohmer's obsession led him to Glnin and not vice-versa. Fundamentally, I find his fixed idea silly and passé, though he presented it tricked out in highfalutin jargon, dropping names like rose petals.

"You see," he said across a spinach salad, "the whole world is a text or, more exactly, all that we humans do in and to the world. Nature is a constant; she is the sheet of paper on which we construct our lives, which, like all classical fictions, have a beginning, middle, and end. And, of course, these fictions can collide, collide all the time, in fact. But by virtue of this form alone—I mean this Aristotelian structure—the difference between a literary character and an historical personage is essentially moot. George Washington or Julien Sorel, Alexander of Macedon or Don Quixote de la Mancha—who, for that matter, is *also* an old Spanish gentleman by the name of Quijana."

"But with respect," I objected, familiar with this line of thinking from my sophomore year, "this is mere solipsism and game-playing, Mr. Pilkrohmer. If you're going to suggest that Robert Glnin is in some sense a *literary* character—"

Pilkrohmer began chuckling, looking at me as one might at a trained poodle standing up straight as a bank teller.

"No, no," he said with oily deprecation. "Nothing so simple. However, you must grant that a good deal of the allure of Glnin lies in his being the only example we have of a novelist catapulted overnight into the position of a head of state. Moreover, I do not think you can so easily distinguish between Glnin and one of his characters as you seem to suppose. Really, it *is* no easy matter—even for a brilliant young American with a generous fellowship."

It was at this moment that the check arrived.

"No," said Pilkrohmer once I had picked it up, "Glnin was in a metaphysically complicated position as, indeed, are we all. Here he was, really and truly President of the Republic, but did he cease for a moment to be an artist of the imagination? And is the world not, in some sense, really a text? Do we understand it any differently, with distinct tools? But come, let's go back. There's something I want very much to show you. It's in one of the notebooks I have been examining."

And that is how I came to see the passage I cited earlier.

"If you look closely enough," says Verheim's 44th aphorism, "all deception is self-deception."

5

The excellent, utterly irreplaceable brains of Roman Propp and Carolus Peyser, both bearded third-year engineering students and the best of friends, mingled on the cobblestones under the equestrian statue of Prince Frunzi. The six drunken steelworkers who had clubbed them to death swaggered and staggered off in the direction of the Cafe Magus, the windows of which were already smashed, the slowest of its patrons streaming out the back way.

Karel wiped his mouth and asked his pal Viktor if he were certain that slaughtering intellectuals was really necessary. "They're only boys under those beards," he pointed out. "Poor bastards."

"It's a hard business, Karel, and no doubt about it, even if the eggheads've got it coming, which they do. That's why I'm drunk. Maybe you didn't drink enough? See there? You ought to grab a bottle or two

out of that place," Viktor said, moving his burly shoulder forward in the direction of the Magus.

Across the square a few other steelworkers were still chasing people, but most just stood around under the sharp but pale November sun smoking and talking to one another. At the far end, near the National Museum, lay an overturned limousine and a burning tram. There were no police to be seen. Shouts and the sound of shattering glass came intermittently from the narrow streets that led off the square. Only a few of the injured lay about. Most had been dragged away.

An hour before these wolves had descended on the fold of Frunzi Square, Robert Glnin, dressed in his usual worsted trousers and outsized sweater, was signing a whole stack of executive orders in the ornate Office of the President, into which he had moved a cot. As he did so, he was also thinking of the interview he had scheduled that morning with Amanda Hare-Stephenson, the well-known English journalist and critic.

While he had never met Amanda, they had exchanged letters on two occasions. The first time was eight years earlier, when *The Last Two Positions of Gronsky,* smuggled out of the country by Professor Alasdair Dundee, had appeared in English translation. She had written him a fan letter and enclosed a draft of the splendid review that later appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement.* Robert had written back to thank her, saying, truthfully, that her own work was hardly unknown even in his country. Four years later, when he was in prison, it was Amanda Hare-Stephenson who had helped to organize the international protests that got him out—who knows?—a little sooner rather than later. After his release they had written back and forth more seriously, more politically; and, with his permission, Amanda had used passages from his letters in a long article about him for an American newsweekly. So, he owed her. Moreover, since he had seen her photograph, duty and inclination coincided in his decision to grant her his first foreign interview as President.

At ten o'clock Pleyl walked in. Robert, fond of living by a few metaphors, kept his office door open at all times.

"She's here," Pleyl said. "The Englishwoman."

"Good."

"You finished?"

"Not quite. I've put some aside anyway."

"What for?"

"Reconsideration."

"You want to reconsider something?"

"I *always* want to, don't you?"

"Robert, you're not revising a novel, you know. The syntax and diction needn't be altogether deathless. Decisiveness is—"

"Look, Pleyl, I went without sleep last night; the night before, the celebration went until three. Don't you think I might be allowed to go without a lecture this morning?"

Pleyl clicked the heels of his tennis shoes and gave a mock Prussian bow. "My apologies, Your Excellency."

"Cut the horseshit," said Robert brusquely. "The farce comes a little later, I hope."

"All right. So what is it you want to reconsider? I'll have to tell the others."

"Certain personnel matters."

"Oh?"

"Dismissals and arrests."

"The iron's only hot for a short while, Robert."

Glnin didn't answer. He didn't need to.

"All right," said Pleyl, "but I'm glad *I* don't have to interview you this morning." On his way out he added, "You've got exactly one half hour."

In the black and white photograph Glnin had seen of her—it was on the back of one of her collections—Amanda Hare-Stephenson was standing against a white background in a jet black dress with a long, full skirt, little epaulettes and a double row of buttons down the bodice, tightly belted at the waist. She wore her hair stylishly up and was looking straight into the camera as if she meant to yank the photographer right through the lens. When she came into Glnin's office she looked even better and much less intimidating. The first thing he noticed was that her hair was down and the thought flashed through his mind that her middle name was apt. He rose to greet her.

"Mr. President," she said and held out her hand. She spoke it formally, but smiled like an old, old friend.

"Amanda," Glnin said and enfolded her hand in both of his. "You'd better call me Robert. *Dear* Robert is how you began your last letter."

"Oh," she said, "before I forget. I've brought something for you." She was fumbling in her large shoulder bag.

"Your trip?" he asked.

"Uneventful. Here it is."

Amanda handed him a check for ten thousand pounds.

"What?"

"It's not a bribe," she laughed. "Don't look so horrified."

"Then?"

"Look closely. It's signed by your English publisher. They *owe* it to you, Robert."

"I see."

"There'll be more later."

Flabbergasted by the check and fuddled by her perfume, he offered Amanda a seat.

She doffed her overcoat. She was wearing a denim skirt, high brown boots, and a black turtleneck. He tried to think of adjectives to describe her hair.

"Well," she said, settling in. "Congratulations. I can't tell you how thrilled everybody is, how amazed."

"No more than yours truly."

"I guess we'd better get right at it, eh? I counted three ambassadors out there. At least there were three guys in three-piece suits."

Robert passed his hand down his sweater. "So far the new government's going casual," he said. "You see, you're just right, too."

She looked down. "Oh, my travelling outfit?"

"Among other things. Notice please that I am already flirting."

"Yes."

"Mind?"

"Not at all."

"Don't be so nonchalant. I'm sincerely flirting. Why, is it better for the interview if the subject flirts?"

"Oh, absolutely," she said, pulling out her little tape recorder, pad, and pen.

"Smashing. Then I'll go on doing so. All right, first query?"

"There's a rumor that your government intends to dissolve the armed forces. True?"

Robert picked up the recorder and spoke directly into it. "Sugar dissolves in water. Ice dissolves in summer. What's the solvent for an armored division? Next."

"You'd rather not answer that one, I take it?"

"Not just at the moment, Amanda."

"Then you're not ruling it out?"

"Did I mention that I like your hair down like that?"

"So does my husband."

"Oops."

"What about subsidies to inefficient industries?"

"You know the story about the shepherd whose dog went lame?"

"No."

"The dog, being lame, couldn't keep up with the sheep. The shepherd happens to like his dog, so he hobbles all his sheep. That way the dog can keep up with them. Next?"

"Okay," she said slowly and with a fetchingly uncertain frown. "Elections?"

"In favor of them."

"When?"

"It'll take six months at least—and then, with any luck at all, I can be an ex-President. We're working on a new constitution already. Parties are popping up like fairy rings all over the place. In a couple weeks or so I expect we'll be inundated with media consultants telling us all the most effective methods of fibbing."

"So you're not an idealist about democracy?"

"Idealism is anti-democratic, Amanda—or don't you have to read Plato at Oxbridge? Anyway, Pleyl told me you were divorced."

"He's misinformed. Separated."

"More like a shoulder, or more like a yolk and a white?"

"More like a fool and his money, actually."

It was at this moment that the noise from Frunzi Square reached the Office of the President.

"Another celebration?" Amanda suggested.

Before Robert could reply, Pleyl and Markovitz rushed in, both shouting.

"A riot's broken out!"

"Workers from Provice, the steel plant."

"They're clubbing everybody in sight."

"My God! What about the police?"

"Don't know," said Pleyl.

"I'll get on the phone," said Markovitz, already on his way.

Amanda, her blue eyes bright with Anglo-Saxon excitement, asked if she might stay.

"Better than going outside," said Robert, then turned to Pleyl. "Find Captain Spinkin. I want him here two minutes ago."

"But—"

"No questions, Pleyl." He pointed at the stack of unsigned orders. "You'll find him in his office, I'll bet. And tell him—or else. Got it?"

Pleyl nodded and shot out of the room. Glnin started rifling through the pile of papers, tossing the ones he didn't want over his shoulder.

Amanda carefully placed her tape recorder on the corner of the desk and began to write.

Having found what he was looking for, Glnin got up and went to the elongated window behind his desk. He made a short, low noise.

Amanda looked up brightly from her notes. "Pardon me?"

"They're brutally murdering people out there, you see, and it's not really their fault. They've been lied to, of course, and then they are all too ready to hate intellectuals. It's obvious they feel threatened."

"*You're* an intellectual," said Amanda leadingly.

"I'm a writer, not an intellectual."

"Isn't that a distinction without a difference?"

"Not to me. I've always wanted to make books exactly the way those brutes make steel: mine the ore, purify it, smelt it, temper it, and then pound it into grand structures that weigh hundreds of tons but look weightless. I would have liked people to say of what I write, 'It's nothing for him to write,' but at the same time to know that it's back-breaking, soul-consuming—"

"Mr. President, you're having your first crisis—possibly your last—and here you are talking about writing."

Robert turned and smiled wearily at Amanda. "No. Merely flirting."

Amanda actually blushed, her cheeks turning just the color of an English primrose, at which point Pleyl arrived with Spinkin, the latter looking maliciously gleeful.

"This liberal bully's always threatening me with something," he said. "Ah, how do you do, Mademoiselle," he added, noticing Amanda.

Glnin resumed his seat behind the massive mahogany desk, beetled his brows, and picked up one of the two papers lying before him. When he spoke his voice was hard as Provice steel.

"I'm going through this once, Captain, so listen closely, keep your mouth shut, and then do exactly as I tell you or I swear I'll sign this order for your arrest and will be the star witness at your trial, which I guarantee to be a quick one. Now, I want you to get me Ferfatkin and right away—I mean *right* away, within the hour. No arguments. I'm satisfied you know where he is. This government—*your* government, by the way—is going to survive this crisis, so don't for a moment bank on any other outcome. What happens to you will depend entirely on your behavior today. You understand me?"

Spinkin looked at Glnin fiercely, but with a kind of respect. "You surprise me," he said.

"No need to click your heels," Pleyl chimed in. "Just get them moving."

"One other thing," Glnin added.

"Yes?"

"Bring me a submachine gun when you get back with Ferfatkin. Loaded. One extra clip."

"What?" said Spinkin with exaggerated alarm. "But Mr. President, what about Gandhi and King and Thoreau?"

"Move it, Captain," Glnin said between clenched teeth.

And Spinkin did.

After he left, Glnin turned to Amanda and asked, "Do you know what Gandhi said about Hitler's persecution of the Jews?"

"No," she admitted.

"Gandhi recommended that the Jews commit mass suicide and thereby arouse the world's conscience."

"Robert," asked Pleyl in a rather subdued voice, "do you know how to use a submachine gun?"

"Really, Pleyl. My old drill sergeant made absolutely sure of it. Didn't yours?"

"But what are you really going to do?"

"At the moment, smoke one of my predecessor's first-class cigars. In addition, I'd like you to scare me up one of those trucks with loudspeakers we used to detest."

Markovitz dashed in, very upset indeed. "I've been screaming at the Commissioner of Police. It took me ten minutes just to get him to the phone, if you can believe it. He says his men are too *scared* to do anything!"

"He's lying," said Robert evenly, lighting up his cigar. "Please call him back and tell him the President *knows* he is lying and then hang up."

Markovitz left.

"Robert," said Amanda. "What *are* you going to do? Those workers could storm this building at any minute."

"Oh, they won't do that."

"Why not?"

"Not part of the plan. What nice earrings, Amanda. I just noticed when you turned your head like that."

"You're incorrigible, but thank you."

After a few moments of silence, Amanda asked Glnin if he would like to answer more questions.

"I'll answer one, and you needn't even ask it. While it's true I've only been in this ridiculously honorable position a few days, so far the chief difference I find between writing novels and being president is the number and variety of people who interrupt you. Otherwise, the similarities are remarkable. For example, both jobs call for a virtually infantile will to rearrange reality alongside an adult reverence for things as they are. Most governments, I suspect, begin with a lot of both, as do good novelists, with plenty of sharp pencils and fresh images. But the longer they're in power the less of both they retain. After a while, they become like aging writers who fall into sclerotic self-parody or those who find so-called new inspiration by succumbing to vulgar fantasy. Bad art and bad government, I suspect, bear the same relation to reality, which is the desire to evade it. Anyway, I was made president by a parliament which despises and fears me, that agrees with me about nothing—at least in private—and they did it under duress, simply to save their necks. I agreed because, strange to say, I actually *wanted* to save their necks. I'm acutely aware of what Socrates and Lord Acton had to say about this sort of situation; in fact, I find

the phrase 'power corrupts' the only purely self-evident lesson of history. Easier to be one of the unacknowledged legislators of the world than to give a speech on the sewer system. And I know that I'm here to be compromised, that I'm being set up to disillusion and disappoint and can hardly fail to do so. Nevertheless, Amanda, nevertheless. . ."

"Nevertheless what?"

Glnin, who had begun pacing during his long speech, leaned back against the desk, rubbed his eyes, and looked hard at Amanda.

"Tell me," he said, *"is* power an aphrodisiac or not?"

While he was interviewing Amanda on this and related topics, Spinkin, carrying a gun, arrived with Ferfatkin, who looked both put out and frightened. Robert looked at him ferociously.

"And so," said Spinkin quite gaily at the door, "the whirligig of time brings in its revenges. In the present instance, Captain Spinkin brings in ex-Minister Ferfatkin as ordered, Sir." He gave a salute, put the gun on the desk, took an extra clip from his pocket, laid it down too, chuckled, and walked out.

"Ferfatkin," said Robert after resuming his official chair, "as you know, I'm a novelist. Consequently, I can see a plot when one pops up and bites me on the nose. Now, I have here an order for your immediate arrest, a pen, and a telephone. You can use the latter to call off your thugs and provocateurs, or I can use the former two. You already see that you can't trust even Spinkin, and he's an old hand capable of quoting Shakespeare. You've got one minute. And, by the way, allow me to introduce Amanda Hare-Stephenson of the United Kingdom."

Ferfatkin, still obviously stunned by Spinkin's betrayal, stared dumbly at the loaded machine gun. Robert picked it up and placed it out of sight on his side of the desk.

"Thirty seconds," he said.

"We only told them the truth," Ferfatkin said suddenly and defiantly.

"Oh?"

"That in two months you'd close the plant and they'd all be on the street."

"Fifteen seconds."

Ferfatkin made a cynical, hostile sort of sound, then went to the phone and began dialing. "This won't accomplish a damned thing, you know."

"This won't accomplish a damned thing, you know, *Mr. President!*" Robert thundered and pounded the desk with his fist, startling both Amanda and Ferfatkin. The tape recorder fell to the carpet.

Ten minutes later, as Amanda watched from the roof of the Parliament building, a truck equipped with a loudspeaker pulled up next to the Frunzi statue, close by the bodies of Roman Propp and Carolus Peyser. Pleyl drove. Glnin climbed out with a microphone in one hand, the submachine gun in the other.

Karel, Viktor, along with most of the other steelworkers from Provice stood around drinking and smoking at the far end of the square, where there was more sun and no corpses. Others were desultorily looting, a few arguing or looking confused. All still held their clubs, their liquor, and their grudges.

"It's on?" Robert asked Pleyl, holding up the microphone.

"Yes," said Pleyl, nervously checking the switch. He had already refused to turn off the engine, just in case.

Glnin began forthrightly. *"Hey!"* he called into the microphone. "You murderers and dupes from Provice!" His words echoed off the baroque facades of Frunzi Square. A low rumble rose from the workers, as from an irritated rhinoceros.

"You can't hear me?" cried Robert yet louder. "Over here!" He raised the gun and actually squeezed off a short burst into the air.

Some of the workers ran for cover.

"I shot into the *air,* imbeciles," said Robert. "I want your attention, so try to concentrate, will you? At least *pretend* you're halfway sober and rational. This is Robert Glnin talking to you, not some fat colonel or lazy foreman."

A few men moved a little toward the truck.

"Jesus," said Karel to Viktor. "It *is* him."

"Yeah, and by himself it looks."

"Got to admire that."

"My old girlfriend—remember Trudi, the redhead?—she read one of his books once."

"No kidding?"

"Couldn't make it out, she said, but she liked it."

Robert now clambered up onto the hood of the truck, still holding the

microphone, which had a nice long cord, and the gun as well. Up on her roof, Amanda tried at first to transcribe what he said, but then gave up and just took it in. It struck her that the words counted for less than something else—the music, so to speak.

"Look here!" Robert shouted, pointing downward. "Two young men dead. Two young men who stand for the future. Look hard, you who wanted to teach those damned intellectuals a lesson. You've broken their skulls; you've scattered their brains without which there *is* no future, not for you, not for any of us. Do you have any idea how foolish you've been? Agents of the old regime tell you that those smartasses up at the capital, those fairies at the University, are going to screw you out of your jobs. They give you a few drinks and off you go like a herd of elephants. I'm ashamed of you. You hear me? Ashamed!

"There's no place for violence in this country any more. No place for hatred and stupidity and blindness. Above all, there's no place for a herd of dupes who use clubs instead of brains. There's nothing wrong with your brains except lack of exercise. So *think!* Your factory *is* inefficient, and you know it. And you know *why,* too. And you certainly ought to be able to figure out that it can't go on that way either. How, then, are your jobs to be saved if not by those who can *make* it efficient—people with brains, workers who work, managers who manage—and students who study?

"All my life I've been opposed to violence and I'm just as opposed to it now that I'm your President. I would never order the police or the army to shoot you down—even though the imbeciles who did *this* surely deserve it. But I *do* mean to improve this country and that will call for sacrifices from everybody. A sacrifice means giving up something that's dear to you. So here's *my* first sacrifice. Much as I am revolted by violence, I will personally shoot any one of you who hasn't thrown down his club by the time I've counted to three." And with that, Robert threw down the microphone and pulled out his spare clip.

An hour later, back in his office, Robert downed a healthy dram of Laphroaig. He had prudently thought to bring what was left of the whisky with him when he moved on the 24th. He needed it. Even the enthusiastic cheers he had received as he walked through the lobby and up the stairs and crossed the outer offices did not soothe him, lower his adrenaline, overcome his disgust with what he had done, or abate the fear

still roiling up his stomach. Not even the English embrace of Amanda Hare-Stephenson helped much. However, Professor Dundee's scotch did; and, after a dinner of veal and broiled potatoes was brought up to them by Markovitz, Robert closed his office door for the first time in two days.

Amanda, showing the adaptability of her national character, was a good sport about the cot.

6

Verheim's 82nd aphorism, especially apt for historians: "It is easier to believe in the nobility of the past than in the free will of those who inhabited it."

Amanda Hare-Stephenson's feature article entitled "Glnin's Grand Coup de Théâtre" created what is called an immediate sensation. In retrospect, it is obvious that it could not have failed to do so, though, as Verheim suggests, one should beware of such suppositions. Life must be lived forward and in real time, not in fast reverse, so that truly it is only the past and the distant future that appear to us "inevitable."

Anyway, the article was reprinted all over the world and did more than anything else to give Glnin the peculiar international status he was to enjoy for the rest of his life—enjoy *and* loathe, I suspect, for years later he called this notoriety of the Frunzi Square incident "vulgar." In the same place, his private journal, he also analyzes with some amusement the singular effect of the incident on the foreign leaders he met in the months that followed. As he sees it, at one stroke (coup?) he had apparently contrived (de théâtre?) to unite in his own person the man of action and the man of peace, the intellectual and the swashbuckler, Hamlet and Fortinbras. You could say it was a magic that rapidly became myth, or, conversely, a bit of myth-making that made the name of Glnin political magic. What leader did not yearn to be photographed with the hero of Frunzi Square, the novelist-president who could also wield a submachine gun, at one bloodless but doughty stroke putting down a riot and inspiring the renewal of a nation? As Glnin himself notes, the irony of his "sacrifice"—which in a literal sense he never had to carry out, like Abraham—was suppressed. That part of the story became somehow commingled with the physical danger he faced down like a lion-tamer, and this was the

very thing of which his fellow heads-of-state were most jealous, the secret of his aura. There was a deep need—one which the Hare-Stephenson article rather played up, in my opinion—to present Glnin as, above all, a *sufferer.* Why? Consider Verheim's incisive 67th aphorism: "A great leader must represent the suffering of his people; it is the only way he can bear their hopes."

Pilkrohmer, needless to say, has his own view of the Frunzi Square heroics. He talked to me about it the other day when I consented to buy him a beer.

"Of course a 'coup de théâtre' is precisely what it was," he said, wiping his lips. "In fact, a better illustration of my theory can scarcely be imagined. Consider what we know. First, we know that Glnin was not acting spontaneously, but rather carrying out a plan, albeit one he formulated with a kind of suddenness. But, as I see it, this is the suddenness which characterizes any inspired act of composition, or self-invention. Second, we know that there was an audience."

Here I objected. "But the square was cleared and the event wasn't even photographed, let alone televised."

"No, no," he said with that irritating, characteristic gesture of dismissal I so dislike. "The audience consisted, in the immediate sense, of only one person—namely, Amanda Hare-Stephenson. However, this Englishwoman was actually the conduit to a world-wide audience of billions."

"I still disagree. If Glnin were deliberately aiming at this audience of billions, he would certainly have arranged—as he might easily have done—for the great scene to be taped."

"That a lesser artist would certainly have done so, I grant. But Glnin was not a mediocre novelist, and like all true writers he believed in his soul that one *mot juste* is worth ten thousand pictures. Moreover, the absence of photographs or videotape left space for mystery, for imagination. One's imagination of Caesar crossing the Rubicon is a much grander affair than would be a snapshot of a short, bald, middle-aged man stepping daintily across a drainage ditch."

Well, Pilkrohmer's is one possibility, and probably it's wrong to have contempt for an idea merely because you can't stand the man who enunciates it. All the same, I cannot bring myself to accept what Pilkrohmer has to say, if only because he is so excessively sure of it.

A different train of thought was suggested to me yesterday when I at last succeeded in tracking down the obscure reference in Glnin's notebook entry about the prophetic absurdist novel. After asking Mrs. Gulwich for her advice (she suggested Kleist, Kipling, and Kierkegaard), I decided the "K." referred to was more probably Kafka—who owns the initial—but could think of no story of Kafka's about a poor student with bad hearing. And indeed there is none. However, such a story can be found in one of his letters—and not just any letter, but one in which he writes variations on the theme of the sacrifice of Abraham.

In one variant we have an Abraham who wishes to carry out the sacrifice properly and even has sufficient faith, but who "cannot imagine that he is the one meant. It is as if the best student were solemnly to receive a prize at the end of the year and in the expectant silence, the worst student, because he has misheard, comes forward from his dirty back bench and the whole class falls apart. And it is perhaps not that he has heard wrong, for his name was actually spoken, because it is the teacher's intention that the reward for the best is to be accompanied by the punishment for the worst."

So here is another Glninian perplexity, this time yoking the theme of Abraham's sacrifice to the author's summoning by history, to his ironic speech in Frunzi Square, even to the favorite author of the pedantic Captain Spinkin—once Glnin's interrogator, for a time his Minister of Education. It does make you think.

Perhaps in the end, and despite all the undoubted good he did, Glnin may indeed have come to regard the extraordinary turn in his life as more a punishment than a reward. Certainly he never wrote another novel and, as Verheim puts it in his 27th aphorism, "The world likes imagination more than imagination likes the world."