

Chapel Road

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Here begins the first chapter: Spring in Termuren

A LINE THROUGH EVERYTHING

From your open attic window you can see no-man's wood being painted red by the sinking sun, and you hear msieu colson of the ministry's melancholy sheep bleating one last time before it disappears behind the stable door: and then you push your papers aside and go downstairs, just when the music master opens the door and together with his pretty wife lucette lets a little of that red sunshine enter. He shakes his head in his music master's way and you hear him say:

I suppose you've been poring over your papers up there in your attic, writing about the world-of-today; well, I've misunderstood so many books already and I know that all there is to say has already been said; I'm not even talking now of ecclesiastes, of the faust-writers or the mad actor or hamlet... no, please, don't interrupt me, let me go on; do you really think that up in that attic of yours you're going to gather greater wisdom of than lao tse, or can you be more surrealist-erotic-simple-minded than the songs of maldoror? Will you sound human depths and heights more deeply and more highly than the demons in the brothers Karamazov, will you chase time outside time and space more ferociously than proust, or will you whip life within time and space more grimly than in the voyage au bout de la nuit? Will you be any better in depicting modern derailed man-in-a-crooked-society in his true condition of living and thinking animal than lady chatterley's lover? Can you play with words more soberly than lenin, more naturalistically than zola, more symbolically than the bible? Can you possibly be more solemn and more infallible than the pope in rome, more fabulously immoral than the arabian nights, more heavenly than the imitation of Christ, more subtle and more cunning than the Reynard of William-who-created-madoc; more tragi-rustic than nivardus' isengrinus? And can you be more modernly mangily unbelieving than tropic of Capricorn? Or more romantically miserable than the sprawl of suburbia?

And when you hear the music master fall silent and see him press his lips together, you reply: maybe it is impossible to say anything new and better, but the dust of time falls on everything that has been written and so I think it's right if every ten years someone else draws a line through all those old things and describes the world-of-today in different words.

ATLANTIC ATOMIC

While johan janssens, poet and journalist, is walking towards you, his bare feet in slippers, saying pff instead of good morning and while the music master replies that there's going to be a storm, looking more at the impassive eyes of his pretty wife lucette than at the sky which is a sky far away in the distance – you ask them what they'd like, they've just had something about world literature, will it be the same again?

When I sum up what has been said, says johan janssens in his best journalist's style, I have to agree with the music master when he says that there's no more to be said, and yet I can't disagree with you when you say that it should all be repeated every 10 years in different words. Ha, and if I'm right it comes down to this, that the form should change, because man's increasing intelligence and lasting stupidity, as well as his faith in and his heretical doubt about the future, were exactly the same in antiquity as in our civilization today. But someone has to pour new wine into old vessels, if I may express myself thus in my capacity as a poet – so that anyone who gets drunk on it may understand that not only the magician's world of atlantic has perished, but that the jobless world of atomic follows it closely... hey, here I turn pale and startle and laugh at my own spirituality... I quickly start talking about something else; all right, the form: if we want to repeat what the music master said, we'll have to look for a different form, but which? for instance a novel into which you pour everything, higgledy-piggledy, plouf, like a tub of mortar falling from a scaffold, & besides this, your hesitations and doubts about the purpose and the use of the novel, & besides and above all this, something you might call the journey from nihilism to realism – return trip, 3rd class – because today there's still hope that something will come of this world but tomorrow this hope will be shattered... and apart from this you could still make marginal comments, record brain waves, useless descriptions, sublimated, erotic dreams and even newspaper cuttings...

In other words, something like we're doing now, you say... and johan janssens, the music master and msieu colson of the ministry look at you with gaping mouths.

PATCHWORK

In the mild evening-with-a-little-rain, johan janssens talks in his capacity as a poet of his doubts about the novel. But when he wants to say quite seriously that he's fed up with the novel, he discovers that he's fed up with the expression itself – to be fed up, and he demands a session in camera, to replace that expression by another one... and as the pretty lucette learnt later from her music master, johan janssens told them that he's making up a list of expressions which aren't mentioned in any dictionary and that he will publish this list in louis paul boon's 1st underground novel, the moment the last reader has dropped dead – of which note is taken...

And when your own wife and the pretty lucette have returned, he continues his discourse, that he's fed up (winking to all sides) with struggling through one respectable novel after another, because if you compare the novel with Life you see that it isn't much more than patchwork, and that it has a more than striking resemblance to the antics of a clown running after a tight-rope dancer high up in the big top, wobbling and consciously making crazy gestures, but who could slip all of a sudden...

And when johan janssens in his capacity as a poet takes a short breath, the music master raises his head and says that this kind of rambling talk isn't leading anywhere. But johan janssens has got his breath back and continues his discourse against the novel; but in the meanwhile the clown is still moving about on the tightrope up there, weeping comically, but suddenly slipping and risking his life... for although it's his job to give a parody of an acrobat, he risks his life just the same as the

acrobat who walked in front of him... and fidgeting with his trousers which are falling, he asks the audience below whether anyone can lend him a safety pin, but when he turns about in all directions, the audience notices a giant safety pin on the clown's back. Then johan janssens sits down and the music master adds that if you write 1000 pages you've distorted and twisted 1000 small truths, put them in a bag, shaken them about and tipped them out in a jumble. The 1000 small truths form together the 1000-fold big lie, the parody on life, the clown from the circus, the fish on the land, exclaims johan janssens in his poet's capacity and he knocks his glass over.

NEITHER GOD NOR DEMOCRACY

You've knocked a glass over and broken it, your wife says to johan janssens, poet and journalist... but he sits there in his capacity as a journalist and he doesn't hear very well on that side: he taps on the floor with his feet and drums with his hand on the table; beats... no drums... the song of the rum-ti-dum novel, rum-ti-dum, rum-ti-dum the-novel, rum-ti-dum; so that the pretty lucette holds her hands to her little ears. Shaking his head he tells her that she can uncover those lovely pink ears because he's got something interesting to say: only in my capacity as a Poet do I discover that everyone lives for himself and believes in nothing; taking my colleague, the poet johan brams, he tells me that he only lives for himself and has become cynical and doesn't believe in anything any more. And he tells me about the little man who was arrested and sentenced because he went over to the wrong side in the war, because he was hungry, but the great nazi generals said on the radio that basically they had never anything in common with hitler. And he also thinks, my colleague johan brams, that we're back in '36 and that the world is moving towards an era of total destruction... and then there's another interesting thing, which I can't remember now. And in my capacity as a journalist I go and see professor spothuyzen in the same road, who teaches at the university and is one of the 7 intelligent people of belgium; I feel very small and stupid beside him, because he's got heine and goethe and dostoevsky in his head and comprehends the world and yet he simply plays in the village band like any ordinary bloke... and he tells me, hell, I don't believe in anything any more, I'm becoming so cynical that I'm surprised at myself. And I ask him what he thinks his opinion is, why the whole world is becoming cynical and believes neither in god nor in democracy nor in dog's balls – pardon me – and he reflects and tells me what he thinks about it and I'm staggered; it's such a tiny little thought it almost pushes me over on my backside. And in the evening I ask someone about this question too, again in my capacity as a journalist, someone who knows what's what and who walks around with feelers on his head and always lands on his feet whichever way fate swings him – and he was as pleased as punch because he was allowed to walk up with me, johan janssens, poet and journalist – and he answers me about this question and once again it was such a tiny thought it could have pushed me over on my backside, so that was 2 times that I fell on my backside, but of course, I didn't, I'd rather go home to my wife... But the pretty lucette sits there again with her hands on her bare pink ears and your wife says: talking of falling down, are you going to pay for the glass you knocked over?

MALaise

It's saturday evening and fine weather as johan janssens, poet and journalist, walks behind the music master and his pretty wife lucette and catches up with them on the way to your house. And with a glance sideways at pretty lucette's bare pink ears johan janssens says:

I was talking about faith and cynicism yesterday and I told you I'd forgotten something – it's always like that: the things that most need to be said are soonest forgotten and I get quite upset when I think of all the great things that might have been said down the centuries if they hadn't been forgotten by accident – ha, but you'd only just gone and I remembered, my colleague johan brams

told me there's a general malaise, no one believes in anything any more or starts on any great work, rich people don't build workman's cottages any more but buy themselves a row of cars and the poor who haven't got the money to build themselves a little cottage, crowd together in single rooms or in council prefabs – temporary, temporary, like everything is temporary, god and people and the world and the atomic age and the art of the novel – and the building trade lies still. No one bothers any more to read a book and the publishers reject manuscripts, good ones and bad ones, profound ones and slapdash ones... and when a profound book is a good book in my eyes the reverse is almost true in the desperate eyes of a publisher... and not a single great writer has the courage to depict this age in an unparalleled work. Ha! and that's because together with the afore-mentioned rich, who no longer build houses and with the poor who make the best of it in one room or who herd together even more temporarily in slum dwellings, and with the stagnant building trade and with the publisher who rejects manuscripts... he can't be bothered any more to start on a great work: the world is going to the dogs anyway. Ha... the music master wanted to say... but johan janssens interrupts him in his capacity to as a journalist and says that he also met andré, the theosophist and medical student, and asked him whether he had discovered anything like a general malaise, but that andré replied with an innocent look: no, because they're still giving lectures at the university.

Ha... the music master wants to say again... but his pretty wife lucette laughs at johan janssens' words and meanwhile they've arrived at your house and when they enter they see you standing there with a sheet of paper in your hand: the INTRODUCTION TO YOUR NEW NOVEL.

LITTLE ONDINE AMIDST STEEL AND GLASS

Be serious now, because although novels are no longer written nowadays, the writer of this outline wanted to present something which would embrace Life in its Entirety... but you see that right from the start he's got to use words that are too big, with capital letters... and it is to be expected, humanly speaking, that he will fail when it comes to the novel itself. He will gloss over this and expand a bit too much there and so it will become a sea, a lake, leading nowhere: but there remains the small consolation that he will be a master of detail. *He wants to write a novel with as its so-called heroine the little ondine – for amidst doubt and fear and the last hope of the last mohicans, amidst steel and glass and concrete, amidst bureaucracy and nuclear fission and the stagnant building trade, this little girl will be something refreshing, pleasing... but besides being the novel of little ondine it must also be the novel of her sweetheart and husband, oscar – ondine and little oscar, two o's which must be brought together by coincidence, to unwind the bobbin of their lives together, while the one will never understand anything about the other, although they will cherish the same misconceptions about everything – but god help me if it won't be more than that: it must also be the novel of socialism, from its beginning till the present day, and at the same time the novel of the lower class which was knocked on the head by 2 world wars, trampled in the dust, all the time saving and starving, and yet trying to keep up appearances. Oh, he would talk about vapeur with his godless machine, and about valeer-traleer with his cut-off finger and his monster's head wobbling bulbously this way and that through life...*

Alas... you've only got half way through your outline when your wife says, shaking her head: that's much too much. There can never be too much of a good thing, says johan janssens poetically, but journalistically he adds: however, lack of space prevents us... And the music master puts his hands up and says: excesses are odious. And msieu colson of the ministry, who never says much, says: you, mister music master, you think so because you're a man of few words.

A MISTAKE AND A WARNING

Look, you go to a meeting where our future civilization – the one after the nuclear fission civilization – is described and promised, and you're happy like a child with santa claus, but on the way home your shoelace breaks and you swear goddamn here and goddamn there. This doesn't mean that santa claus... I beg your pardon, our future civilization – won't come, but it does mean that one will always have to reckon with broken shoelaces. And so you also have to remember that you can read out the synopsis of your novel – even if it's only half the synopsis – and people pooh-pooh it and say it's too much... excesses are odious... and novel or no novel they switch on the radio and listen to the weather forecast: moderate wind force three... yes, but you don't therefore shut yourself up in bitterness, you also listen to the weather forecast and conclude: all is normal, and you buttonhole msieu colson of the ministry, although he never says anything and never reads a novel: *in my novel, you say, there will also be a mr brys who spoke in rhymes and was the first socialist without knowing it, and Jeannine who was such a nice girl, but oh, so bloody stupid, and malvine with the squint – oh yes, and there'll be a bit about spiritualism too – don't faint, msieu colson of the ministry, and there'll even be some things in it which I can't mention to any serious person – and marvellous, touching, subtle things which are overlooked by everybody, as is always the case. And somewhere in the middle of the novel there's suddenly talk of a child, without the reader having been told that it was going to come.*

And msieu colson of the ministry, who never speaks, says: I shake my head, because your book will be a world, will be 100 worlds, but of course you'll have to admit that all these things are 1 big lie, from beginning to end: for instance, you could say that you're surprised at your own imagination which makes you think it all up, and that if anyone wants to sue you, you'll bash his brains in, because you are... it doesn't matter – but forewarned is forearmed.

CHAPEL ROAD

There's been a bit of rain over rabbit hill and over no-man's wood but the sun is coming out and everything becomes much more beautiful: and you read the 1st page of the outline of your rum-ti-dum novel, which is the setting of the scene in 7 words: *the muddy chapel road wound towards the hamlet of termuren along the endless wall of the weaving mill 'the labor', and along the brushwood of rabbit hill, which was the last remaining bit of wasteland in the grounds of the derenancourts' castle. It was lonely there. Will o' the wisps, which are the souls of still-born children, swarmed above the shrubs in the dark. The cloven-hooved devil ambushed the late factory girls as they struggled through the mud on the dark path, and one of them, the loveliest ever to bloom in anyone's lifetime, had been raped there. A shame it was, to be so beautiful and to be maimed so pitifully by the devil's horns. And a nightwatchman who said he'd discovered footprints leading to the castle was dismissed from his job, because in all probability he'd been drunk again. And besides, the most clinching proof, that same week the dreaded smallpox broke out: the people of termuren silently and solemnly crossed themselves that evening.*

You give a little cough and you put your paper in the folder in which you will keep the story of little ondine, while msieu colson of the ministry waits in silence, looking at the music master who's shaking his head: *you're talking there of rabbit hill, I can see it from here, and of no-man's wood, I can smell it through the open window, but you turn the ugly rich man's house on rabbit hill into a castle where a mr derenancourt, unknown to me, is supposed to live. I don't see why; why don't you write about things the way they are, why do you mix it all up, making a hotchpotch of familiar names and unknown people and things, you're getting me confused. And then you talk about will o' the wisps and about the devil who's supposed to have raped the prettiest girl – ouf – how romantic! and you make the nightwatchman who found a trail leading to the castle get the sack, and then smallpox break out and the people of termuren – a beautiful name – slowly and silently cross themselves.* But it seems to me that things are complicated enough in this world without someone shaking them about in a fantastic book till they can't be recognized and then pushing them back into a bygone time of devils and smallpox, let's say 1800-

and-something. Shouldn't the novelist who's stuck to the present with his nerves and his blood and his sperm – excuse me – describe the present, instead of venturing out on the path of 1800-and-something with a stable lantern? Msieu colson of the ministry nods and agrees with the music master. *Even so, it was very nice, he says, that description of chapel road.*

THE HEROINE BETWEEN TWO MILLS

Everybody laughs because msieu colson of the ministry says that so convincingly; you too, and after the description of the setting you try to introduce your heroine: *among the people of termuren, by chapel road, lived little ondine, who would probably grow up to be a beautiful woman, but unaware of this she went about on her clogs wearing her brown hair in 2 stiff pigtails on her back, and very selfishly considered the world of termuren to be hers alone. But the beginning of the long wall of the weaving mill 'the labor' she thought of as the beginning of a different world... and the grey rainy sky, against which the smoking chimneys of the spinning mill 'the filature' were outlined, was to her the sky of the filature. She felt as if her world was pressed between on the one side the endless fields where a late peasant went bent over his fallow land and on the other side the smoking, stinking town where the people of termuren went to work in the derenancourt mill. The first time she heard people talk of god, who was almighty, she thought they meant mr derenancourt of the castle, who lived on rabbit hill in the summer and the mill in town with its smoking chimneys in the winter. When the workers of the spinning mill came home along chapel road, little ondine saw them fighting with those of the weaving mill 'the labor', who lived in the first dirty houses behind no-man's wood: termuren was encyclical because mr derenancourt was, and the first dirty houses were libertine because the owner of the labor was: none of them had the vote, though... something ondineke didn't know yet at the time.*

Msieu colson of the ministry wakes up with a start at these last words about the vote. Perhaps, he says, the music master will say what he always says, but when you say that the people of termuren quarreled and yet didn't have the vote, I'd like to add that right now in the ministry... and msieu colson of the ministry does the exact opposite of what you wanted him to do: he brings things from the past forward to the present. Ha, you see, just what I wanted to say, says johan janssens, poet and journalist: in my capacity as a journalist I would avoid all this poetical business: 'she thought', 'she felt', 'it was to her'... and I'd far sooner compose a novel straight from newspaper cuttings, from 1800-and-something to the present day. I would give information about the franchise, about accidents in the spinning mill 'the filature', about mr derenancourt in his castle on rabbit hill, about a child burnt or a tree blown down by the first dirty houses behind no-man's wood: that would be some novel, my journalist's heart would beat in it... I must control myself, or I'll start talking in my capacity as a poet.
